A Member of the Choir

November 21, 2010 By Richard Ferri, PhD, ANP

Today was a hard day. Today I felt like a member of the choir in church. Rather an odd saying I am sure you are thinking. It is when left alone in isolation, but not when placed back in history.

I guess the year was somewhere around 1986. Maybe I had just turned thirty or so. I don't remember. It doesn't matter. I was still lingering in my "invincible" stage of young adulthood. I was clearly indestructible. And as clearly, I was also rather stupid.

AIDS was becoming more real as the days passed but I did not care. I was young, and I did not know that I needed to care. I was beginning my life with John that would last for nearly 26 years until his death. Still it is inconceivable to be me that life has changed and John is dead, and yet I go on. Hardly just on. I have a new life and wonderful man in it, but that is another story for another day. Today I was a member of the choir.

So back to 1986 and AIDS was a palpable pulse in Manhattan where we lived. The screaming and the avalanche of deaths were mounting. I had my first HIV test that I had to personally carry to a basement lab in the old Bellevue Hospital. I felt like an interloper into the world of sex and disease. Little did I know I was no interloper but full-fledged actor playing the part of the fool. I turned over the test tube of my blood to some sad looking man in a stained lab coat with a cigertte hanging out of his mouth. My doctor has told me it was foolish to even take the test then since the only outcome was death. I thought I would rather know than not I told him. He just looked at me. "What the hell" was clearly spoken in his eyes. A week later I was told I was negative. Yea, right. I would test again some 15 years later and get different results. But who the hell knows when the moment of infection occurred, and who the hell cares?

But John and I really did not know anyone with AIDS...*yet*. Or so we thought until one Sunday we were sitting in church and I kept on looking at one of the guys in the choir. He was handsome, gaunt, waxy, and suddenly the color drained from his body. He could no longer stand to sing and slowly lowered himself to a seated position in the choir stall. He was gone for several services and

when he came back he could never make it though an entire hymn without crumpling to his seat.

The word was out: he had it; AIDS. He stayed for a long time in my memory then simply disappeared. I suppose some acknowledgement was offered but I don't remember. It doesn't matter now anyway except I felt like him today in church.

My breath came in short little spurts, my strength gone, and my guts making a slow rumble to force me to back in my seat. I could not stand. Sitting wasn't an option. It was the only position keeping me off the floor.

As I sat in church and listen to the music and sung silently to perverse my sapping energy I remembered that man in choir long ago, and prayed he was looking down at me. *For today I was just another member of choir myself whose voice weak.*

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