

# WHO WAS HE?

I had never met him, but his impending death was having a profound affect upon me. He was a friend of my boy friend. They had been best friends for thirty years, starting out as lovers then staying friends. He worked in a job that he hated all his life for good benefits and a solid financial retirement. He retired 6 weeks ago. He will probably die today.

Why? HOMOPHOBIA! He was so paranoid about someone finding out that he was gay, that he refused to acknowledge that his health was failing. He was never honest with anyone about who he was or his life style. When he saw a doctor, if he actually ever did, the symptoms were attributed to allergic reactions to something he was working with and would clear up once he retired. He never told anyone he was gay. He even told his best friend hat he had been tested and was HIV negative. His current condition is proof that he could not have been tested, or at least not with a negative result.

Within two weeks of his retirement, he was hospitalized with an unknown lung infection. He has lost almost seventy pounds in the last year but had kept this hidden from even his “best friend”. While his friend suspected something was wrong, and asked if he had looked into being tested, he claimed all was well and stuck to the allergy story. Now he is dying.

How can such a thing happen in 2006, in Canada, where there is so much information, help, medication and technology????????? HOMOPHOBIA! It is hard for me to remember the days when I lived in that fear of rejection since I shed it long ago, but here it is staring me in the face again. I also was on life support for PCP in 1995, so hearing his story hits close to home. Why did I make it, yet he will not? The answer is a simple one. Denial! While I was open about my sexuality and my HIV status in 1995, I believed that I would not be one of the “ones” to get sick and die from the disease. That belief is a two-edged sword. One side is a positive affirmation, while the other is denial about what is really going on. I ended up on a ventilator because I was getting treatment for asthma, not PCP. Luckily I surrendered to the reality of the situation, but only in the nick of time. Even my doctor only gave me hours to live. But I made it and am here.

Now the same doctor is looking at ground zero again, and zero ground has been made. The family involved won't use the gay word, or the AIDS word. Everyone “knows” but for his sake they must not say it out loud. My boyfriend is part of this game. The game is killing people, case in point. But rather than stop the game and speak truth, homophobia and AIDSphobia rule. When will we get it? How many other people are existing in this surreal world? I know of another friend who passed away from AIDS six weeks ago. When I entered the funeral home, his lover rushed up and asked me not to mention the word “gay” or “AIDS”, as the family did not want it acknowledged. I complied, thereby agreeing to play the game myself!

Even yesterday in an interview with our local paper about being a long term survivor on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the AIDS epidemic, as I told the story about my friend who is

dying, I asked the reporter to be careful about how things were worded so that the family would not recognize who I was talking about. My picture will appear with the article. My boyfriend, who is closeted, will not be happy. Again I play the game. Why can't people be honest or truthful? The denial of who I am is detrimental to my soul and my life. The proof of that lies in a hospital bed a few miles from here surrounded by secrets, dying from shame and self hatred, internalized homophobia at its best. The winner? No one. His life is lost, seemingly wasted. His family never knew him and what they will miss is the shell of their illusion. His only friend will have a void that can't be filled, except with the guilt and knowledge that this did not have to happen. Society will have lost the potential of yet another human being because they did not fit into the norm. It is so sad, so very sad. Games are supposed to be for fun, not for life.

Thank you Jed for making me look at my illusions and denial, not as something to be honoured for the sake of those around me, but as the shackles that they actually are. You have allowed me to once again break through another link in the chain that I have allowed to hold me down. So your life wasn't wasted, but why do we need such extreme examples to move ahead? Someday, someday, someday.