Building Walls

March 13, 2013 By Aundaray Guess

I recently experienced a loss of a friend after 9 years of knowing him. The good news is that he has not passed away but the bad news is that our relationship reached a place where it was decided he no longer wanted be friends. I know we had a disagreement but not one that would end a friendship. It ended by way of Facebook which is now the tool people use to end relationships. Unlike days past where matters were discussed to resolve conflicts or misunderstandings, it's now a simple click of the 'unfriend' button and relationship is over. In this age of online friends where we can have 2,000 friends on Facebook in truth one has only a handful of people in our 'real' life we can truly call friend. The loss of a friend can be hard as living with HIV he was someone I could count on to be part of my support system. So what does one do when a person you value enough to share your status and your life decides to part ways? And when it comes to health how important is a support system?

I know for myself as a sense of pride I made the claim that it didn't matter we were no longer friends. Besides I can always make new ones and with my personality it wouldn't be that difficult. I also didn't want to have the feeling that he ended it and in essence won, so to counter that perception I told myself it was mutual. In that time since our friendship ended I have met some great people yet right away I noticed a difference in the new relationships I was forming. I noticed that much of my interactions were guarded. I wasn't sharing as much and was providing only a surface look at who I was. My reasons was not that I thought I would be hurt again but it was more of a feeling of why bother. Why make another investment where you felt that the return was going to be null and void after a few years. Why be an open book and have someone decided they had enough and close the book and move on. And if a relationship can end suddenly after nine years with no warning why go through that situation again?

Building walls is what I started to do. It was a wall to keep and control what and who came into my life. I think that after living with HIV for so many years you become a master builder at building such walls as you live a life where rejection unfortunately comes with the virus. I'm not saying that was the reason for my previous friend ending the friendship but past rejections steels you from being hurt once more. For me it was drawing on past relationships that ended suddenly because of my disclosure of status or the feeling of abandonment of family. So when it came to someone giving rejection, one find yourself falling back into the role of placing those brick into place and making a motto to yourself formed of two words that sounds so familiar, 'never again"

There is a price for such action though and I call it the cousin of rejection, its called isolation. The truth is when you build walls although you're protected from others you also create a scenario where you're behind those walls alone. Your day to day is one of simply staying to

yourself. I admit I was guilty of this. It worked for me and I figured this way I don't have to go through all the work of maintaining a friendship or relationship. Isolation is a great thing at first as you can decide where to go without negotiating with anyone. It was handy if I decided to eat at a particular restaurant with no care how others felt or go to an event that others may not like. You're in that great space where you don't have to negotiate and coordinate times or dietary restrictions. Yet by making friends with isolation you realize that even that comes with a price.

The truth is that isolation and the concept of holding yourself from others hurts not only your spirit but also your physical being especially when it comes to HIV status. The trickle down effect of isolation is that it has a string to depression which as we all know can have a negative effect of your health. It's been shown that depression has a link to your immune system and with an existing compromised immune system it doesn't help matters. Also depression has that funny way of making you revisit bad habits that you have been able to overcome. Bad habits in the way of unhealthy/excessive eating, substance use of drugs/alcohol and for some unhealthy sexual practices which can affect your health long term.

Yet as someone in my forties I have come to that conclusion that the older you are the harder it is to make true friends. I think that's the wicked draw of Facebook as in the space of being connected in truth you're becoming disconnected to the true social of in person interaction. True friends are again not the thousands you have on your social media site but the ones you can knock on the door or call and just know that they have the time for you. So what I have done is look at the friends I have and rather than look at the absence instead look at the greatness of those who call me friend. The loss of my previous friend has to be looked as an action of not taking away something but giving space for others to come into my life. Yet I know that they'll never get in if I continue to make it difficult for them to do so and scaling walls I've built will make that task harder.

I have allowed myself to cry and not pretend the loss of the relationship doesn't hurt. The sad truth is that from the day we set our feet on this earth and until our last steps we're going to be hurt and disappointed by others. The true testimony is what we do with our steps while we're here. I find comfort in the fact that friends are here to travel with us until we come to a certain road in our journey upon which we find others who walk with us for the other leg of our travels. And at least I have the memories of past enjoyment so I can reflect on what makes a true friend for those days when it seems the clouds want to take over.

So I step back into the game of life and not simply as a calculated way to manage my HIV status but to recognize that life is more fulfilling when you have others to share in that joy. For my brethren especially those with HIV who live behind the walls you've created simply ask is it working for me. Am I finding the joy I was seeking or is it a false promise? Is living in isolation creating for me a healthy perspective of life or is it affecting my health and overall well-being? Am I truly safe? I had to ask myself the same questions and know that I will start dismantling my wall and to those I've been holding at arms length, welcome them in. I find comfort that this is moment in my life where I'll look back and remember this sad instant and celebrate how I was able to walk into a brighter light. So here we go again, walls down and arms are open, I'm ready for love!

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