Are You a Victor or a Victim? This Quality Can Make the Difference

John-Manuel Andriote, author of “Stonewall Strong,” talks about the importance of resilience for gay men and the HIV community.

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Since he began reporting about AIDS in the mid-1980s, John-Manuel Andriote has been a vital voice in the epidemic. In addition to his journalism articles, in 1999, he published the pivotal Victory Deferred: How AIDS Changed Gay Life in America, which he updated and expanded in 2011. Andriote chronicled, in the public eye, his own 2005 diagnosis. And he recently authored Stonewall Strong: Gay Men’s Heroic Fight for Resilience, Good Health, and a Strong Community. It’s an instructive and inspiring book for anyone (you can read an excerpt in POZ titled “How AIDS Helped Redefine Limp-Wristed Fairies as Guerrilla Warriors.”) I found myself recalling parts of Stonewall Strong the past few weeks, as the New Year is a time to set goals and take inventory of sorts. While thinking of resolutions, I was often reminded of resiliency. Andriote was happy to discuss the topic further. Below is our emailed interview. Here’s to a happy, healthy and strong 2018!

What takeaways from the book can be applied to people with HIV, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity?

One point I make from my own life story, which I draw from in the first part of the book, is that from the time of my HIV diagnosis in 2005, I was very clear that I do not want to be defined by my HIV status. I am so much more than a medical diagnosis. This is a key theme of the book, as I look at the different sources we have for knowing who we are—including our sexual orientation; our family and place of origin; our ethnic community; our faith tradition, if we have one; and so on. We can draw upon all our sources of identity, taking from each its best examples and wisdom about survival and carrying on. Resilience is important for us to live well with HIV without letting it consume us. This is a luxury and privilege we HIV-positive folk enjoy today when effective medications let us go about and enjoy our lives “in spite of” the viral co-resident in our body. Our forbears in this HIV journey, in the dark days before effective treatment became available, had to focus far more energy on simply trying to survive from one medical crisis to the next.

One of the people you highlight is AIDS activist and author Larry Kramer. What historical role did HIV/AIDS play in the development of resilience of gay men?

HIV/AIDS has been the fire that has tested our mettle and showed us what we are made of, who we are despite all the trauma we suffer in our lives from the time we are boys when we first become aware of being "different" and frequently bullied and abused because of it. HIV/AIDS really showed gay men in particular our own courage, resilience and strength. It also showed the world an entirely new picture of who we are. Speaking about ACT UP in particular in our interview for my 1999 book Victory Deferred: How AIDS Changed Gay Life in America, Larry Kramer said, "Singlehandedly we changed the image of gay people from limp-wristed fairies to guerrilla warriors." In Larry's 1985 play The Normal Heart, his Krameresque protagonist Ned Weeks says, "That's how I want to be defined: As one of the men who fought the war." The epidemic gave us a new, powerful frame for our life stories, and our community's story. Again, it's each of ours to claim for ourselves as members of what gay men decades before Stonewall described as a global brotherhood of men who are rather mystically tied to one another by virtue of our "difference," the things that make us (besides our attraction to men) gay.

How do you see the topic of resilience changing in LGBT history as we move forward? Is it safe to say the sense of community is changing and that many of the older oppressions are increasingly a thing of the past—and how does that change our relationship to resilience?

The overarching theme of Stonewall Strong is that resilience has a great deal to do with how we frame our story—as individuals and as a community. We choose whether to be resilient or not; it doesn't just happen and we are not "born" resilient. We make choices about the messages we give ourselves. You can either tell yourself, "I have been a victor over really difficult circumstances in my life," or "I am a victim of life, the world is against me, it's not fair." The first one supports your resilience; the second undermines you by casting you in the role of a powerless victim.

As part of the community of people living with HIV, I draw on a history of courage and power that goes back to the earliest people with AIDS to assert that they were not victims, that they had power and they demanded the right to choose and be actively involved in all decisions affecting them. I have said, since my 2005 diagnosis, that I will not let myself be defined by HIV—but rather I will continue to define myself by the variety of identities that let me know who I am, where I belong, how I got here and why I believe and live as I do.

