The Shadow of Death

April 16, 2009 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

Mercifully, I was spared the first-hand trauma of witnessing the multitude of AIDS-related deaths in the 1980s. However, I was not spared the second-hand trauma of hearing about them. As a newly out gay man when I was a freshman at New York University in Greenwich Village in 1987, it was impossible not to know that a plague was among us.

Although I was aware that death was a frequent visitor to my community, I was able to physically and emotionally keep him at a distance until my HIV diagnosis in 1992. From that point on, he and I were the best of friends. More like in a love-hate relationship sort of a way, but I hope you get what I mean.

Not unlike with many relationships as the years move on, death and I grew apart. That is, until recently. They say that deaths come in threes. After three recent deaths of people I knew, I find myself again in the shadow of death. Just when you think death has moved on, he taps you on the shoulder and whispers his existence in your ear.

The tragic circumstances of these three recent deaths created an eery echo in my brain. I'm highly aware of death again in a way that I haven't been since the 1980s. I can only imagine the horror of this feeling amplified in the minds of those who went through three deaths back then not in the timespan of three months but in three weeks or even in three days.

Now that we've gone through the ritual that old friends go through of getting reacquainted, I hope that death and I can forge a more balanced relationship. I realize that I was wrong to ignore him. I hope death realizes I'm not ready to make the ultimate long-term commitment.

For a conversation about the connection between wellness and death, please read my interview with Chodo, an HIV-positive Buddhist monk, in the March 2009 issue of POZ.

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