



Time to Feel

In a blog post by The Well Project titled “[Good Morning, World!](#)” HIV advocate Connie L. Johnson shares her journey living with the virus and overcoming adversity along the way. Below is an edited excerpt.

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I’ve spent the last six years unpacking my past, settling in self and growing in grief. This journey of emotional upheaval has been the most arduous work I’ve ever done, including teaching high school remedial reading to teen girls from Chicago’s South Side. Without warning, life demanded that I shake the snow globe of my inner being and allow the flakes to fall in their proper places.

In 2016, I returned to my small but vibrant college hometown after 20 years of living as a gypsy-like prodigal. In those 20 years, I had lived in Chicago, traveled to Kenya twice, wrote a book, earned a couple of degrees and established an impressive career in family and youth services. But I hadn’t managed to conquer the one thing that needed my undivided attention—my feelings. After settling into the home my father was raised in, located less than a block from my maternal homestead and childhood home, every memory I ever subconsciously silenced came rushing to the forefront of my psyche.

So much of my childhood and adolescence were spent hiding and shushing the pain of my parents’ divorce, secret abuses and hustling for love. Add a couple of AIDS diagnoses to the mix and you have a recipe for silent suffering. I now know that for a large swath of my adult life, I lived in a state of high--functioning depression. The grief of losing my mom at 19 to AIDS- related illness and the distress of my being diagnosed with AIDS at 26 took a heavy mental toll. I distracted myself. In the early years, I smoked, I drank, I partied and sexed my pain away. In my quest to discover a higher power, I worked, I churched, I smiled, I prioritized the needs of others and ate my pain. Eventually, I had nowhere to hide. It was finally time to feel.

In 2016, I moved home with every intention of continuing the pattern of masking my darkness with “good work.” I started a tutoring business helping challenged learners. I became active in my community working part-time at an after-school program. I jumped feet first into the music ministry at my church. I did this all while taking on speaking engagements and vendor opportunities as an author. A year later, the bottom dropped out without warning. Suddenly, I found myself with no money, no functioning relationships, no car, no frilly amenities most of us

take for granted. It was just me, my memories and feelings.

It didn't take long to discover that fear was the chief emotion calling the shots. Next up was anger. The last adjective I would use to describe myself would be angry. For years, I refused to allow anger to enter my consciousness because I wasn't sure I could control it if it ever surfaced.

So instead, I suffocated it by inflicting self-harm to avoid exploding on others. With the help of a therapist, I broke that festering emotional wound open and allowed it to ache.

After six years of dissecting, confronting and investigating my feelings, I'm finally feeling something new—joy. I'm grateful for the dark places I've seen and experienced. Because of them, only light and love illuminate every step forward. As I learn to embrace and navigate joy, I'm rediscovering and redefining my passions for creativity and service. I now have a certain clarity about my purpose that was once a vague haze of ideas. At church, we used to sing a song that says, "Weeping may endure for a night. But joy comes in the morning." I didn't fully understand what the older folks meant then. I do now. Good morning, world!