More Than HIV

January 3, 2013 By Aundaray Guess

I had the most interesting dialogue with a co-worker who expressed to me that he was carrying guilt. He shared with me with tears in his eyes something that has been on his mind for awhile. He was carrying guilt that he just had to share with someone. His guilt stemmed from the fact that he was HIV negative and most of his friends were HIV positive. In sharing this he was asking himself what was wrong with him as if he didn't know whether to take it as a curse or as a blessing.

Immediately I wanted to say to him "are you crazy!" but I have a feeling my face was already registering that look as I couldn't comprehend how he could feel that way. Before I passed judgment I listened to him fully explain his reasoning and from it he shared how he just lost a close friend who had AIDS. He shared how he felt helpless as he couldn't do anything for him. He knew that he could be there as a friend to comfort him but he didn't have it within his power to take the virus away and heal him.

After his statement he finished it with a remark that was sad to hear but I knew where he was coming from. He shared that as gay black man wasn't he predestined to get HIV? And why does his friend have it but not him? And that brought on my "Wow" moment as in a surreal way I knew what he spoke of. It was something that I had heard before from different lips and now stuck in a moment when I was hearing it again. How did such a feeling get ingrained in the psyche of my friend, enough to make him guilty of being healthy?

His sentiments were the same as others who felt in that if you're black and gay, it's not a matter of 'if' but more a matter of 'when' you will get HIV/AIDS. This message seems to come from the knowledge that if it pertains to anything black and gay the message is one of HIV/AIDS. As if the only visibility gay black men have is when it's in the context of HIV. Even in the dialogue of gay marriage, equality or any other predominate issues the mainstream gay community is discussing, we're left out of the conversation. But when talk turns to HIV/AIDS, then suddenly we have a room at the table. It's at that moment we're part of the conversations and our voice has a value.

Within the last few months we have been inundated with repeated statistical information that says how infected we are. We're overwhelmed with the only images we see of ourselves as we hold up a condom or pose next to a huge bottle of protease inhibitors. I'll admit as a person who was featured in one of those HIV ads, I even drunk the Kool-Aid and in making monies from the ad, I never once stopped to think how I was contributing to the images of gay black men only seen as having HIV. Yes there's that value of having someone to relate to but the machine that produces one dimensional skewered images of gay black men as contagious beings only reaffirms

my friend’s shame in being healthy.

It seems that since we’re so predestined to get HIV does it create a mindset that cause a person to think, why should I be safe when I’m going to get it anyway? I personally know of a young man who had the crazy thought that if I’m destined to get it, I rather be the one who chooses when I get it rather than loose any sense of control and let someone else determine my fate. In this view he expresses his ownership of his power which has been diluted for centuries, yet instead of affirming it’s used to confirm on how we see those who are gay and black.

I know it sounds crazy, but here I was having a conversation with a friend who was carrying the same guilt of ’why not me’ instead of saying ’thank God it’s not me’.

I truly feel that dialogue has to be restated and recreated for gay black men to let them know that they are not simply vessels for this virus and that their worth far exceeds a three letter acronym. We have to stop reducing them to a statistical number and bring value to them that can not simply be put in an Excel graph. We have to create our own visibility if need be and not be hidden in the shadow of a media campaign that has us in the weighted darkness of a condom. We have to let folks know that I am recognized by the organ in my head rather than the organ that lies in my pants. I’m more than that!

I left my friend with the message that despite what he thought he was blessed and having the virus myself, I wouldn’t wish it on him. He had to know and start believing that his negative status was a blessing and not a curse. And he had to know that his negative status was not a matter of chance. That he is not a lottery ticket whose number had yet to be called. Recognizing he lives in a world where the views of HIV/AIDS is shifting where they see negative as a negative and positive as a positive.

That he has accepted the fact that he is more than HIV.

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