Petal Pusher

After escaping the grim reaper, River Huston lets the rage fall and the forgiveness flow. Our lady of the flowers asks, Why kick the pricks when you can float in the roses?

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One of the many opportunities having HIV presents is the chance to perfect bitterness as, if not an art form, at least a suit of armor. To such common questions as “Do you have AIDS or are you HIV positive?” I’ve learned to quip, “Oh, gee, I’m only positive, so why get your panties in a bunch?” To esteemed medical practitioners asking how I got infected I reply smartly, “Your husband (wife).” And when, for the millionth time, I hear “How long do you have left to live?” I answer in my best Dorothy Parker voice, “Not long, thank God.” Hahahahahahahaha.

But when actually faced with the possibility of my own demise three years ago (bone-marrow disease), I realized just how terribly bitter I really really was.

I had always pictured my death as a graceful and uplifting event. Yet when a friend showed up at my hospital bed with a bouquet, I heard myself tell him that I hated flowers and to save his tears for the funeral. He rushed from the room, never to be heard from again. My brittle mask of humor peeled back, and my raw face of rage was fully exposed. Disgusted, I held off on the morphine clicker and thought about my life. What I discovered at the bottom was nothing but profound sadness and dwindled spirit. Suddenly, the sum of my parts—the books I authored, awards I’d won, TV appearances, new car and home—didn’t add up to much at all. I decided if I survived, I would change all this. I survived.

So my self-examined life began. When I was first diagnosed with HIV, I frantically sought spiritual guidance—from Deepak Chopra to the Baghavad Gita—but driven by fear, I was only soothed for a short time. Then my well-meaning brother sent me an audiotape called “Why People Don’t Heal.” I avoided it for weeks because its title sounded like an accusation. But one day, on a long road trip, I decided to give it a try. The taped voice hit a nerve when she asked with measured sarcasm: “How much longer do you want to carry your resentment around with you? A day, a year or 10? It’s your choice.” In one of those moments of cheesy enlightenment, on the highway, I knew I needed to learn forgiveness.

But where to start? Much of my rage not only predates my HIV diagnosis but may have steered me toward it. When I was 14, six men raped me, beat me and threw me naked into a ditch one snowy Pennsylvania night. Few people in my small town ever acknowledged the crime. Because I was

drunk before the tragedy occurred, those who did whisper about it said that I deserved it. I tried to drown the memory in liquor and drugs. Long afterward, the image of six men crawling into my bed still
disturbed my most intimate moments; rock-bottom self-esteem took a toll, leading me to risky sex. I finally understood the wisdom of the old cliché that to reclaim my spirit, the forgiving had to begin with myself.

No matter the circumstances, I needed to treat myself like my own best friend. Would I call my best friend a fat pig who should die? Not. Then came forgiving others. It's not about Almighty Moi waving some forgiveness scepter over my rapists—it's about detaching with love. (I visualize the person who hurt me surrounded in light, compassion, the whole New Age yards.) Perhaps the most difficult person for me to detach from was my husband, who committed suicide because of AIDS-related illness in 1990. I was diagnosed two days before. Making my way to find him so that we could talk about it, I found a note he'd scribbled in the wet cement outside our old apartment. My mother half-joked that suicide would be her way out, too, if she were in my shoes. (Thanks, Mom, I'll stick to forgiveness.) Through it all I have realized that forgiveness is less an action like turning the other cheek than a state of mind.

As corny as it sounds, HIV is my gateway to happiness, which I have always been entitled to, but still needed to claim. Life gives me the chance to do this through forgiveness in a thousand ways on a daily basis. For instance I turn road rage to lane love: That person in front of me who has the nerve to be doing the speed limit while I am late to meditation class is keeping me from getting a speeding ticket. So the next time I face my death, you ask, will I do it with grace? I hope so. But one thing is sure: A lot more people will be around to see me through it. And I'll take all the flowers I get.

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