Sex, Lies & Videotape

Telling the truth only gets tougher with time

May 12, 1995 By Tod Roulette

I'm in my bedroom desperately plowing through heaps of dirty clothes, books and old issues of art magazines and women's fashion magazines and various other publishing relics. All stubbornly keeping me from finding that one video of myself—an old audition tape for MTV's The Real World—to show my boyfriend that evening. Ah, I find it, along with the pornos we plan to watch together for the first time. Into the crisp blue Gap bag they all go for the 15-minute subway ride to his loft in Manhattan. I stop for a second peek into my overnight bag and my heart stops. In my haste I had not picked up my audition tape but a copy of my semi-glamorous TV debut as a spokes model for the Pennsylvania state health department: Ten seconds of me giving a testimonial about being HIV positive and another 20 seconds basking in the camera's gaze.

This was the last thing I wanted my boyfriend to see. Me admitting to being positive.

"That was close," I thought as I cruised a muscular doe-eyed black guy on the subway ride to Manhattan. How would I ever explain to my 43-year-old HIV positive beau that I was also HIV positive after lying about it when asked?

Let me back up. Earlier, right after he disclosed his status, I mentioned that a friend of mine was HIV positive. He asked me how anyone my age—Generation X—could possibly test positive after the safer sex education blitz of the '80s. I couldn't answer and didn't want to answer. I just wanted to rewind the tape of our meeting. When I finally opened my mouth, I shocked him by telling him I was tested in college once and it came back negative. (Well, it had. Then, a few weeks later it came back positive. I surreptitiously left out this part.) Now, how could he ever forgive me—his young, tormented writer, sleeping partner and friend—for lying to him?

It was our third date when he told me he was HIV positive. We had sex on the first. I had planned to tell him my status on the third date, but he beat me to the punch. I felt less truthful because I hadn't disclosed before him. Of course, not telling a partner one's status and lying about it when asked are worlds apart. And even as I told him I was negative, I couldn't believe what I was saying. The eyes of judgment were upon me and I knew I had come up woefully short, a freak ashamed of my predicament, vulnerable and angry at myself for being afraid to speak. When my boyfriend sheepishly began explaining why he hadn't told me earlier about his own status, it became too painful to hear.

After reading Pedro Zamora's take on HIV in *POZ* ("Pedro Leaves Us Breathless,"), I can understand by why he made a better choice for The Real World. On my application I stated that I did not want my HIV status revealed initially. I feared it would have stripped me of any illusions of glamour and specialness and individuality that I sometimes must conjure to get through a day. It's the same fear that makes me shrink from being frank about my seropositive status when I meet a man I like. It is the fear that I will be put in a box marked "Do Not Touch" and never be considered a suitable mate. It's not unlike the sometimes fleeting fear I feel when I realize I am black in a social setting filled with whites.

The easy answer to all these uncertainties may be for me to always disclose my status to all potential intimates. God knows I have tried to live up to this and am often successful. But, when I am flirting, dancing with my shirt off watching go-go boys thrash, dealing with telling the man who is rubbing himself rhythmically against me in time with the music, then telling a stranger I am infected with the virus that causes AIDS becomes an all-too-bitter pill for me to swallow.

If only I could get over my fear of rejection. Unlearn all those derogatory names whispered among friends. It is very much the same ongoing process of unlearning the ugly images and myths about being a black man in a white country. I had parents and relatives who helped me through that, but with HIV I often have to find other support.

After my boyfriend and I viewed my audition tape, he asked to see other work I had done. I somehow got around it. A few months later the relationship was over. He told me he couldn't feel close to me, that I seemed as though I had a million thoughts I wouldn't share. Part of me was relieved. I could rewind my own tape and direct a new scene. As for my bid to win MTV's HIV beauty pageant, I'm glad Pedro won. I guess my work is to try to get through my own real world and try to make the most sense of it I can. Glamour or no glamour.

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