# S.O.S.—August 1999

August 1, 1999 By Sean Strub

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Survivors can savor the safety of a life more ordinary.

A year ago, I wrote in this space about my desire to grow beyond the status of “survivor.” I have.

I rarely think of myself as a survivor anymore—certainly not the way I did a few years back, in the first glorious months of renewed health and vigor. Other labels—person with AIDS, gay man, activist—don’t fit as neatly as they once did, either. Each is still accurate to some extent, but they have all been eclipsed by something else.

That something else is me: Sean Strub.

For as long as I can remember—from my teen years, when I struggled with my sexuality, through my 20s, when it seemed as if everyone I knew and loved was dying, and my 30s, when I focused on saving my own life—my identity never seemed to be mine alone, independent of some greater trauma.

I was always consumed by a mission or goal larger than myself, a bit player following the only path I could find in a fog of self-loathing, depression, fear, anger and, most oppressively, mourning. Although the trek brought many satisfactions, not least of which was a sense of purpose, these were accompanied by confusion and doubt.

The fog has lifted somewhat. My life is now more my own—a realization I earned in part by fighting for it so very hard. Appreciation of a bright, beautiful day is heightened for those of us who wondered if we would ever see tomorrow.

Friendships founded in activism and cemented in survival have a strength comparable to that shared by comrades who fought side by side in battles decades ago.

After my health returned, I had to plan a new phase of my life. I felt a need to connect to a different kind of community, one not unlike where I grew up in Iowa, which is why I moved to Pike County, Pennsylvania.

My activism these days is less about AIDS, poverty and social injustice than about historic preservation and community enhancement in Pike County. Anger tends to dissipate with age for most people, and I’m almost ashamed to say I’m no exception. My health concerns are more likely

to be about an obnoxiously persistent ingrown toenail than about viral replication. My homosexuality remains central to my being, but no longer to my activism or self-image.

If I sound content, even complacent, I may be so. And these changes may all be temporary, or not. Some friends and colleagues believe I have run away from the epidemic or forsaken my responsibility. I've felt that way about other people at times, but my own experience of the past year has taught me to be more tolerant of what others need at different points in their lives. Years ago, my friend Phill Wilson—who guest-edited last month's special Africa edition of *POZ*—once admonished me for my stridency by saying, "You never know what time it is in another person's life." He was right. I only wish I had learned this lesson sooner.

So I relish each day. Yet even as I'm thrilled by a thousand small things that some might find mundane—my rabbits recently had 10 baby bunnies in the crude hutch that I built for them, by the way—there's no escaping the history I share with so many others. Death after death after death of men and women we've loved are hardwired into our emotional DNA. We cannot forget them, even when, in moments of despair, we most want to.

But bearing witness takes many forms. I now honor those I lost by treasuring my life and the lives of those around me. And by never taking for granted the preciousness of each day and the precariousness of good health. For those of us who have known sickness intimately, times of health are measured by the moment and always subject to abrupt and painful reversals.

As I grow older, it seems that I know less about life and more only about today. I don't know if next month the combination therapy that has kept me alive will fail, but I do know that my dogs will try to sneak into bed with me and Xavier as soon as we turn off the bedroom light. I don't know if the anger that fueled my activism for so many years will ever come back, but I do know that when I drive home tonight, there will be at least a dozen fresh eggs in the henhouse. And yes, I also know that my cholesterol will hit an even more dangerous height if I don't stop eating so many.

More than most, survivors—for lack of a better term, people who have lived through the terrible uncertainties of disaster—can savor the safety of a life more ordinary. Not ordinary as in common or boring, but as in what everyone should have the right to expect in the normal course of events. I've never particularly valued normalcy—and often rejected it—but these days I find it soothing. And that's OK.

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