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*Friendship and community
in the age of HIV*

by

Paul Browde & Murray Nossel

We are white South African men who live in New York City. We are gay. We are privileged to have the opportunity to tell our stories. We dedicate this talk to all people who are not free to tell their stories and to be heard.

Murray: There are magical places in the world. Places where you can feel yourself growing. Places where you know you are learning.

Paul: We share a very special place in the world. It is called Ravina. Ravina is 30 acres of land on a mountain in the woods, overlooking the Delaware River, two and a half hours north of New York City. On the land there is a large house, a cottage and a bungalow. The three houses were built in the early part of the 20th century. The property is surrounded by a sixty year old, 700 foot hand-built stone wall. A stream runs down from the mountain, over the land

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and into the river. On weekends, and whenever else it's possible, our New York City community moves up to Ravina. Our community consists of Murray and his partner David, my partner Simon and me, our friend Natalie, and our friend Craig.

In summer at Ravina, we spend our time gardening, walking in the woods, or floating down the river on large tubes. We're always cooking and we love to sing. On winter nights, we sit in front of the fire and talk into the early hours. People who visit Ravina agree that the conversations that happen there are magical. It was on one such wintry night that Murray and I were having a conversation. It started as an argument, but transformed into something else. We found ourselves communicating with an openness, and an ease that was surprising, as we were talking about some very painful and frightening aspects of our lives. We suddenly realised that this would be a conversation that would be worth sharing with an audience, not only the content of it, but the process of how it happened.

Murray: We decided to take it on the road. We put in an abstract to present it at a family therapy conference in Montreal, which we did two years ago, for an audience of eight people. The audience reflections in Montreal took the story in a direction we could not have imagined, so we had to tell it again ... and again and again. We have now told the story several times. Every time we tell it, we get to know one another more, and we find ourselves able to talk about things we could not previously have done. The telling of the story continues to be healing for us both.

Today we invite you to imagine yourselves at Ravina. The mountain, the forest and the river. Please join us for a chat in front of the fire.

Paul: A month ago I re-visited my high school. It was the first time I had set foot on those grounds in twenty-one years. King David High School is a Jewish Day School in Johannesburg, South Africa. My time there was during the depths of the apartheid years, and all the children were white, and Jewish. A somewhat homogenous group, and if you didn't fit in, life was horrible. I spent my life at King David School afraid of the bullies who sat on the wall.

'Browde you queer. Come here pansy, rabbit, meet us on the top field for a battle, five o'clock we'll be there, bring your buddies.'

Thursdays were especially scary. Thursdays were known as rabbits' day, the days in which it was insinuated that boys did things with other boys. Certain boys were singled out as rabbits, and were teased relentlessly. I was never physically hurt by those boys, but they took up a lot of my energy. I became extremely vigilant at all times. While walking anywhere, if I noticed them out of the corner of my eye, I'd quickly change direction. I would walk for miles out of my way to avoid them as they sat there spitting words at everyone who passed them. If you got them one on one, they sometimes treated you okay.

I remember the relief I would feel when one of them was friendly ... the feeling that maybe it was over, maybe I was now accepted. But hours later, I'd see the same boy with his group of friends, and I knew in an instant that nothing had changed. I found a couple of the taller boys to spend my breaks with. As we stood and talked and ate our peanut butter sandwiches, I'd be scanning the area, alert, watching out for danger, ready for an attack.

I remember Murray from those days. He and I were in the same class and spoke to one another. I remember liking him. My first memory of him was at age thirteen. The teacher divided the class into pairs and told us to tell each other a story. Murray and I were partners in that exercise. But outside the classroom, Murray was someone I considered dangerous to be seen with. You see, it was all in Murray's body. He seemed weak to me. His shoulders were hunched, his neck bent forward. He never approached you head on, but always with his head slightly rotated to the side. There was a clumsiness to his hand movements. I could never imagine him fighting anyone. His body seemed to be saying 'don't notice me'. He was a weak boy with a pale body, and I hated that.

Murray: Johannesburg. 1975. It was summertime. I was wearing my summer uniform. Long socks, khaki shorts and a matching safari jacket, with the school's emblem on its pocket: The Jewish star of David, the head of the Springbok (the animal that is South Africa's national symbol), and the open pages of a textbook. (These were the signs of my education. A Jew in South Africa.)

