Eternally Thankful

November 28, 2006 By Regan Hofmann

The holiday season kicked off to a strange start this Thanksgiving with weather more like that of Easter time--rainy and 65 degrees. My neighbor's forsythia bush had begun, in a moment of global-warming-induced-confusion, to bloom. As I dressed to make the rounds of friends and family's houses, I was having trouble getting into the holiday spirit. Perhaps because it felt more like I should be home spring cleaning than sitting down to stuff my face (which, of course, is exactly what I did.) Or, perhaps because the mass media, in an effort to milk the max out of its most lucrative celebration of the year (Christmas), skipped right over ole Turkey Day and was steaming, full speed ahead, towards the yuletide filling the airways with Christmas carols. All I'm trying to say, not very eloquently, is that it was bizarre to be driving, in shirt sleeves with the windows of my car down, pecan pie in lap, listening to "Deck the Halls" while passing bushes bursting with tiny, yellow flowers.

As I struggled to remind myself that it was indeed Thanksgiving, the sound of a shotgun rang out across the valley. The start of buck season in New Jersey coincides with Turkey Day. Every year, there are more weekend warriors traipsing through the woods in full camo and crazy face paint. The naturalist in me accepts that we have become the deer's only predator and that hunting is necessary to maintain herd control and to prevent deer from starving or from killing people on the roads. But the animal lover in me hates the thought of these magnificent, peaceful grazers being gunned down while we sit around our dinner tables, counting our thanks and asking for peace around the world.

I always do my best to ignore the commercial hoopla surrounding the holidays and to honor the essence of the day. On Thanksgiving, yes, I gorged myself like an boa constrictor swallowing a pig, and then laid around and watched football while I digested. But I also gave thanks. Particularly for having survived another year on the planet. Usually, my continued survival is just one of many things for which I am thankful. But this year, perhaps because the gun shots seemed more plentiful and because I've had a heightened sense of mortality lately, I was beside myself with thanks for having passed the ten year anniversary of surviving HIV.

Since my diagnosis, I've done a good job of convincing myself that HIV isn't going to take me down. I almost never believe that I will die from this disease. But a few weeks back, I read a report that extended the life expectancy of those living with HIV to 24 years. Jeez. That means I have 14 more to go. Which is a lot more than the 1-2 years I was initially given when diagnosed during seroconversion. But still, it scared me. It reminded me that while HIV has become "manageable," it is still potentially as deadly as all those dudes in camouflage crawling around the woods. I think I

connected, on some weird level, with the deer, who must be vaguely aware of the danger lurking all around them while they innocently chew their grass.

Of course, they might find the cure. They might continue to develop new treatment options that offer greater longevity. There is hope. Lots of it. That's what I keep telling myself. I think that if I never allow myself to belive that HIV can kill me, it won't. But sometimes, I think it's also okay to allow a thought or two about the other option. And to be scared. And ask for comfort.

There was that medical report on the 24- year lifespan and there was also an encounter with a woman at the barn where I keep my horses. She is really sweet and supportive and concerned and I know it was in a kind spirit that she shared the news with me that her cousin, who'd visited for Thanksgiving, was very knowledgeable about HIV and that she'd talked with him about my prognosis. I know it was out of care that she asked whether I'd been on ARVs for a long time and inquired whether I ever feared what would happen if they stopped working before they found other options or the cure, but it was, well, upsetting. Between that darn report, and her asking whether I feared dying from HIV, I got all worked up about HIV taking me out--something I rarely do.

After she left the barn, I stood with my horse in his stall for a while, trying to calm my fears. I buried them deep inside and went about my life, for a day or so. But, as our fears so often do, my worry burst out at an inopportune time, like those little yellow forsythia buds. I was at dinner with my boyfriend and we were having a great time in a lovely restaurant. Still, I was sad deep down inside, and he could tell. He asked what was wrong and I spilled my guts, ending up in tears at the table over whether or not I would die from HIV. I was embarrassed and felt weak. After all, part of my job as editor of POZ is to keep the torch of hope alive, right? And there I was, blubbering about my fears of death and being all glass-half-empty when I have more to be thankful for than so many other people on the planet. He was great and reminded me that treatments and research were progressing and cited the huge amount of money we saw Sharon Stone raise recently at an amfAR event. He also told me that it was okay to be afraid--sometimes.

And I remembered something I've learn to tell myself whenever I get sad over the notion of something or someone dying: That it's not how long we stay on the planet but what we do with our time while we're here. No time, no life span is ever enough. I try to focus instead of making the most out of whatever time I do have. Before coming to POZ, I always feared I would die before I got a chance to try to help people living with HIV. I knew if that happened, I'd be more upset than if I died trying to help people. So, on this Thanksgiving, I turned my thinking away from my own fears of death to a happier subject: the fact that I have had the privilege of starting work as an activist at POZ and that I have lived long enough to join, publicly, in the fight against AIDS. Now, if I could just find a little time to do something about that hole in the ozone...

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