My So-Called Afterlife

Spencer Cox is getting over the AIDS crisis—and on with his growth.

August 1, 2005 By Spencer Cox

I can't tell you how many times it's happened. I bump into someone I haven't seen in years. We chitchat, then they blurt: "I thought you were dead."

I've finally nailed the response: "That was my sister, the Wicked Witch of the East. I'm worse."

Yes,reports of my demise are somewhat exaggerated. To paraphrase Stephen Sondheim, I'm still here. So is AIDS, of course. Worldwide, the staggering deaths persist. But in the mid-'90s, drugs arrived that halt HIV. In the West, the epidemic continues, but the crisis is over.

A friend and former bigwig at a leading ASO recalls a 1998 fundraiser where a speaker cried: "AIDS is still killing gay men. AIDS is still killing women. AIDS is still killing people of color. The AIDS crisis is not over!" At each declaration, the crowd erupted into thunderous applause, as if even the slightest acknowledgement of the resurrections all around us would fatally compromise…what? What were we holding onto? The suffering of those who remained sick? The nobility of our fight? Our guilt for surviving? Or had we been traumatized into believing that hope itself was unthinkable?

The funerals that flooded my mid-twenties have essentially stopped. Last week, I lunched with two old friends, both positive for years. We lead active lives and face the reading glasses of middle age—something we never thought possible. It's not all lollipops and rainbows, but it ain't all explosive diarrhea, either. Our challenge? Rebuilding lives that honor what we've lived through and still battle—but that aren't defined by the ravages of HIV or the rhetoric of crisis junkies.

That challenge is a privilege. But to demand that HIVers, who have lost so much to the disease, refuse to enjoy their respite until all HIVers everywhere share it…is like my mother demanding I eat my string beans because children are starving in China.

For me, 1999 was the dark time. I became terribly ill, broke up with my lover and had to leave AIDS advocacy work. I wandered around in a weepy, HAART-induced stupor.

Convinced I was dying, I tried what 12-steppers call "a searching and fearless moral inventory." I found much to be proud of, but even more I didn't like: the little slights and destructive people I'd

held on to, the acts of kindness I'd left unthanked. I'd been in a state of crisis for so long that I'd forgotten how to take care of myself and the people I loved.

I somehow stumbled into a little Episcopalian church in Greenwich Village. Leather daddies knelt beside tweedy little old ladies. The pastor preached not the Baptist brimstone I'd grown up with, but love. I had found something special.

It was spring when I felt the sun on my face for the first time in a long while. My drugs were gradually controlling the virus, and I realized I was, in fact, going to live. I felt like shouting, "It's not too late." I promised myself I'd be kinder, more generous, more courageous. I'd be nothing more or less than me. No apologies. No explanations.

And, say what you will, no more AIDS crisis.

When I first left activism and anger behind, this magazine dubbed me "the Dorothy Parker of AIDS," a sobriquet I've clung to proudly. But I now renounce that brittle, cynical persona. Yes, we must ask, "What has the epidemic meant to us, and what does it mean that some of us have been given our lives back?" But let's ask other questions, too. Such as, "What's cooking besides all those goddamned string beans?"

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