So Long, Dr. B

December 29, 2013 By Lora René Tucker

With Simon and Garfunkel between my ears, I stepped into my doctor's office on 25th and Broadway for the routine blood letting and check-in. Dr. B's my partner in the matter of my life; he wouldn't just check my chart and blood pressure but will have a nice and concise chit-chat about "Life according to Lora" and so forth. Finding a seat, humming "Bridge over Troubled Waters," I didn't think this day would be any different. I had been getting over a cold, needed to get new prescriptions, and get "Big Mamma" (one of my more cooperative veins) tapped. But my usual greeting was receiving a solemn response - I almost thought I had entered "The Gulag." I sensed an ominous pall in the air, so I didn't become my boisterous self or even ask; I assumed I would find out what was happening sooner than later. The office had become rather quiet the past couple months - the mood was like a bi-polar on a down-swing - the doctor's associate had announced the opening of his own practice - something wasn't right.

Right before it was my turn to see the good doctor, I pulled out my little list reminding me of what I wanted to talk about, including a humble thanks for counseling me through my year of challenges and having the confidence in my ability to cope and continue. Since 1997, we had been through so much together; from disclosing my status to my elderly parents, to supporting my advocacy work, and my struggle with the stigma, rejection, and desire to belong. He was not only an ear but had an empathy that went far beyond that of an internist for an HIV+ black woman in America trying to make it. I heard Dr. B call my name; I left my coat on the waiting room chair, pulled the plugs out of my ears, and lugged my pocketbook and myself into his office. Slightly slouched, as if his lower back was giving him some grief, Dr. Bellman greeted me as he had for the past sixteen years:

"Hello Miss Tucker, welcome to our establishment. How are you today?"

I plopped myself in one of the two chairs in front of his desk.

"Hey Doctor B..."

I remember when I first met Dr. Bellman, at Friends in Deed in 1997 - I might have just been two months with my diagnosis of AIDS and I was out to find the soldiers for my army against the disease. I listened to what Dr. B had to say about the new antiretrovirals that were saving lives. I also scanned the large meeting room of mostly gay white men and spotted the doctor's fine ass gay nurse who was working the room (Listen, I still had eyes.) I met a couple of women and a scattering of gay black men who acknowledged my existence - but that October of 1997, I realized straight, black, female was surely a minority. When the question and answer portion of Dr. Bellman's talk commenced, I pulled out my list of questions I had prepared (yes, I'm into lists,) but as he called on me, I began with what was really on my mind...

"Doctor, I am newly diagnosed and have a few questions. How many blacks do you have in your

population?” A hush came over the room.

“I have a few, mostly male.” He went into some detail.

“How many straight females do you have?”

“Not as many as I would like.” He shared how he’s willing to be the best doctor no matter the person. I paused.

“Well, how would you like to add a straight black female to your population?”

The room roared. So began our doctor/patient relationship.

Sitting in Dr. B’s office, we went over the aches and pains, he filled out the orders for my blood work, and I, like always, asked for a B12 shot.

“Of course, Miss Tucker.” He answered never missing a beat. I then asked how he was doing. He looked up and realized I needed to swap chairs so to look at him directly. I moved.

“Lora, at the end of December, I will be closing my practice after 28 years.”

What the.....

“Oh -” I gasped. Tears began to march down my cheeks.

“Well, you do have a right to retire, after 30 years...”

I don’t know how I did it - smiling and crying at the same time. We talked; he assured me that I would be able to transition to another doctor and that I will be able to keep him posted on my continuing journey. I asked him what his plans were. (Was he going to go to Disney World?) He shared that he would still be an active advocate, but he needed to rest. As my sinuses built up for the “boo-hoo finale,” I thanked him for being my trusted partner in my fight against this “dis- ease” and a Sherpa in my climb up this Everest-like mountain called life. I asked him for a hug. We hugged.

After I donated my four tubes of blood, set my last appointment to see the doctor, put on my coat, plugged my ears, and headed out. Simon and Garfunkel worked their way on my ipod to a song for the occasion:

“So long, Frank Lloyd Wright. I can’t believe your song is gone so soon...”

I couldn’t believe what the universe handed me...I stepped on the elevator.

“I hardly learned the tune - so soon, so soon; I remember...”

I started to create my own lyrics...

“Paul Curtis Bellman - our office talks would always go beyond. You understood my song for so long, so long...” It was like my soundtrack to my own reality show (in my HEAD...)

"Doctors may come and doctors may go and never change your point of view. (How true.)

“When I ran dry I’d stop and always think of you…”

I walked to 14th Street and 6th Avenue to the “F” train, playing and replaying the song, singing my rendition, accepting the next signpost I was passing.

So long, Dr. B. You did a job well done and I will never forget the sternness in your brow, the focus in your eyes, the conviction in your voice. I will always cherish the break into a smile I would try to capture before I would leave your office, a smile that would help me carry on as I battled that rude guest in my body and the often unforgiving world that waited for me. Just know, when I was in your company, and was able to capture an impish grin or smile, I knew then I had done my job.

Check out the original song by Simon and Garfunkel: "So Long, Frank Lloyd Wright:"

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