Editor’s Letter

A Matter of My Life—and Death

March 1, 2009 By Regan Hofmann

When the doctor told me I had HIV, he said I had a year, maybe two, to live. I was diagnosed in the middle of seroconversion, and based on my blood work (high viral load, very low CD4 count), he erroneously assumed I had had HIV for a long time. For the first three months of being HIV positive, I thought my life was going to end—soon.

But then a funny thing happened on the way to my death—they told me I might live a normal lifespan after all.

Several months after my diagnosis, while I was under the care of a new doctor, my blood work revealed that I’d just gotten HIV. And a new class of medications had just been approved; they were bringing people back from the brink of death. So, it seemed I had more time than they thought. But even with the possibility of a longer life, I still had to face the possibility of a premature death. Maybe not as imminent as before, but still, sooner than I’d like.

Struggling to deal with my fears of death, and my survivor’s guilt (why should I get to survive HIV when it had killed so many others?), I finally realized that neither doctor had told me anything I hadn’t always known: Death finds us all, and no one knows when it’s coming. I understood that, in some ways, having HIV didn’t make me any different than I was before. I was always going to expire—no one gets out of life alive. That made me resolute to relish my life, while preparing for the end.

And so, after the advent of protease inhibitors and being told that I could have “many more years” to live despite HIV, I have never taken a single moment of my life for granted.

Nearly 13 years into living with HIV, I have learned to coexist peacefully with the notion of my death. Don’t get me wrong; my survival instinct is still killer, and I will not go gentle into that good night. I am afraid of pain and suffering and death and what happens when, and after, we expire. I still have a lot of work to do before I’m really prepared for my death. But at least, in accepting the inevitability of it—embracing it even—I am closer to being in a place where I live more fully and will one day, hopefully, die well. It may seem a strange thing to say, but since we try to live our best lives, why not also try to die our best deaths?

Which is what Chodo, the HIV-positive Buddhist monk who graces our cover and whom we profile in “Zen and the Virus,” teaches people every day. Working with others living with the virus, Chodo helps people heal and prepare for the end. In doing so, he also enriches the time they have on earth.

If HIV has taught me anything, it has shown how accepting death can make your life so much better. Imagine living each moment as if it were your last. Would you fight? Feel jealous? Lazy? Unforgiving? Probably not. Because when the end is nigh, we’re often on our best behavior. Imagine if it were possible to live every second of the rest of your life like that. And imagine if everyone else were doing the same thing…

By threatening my life, HIV taught me a valuable truth: We can’t change the fact that death’s coming, but we can change how we live until it arrives.

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