Light and Darkness

Rae Lewis-Thornton is an African-American jewelry designer who has lived with HIV for more than two decades. In this edited excerpt from her blog post “Living in the Light and Darkness of Life,” she deals with HIV a bead at a time.

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Days ago I wanted to blog about living life to the fullest. Yep, I still have dreams at 51, having lived over half my life with HIV. Then, one morning when I woke, I wanted to blog about drowning in the shit called life.

As I lay in bed trying to face another day with another headache from one of my HIV medications, I started thinking about how one can have so many contradictory emotions wrapped up into one being, one existence. But that’s how life is: a lot of gray.

You could wear an all-white outfit or an all-black outfit, and each would convey a very different viewpoint and style, but over time, if you keep alternating the looks—and no one wears the same thing every single day—the effects eventually blend together. After all, black and white combine to make gray.

So, how does one live with purpose and dreams when it feels like you’re drowning? One day at a time, and even sometimes by the hour and minute. Like the other day, I was overcome with the fact that my head wouldn’t stop hurting. Days like that make me hate HIV medications. At the same time, I’m inundated with the fact that I’ve invested everything I have into my RLT Collection of jewelry—and I mean every penny.

Yet, I’m also overwhelmed by the good things that are happening in my life. The bad things confuse the good things and place me in some weird kind of limbo. I launched necklaces as part of my collection, and I’m talking to a department store about a trunk show, which sometimes takes over a year or more to happen. I know I’m on the verge of a breakthrough and my hard work will pay off.

How do you stay sane long enough to receive your miracle, your blessing and your breakthrough? You remember that each day is a miracle, a blessing and a breakthrough. Most important, you keep living in your right now. It’s not enough to be alive and muddle through life. When we only do that, we squander the gift of life.

I do little things to find solace in the midst of chaos. I read, for example. A good book takes my imagination and spirit to a new place. In the pages of a good book, I don't have to think about the headache that I currently feel. It doesn't cure me of my headache, but it cures me of the stress of the headache.

I take it one day at a time, some days one hour at a time. One hour I read, and then another hour I bead—I can't let all the hard work on my collection go to hell because of a headache. I may not be able to do detail work on my bracelets, like wire wrapping or knotting, but I can put beads on a stretch, and that gets that bracelet one step closer to being finished.

I don't surrender to the darkness. The key to my life has been finding the balance that is rooted in my hope for a better tomorrow, my faith that God has promised me better tomorrows, and my patience and understanding that God's tomorrow is not on my time frame. In the face of light and darkness, I have an absolute understanding that today is a guarantee of God's blessing on my life.

How do I know? Just do this simple thing right now: Put your hand in front of your mouth, then blow. You feel the hot air? That's a blessing from God! The two sides of life—the darkness and light—have a way of overwhelming us in our right nows, but as long as you remember that there is a blessing in all things, you can go on with what you are facing in the right now.

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