The Bug Stops Here

This Christmas, will Shari Margolese's positive son toy with her HIV guilt?

December 1, 2006 By Shari Margolese

Welcome to 'Positive Parenting Without Guilt'! This morning, we will discuss why we feel guilty and how to move beyond that guilt toward meaningful relationships with our children."

Ugh—what was I saying?

As I heard myself introduce the workshop, I felt like a charlatan. Yes, I'm HIV positive. And yes, I am a parent. But here's my dirty little secret: I didn't feel guilty. They exposed me soon enough.

One mom—who, like me, had a positive kid—raised her hand. "Shari, you must feel guilty because you gave your child HIV." I paused, then came clean. "No, actually I don't. Should I?" After all, I hadn't known I was HIV positive when I got pregnant, back in 1992. Perhaps if I had known, I might feel different now. Determined to break me, she persisted. "Well, don't you feel guilty about what *you did* to become positive?"

Another pause.

"No, actually, I don't. Should I?" (I'm sorry, but I just can't feel guilty about having consensual sex with someone I loved, even if that did give me the virus.) By the end of this little blamefest, though, I was actually beginning to feel guilty that I didn't feel guilty.

I did tell the workshop I was leading that my 14-year-old son had tried to play the HIV guilt card when I made him skip his first class field trip for a doctor's visit. "If you didn't give me HIV, I would be able to go!" he shouted. I stood strong. "Listen, son, I did not 'give you' HIV on purpose. If I could somehow take away your HIV, I would. You have it; I have it; and nothing can change that. What we can do is everything possible to stay healthy. Today, that means we have to go and see the doctor."

I meant what I said, and the admonishment silenced him. But my workshop testimony bordered on perjury. I didn't tell them that after that long day at the hospital, I gave him 20 bucks, treated him to dim sum (his favorite lunch) and a shopping trip.

Recalling this while flying home from the retreat, I began to reconsider my not-guilty plea. Was I in

guilt denial? I thought about the lunchtime lattes I'd sacrificed from July to October to make payments on the $150 shoes my son outgrew in two months. The compensatory toys I'd bought for every fight my (HIV negative) husband and I had had in front of him, every swear word I uttered and every time I broke a promise. I remembered last year's Christmas tree, loaded with goodies, though he'd stopped believing in Santa five years ago. Was I unknowingly assuaging my guilt by giving outrageous gifts and special treatment?

My doubt grew as I drove home from the airport and pulled into my driveway. My son greeted me with a hug. And then this: "What did you bring me?" The other day, he presented his new Christmas list: 1) a BlackBerry (an upgrade from the cell phone I bought him last year); 2) a laptop; 3) scuba lessons. All kids, positive or negative, have a talent for materialism. But was he exploiting my HIV guilt—guilt I hadn't even sensed myself? Or is he just spoiled rotten?

When I look back on my own childhood holidays, it's not the gifts I recall. (OK, maybe the Easy-Bake Oven.) It's the family time; baking cookies with Grandma or building a snow fort with Dad. This year, I admit, there will likely be a laptop or scuba certificate under the tree (not even I have a BlackBerry). But, more important, our family will celebrate being together for yet another year: healthy, laughing and making new memories.

Come to think of it, why *don't* I have a BlackBerry? Are you there, Santa? It's me, Shari. And I haven't been feeling so hot lately....

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