Sentimental Education

Jon Nalley takes a page from the Dead Uncle Society

September 1, 2001 By Jon Nalley

While doing some spring cleaning recently, I came upon three children's books I hadn't seen in years. Each is about a gay uncle dying of AIDS. The first, *Losing Uncle Tim* (Albert Whitman & Co.), by MaryKate Jordan, I picked up in 1992, when many friends had died and my own hopes of a long life were dim. The other two, *Uncle Jimmy* (Real Life Story Books), by Illana Katz, and *Tiger Flowers* (Dial), by Patricia Quinlan, entered my library in 1994. After my first hospitalization that year, I put all three books in a large manila envelope with the intention of adding a note to my parents if my health headed south. I wanted the stories of uncles Tim, Jimmy and Michael to reach my nephew and keep him from seeing his late Uncle Jon as some shadowy mystery.

But my health's comeback, HAART and raised expectations made me file and forget these three loving books with their warm illustrations. Looking at them now feels strange, like looking at a group photo in which half the smiling faces are dead. The books definitely show their age. In all three the uncle with AIDS is the brother of the child's mother, not father (as in my case) -- as if straight men were less accepting of a gay PWA than women. The same goes for the euphemistic explanations of HIV transmission. In *Tiger Flowers*, Joel's uncle simply tells him that he can't get AIDS the way he caught chickenpox. When Uncle Jimmy explains to his young nephew how he got HIV, he says, "Some things I did were not good for my body."

Now, some HIVers would object to such a moral summation. My feeling was that the books' positive images of gay men and their integration into their family more than made up for it. (I am too old-school to advocate introducing pre-adolescents to issues like anal sex.) But the books explore HIV-related sickness, death and mourning (only Uncle Jimmy survives story's end). And the young characters find meaningful ways to remember these dear men and what to carry forward of their extinguished lives.

These books consoled me in my obsession over how my nephew would think of my death -- or even whether he'd be told at all. Separated not just by distance but by family estrangement, I had no opportunity to bond with him like the uncles and nephews in these books. Their relationships were what I wanted: bringing my nephew to baseball games, building a tree-house and sharing my insights of the world.

Even now, I'm reluctant to let go of these sugarcoated stories. I still wonder what would happen if I ran out of treatment options. But the nephew I originally bought these books for graduated from

high school in June. My other two nephews, ages 3 and 5, are quick learners and may already be too jaded for these sentimental tales. Besides, they have come to know me as the uncle who travels a lot and sends them things from Spain, Germany and other foreign lands. I have a place in their lives.

So I think I'll keep these books -- even if I feel as if I need an insulin injection after reading them. They bring back a time I'd love and hate to forget.

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