# First Words

October 5, 2010 By Jay Vithalani

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First words. Some self-introducing to do -- which, for me anyway, is usually an awkward business. Hulloos. I'm Jay Vithalani, the newest "kid" on the POZ blog block. I'm 37-years-old (will be 38 next month). I'm a gay man. I'm a graduate student in the humanities -- trust me, you don't want to know in what specific field, at least not yet. And I've been HIV-positive for just over five years now.

If you're still with me, let's pretend this is *not* a bad first date but a neutral or ambiguous speed-date encounter. Moving along, then. I was born and grew up in Bombay (I persist in calling it that, not Mumbai, for reasons that will probably emerge at some point) in, well, simpler if not better or worse times. About all that growing-up stuff. Adapting some words from an essay I wrote a few years ago, about coming to these United States: "My education and upbringing were of a peculiarly 'Western' kind. English is my first language. (I refused, on principle, to give the TOEFL exam when applying to American colleges and graduate programs, with some interesting consequences; but that's a story for another time.) I went to a school which used, until the eighth grade, only American textbooks, and then to another for high-school which based itself very seriously on British models. I grew up watching American TV shows -- many, still too many TV shows - and listening to American pop music. Jackson Pollock and Jon Stewart are not 'alien' to me; neither are Emerson and the Emmy Awards."

I was an undergraduate at Amherst College, majoring in English and philosophy; I spent my junior year in England. Then a stint at Harvard for a PhD in English (which I didn't complete). I moved back to Bombay in the late 1990s and worked in the test-prep business -- tutoring kids for standardized tests like the SAT and GRE -- for a few years before a couple of freelance gigs as writer and editor. Back to the U.S. in 2005 -- Iowa City for a few years, and now in the Boston area again.

So, yeah, I've moved around a bit in the last 20 years or so. And no, I'm not really *as* dull as this summary makes me sound. And yes, my accent is a bastardized mixture of generic American, clipped British, and upper-middle-class Indian.

Major omission in this mad-dash-through-the-decades outline: any mention of family. That will have to wait for a while.

Nabokov once said that Mnemosyne, the muse of memory, was a very careless girl. Which is a

fancy though beautiful way of saying that memories, and the stories we tell and re-tell based on these, are notoriously prone to error. So, apply the caveats by all means; I do. Nevertheless, certain snapshots from my past are incredibly vivid to me, and it would take a pretty powerful psychic crowbar to prise them from my head. Like the one about masturbating in the bathroom after watching *My Beautiful Laundrette* at age 15. Or the ones about hearing the news at 18: that Magic Johnson was HIV-positive and that Rock Hudson had died of AIDS. Or the one about my first Boston Fourth of July, sitting by the Charles River, at 22. Or the one about meeting P, looking at incomprehensible paintings, and asking her out to dinner ("I'm not hitting on you; I'm gay; and I'll pay") at 27. Or the one about my final session of psychoanalysis at 31. Or the one about the night of the Iowa caucuses, 3 January 2008, celebrating Obama's victory, at 35...

But enough of these "snapshots." Too many of them already -- "lurid, rapid, garish, grouped, / heightened from life, / yet paralyzed by fact." Those words are from Robert Lowell's great poem, "Epilogue" -- and certainly, the irony of quoting from a poem so titled in this self-introduction is not lost on me. But Lowell goes on:

All's misalliance.

Yet why not say what happened?

Pray for the grace of accuracy

Vermeer gave to the sun's illumination

stealing like the tide across a map

to his girl solid with yearning.

We are poor passing facts,

warned by that to give

each figure in the photograph

his living name.

The snapshots have become, or at least aspire to become, by poem's end, paintings and photographs.

And so it is with me, gentle blog reader -- your new and shy poor passing fact. In the weeks and months and years to come, I hope to give many figures in many photographs -- the old and the new, both mine and those of the world at large, spontaneous as well as rigidly composed, not only sad but also giddily happy -- their living names.

Next up: Why I decided to come out about my HIV-positive status. And why I wanted to start blogging on POZ. And a collection of more-or-less random facts about myself -- you know, the are-you-a-cat-person-or-dog-person variety. Stay tuned.

JV

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