It was lunchtime. I had walked out of the classroom, forgetting my sandwiches, which my nanny Paula had packed for my lunch. Though the corridors were out of bounds during break times, I thought I'd make a quick

dash for the classroom and retrieve my lunch. The classroom had big banks of windows facing the corridor. It was silent but for the distant voices on the playing field below.

I entered the classroom.

A voice shouted 'Look who we have here'.

And then there was laughter, loud laughter. I started towards the door. But they'd already surrounded me, blocking my exit. I knew all the boys, all the faces, all the names.

There was Myerson and Gavin and Joseph and Epstein.

They lifted my body and threw me down onto the wooden table at the front of the class. It smelled of chalk and lavender-scented wax. Their hands were all over me. Ten, twelve hands, punching, burning, pushing, twisting at my skin. And there were words. Pansy, sissy, morf. Pansy, pansy, pansy. Nossel you pansy, are you having a good time? I was silent. I didn't want them to hear me struggle. I tried to get up. Which made them thrust harder at limbs with their knuckles and their fists.

Look at him, thinking he can get away. And they lifted me towards the metal stationery closet. I knew what was next. I'd be put inside it, and then they'd turn the closet over and smash it against the wall. Then bash it with a cricket bat.

I managed to escape. I ran down the corridor, down the stairs out onto the stretch of lawn above the field. My arms and legs were branded with the deep red marks of their hands, which later turned to bruises.

Paul: Our Afrikaans teacher was completely unable to control the class. Most days she would storm out in tears. 'You kids are enough to make people anti-Semitic.' One particular day, and it was summer because we were wearing the beige safari suit summer uniforms, she decided to treat us like children and to punish us for being naughty. 'Okay class, if you are going to behave like kids I will treat you like kids.' She proceeded to herd us out of the classroom to the corridor outside. It was an upstairs classroom which looked down onto a grassy courtyard below.

'Now kids', she said in her quivering Afrikaans accent masquerading as tough, 'Boys on the right, and girls on the left'. There was a moment of silence, as I heard myself say 'and Murray in the middle'. Uproarious

laughter erupted. Murray stood very still, I felt terrible, and I felt wonderful. I remember the relief. All eyes were focused on Murray. He was the object of derision. I was free. I was one of the guys and it felt great. It felt bad hurting this boy. I liked him, but I liked the relief more. The relief that I felt was worth any discomfort.

Murray: It is Sunday afternoon in Johannesburg. I am listening to a record of Wagner's Valkyries. The bright sun forms a pool of light on the shelves of books which flank the wall. There is one book, a biography of Adolf Hitler. His face on its spine. A black image on a white background, and the words in red, Gothic print. Adolf Hitler. I lift out of my body, hovering above it looking directly at it. I see on my body the face of Adolf Hitler.

1976. It is quarter-to-nine on a Friday morning. The daily prayer service before school begins. I am among rows of boys. Our hands and heads are bound with the Tephilin, the leather straps of our Jewish faith. The religious boys are singing, swaying from side-to-side, deep in prayer. The prefects – with their distinctive blazers and badges – pace up and down the aisles, reprimanding boys for talking, chewing, laughing. Nonetheless there is a constant rumble of noise that isn't prayer or song. It is the sound of boys.

Ever since finding my seat, I have searched the room to locate my tormentors. Myerson, Epstein, Gavin, Joseph.

Myerson is standing in the next row. I drop my head immediately, but he catches me in my terror. It's too late to look away. He stings me with a sibilant 'sissy', mocking me with a limp wrist and a cocked head. He punches Epstein on the arm. I am encircled by their loud, derisive whispers. A prefect approaches. Myerson and Epstein fall silent. It's a moment of relief. I turn around, face the other way, look out of the window to the summer sky and the playing field. A punch stings my upper arm. I spin round. Myerson and Epstein are looking the other way, at the sea of girls in their blue pinafores. Who was it? Who punched me? I look at the boys surrounding me. It could be any one of them.

