Time After Times

Reporter Tom Morgan firmly takes stock

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Before he left The New York Times last July because of AIDS, Tom Morgan defined himself differently than he does now. He's still proud that he was the first (and so far only) openly gay president of the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ), that he wrote the Newspaper of Record's first story about ACT UP and that his byline graced three of the country's most prestigious newspapers—The Miami Herald, The Washington Post and the Times. But as his T-cells dwindled, he started doubting whether accomplishments make the man. "I wanted to have time to really get to know me," says Morgan. "That may sound strange, but we get so identified with what we do. Leaving my job removed the obstacles to discovering who I am."

There has been no grand epiphany, but rather many subtle ones. He listens attentively to his feelings and tries to be "direct about what I want." It's a struggle. "My masculine role model is my father, who is basically nonverbal," says Morgan. "And I had a stuttering problem as a child. To not stutter, I would not talk." One result was that Morgan turned to writing, but another was that he never got "in the habit of talking to people about emotions." Having AIDS has "emboldened" him to start.

Recently, an old friend came to visit from out of town, but ended up not spending much time with Morgan. "Before, I would have taken the issue to bed, and tossed and turned in my fury," he says. but acutely aware that "tomorrow is promised to no one"—especially not to someone with only 60 T-cells—Morgan told him how much he had looked forward to his visit and how disappointed he was. He laughs, "As a PWA, I can say whatever I want. What are they going to do to me?"

His laughter is low and soft, much like his voice. At 43, he is handsome in a way that is both rugged and refined, like the thick silver jewelry he wears: A chain necklace, a ring and a bracelet. He sits military-straight and looks you right in the eyes.

Sheila Stainback, a friend for 20 years and a fellow journalist, says, "Tom reminds me of an iron butterfly. He's soft-spoken and doesn't have a temper, but he has a great deal of resolve and tenacity." When he ran for the NABJ presidency, Morgan purposely let the opposition bring up his sexuality. They walked into his trap, "whispering that i shouldn't be president because I was gay." Their smear campaign angered more members than it scandalized, and Morgan, who as treasurer had doubled the organization's endowment, won handily. In a convention speech at the end of his

term, Morgan finally talked openly about being gay and publicly acknowledged his lover, Tom Ciano.

Coming out as a PWA has been similarly long and deliberate odyssey. Morgan, who has had no major opportunistic infections despite his low T-cell count, feared revealing his HIV status would jeopardize his health benefits. Even at the Times, so ballyhooed for being liberal and gay-friendly? “The newsroom is light years ahead of the business side,” said Morgan, who two years ago left reporting for a management post.

“My time is now my own,” he says. He has been writing “just for myself,” working a potter’s wheel and serving on the board of an agency which provides health care to the homeless. “Unconditional love,” he manages to say without sounding false, “is an important tool in the fight against AIDS.”

He’s also helped by one of the things he’s learned since leaving his job. "We live most of our life thinking about the future—what to do about tomorrow, if only I had enough money to take that vacation—and it’s good to plan for the future. But it’s even better to enjoy what I have right now.

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