Thanks, but No Thanks

Jesse Cameron Alick finds stigma lurking in his friends' backhand compliments.

May 1, 2007 By Jesse Cameron Alick

Zack is straight; I'm queer. He's white; I'm black. He's HIV negative; I've been positive for 6 of my 25 years. We have virtually nothing in common—have I mentioned that he's Jewish and I'm Buddhist?—but Zack is my best friend. Yet sometimes, despite all of his tremendous support and inspiration during my journey with the virus, the kid makes my teeth grind.

The other day Zack turned to me with a teasing smile and said "Jesse, you're the whitest black man I've ever met." I could feel my jaw tensing. It wasn't the first time he'd said it; when we're in a room filled with Caucasians he loves to whisper, hoping to reduce any racial anxiety, "You are the whitest guy in this place!" For a long while, I've let the comments go, realizing that for him they are merely a misguided way of making light, so to speak, of our differences. Also, I may be particularly sensitive about perceptions of race, because I am a black New Yorker raised in Montana (a state that's not exactly a case study in diversity).

But I hadn't realized what truly irked me about Zack's very backhanded compliments until I bumped into another old friend, Tabitha, on a Manhattan street. She'd moved to San Francisco after I found out I was HIV positive; we hadn't seen each other in ages. As she stood on the corner, she smiled, overcome by emotion. "You look so healthy!" she cried. It's like I could hear her thinking, "Wow, you're the healthiest-looking positive person in this town. I can't believe you're not dead yet!"

It's worth pointing out that Tabitha, like Zack, always speaks from a place of love. But just 'cause love is in the air doesn't mean that you feel it. Zack, intentionally or not, belittles my life as a man of color when he calls me white. My HIV negative friends, whether they intend to or not, highlight my mortality when they call me "healthy." Similarly, heterosexuals, by trying to assimilate me, actually marginalize me.

As I said, the impulses are kind. Knowing that I'm positive, people look at me and search for ways to connect. They want to express how sad they are that I am often in physical and emotional pain. At the same time they want to make it known that they do not think any differently of me. They try so hard to express their fear and concern, love and hope. But by automatically assuming something splendid from my appearance—especially as HIV becomes "manageable"—they're oblivious to the fact that, say, I spent the morning throwing up my meds.

Anything anyone says is split into two parts: what they mean and what the other person hears. Is it possible that the only person who can really understand your life is someone exactly the same as you? How can you try to communicate what your life is like to another human being without sounding like you're on a soapbox? Sometimes it feels like being a human is akin to being a blind man stumbling in the dark. You try to reach out to others, but just end up poking them in the eyes.

I do think that real connection is possible. With humility, honesty and bravery. Tell me it doesn't take bravery to say to someone "I don't know how you are feeling. I have no idea what it must be like to be black or gay or positive. I am scared for you and scared for myself, because I care." Well, yes—it's scary. But sometimes scary is just what the doctor ordered.

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