We are seated for the sermon. My head fills with Wagner's Valkyries. The orchestra surges and I begin to feel powerful, alive. I stand mighty, towering above Myerson and Epstein. Everyone, the boys, the girls, the prefects, the teachers look up towards me. Slowly, I peel my face away, to reveal

underneath, the sculpted statue of a Nazi soldier. My eyes are no longer dark, but blue like the summer sky outside. I issue the command. My soldiers rise through the floorboards like spirits. Their uniforms are black, and their arms bear the insignia of the SS. I issue the command. Our flags are raised. Swastikas, eagles. Red, white, black, gold. Myerson and Epstein are the first to be led to the gallows, where they will be hanged in full view of everyone. The music is loud in my head, beautiful, triumphant.

Then suddenly something hits my neck. It is a piece of paper, rolled together with spit. The music stops abruptly. The statue crumbles. The soldiers disappear back into their spirit world.

The morning prayers are over. the teachers file onto the stage for the Friday morning assembly. A guest speaker has come to address the school. She is from New York, and her name is Esther Jungreis. She is a Rebbetzin, which means wife of a rabbi. She is tall, with blonde hair and a European accent. Her voice is strident. She tells us a story from her childhood. This is how I remember it. When Nazi soldiers arrived in her small Polish town, the Jews were rounded up, and taken to the town square. Her father, a rabbi, and all the other religious elders were led to the centre of the square. She watched as a soldier ripped her father's beard from his face, and shot a bullet through his head.

Her voice fills my head. All around me boys are biting their lips, trying not to cry. I am one of them. Ten miles away, soldiers are invading Soweto, the huge black township outside Johannesburg.

Paul: 1981. Murray's body had changed. His hair was blond and long. His shoulders were more pulled back and his head was held high. He enunciated his words, wore black, and walked around the campus like an intellectual. Murray's body had changed and it was no longer weak. He had a group of intellectual artist friends. They smoked cigarettes and blew the smoke out forcefully as they laughed at the pathetic nerdy medical students of which I was one. I tried greeting Murray at times, but he would sweep past me with a brief, dismissing 'hi'.

Murray: 1981. Kathy comes over to visit me and my boyfriend Ashley. She is furious and has come to us seeking comfort. She tells us she wants to have a relationship with a man, but he's gay. I press her for details. Finally she tells

me, it's Paul Browde. I am more than pleased. It is a victory. It is thrilling news. I am excited. Paul Browde is on my team.

Paul: 1984. San Francisco. I met Gary. I was 23 years old. Gary told me he was a social worker in an AIDS ward at a San Francisco Hospital. I was a medical student doing my elective in psychiatry up the hill. I was very interested in seeing what Gary did at work. I was also interested in an opportunity to feel a connection with one of these men. The gay clones of San Francisco. I had to remind myself that these men were gay, they were not the bullies from the wall at school.

I went to the ward and met the people who worked there. It was interesting and also shockingly sad. Young men were hooked up to IVs in the waiting room, watching re-runs of 'I love Lucy', chatting and laughing. These patients seemed used to their illness, they related to one another with humour and familiarity. All of them were young men with AIDS. Some were covered with the red spots of Kaposi Sarcoma, and all were very thin. Gary introduced me to the doctor in charge of the ward. One of the nurses showed me the whole set-up. I remember wishing that I worked in such a place, so gay-friendly, a place where people felt they belonged. Gary did great work, helping these men with services and counselling them. 'Whew, this is tough work', I thought. I was so struck by the contrast between Gary at work, doing service for his community, and Gary as one of the glazed-eyed, beer-drinking, pot-smoking, sex-talking men in Bobby's apartment where I'd met him. After work, Gary invited me to a party the following Saturday night. It was a birthday party of his upstairs neighbour, a well-known theatre person, in a very fancy area of San Francisco.

Saturday evening, I took time to get ready, dressing carefully, making sure I was well-showered and shaved. I dotted a little cologne on strategic points all over my body, including the little groove above my top lip, so that I could smell it. I entered the party a little daunted by the formality of it all, the tuxedos, the well-built, elegant men in white suits who harmonised with the women in black evening dress, as they milled around the white baby-grand piano. I chatted with a few people, and was of interest to some. I was an exotic foreigner, a medical student and a South African. I was tall, had dark curly hair, black eyes with thick jet-black eyebrows, and a persistent smile.

Gary arrived late. He was a slight man of average height. He had wavy brown hair, a narrow moustache, and a very childlike and open face. He was dressed in a checked flannel shirt with denim jeans, and seemed preoccupied and not particularly friendly. I was disappointed. I spent most of the evening eating snacks and listening to the classical pianist, who entertained to much applause. It was getting late and I decided to leave, said goodbye to Gary, and made my way down the steps to the street.

