“Why did you come out?” “Because.”

October 13, 2010 By Jay Vithalani

“What are days for?” is the irritatingly simple question. “Days are where we live” is the deliberately pat and deceptively flat answer (or at least *one* answer, from a Philip Larkin poem). But days are also there, thank goodness, for the sake of having names given to them. Days are where we commemorate and celebrate someone or something; days are what we use to mark a tragedy or indulge in some purposeful frivolity. I happen to like, in particular, September 24: that is National Punctuation Day as well as Hug a Vegetarian Day. But there are days dedicated, it would seem, to just about everything -- from popcorn (January 19) to mental health (St. Dymphna’s Feast Day, May 15) to Joyce/*Ulysses* (Bloomsday, June 16) to the scourge of HIV (World AIDS Day, December 1). And this Monday, as many of you know, was, among other things, National Coming Out Day. Every October 11, for the past 18 years, I’ve worn a pink triangle somewhere on my body. Intensely self-conscious, in my early twenties, of that giant and laser-bright (or so it seemed) pink beacon, I’ve actually had to make an effort, in recent years, to remember the occasion and re-affirm its importance. The more things change, the more they remain the same? So goes the old (French-originating) aphorism. But it’s been irritating me for a while, so I’m going to thumb my nose at it and say: Nah.

October 11 had a different valence for me this year: less than two months ago (55 days ago but who’s counting?) I came out “officially” -- to the world at large and on the World Wide Web -- as being HIV-positive. Since I was not a contestant on *Project Runway* (rooting for you, Mondo!) I used a different technological medium: I said what I needed through a status update on Facebook: “I told an old friend I have HIV. She cried. Well, I’m coming out, I want the world to know (are those lyrics, eh?). Have been positive for five years exactly. Details upon request of course.” That was that. As comments were made, and private messages and e-mails came in, I felt obliged to offer an explanation, in a comment of my own, for the manner if not the matter of my coming out: "Apologies for the somewhat sudden and dramatic ’announcement.’ In an ideal world I would have liked to talk to each person *in* person; but several dozen plane trips or even a few hundred phone calls seemed unrealistic.“ Well: that’s the disadvantage of having peripatetic friends and being somewhat nomadic yourself: you don’t have the luxury of individual or ”personalized" coming-out talks, and you miss out on the wonderful catharsis of actual rather than virtual hugs (and, occasionally, tears). True that, sadly, mos def.

I was out, in a limited way of course, about my status, before this general coming out. In the first year after seroconverting I told a dozen people; in the next four years probably another 30. Maybe 40 even, I didn’t keep track. So it’s never been an entirely solitary trudge; my poz closet has never been a completely sealed-off space; and in rough times I’ve had friends I could count on. In fact, the real annoyance, as the five-year “anniversary” approached, was *not* being totally out. HIV has

become part of the background hum of my life. By that I certainly don't mean to say I've fully domesticated "my pet virus" (to borrow Shawn Decker's wonderful phrase) or that I take my health for granted or that I go about spouting that mindless "What's-the-big-fucking-deal-you-whiners?" crap. But I *have* grappled with some demons, and I've either killed them or negotiated some (shaky? durable?) peace treaties. Having made my peace, I needed to say my piece as it were: being closeted doesn't agree with me. I know it sounds like a weak explanation, but it's a matter of temperament. "That is his temperament," writes J.M. Coetzee, of the protagonist in the resolutely unconsoling novel *Disgrace*. "His temperament is not going, he is too old for that. His temperament is fixed, set. The skull followed by the temperament: the two hardest parts of the body."

That's a casual, and decent enough, explanation of my coming out. But it wouldn't have satisfied Aristotle. (Aside: I hated reading him in college, as the driest of the dry; and I conveniently blame him, along with Anglo-Saxon poetry, for my youthful smoking habit. So it was a pleasant recent surprise to hear him described, in the words of a gossipy ancient biographer, as having "a lisping voice," and that "he used to indulge in very conspicuous dress, and rings, and used to dress his hair carefully." Sounds like Oscar Wilde in Oscar de la Renta at the Oscars.) Aristotle believed that, behind the existence of an object or the performance of an action, there were four causes -- material, formal, efficient, and final -- and that unless you were able to articulate, in each case, what the four causes were, your explanation or causal answer was incomplete and inadequate. This is difficult territory to cover in brief, but I'm going to give it a shot. Here goes...

"Why did you come out?" The *efficient* cause (the contemporary sense of cause, as in "X caused Y to happen") or "trigger" was the phone conversation with my friend; it pushed me to do something, i.e. post my status as a status update on Facebook. But what did this trigger act upon? That's the *material* cause -- me, my body, my brain, the neural connections at that time in my brain. That's still not enough, for this matter is not only the object of change but also its subject -- in Aristotle's terms, the *formal* cause. The trigger event acted upon some matter, and that action resulted in that matter achieving a different form or shape -- a transition from "merely" being matter to matter having "coming-out shape," or a rewired brain-state (let's say for the moment) that allows my being out as a poz man. Finally, the *final* (and most important) cause: the purpose or ultimate goals of my coming out. There is certainly a selfish purpose at work here, namely the desire to minimize the time and effort involved in telling each friend, each colleague, each (potential) partner the same thing ("Guess what? I have a certain pet virus which I acquired five years ago") over and over and over again. But there is also a hopeful goal: the desire to rob the closet, in however small a way, of its power to shame and stigmatize.

Put these four causes together -- the trigger (phone conversation) acting upon matter (my grey matter pre-coming out) that changes form (grey matter altered) for a set of goals (selfish as well as hopeful) -- and you have a comprehensive answer to the question, "Why did you come out?" Let's hope Aristotle's dressy ghost is satisfied.

Being HIV-positive does not, obviously, "define" me. No single attribute or fact about a person can ever be definitive. It is nevertheless, just as obviously, a part of who I am -- part of the hum of life,

as I said earlier. And why be ashamed, or silent, about that?

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