Why We Have to Share Our Pain

October 1, 2014 By Mark S. King

I have twenty staples in my back holding an incision together. It hurts.

Just making that rather gruesome statement leaves me feeling conflicted. Yes, I want sympathy. Yes, this pain has been a constant companion for the last two months, from throwing out my back again to discovering from an MRI that a nerve was being crushed to a serious back surgery and then a slow recovery with more pain than I bargained for.

But the self-indulgence bothers me. How can we possibly complain, about anything really, in relation to the trials of others?

It reminds me of the 1980's, when there were so many deaths from AIDS that we couldn't grieve properly for individuals losses. The problem with living during that time, and seeing such mortality, was that everyone was doing it. There was no room in our aching hearts to feel for them all. And how in the world was I supposed to feel sorry for myself, the one with HIV who was healthy and alive?

Soliciting sympathy is a perilous enterprise. I'm That Funny Guy with HIV. Revealing that I'm hurting and feeling miserable feels like I'm going off-script, that these words don't belong on this blog, that you'll see me as self-centered and a whiner.

The self-pity comes and goes, like the muscle spasms, like the ocean of pain that ebbs and flows, like my own attitude toward what has happened to me, or what is yet to come. It's a kaleidoscope of impatience and gratitude and hope and anger. So I don't talk about it much or I make light of it and try to keep things in perspective.

During my hospital stays these last weeks, I witnessed true medical emergencies, and saw other patients awaiting care who clearly were more frail, and more afraid, than I was. Meanwhile, I was cracking jokes with the nurses as I was being prepped for surgery and looking forward to the bliss of sedation, as any red-blooded addict in recovery would. I liked the attention, the drama of something serious underway, and how, at least for a few hours, it was all about me.

But then the surgery happened. And it isn't funny anymore. And I understand the legitimate use of oxycodone. And I can't put on my own socks.

So, for long periods of time during each day, I don't care about the suffering of others or the inhumanity of war or the latest HIV infection rates. Because what I am going through right now hurts. And it's really hard.

And I want a pain of my very own.

It is that very realization, of wanting to hold tight to something shared by no one else, that

shatters my selfishness. Because if there's anything I believe in, it is that we heal and strengthen by sharing our common challenges. Whether it is living with HIV or a death in the family or a breakup, we get stronger when we talk about it.

I have a folder of special emails called my Rainy Day Folder, and in it are messages I have collected over the years. They are from people all over the world thanking me for a posting on my blog or sharing their own stories with me of stigma or fear or loneliness. And during this entire experience of mine, I have neglected to do the very thing for which that folder is intended: when I'm feeling low, read some of the emails and take heart that I'm making a difference by sharing my truth or offering advice.

So, this morning I opened the folder and began to read. And one piece of advice, something I offered repeatedly to others who were experiencing misfortune, stunned me with its precision and irony. "You are going to get through this," I said, more than once. "And one day you are going to be able to say to someone, 'I know what you're going through. I understand. And this is how I got to the other side.'"

Seeing the intersection of hurt and healing in those emails released something in me. The really good cry that followed was about me, and them, and all of us.

And I felt no pain at all.

Mark

Update: The staples have been removed, and the surgeon was practically gleeful during our appointment that I am walking nearly normally. He said that during surgery he was alarmed by the nerve damage and he feared for my mobility. So I dodged a bullet, thanks to taking fast action, getting good advice, and walking (or limping) through the experience. Thanks for all the kind messages of support. I'm on the mend.

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