‘Paul’ – it was Gary calling out to me – ‘Want to come in for a drink?’

I spun round with relief.

We entered his basement studio which was magically illuminated with tens of recently-lit candles. They cast a gentle light. He must have sneaked out of the party to prepare the room. There was tranquil music playing, creating a peaceful and romantic atmosphere, and Gary was charming, and beguiling. We had a passionate evening. The next day, I was in love. I knew where I could bump into Gary, and orchestrated doing so as soon as I could. The moment I saw him, I knew that Gary was clearly no longer interested. He was aloof and cold, and I was miserable and lonely.

The next day a friend of his called me and asked to meet with me. She told me over lunch that Gary was in a bad way, that the previous week he had found out that his T cells were abnormal. She told me that this meant that his immune system was damaged, that he was infected with the virus.

How could he be infected? I was baffled. He is a social worker, he would have told me, surely?

I had had unsafe sex with a man who was infected with HIV. What was going on in my mind? What was going to happen, and what was I to do?

Murray: 1986. Cape Town. I began to have attacks of rigours. The experience of intense chills and trembling followed by profuse sweating. I consulted Dr G, a physician who had his offices in the medical centre where I was also practising as a psychologist at the time. He told me I had flu, prescribed Aspirin and sent me on my way. A week later, I collapsed during a consultation with a patient. My receptionist immediately helped me to Dr G’s office. I was shaking uncontrollably and barely able to speak. Dr G asked if I’d ever had sex with men. I knew what he was thinking. ‘It’s impossible’, I said, ‘I can’t possibly have AIDS’.

Nevertheless, he insisted that I be admitted to the hospital for tests. He didn't know what else to make of my symptoms. I asked if it couldn't be Malaria since I'd recently visited Central Africa. He rejected this explanation on the basis that I had taken my anti-malarial medication. 'No', he said, 'It is most likely AIDS'. The term AIDS had no meaning for me, except that the very sound of the word filled me with terror. All I knew was that it was a deadly disease that afflicted promiscuous homosexual men. On route to the hospital – in an already delirious state – I was visited by paranoid thoughts which seemed to go round and round in my mind. Had somebody deliberately pricked me with an infected needle? Was somebody trying to kill me? Did my lover have AIDS? I was admitted to an intensive care unit of Cape Town's General Hospital. Bloods were taken from me. They didn't give me sedatives. Racked with pain in my head and limbs, I lay awake the entire night, tortured by questions about what was happening inside my body. In the beds surrounding mine, men coughed incessantly throughout the night. The following morning I learned that I was in the tuberculosis ward. Shortly after sunrise, a cheerful medical intern informed me that I had tested positive ... for Malaria. In my relief, I forgot all about AIDS.

Paul: 1985. I had noticed lumps behind my head. I felt them on the bony prominence behind my ear. I used to try and massage them away, to press them flat against my head. Soon there were more lumps, in my groin, under my arms, behind my elbows. I was in my final year of medical school, and try as I might to ignore them, after a while I had to take notice of them. My mother, an oncologist, was nonchalant about it. 'It's probably not serious. Let's put you on antibiotics and we'll see in six weeks.' Six weeks later there had been no change. 'Why don't we call Jack and ask him to biopsy one of them', my mother suggested. Jack was the father of one of my closest friends, and the best surgeon in town.

So it was that I took my lumps to Jack's office, where he recommended that I have the lymph node in my left armpit removed. Within days, a nurse was shaving my armpit smooth, and I was lying on the table, with my hand behind my head, Jack's warm eyes smiling above his green mask as he swabbed me with cold iodine. 'Count backwards from 10 to 1.' I woke up with stitches and a short stabbing pain under my left arm.

Five days later my mother got the results of the biopsy: ‘non-specific inflammation’.

She was elated. ‘I can tell you now. I have been so worried, you know me, I thought it was lymphoma.’

My family celebrated. My father popped champagne and toasted me: ‘To good health, this is marvellous’. They all laughed with relief. I on the other hand did not feel relief. I knew. I knew that this was not the end. It was a vague, inchoate knowing. It was an unconscious horrified knowing, a dread, that I couldn’t even speak to myself.

