

# Life After AIDS

Two years ago this month, I learned I was HIV-positive. The worlds of my public life and secret life collided, the neat package became a mess, and I was faced with the horrifying fact that I would pay the ultimate price for my secret.

Up to that point, I had neatly packaged and compartmentalized everything in my life and had become a master of secrecy. Although it had been a struggle to keep the two worlds separated, I felt I had no choice but to expend great physical and emotional energy to conceal my shame.

As long as I can remember, I admired and idolized older boys and men, desperately wanting to be like them. I always hated who I was, the way I looked and saw myself. I don't remember a time when I liked who I was.

My parents raised me in a strict Christian environment. But though my dad became a Christian when I was 5 years old, he fought his own battle with anger and abuse until I was well into my junior high years. This did subside over the years, but our family learned to effectively maintain the secrecy surrounding his abuse. Publicly, we lived a perfect Christian life. Today I understand my father's battle because I grew into an adult who would fight his own battle with sin.

I had become a Christian at the age of 4 and truly set out to follow Jesus Christ. Jesus offered me a love I desperately needed, and my decision to follow Him was genuine. Everyone who knows me can attest to the fact that I was, and still am, deeply sensitive to the things of God and to the Holy Spirit. The scars in my life, however, were so deep and painful that sooner or later they would erupt, and I would fall. Poisonous wounds infected my life and constantly festered.

My father was abusive to me, my mother and my three siblings. I never felt I was masculine enough for my dad, other boys or

even myself. I was programmed by circumstances to believe that I was a "sissy."

Consequently I rejected my dad, other boys and the masculinity they represented. Conversely, I felt strongly connected to my mother. The pain we shared made us one. I can still remember being in the third grade, sitting at my desk and hiding my tears because I longed to be home with my mother. We needed each other.

Although I admired other males, I never felt safe or comfortable with them. Besides not being athletic, I also was younger, smaller and less coordinated than my school-age peers. These factors, combined with what I perceived to be the rejection of my father and my peers, led to a total withdrawal from other males and normal masculine activities.

I always was more comfortable with girls. I don't believe I was born gay, but circumstances in my life and environment worked together to create a serious gender and sexual confusion.

As I reached adolescence, hormones took over. My admiration for older boys and men turned to fantasy, and eventually lust. The love I craved from them took on an entirely new meaning. On one hand, I craved intimacy with God. But on the other hand, I yearned to be loved, accepted and tenderly held and cared for by older males.

### **Shrouded in Secrecy**

I left home at 17 to attend an Assemblies of God (AG) Bible college. Once again, I was younger and more insecure than my peers. I still gravitated toward friendships with women instead of men. I felt safe with women. My thinking was, "Please don't ask me to be a man because I don't know how, and I'm simply not good at it."

On the positive side, I soon met the girl who would eventually

become my wife. She was, and still is, strong, stable and trustworthy. She offered me a protection and a stability that I needed.

My wife and I were married in 1981. She had no idea of the secret I held, and how her life—as well as the lives of our two children—would someday be radically affected by it. Even I never would have imagined the dark turns my life would take.

After college I received my AG ministerial credentials, and my wife and I headed overseas to serve as volunteer missionaries. Later we became senior associate pastors of a thriving church on the West Coast and eventually even served as full-time missionaries. All the while, I protected my deadly secret.

As long as I felt fulfilled in my ministry, my sexual needs seemed to be minimal, and I could keep from acting out in my sin. But then there were the dark times, when the need to act out would become compulsive and obsessive. At the lowest points, I found myself at bathhouses, gay bars and adult theaters. I was like the drug addict or the alcoholic who maintains his sobriety, slips up occasionally and eventually crashes.

I would swing from times of great victory to times of dark bingeing. Every time I met with a man, I felt accepted, loved and wanted—but only for a fleeting moment. The pain and self-hatred would always return. I felt dirty and used. The little boy was now a man, and he hated himself more than ever.

