Happy Anniversary or Diagnosis Day?

I don't know what to say…

"Happy anniversary? Diagnosis Day?"

January 29, 2018 By Lora René Tucker

On August 27, 2017 I felt I should celebrate the day I was diagnosed. It was my anniversary; the day that marks when I began to beat the odds and survived… but there's also something uncomfortable, even somewhat creepy about it to me.

August 27, 2017 was the twentieth anniversary of me receiving that life–altering statement, with the doctor holding my hand and a lilt in his voice saying: "I'm so sorry." That day in 1997 was like knowing where you were when either of the Kennedy's were assassinated, when the Challenger exploded, or when the Twin Towers went down. I have two very personal signposts for my diagnosis day: the death of Princess Diana and John Kennedy Jr. (Oh- what could have been…) Both were my contemporaries. Both died the same year.

Maybe that is why I feel I should celebrate in some way… it's an hiv thing, (you may get it. (?)

I would like to share a story with you, I promise I'll make it brief:

In August of 1997, after over seventeen years of being a corporate interior designer, I left my job at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York as a senior designer and accepted a position in human services. I also decided to take an HIV test after getting a phone call the prior winter. On August 27th, my doctor informed me that I had AIDS, on the 28th, I went to my first day on the job at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, conducting empowerment workshops. As I began my journey, with the only family member I told at the same time; I went to several doctors; one of which informed me I probably had six months to live and to get my business in order. (And I did… First, not returning to THAT so-called specialist.) I did find a doctor and kept the one who broke the news; both became my partners in my survival. So, I made plans to live with the virus, not die of it. Up to this day, I am still mentally resisting this virus and the stigma that labels me, marginalizes me, and places some scarlet letters across my forehead. In neon.

BUT

Since I was informed that I had six months to live, (twenty friggin' years ago,) I achieved more than I imagined I would had if I were sero-negative: I obtained my credentials as a substance abuse counselor, assisted in the clemency of a mother of four who was a victim of the draconian Rockefeller Drug Laws, graduated with honors with a master's in social work and received my

license, published my first book of poetry, became an adjunct professor teaching Diversity and Racism… now I am a psychotherapist, working to obtain my LCSW, training for my certification as a poetry therapist, writing for POZ, and following my bliss.

Like everyone else, I have been and still am living until I die; grabbing hiv by the…. throat and making plans, having setbacks, and reaching some goals. I refuse to give hiv any more power than it has.

Hell, there are people I have met and know who can boast of being 30-plus-year miracles; surviving when all hope appeared lost, when friends and lovers were disappearing around them… Do they celebrate their anniversary? Would I be considered obnoxious even thinking this way? (Bitch, why even bring it up?!) How do I celebrate the miracle that is my surviving this dis-ease that still savages so many loved ones? Still orphaning children and destroying families?

Should I be just moving on, no acknowledgement, no love… Love for me… And my perseverance… And my friggin' life?

I did ask a few of friends (who aren't hiv +) to join me to "celebrate." I (tried) to explain why. One seemed to ignore me as if I might have lost my mind. A couple of people reacted to my remembering my diagnosis date with a weird disdain:

"Why are you even uttering you have had it ("the cooties") for so long, let alone boast…"

(Maybe, because I'm a survivor, not a victim.)

"What's the big deal? It's not as if that day was positive."

(But look at all the positive things that happened after that date.)

"I'd want to forget that date…"

…But I can't.

Because I will always be aware of my diagnosis date. One way (death sentence) or the other (I'm a survivor). It's like the disease, lurking in that reservoir, that dark abyss; surfacing in August whether I want it to or not. I always know when it is near. And those signposts through time kept me counting the years, tears, months, since that first day I walked out of my doctor's office. This year I took notice when the deluge of documentaries and news clips about Princess Diana's death surfaced; constant articles and moments of silence for John Kennedy Jr. Then they said twenty years had passed,

DAMN! It's been THAT long? Time flies… (Am I Saying That?!)

I just worked through the day, August 27, 2017. I moved through that day, looking around, realizing I continued to LIVE and lived through the anniversary of when I was told I had AIDS.

I have survived twenty years, when so many have not.

One thing I did before that day passed, I sat still for several minutes, looking at all my signposts along the way… being grateful, I looked up said “Thank you” to God and everyone who was and is a part of my life; my survival… A new year has come, August is months ago, and I sit here typing, just as stunned as I was twenty years ago. But this year, I will celebrate that I am still right here… Yay!

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