HIV and Lost Faith in Faith #NFHAAD

"AIDS is God's punishment for being gay". A mantra that began in a church. So how do people with HIV reconcile this with their own beliefs?

August 28, 2020 By Shawn Decker

I'll preface this entry with a disclaimer: I haven't been to church in quite some time. I'm not sure I describe my feelings about the universe and life itself under the word, "faith", even though I do believe in an after-life of some sort. Whether it's anything we'd recognize based on our experiences here on Earth remains to be seen (or not)...

What I do know is that, as a kid, as my belief in the existence of dragons and monsters began to butt up against the rigid confines of reality, I continued to carry a belief in Jesus and God, as both were explained to me in Sunday school growing up. Once, I decided to skip out on Sunday school and play beside the church instead. Slyly, I returned just as Sunday school was ending and attended the service, worship, whatever you like to call it. Well, my dishonestly was quickly discovered when we got home, and my parents discovered that I had a tick on my head. They were trying to figure out where I got... I knew, and came clean.

In my precious mind, God had punished me for lying to my parents. Shit, who I am to say he didn't?

As I got a little bit older, we stopped going to church. After I tested positive for HIV at age 11, my mom really wanted us to get back into the routine of attending church. It couldn't hurt, in terms of increasing the odds of my survival. If anything, I believe she wanted me to make peace with the afterlife, since it seemed I'd be beating my grandparents to the show. Mom was honest about her intentions when meeting with pastors about attending church. I believe the response was lukewarm. Years later she told me that one person said they'd need to educate their congregation first...

Mom never heard back.

A few years later, I started to get a knock on my bedroom door on Sunday mornings.

"Shawn! Get up! Time for church!"

"GO AWAY!"

As a teenager, there was no way I was waking up to go to church. My parents allowed for a more

than reasonable amount of independence at each stage of me and my older brother's development. So it was kind of strange how pushy mom started to get on Sunday mornings. I remember one morning she attempted a softer approach through the closed door that separated my world from the rest of the house. I remember hearing some sadness and defeat in her voice. Then the car started up and drove away. I felt guilty for not going along, but it didn't change my stance on the issue.

After I opened up with HIV at age 20, the local newspaper interviewed my family and I for an article about HIV. In it, my mom explained that her and my dad's friends from college; devout Christians who were really into the televangelists of the 80s, had broken off contact after I tested positive. Likely because they'd heard that AIDS was some kind of punishment from God, but also due to fears that I'd infect their children. I was surprised to learn about this painful part of my parents' experiences, but I knew right away what I needed to do: get a fresh set of Godparents! I enlisted some new friends I'd made since opening up- Steve Schalchlin (HIV positive and the son of a preacher!), his partner Jim Brochu (the talented one) and POZ founder, Sean Strub, who'd changed my life by reading a fan letter to POZ and inviting me to NYC for the first time to be interviewed by the magazine.

My new Godparents had literally changed my life with their friendship and talents. And like me (minus Jim), they were all positive. If AIDS was some kind of punishment from God, I'd be honored to serve whatever sentence was handed down so long as these guys were by my side. Also it was Steve, who'd been saved by HIV medications just in the nick of time in the mid-90s, who showed me some tough love when my health was failing and I was dragging my feet about starting meds. "You're going to DIE if you don't start taking meds, Shawn!" It was the jolt of truth that only a true friend can deliver. And I knew he was right.

What has changed regarding faith and HIV since the 1980s? Evangelicals in the U.S. did irreparable damage to not only their own reputation, but the country and the world with their steadfast support of Donald Trump. It's safe to assume that people with HIV are just one of many groups that they do not particularly care for. And Jerry Falwell Jr.'s recent escapades have certainly shown the hypocrisy of those who are so quick to judge others. I try not to lump everyone who identifies as a Christian in with the evangelicals. It helps that, when I think of Christians, I think of my mom and Steve Schalchlin. And, as a songwriter, Steve wrote one of my favorite lyrics of all time: "I'd rather be me with AIDS... then to have to be you without it. At least I know what's killing me!"

Right now, more than ever, compassion and kindness are needed. I know many people of faith are doing wonderful things in their community and will help anyone in need regardless of HIV status or skin color. That's the empathy in action that reminds of those stories about a man named Jesus Christ that I heard through a little boy's ears a lifetime ago...

Positively Yours,
Shawn

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