While we have successfully pushed off some of the shackles of the "old oppressions," at least in terms of making progress on the legal and political front, it's important to remember that the most damaging oppression comes from the negative, hurtful messages we internalize from those who judge and stigmatize us—whether because of our "different" sexual orientation, or because we live with HIV. Re-framing our story in a way that makes us the hero rather than the victim is the key to silencing the shaming voices in our own minds and to claim our full equality and humanity for ourselves, regardless of what anyone else might think of us.

Why is it important for us to focus on resilience, as opposed to, say, discrimination or victimization?

It's important to believe in our minds, and hearts, that we are each worthy of love, respect and kindness. We deserve those things simply for being human. We also need to believe, deeply, that

we are fully equal to every other human, of every color, creed and sexual orientation. And we must be sure, in the depths of our soul, that our story—as individuals and as a community—is every bit as important, interesting and relevant to everyone else's story, and every other community's story.

This means that we need to tell our story from a place of true equality, the place inside us where we know we are truly "OK," where we have chosen to live our truth rather than bow to the yoke of other people's disapproval and prejudice. Gay men, and LGBTQ people in general, have a proud history of subverting even the toughest homophobes. Even our camp humor is subversive in undermining the expected norms of, say, what it "means" to be a man or a woman. Drag is totally subversive in pushing us to doubt our certainties about gender.

In the earliest years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, out and proud gay men with AIDS rejected the label "victim." "We are people with AIDS," they declared in the 1983 Denver Principles, the "constitution" that has informed care and treatment for PLHA [people living with HIV/AIDS] locally and up to the global level through the United Nations. A core value is the recognition of PLHA's agency and right to be an equal partner in our own health care and other decisions that affect our lives.

I talk about gay men's "heroic legacy." It is a proud legacy of men who valued their integrity over others' approval, who believed it is more important to be honest and whole than to lie and know yourself to be a fraud. We showed it on a much bigger scale, and stage, during the HIV/AIDS years as we asserted our political and financial power in a way our early gay activist pioneers couldn't have imagined.

This history belongs to each of us, and I believe there is real strength and confidence we can have as individuals by claiming it for ourselves. We belong to a long line of resilient, courageous, people and engaged citizens. That is something to be inspired by.

Finally, What are some ways we can build resilience in our everyday lives?

First, it's important to understand that none of us is born resilient. It's something we become, and it's something we can learn. I describe resilience as being able to rebound after a traumatic experience. It's about picking ourselves up, dusting ourselves off, and carrying on--as a changed person, in some way, but not staying stuck in the injury and pain of the trauma. It may be the loss of a loved one, a breakup, losing a job, or moving house, as I recently did. We all experience trauma.

The key to being resilient is in the story we tell ourselves about that trauma, about our suffering. If we tell ourselves, "The world is against me, nothing will ever go right," chances are we will develop resentment toward "the world" and stay stuck because we'll feel discouraged about even trying.

But if we tell ourselves that what happened was indeed hard, painful, or rough, but I am still a lovable person and life is worth living, it's a different experience. We're able to put the puzzle

pieces of our life back together in a way that lets us carry on. Like so many men my age, I'm 59, I learned a lot about saying goodbye much too soon to so many of my friends stolen by HIV in our twenties and thirties. It was certainly challenging to come through those experiences and still feel hopeful about the future, that life is still worthwhile. I was able to do it in large part because my way of honoring my friends' dear memory is in living my life as fully as I can, using my talents and time to the best of my ability. I miss them for sure, but the fact is that I must carry on and I know they would want me to find joy and other goodness in my life.

The last thing I'd like to say about Stonewall Strong is that I felt, and feel, very exposed from writing about deeply personal experiences and feelings in the book's opening section. I share personal stories of trauma in my life, coming through these difficult experiences, and becoming more aware of my own resilience. As I write in the book, I have chosen the slogan I learned in my years in Al-Anon, "We are only as sick as our secrets." It's the things inside us that we hide, keep secret, that can really harm us because of the way shame undermines us. Shining a light in those dark places we take away the sting of shame. This is why writing Stonewall Strong was not only very hard for me, but also incredibly healing and liberating. I hope it will have the same effect on everyone who reads it.

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