Tables Turned

An edited excerpt from Shaan Michael Wade's blog post "Tables Turned: HIV and the Other Side of Stigma" on his friend disclosing he has HIV.

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We read the reports. We see the posters. We memorize, internalize and regurgitate the statistics. Still, we manage to think HIV is something that can't happen to us. "That won't be me," we say.

Then it is. Despite the red ribbons pinned to blazers, the panels of doctors and academics, and the condoms everywhere from the window to the wall, it happens to us. Or…it happens to our best friend.

I'm used to being on the other side of the table. I'm used to being the one to take a deep breath, make the person promise to never tell a soul, guarantee that I will kill them if they do, take another deep breath, then say, "I'm transsexual."

I'm used to avoiding eye contact because I expect to see anger, disgust or pity written on their faces. I'm used to the slow, nervous scoot away and timed breaths, as if breathing the same air as me will make them "catch the tranny." I'm used to being rejected, despite having been the token of their affection just moments ago. The tables were turned. What was I to do?

When someone close to you comes out as HIV positive, you might expect to feel a sense of internal chaos. We have been socialized to respond to difference with anger, shock, grief or other such emotions and actions. Some people cry. Some people run. Some people murder.

I did what I wish others had done to me. I looked at him. I said, "Okay." I hugged him. I told him I loved him. Then I stole sips of his smoothie. When we parted ways, I texted him later that day to reaffirm the fact that I wasn't going anywhere. It was not an emotional moment, but one of pure vulnerability—something that does not come easy nor often for this friend.

I'm not sad for him. I'm not embarrassed to call him my friend. I don't question what will happen if his CD4 count gets too low. There is no need for any of this. If he begins to feel sorry for himself, if he begins to feel embarrassed, I'll put him in a banana suit with a tutu and fairy wings to give him something to really feel sorry and embarrassed about. If his CD4 count drops, I'll be at every doctor's appointment and hospital visit (if he lets me). I'll admit: I'm afraid.

I’m afraid because compared with White men who have sex with men (MSM), Black MSM are significantly less likely to be alive three years after receiving an AIDS diagnosis. I fear the looming battle against stigma he will face as a Black gay man with HIV. I fear he will lose his sense of self-worth, self-esteem and perhaps even himself.

I fear this because it nearly happened to me. Society has a way of leading you to believe you are unworthy of things you had just moments ago. I understand the pain of stigma. I understand the shame it can bring about. After years of dealing with both, I understand how important community and love are.

An estimated 195,313 Black MSM in the United States have HIV. One of them is my best friend. One of them is my best friend. And I love him. Just as I am not “his trans friend,” he is not “my HIV-positive friend.” We are not objects to be tokenized. He is my friend—my brother—and I am his.

I will continue to love him; I can only hope that he will continue to love himself.

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