Typically, during periods of ministry, I maintained my sexual purity so as not to feel like a hypocrite. My thoughts were a torturous playground, but at least I wasn't acting on my sinful desires. But then other times, I would fall. And the self-hatred would sweep in again.

I believe there is no pain like that experienced by a Christian who is driven by homosexual desires. Frankly, I've

always felt that in the Christian world it would be better to be a murderer than a man or woman fighting homosexuality. How many people have we driven away because they haven't felt safe within the walls of the church? The church too often offers no forgiveness or compassion for them.

I felt trapped, and the pain was beyond belief. I had prayed and begged for God to change me. I had fasted, read the Bible and memorized Scripture. I had studied and fought spiritual warfare before it was en vogue. I had tried the "white-knuckle" approach to overcoming sin. I had done everything I knew to do.

So many times I or someone I knew had quoted 2 Corinthians 10:5, "Bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (NKJV). But how do you take every thought captive when you are driven by fantasies, lust and, most important, deep, festering wounds?

By this point I had lost any hope that I could be free. I wanted to run away, to just drop off the face of the earth. I considered suicide more than once. Anything would be better than living in this painful secret prison. God did not seem to respond to my pleading, and the people of God appeared to offer me nothing more than judgmentalism and powerless prayer.

## **Discovering Freedom**

Ultimately, the Holy Spirit used my HIV diagnosis to help me realize that sins such as homosexuality, drug or alcohol abuse, and other compulsions were symptoms of deeper issues, or scars, in people's lives. Acting on my homosexual desire was a grave sin, and God did not desire for me to struggle with these feelings. But those desires and temptations were only symptoms of the deeper pain in my life. Until I found healing for those wounds and scars, I would always be driven by the sin and would remain unable to bring "every thought into captivity."

The Holy Spirit had given me the direction I needed, but it would cost me one thing: my secrecy. If I was ever to be free, I would need to become open and transparent with people I knew and risk rejection—something I had feared all my life. I had learned the hard way that secrecy breeds bondage and ultimately death.

I am thankful I made the tough choice to open up about my struggle. I would give anything to change the past, but I cannot. I have great regrets, but I can truly say that I no longer feel shame. Jesus took my shame when He forgave me.

I never gave the AG a chance to react to my situation. Although my credentials had always represented acceptance and approval, I resigned them, knowing that I no longer “needed” them in order to minister to hurting people. I could share the story of my past and minister out of my wholeness. I have subsequently written letters to the denomination, apologizing for my deception and secrecy. They have responded with great love and compassion.

The most beautiful response has been from my wife and children. As painful as it was for her to hear my confession of how I contracted the AIDS virus, my wonderful wife made the choice to forgive me, to love me and to keep our marriage and family together. I admire her commitment to God and to our family.

My children also made the choice to forgive me, and have responded as true servants of God. I am a blessed man because despite the tremendous pain I have caused, my wife, children and father and mother love me and have stood by me.

My life is given to one single purpose: turning this tragedy into ministry. As Romans 11:29 states, “For the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.” I must share my story. People in the prison of homosexuality need to know there is a way out, that there is hope.

Sadly, our churches are filled with people in this prison, and they are too afraid to tell the truth. They are afraid of our judgment, afraid of our inability to offer them any hope.

I am a testimony of the hope and the freedom that does exist and is available to all who need it. I know the pain of homosexuality and secrecy, but I also know the joy and peace of freedom—freedom that lasts. I know that the ultimate victory in my life has come as I turn what Satan meant for harm and destruction into ministry. I like to imagine the victory as my story of pain and bondage is used as a weapon against the enemy of our souls.

The church does not need to be silent about homosexuality. We can preach a message of hope, freedom and deliverance to all those who are held captive.

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**Phil Williams** *had to write this testimony using a pseudonym. He was told that he might lose his job if he disclosed how he contracted the AIDS virus.*