Some days later, Jack called me. He asked me to come and see him in his house, which I knew so well. I drove, more slowly than usual, up the winding road to the house. I walked into his study, and now, as if for the first time, I noticed the bookshelves, the desk, the leather chairs. It was early evening and the desk lamp cast a large shadow of Jack, who sat across from me, onto the beige curtains behind him. Jack’s eyes were still friendly, but his face looked different. I was aware of his glasses perched on the bridge of his nose, his grey curls, and his large white teeth which seemed to grow as they began to move up and down in unison with his deep voice. He had begun to speak. ‘Paul it is no secret that you are gay, everybody knows that.’

I was silent.

‘So when you had the lymphadenopathy, I decided to test you for HIV, and I have to tell you, the results have come back positive.’

At that moment time began to play with me. The space between his revelation and my answer remains the longest moment I have ever lived. As if in trance, I experienced my life, and encountered my own death.

Murray: The 20th June 1986. (I remember the day well. It was my twenty-fifth birthday.) I was contacted by Dr G, who asked whether I was willing to make a house visit to one of his patients who most urgently required psychological treatment. Why can’t he come to my office? The physician was awkward. ‘Well, he’s recently become blind’, he told me. Then added – with some trepidation – that the patient had AIDS.

My response was immediate. No. Absolutely not. I wouldn’t do it. I was shocked, disturbed. Why was I hearing this word AIDS again? Why on my birthday? To confront a man, who (as Dr G put it) was having to come to

terms with death. What about contagion?

Dr G assured me that one could not contract the disease casually. Specialists in America had come to this conclusion. Eventually I gave in. I felt it was my professional duty to go. I was told that the patient was residing in a building of holiday apartments, and that his diagnosis was strictly secret. If anyone found out he had AIDS, he'd be evicted immediately. I also learned that all hospitals in Cape Town, had rejected him. He was too contagious.

I parked my car outside the building – which was situated on a quiet street facing the Atlantic oceanfront – terrified of what I was going to discover. Terrified by my first-ever contact with AIDS, a disease that the Cape Town Press was calling the gay plague. Armed only with the hope that the 'American specialists were correct', and that I was not in any personal danger, I made my way to the room where my patient was (to put it plainly) being hidden. I rang the doorbell. I heard him stumbling. He extended his hand to greet me. I took a step backwards, avoiding his hand. He obviously sensed this. I went inside. The room was sad, chaotic. He was a gaunt man, unshaven and pale. His face was covered by dark purple spots. I noted that he coughed occasionally; and I made certain to sit what I considered a 'safe' distance away from him. I didn't know where to begin. What to say. What to ask him. Should I mention his illness? Should I ask him about death? I cannot remember what I asked him. I only remember that he began to cry, as he spoke to me in broken, barely comprehensible sentences. He battled to find words.

Paul: I felt my voice rising, from my belly, up into my throat and out into the air which had become viscous, thick, holding the sound like smog, it echoed. 'Jack', I said, 'I wish you hadn't done that'.

'I didn't know whether to tell you or not. It has been a very difficult decision. I spoke to your GP, and we have agonised about whether or not to tell you. Your GP even called the Lubavitcher Rabbi in New York, and he thought we should tell you. We all agreed that I had to tell you.'

Murray: I left the apartment and drove directly to my home, where I washed my hands, keys and pen in a powerful antiseptic. I had entered the plague, with its imagery of calamity, scourge and death. It was like a bad dream.

Dr G managed to have our patient admitted to a local psychiatric hospital, arguing that the patient had depression related to organic brain damage. About two weeks later, my patient died.

Paul: The next few days were very slow. Nobody knew much about this condition. I consulted with a leprosy specialist who advised me to tell my mother the news. 'Look', he said, 'While we do our best to keep confidentiality, you never know. Your mother works in this system, and it's better she finds out from you than through the grapevine.'

I was sent to Dr B, a renowned and feared chemotherapist. He was an imperious man, who never looked me in the eye, but stared at his desk with no expression on his face as he listened to my story.

'Well, we need to do a battery of tests. You should have a whole lot of blood work done, and you need a bone marrow biopsy. Go into the next room and get undressed. I will do the bone marrow now.'

