Those Little Signposts

January 30, 2012 By Lora René Tucker

Happy New Year and Hello World!

I have been racking my brain since I was offered the opportunity to write this blog, thinking of what would be the running theme, what would be relevant, thoughtful, and hopefully entertaining. For inspiration, I read every blog on poz.com, quizzed all (or most) of my advocacy-minded friends, thought and wrote and thought again. I got so caught-up with "what would be my manifesto..." I got all wound-up in minutiae. I made myself batty. Then a thought ran up my leg...

When I'm fixed, locked, and loaded in "survival mode," knowing that I have rent to pay, work to go to and that there are other ailments that will take me to my maker faster than hiv* ever will, I find myself on "auto-pilot;" taking for granted those pauses, those little signposts that make me stop and reflect. Now, I realize I have to appreciate every day, savor those precious moments, ("yadda, yadda,") but all that I've been able to do is plow through the day, stopping long enough to look around, channel Peggy Lee, and ask "Is that all there is?" In "survival mode" any enlightenment will only come by hitting me upside my head.

And this is exactly what has been happening to me this past holiday season: Survival mode, "yadda, yadda," then enlightenment upside my head... Bear with me.... Being hiv* positive, (*hiv, I do not capitalize "the virus," my way of not giving it any power,) I tend to think that I am going to die before any of my loved ones; my family, friends, even associates. Not that I obsess over the thought of my demise, but that warped, "magical thinking" is a part of my "pity-pot" (got one?). As the years go by, as I survive this disease and live my life, that warped thought does get a reality check now and again:

Take for instance the week of Thanksgiving; I received a message from a person I had not talked to in years. She informed me that a mutual friend from my past had died. It had been over fourteen years since I had seen "Jim." I knew the interval of time because it is the time I have known I had hiv. In 1997, when I shared my status with him, thinking I could not only confide in him, but gain support, he retreated from contact with me almost immediately. He broke my heart. I had experienced many episodes of racial prejudice with more resilience; this was something new and very traumatic. I never hated him for what he did, but realized early how I had to cope with another layer of oppression; I was "marginalized peoplz'." He ran from me when I shared with him my diagnosis; maybe because it put his mortality in his face, who knows, but there I was, fourteen years later, being told that he had passed on, and I was the executor of his will. (About twenty years ago he wrote a will, and never updated it.) And I survived him. I "did the right thing" by my long, lost friend, but how life was busy happening...

Right after Christmas, as I searched the web to find out which colored candle goes where on the kenora for Kwanzaa, (hold that thought,) I saw on the internet the video of an Austin, Texas teenager, Benjamin Breedlove, 18 years old. Ben had a life-threatening heart condition that he fought every day as he was

growing up. Who, after cheating death three times, finally lost his life after suffering a heart attack on Christmas night. But days before he passed away, he left powerfully quiet, simply recorded videos about his near-death experiences and how at peace he felt when he believed he was leaving this world (click here to check out both parts one and two).

A young man, a boy, 18 years old, filled so much into those finite minutes called his life and left a gift of hope, the only way he knew how. How many messages of hope can I share?

I passed two of those "sign posts," yet I was still sitting in my "neurosis".

Sometime around New Year, I stopped for a minute, took a long, deep breath, and continued in "survival mode"...

Then, on January 3rd, I received a phone call at work and was told that a young man, 38 years old, died far before he should. I yelled "No!" in rapid repetition, into the receiver. The phone call brought me back to a cold winter day in 1997, when I met Apache Paschall at his home on the lower east side and took a walk with him down and around Houston Street, pitching what I wanted to do for his mother, Elaine Bartlett: Get her story out, so she could get clemency and be freed from the Rockefeller Drug Laws. I could not do anything unless her son Robert "Apache" Paschall, was okay with it. (Elaine made it clear to me on the Thursdays I would see her at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility: "...if Apache approves, we'll do it.") Apache was the eldest son; fiercely protective, staunchly loyal, and unconditionally loving. In the course of the walk, I shared who I was, (which is just a zealous black woman) and that I "...wanted to help." He checked me out; I know he scrutinized me, having met enough people that were always "willing to help," but never there for the long haul. He could tell I would be there for the long haul. And I was.

Born in 1973, he was a product of the New York City Housing projects and a close, struggling family. He had a hard life, having had obstacles to leap over often in his brief existence. While in college, he had to leave a basketball scholarship and a dream, to go home and care for his ailing grandmother and his siblings. His mother was incarcerated when he was a child. Instead of becoming angry, collapsing into the pathologies waiting to engulf him, he reinvented himself and became a coach, ultimately building a girls' basketball dynasty. If he came from "a farm in the mid-west" he would have been hailed as a basketball "Horatio Alger," maybe he would even have had a noteworthy coach pay attention and mentor the young "genius;" instead, he came from the lower eastside, the projects, and was touted as "controversial," and was characterized. But with his tenacity and refreshing humor, he prevailed. Through the years of quiet protesting, marching in Albany, meeting stars and politicians, and seeing his mother released in 2000; coaching his girls, talking to reporters, dealing with "the slings and arrows of sports writers," and creating a dream for a community, I watched this young man become a giant of a man, my hero.

I hadn't seen him in a long time. Unfortunately, his mother and I had lost contact, but I did reconnect with his mother at his memorial service. Elaine is looking to keep her son's organization and dreams alive. Maybe his family can follow his star; they can create what "the one percent" calls a "legacy." And why can't a family from the projects carry the legacy of a man who just wanted to help others get that chance; to break the cycle of poverty, isolation, and the justice system and to just play basketball?

I went to the funeral and his memorial services through the ML King weekend; I sat in awe, watching the droves of people from all walks of life pay their respects. My heart broke when I saw him lying there still;

not poking and teasing me with his big voice and smile. I looked at him. How he packed so much life into his time on earth. Apache didn't wait a minute to live his bliss, he didn't waste a second regretting, nor did he take much for granted. He made me stop, look around, and remember that sometimes it ain't about the hiv, but about living and doing the best I can with "what I got."

So here I am, after seeing Ben Breedlove's message of hope, after experiencing the irony of being human, after going through what many have gone through a thousand times before, saying good-bye too soon; I took my "reality check" and cashed it in to give my first offering to you.

And being this life is no dress rehearsal…"Thank you for your time. See you next month."

I linked three articles that should tell you about this young man's dedication to help the girls he coached basketball to and the family he loved, especially his mother, who spent 16 years under the Rockefeller Drug Laws:

http://www.nypost.com/p/sports/high_school/basketball/paschall_early_years_highlighted_fb209ad6ZtNZILI64ar88N

http://espn.go.com/high-school/girls-basketball/story/_/id/7420386/apache-paschall-coach-nazareth-high-school-exodus-nyc-aau-director-dies

http://articles.nydailynews.com/2012-01-03/news/30586337_1_apache-paschall-ron-kelley-lady-kingsmen

Oh BTW: I'm Lora René Tucker, everyone calls me Lora. I'm a poet (known as "The Therapeutic Poet,") writer, social worker, and advocate for social justice…welcome to my blog.

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