HIV... What's Love Got to Do With It? Everything.

February 12, 2022 By Shawn Decker

Valentine's Day is here again!

I remember signing valentine's day cards for my classmates when I was a little dunderhead. Someone's stock would go way up if they got you a comic book character valentine. Or a hard piece of gum that never spoils. Then god knows when those damned carnations were introduced, unnecessarily complicating matters of the candy heart. White meant friendship... pink meant interested... red meant love! Maybe it was a fever dream that never actually happened, but I swear I remember the hottest among us prancing around with more red carnations than white.

Ah, our crazy human rituals. The preening of our invisible peacock feathers is on full fool display at this time of the year. And what, with just enough time for a financial recovery reboot inflicted by the holidays? The timing of it all is merciful, but only in the most forgiving of assesment of the situation that our collective desperation has helped to build.

I'm fortunate. Not only did I survive not receiving the red carnations and public adoration I deserved in my youth, I also survived HIV, which hit right before puberty. From the age of 12 on, every Valentine's Day I experienced henceforth hung over my head like the gooey drippings of a freshly cracked egg on the noggin'. Messy? Sure. Oddly titillating? You betcha! Oh, and before I move on I gotta fess up to being overly dramatic. I did indeed receive a pink carnation once and boy did I feel like the bee's knees, kids, I tell ya...

Anyhoo. I'm also fortunate in regard to matters of the heart because I eventually made a decision about how I viewed my own HIV status. It happened at age 20 when I decided to speak up about being HIV positive for the first time. The turnaround was dramatic and happened in an instant. I went from keeping my medical secret for close to a decade to splashing it online and in POZ for all to see. One of the inspirations for doing so was simple: I'd never have to worry about who knows I have HIV if everybody knows. And I was hell-bent on telling everyone. I'd never felt so empowered in my life... not counting learning how to walk or finally being able to verbally express my needs to my parents, among other achievements, of course.

We all have our own issues to weigh when it comes to disclosure, and I respect anyone's decision to keep that kind of info out of the wrong ears. Some people suck. And some people have to deal with those people, who can often be family members, co-workers, anyone with regular access to

the control panel of your emotional circuit board. Disclosure isn't an option for all, because we all still live in a world where stigma against people with HIV is still very real.

What I do know is that my own path to finding love got a lot smoother when I freed myself from the secret of my HIV status. When I realized that if rejection came- and it had anything to do with my HIV status- it was the result of someone else's fears and not a reflection on the worth of my entire being. My self-worth, in effect, wasn't going to be measured by how many invisible white carnations were in my bouquet when I wanted it to be brimming with reds.

I have shared half of my life with Gwenn, who I would have never met were it not for the HIV educational work that brought us together. Occasionally I recognize the normalcy of my domestic life today, and how those early feelings that HIV would somehow disqualify me from love couldn't have been more wrong, considering what destiny had in store. Love is a strange journey, and my path has been charmed from the day I received that mysterious pink carnation to today. There were so many steps that propped me up to a place where I felt comfortable disclosing my status, and I am thankful for the lessons learned on the bumpier parts of the journey.

Well, that's a poorly wrapped box of chocolates. But who tries to wrap up a heart, anyway? Wear yours on your sleeve, proudly, but spring for dry cleaning once in awhile. I'm sending some red carnations your way for reading these thoughts. Just remember that it's the Valentine's Day card you write for yourself that matters.

So, please, be kind to you.

Positively Yours,

Shawn

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