'Now?' I was terrified. I was well. I didn't feel sick. I had not prepared for this. I was not ready for this sudden assault on my body, being pricked and prodded everywhere. Dr B continued speaking to his desk: 'It has to be done, we may as well get it over with.' Within minutes he had pierced my hip with a wide-bored needle, plunging it deep into my bone marrow. 'You will feel some pressure as I pull back on the syringe', he warned me. Pressure was right. He failed to mention excruciating pain. I never got the results of the bone marrow biopsy, which I presume were negative.

It was around that time that my emotions switched themselves off. My life was bathed in a deadening numbness, which allowed me to complete my medical training. Troubled by the faint thought that I wasn't going to be around for very much longer, I decided shortly after completing my medical training to give up medicine completely and pursue my life-long dream of a career as an actor. I was accepted to start a full-time drama program the following August. All I needed was to live long enough to get there.

Murray: 1990. I left South Africa. I wanted to pursue my life-long dream of a life as a playwright. By this time the so-called 'gay plague' had spread into the black townships and was reportedly being transmitted through heterosexual contact. But AIDS was no longer an issue in my life. I had been

in a long-term monogamous relationship with a man; and, as far as I was aware, none of my friends were infected. Upon my departure from South Africa, concerned friends implored me to 'be careful' in New York, where the 'epidemic' was thought to be 'out of control'. I felt the reverberations of their warnings on the streets of Greenwich Village where the shadows of wasted bodies appeared and disappeared. Evidence of AIDS was everywhere. In the newspaper, on billboards, in the subways. Advertisements for condoms and safe sex were ubiquitous. I was determined to be careful; to keep AIDS out of my life.

Shortly after arriving in New York, I wrote my first play. It was called 'No Boundaries'.

A successful young French Canadian was recommended to me to be the director. It turned out that he was the lover of the man who told me to stand in the middle, Paul Browde.

In the course of the play's production, Paul and I began to have conversations.

Paul: I remember that I couldn't really feel comfortable with Murray until I had apologised. I wondered whether he remembered the sentence I had spoken fifteen years before.

Murray: It was a sentence. I remembered it, and hearing the apology was a liberation. It was the beginning of my ability to extricate myself from a profoundly confusing past. It was the first time that the past had come back to greet me in a friendly way.

Within a few months, we were speaking to one another on a daily basis, oftentimes lamenting the fact that we had never previously developed a closer relationship.

Paul: I made it to drama school. It was a great experience, but acting as a career was not for me. But, it was at drama school that I met my partner, Simon, the French Canadian actor whose first gig in New York City was to direct Murray's play. Our relationship continues to be a wonderful, and exciting journey, but that's another story!!

After drama school I decided to do a residency in psychiatry.

It was in my third year that I had my first experience of conducting psychotherapy. The young man I was therapist to was in his early twenties and a medical student in a nearby hospital. One day, and out of nowhere, he came into the session with the question: 'How are your T cells?' I was completely stunned, unable to think, consumed with fear. I said: 'What are you talking about?'

'Your T cells. I know you are HIV positive, I saw it on the computer at the hospital.'

The hospital where he worked was also the hospital where I received my care.

'That is not true', I answered, 'You must have the wrong person'.

'Isn't your middle name Eric?' he asked.

I was cornered. I didn't know what to do. I held onto my seat till the session was over, and then froze in a rush of terror. He knew this thing about me that no-one at work knew. I was going to lose everything. My job, my career, my future. They were all over.

I didn't know who to turn to. It was a secret. I decided to take the risky step of telling my supervisor the truth about what was going on. Her response was 'love him, just keep loving him'. Given the way I was feeling, this was easier said than done. My therapist was helpful in getting me through the anxiety of that time. What was never addressed was the politics of secrecy. The fact that I belonged to a discriminated-against group. That I was forced to be silent. It was a couple of months later I realised that, until this was no longer a secret, I would never be free.

At that time, Murray was running a story-telling group at an AIDS day treatment program in Brooklyn. He encouraged me to come out as HIV positive. I trusted him. He said that, knowing me as he did, he was confident that this was a path to freedom.

Murray: I encouraged Paul to speak out. I'd known a man who had died in silence, as a result of which, my community had been robbed of the value of his life, and the impact of AIDS on it. I was working with people at an AIDS day program and on a daily basis was experiencing the value of their stories. At first they thought they didn't have stories to tell, but as we grew together to recognise the power of listening, stories began to emerge. Some of the

people I worked with made a decision to tell their stories publicly, and participating in the making of a video (Nossel 1999).

