Learning to say No

November 6, 2013 By Aundaray Guess

It was about 3 in the morning when the phone rang. For most people when the phone rings at such an early time it's to announce bad news of a loved one. For me I knew right away that the call was for a different purpose. The sound of the ring seemed like a crashing of pans on the floor as it filled the small studio space, wondering if I was waking the neighbors. In trying to decide whether to answer the phone I stirred in the covers, battling the growing excitement of my manhood.

The phone rang louder as did the voice in my head telling me no, don't answer it. The voice knew that it was another stranger, one who I had a previous sexual encounter with but who still remained a stranger. Someone who I only knew by the twelve characters that made up their screen name. A made up pseudonym made up of a sexual act that told you what his intentions were without him saying a word. He wasn't real, the stories of his self wasn't real yet I wanted him to make me real, to have validation through the process they call sex. I knew with each ring my response was needed and wondering what direction was I planning on taking. Was I going to put myself in literally a position of giving away my 'stuff' or was I finally going to have the gumption to finally learn to say no.

Saying no had always been a problem for me starting from the days when I was taken advantage of as a child. All those many years ago when I said no it was overridden and ignored for the benefit of another. In my powerless state I felt that the word no was stripped of any rights I had and that who was I to say no, I was black and based in the definition of society I had no value. And in my older years as a gay man with HIV I had even lesser value as a person so who was I to let no fall from my lips. Even those years I stood on my own two feet I still denied myself the power of saying no. I was a people pleaser. I wanted to make everyone else happy and in their happiness I probably would find my own.

My dance was how I became HIV positive. It was a first time experience of a situation where I wanted to be liked. Where I thought I wanted to be loved even if I didn't know your last name. Just the fact you saw me was priceless enough. I put on a show for you to simple see me. My costume were tight fitted clothing that showed my definitions, a voiceless mannequin among other mannequins all fighting to be seen and admired. Even when I was given this lifetime gift of HIV and finally voiced 'no' it was too late as the deed had been done.

Learning about sex so young I thought that using your body was how you were supposed to show your value. I thought that the way you performed in bed was a validation as an individual and that

by doing so you mattered. In that search for validation I kept giving my stuff away again and again not seeing how each time I was giving a piece of my soul away. Each encounter was not always about the pleasure of sex but for you to like me enough to say one good thing about me. Something I could hold on to until my next fix of a stranger's praise. When I finally opened my eye to my reality I told myself to stop and don't do that again. But just like I couldn't voice my 'no' to strangers, sadly I couldn't voice 'no' to myself.

In a way I didn't want to stop my destructive behavior of random and sometimes anonymous sex. I had HIV so little else mattered and I basically didn't care. In that moment I didn't have to learn to say no as I was living for the moment. The online world was my real world as I trolled profiles looking for the next person who was going to affirm me. I lied in my descriptions and told people what they wanted to hear as I typed away with uncontrollable furor, my fingers seeming to have a power of their own. My sex life was like Lays potato chips, I couldn't eat just one. The real world of becoming re-infected or getting another sexual transmitted disease fell on my deaf ears. It wasn't that I didn't care but I felt when it came to my sexual urge I no longer had control. That I knew it was wrong and I should have told myself no don't do this to myself, but if I couldn't say 'no' to myself how was I going to say it to you especially when you tell me you're not going to wear a condom because it doesn't feel real. I would have died for any feeling as I become numb to my own wants and desires. I wanted to feel real myself.

There were many moments when I would look in the mirror and in those moments I couldn't look myself in the eye ashamed at what I was doing and letting others do to me. I would step into my living space and see the clutter, not only mentally but physical as around me everything was out of place. The dirty dishes, the unmade bed, the uneaten food left on the dining table, the days old papers strewn about all reflected my life. My home was dirty, my thinking was dirty, and I felt my soul was dirty. I had a conversation with myself asking why and trying to remind myself what kind of person I was. Telling myself to think about my dreams and is this who I want to be? Reminding myself of my talent and worth and contributions and this is not me. I would apologize to myself and tell myself that never again would I place myself in that position. Never again will I compromise my values for an instant gratification. Never again.

But then my hand would direct the mouse to the online chat room or the phone rang at the odd time of the night and my will was once again tested. The worst part was not that I did what said I wasn't going to do, going back on my affirmation. The worst part was that I let myself down, again. I didn't say no.

At first I thought it was my HIV that placed me in this irrational place. That it was this disease in me that made me feel like I had nothing to give but my body. It wasn't until I let myself go back past my HIV and reexamining my child abuse that I found my reason for my self-destruction behavior. I had shut the door on that part of my life and felt it didn't have an effect on my present. In a way I even fooled myself into believing that it didn't happen at all and if it did I wanted it. I didn't know then that this was my way of not being a victim and to gain power of the situation.

But I was a victim and being a victim didn’t mean that I was a powerless but that an unfortunate situation happened to me that was not my fault. Pulling back the covers on my private shame I realized that I could still say no. Say no to being victimized again. Saying no to my past abuse continue to pull the strings of my life. Saying no to myself and that I will stop denying myself a full healthy life. I had within me the power to say no. By taking a step back and facing my darkness I was able to finally see the light of my life. It was always there waiting for me to discover it. Waiting for me to embrace it.

And when I stripped myself of past lives I did the most wondrous thing. I learned to embrace the person that I was. I learned to accept everything there was about me, dysfunction and all. In my imperfect life I found perfection that I had the power to share on my own terms and no one else. I was no longer auditioning for the attention of others but each day made sure my own life was a showstopper for myself. I stepped away from the lies and clenched for dear life my truths of who I was. I created my own worth.

So as the phone rang although old feelings came rising to the surface I was now in a position to say no and by doing so emerging into the person I wanted to be. Many years later the phone has stopped ringing and my self-control is now in control. I live in a relationship for the past 14 years with God and my partner on earth and my past no longer is my future. I still have HIV but it doesn’t have me and I have been rewarded greatly by simply learning to say no.

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