My Refuge

In this edited excerpt of his first POZ blog post, titled “Why I Still (Kinda, Sorta) Go to the Gym,” actor and writer Bruce Ward shares how going (or sometimes just trying to go) to the gym helps him cope as a long-term survivor.

December 29, 2014 By Bruce Ward

Through my 30 years of living with HIV, there has been one constant. Relationships and friendships have come and gone, illnesses have brought me to the brink and back to full health. But I have always kept a gym membership.

When I arrived in New York City in the summer of 1980, at age 22, I was ready to embrace my true self. I knew that if I wanted to attract the kind of masculine jocks I lusted after during my college years, I had to become one of them.

I wasn’t a particularly athletic kid, but I did enjoy the challenge of sports that I could practice by myself: shooting hoops in the driveway, slamming tennis balls with my racket against the garage door. Going to a gym I could do alone.

Gyms in the early ’80s were basic, consisting of free weights, Nautilus machines and treadmills. At first, I didn’t know what I was doing. But I learned by observing and asking questions.

I saw immediate results, transforming from a slightly pudgy duckling who never put much thought into his appearance into a sleeker, more muscular swan. I became aware of my body for the first time, and I was proud of it.

I began to build confidence and went to my first gay bars, meeting men I was attracted to and who were attracted to me. The validation was enormous.

Just as I arrived in New York, news of the “gay plague” and “gay cancer” began popping up. The fear of sex drove some gay men to celibacy. A different group of men was determined to avoid being perceived as one of the “others,” marked by muscle wasting and gauntness.

And so gay men began joining gyms. A new addiction was born out of fear: Spending hours at the gym, gaining muscle, and avoiding sex and poppers and the Saint disco would stave off the Angel of Death, at least for the moment.

After I got HIV in 1984, I continued to see the gym as my refuge, a place where I could actualize my vitality. If I could still break a sweat on a StairMaster and pump weights of increasing increments, then I couldn't be dying, could I?

Living in Boston during the '90s, I developed many illnesses related to the virus and to the medications: shingles, frequent sinus infections, a gastrointestinal bug appropriately named cryptosporidium, and AZT-related anemia requiring a transfusion.

Despite having fevers and fatigue so bad I would nod off at my desk, I looked forward to the short walk to the gym at lunch or after work. I could tell myself that I was still capable of physical activity. I could say, "I'm still here."

After the drug cocktails in 1996 changed the course of the epidemic, I moved back to New York at the end of 1998. I joined a gym even before finding an apartment. And I continued to switch gyms as I changed neighborhoods, knowing that, for me, proximity was directly related to the number of times a week I would drag myself out.

Since 2004, I've had two occurrences of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, a heart attack, diabetes, bone loss, gum loss, facial wasting (lipoatrophy), belly bloating (lipodystrophy), depression, anxiety and ongoing fatigue.

I now live in the Meatpacking District with a high-end gym attached to my building. I can take the elevator and never have to step outside. Yet getting there is more of a chore than ever.

I'm older and less motivated. I have lower and upper back tension, a bum knee, and shoulder spurs that, unless I opt for surgery, prevent me from benching or lifting heavy weights over my head. I am constantly fighting the "What does it matter" syndrome.

I have friends who have given up. The losses of the past and their current obstacles are too difficult. I understand. I have been there too. But somewhere along the line, I made a decision. I am not ready to disappear. I'll continue making it to the gym, when I can.

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