Paul: I got together with a colleague whom I had met at an HIV positive doctors' support group, and together we designed a strategy. And so in Washington DC at the Annual Convention of the American Psychiatric Association, I revealed my long-held secret to a room of about fifty colleagues. I told the story of the young man who had discovered the truth about me. I spoke of how I had heard doctors speak of people living with HIV, and of how it affected me when I heard such comments as 'he's a goner'.

I spoke of how everything I had ever seen at the APA regarding HIV related to death, depression and dementia. I related to none of those categories. I spoke of how I had a happy life, and that my partner and my families of origin and of choice were supportive and loving. Living with HIV had transformed my life and their lives, in many and varied ways, and I was tired of hearing the subject whispered about in the hallways. There was a difference between privacy and secrecy.

I was free to tell or not to tell and no-one could use it against me again. My secret was no longer a secret.

Reflections

Murray: Our work together has shown us how there really is no separation between work and life. It continues to teach us how friendships and relationships are healing. Preparing this talk has been a process of retelling, remembering, healing, forgiving and apologising. In the past we have prepared for talks such as this one, and have had to deal with a certain amount of conflict regarding the ownership of stories. I often felt that I was there to provide a background for Paul's story, and because I was HIV negative, was not entitled to tell my own story. I resented Paul for reminding me that I was HIV negative at times. At the same time, I felt that the HIV positive identity was so much mine, especially given the fact that my life partner has an HIV diagnosis. As such, it is my story.

Paul: For me it was difficult to accept that Murray's experience of HIV was the same as mine. We found ourselves struggling to create a unified experience, at the same time each yearning to voice our separate identities. I had something in my body that Murray didn't have. I had to take medication five times a day and he did not. I had physical side-effects of these medications and he didn't.

HIV is an integral part of who I am. I recognise that it will live with me for the rest of my life. I can hate it, or I can learn to love it. I find myself reacting when people talk about wiping out the virus – it's my body they are referring to. HIV has taught me so much, about what's important in life, about forgiveness, about love. As such, it is my story.

Murray: I came to realise that I am HIV negative. I do not take medication. I do not have side-effects, and I consciously practise safe sex in order to avoid becoming infected. HIV negative in the context of this discussion has become a conscious identity. I choose to remain HIV negative.

Paul: In preparing for this talk we found ourselves struggling less for ownership of the story. Murray described feeling completely included in the process, rather than just a provider of context for me. I found myself trusting him in a way I hadn't before. I believe his acknowledgement that we are different, that his experience is not mine, has relieved me. I find myself able to listen to his experience with compassion. We are conscious of the struggle for ownership of the story, and continue to give up that struggle on an ongoing basis. Two weeks ago, in preparation for this conference, we spent forty-eight hours unearthing memories, retelling stories that we have told one another countless times. Finding inside them new meanings, new feelings. We looked at our old school photographs searching for the monsters we had been describing in our recollections. We were shocked and almost disappointed to find only the faces of gangly adolescents posing awkwardly for the group photographs. We found ourselves crying and laughing and discovering in our relationship a new level of intimacy, which involved talking about things that we had been too afraid to talk about before. We spoke about our reactions and thoughts about one another's bodies, a conversation we had never had before. We came to realise that there are still

some stories that we do not feel comfortable or ready to tell in a public setting.

Murray: Ultimately this talk is not about either one of us. We have used our experiences and our stories as a way of understanding how people hurt one another, how they find compassion, and how they forgive. I was worried about how my life would sound to people in this audience, especially other Jews. A Jewish boy fantasising himself into the body of a Nazi. This was an extreme measure and I cannot apologise for the fact that it happened, but I can forgive myself knowing that it has been my life- long endeavour to understand why that happened to me in the face of my own terror.

I forgive the victimised silent boy at school. I forgive myself for finding refuge in images of Nazi Germany.

I forgive Myerson. I forgive Epstein.

I forgive Joseph. I forgive Gavin.

I forgive the doctor who mis-diagnosed me. I forgive myself for letting a man die in silence. I forgive Paul.

Paul: I forgive myself for humiliating Murray. I forgive myself for being frightened. I forgive my doctor for taking my blood while I was asleep.

I forgive Gary. I forgive HIV.