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**Show your love while they are still alive**

By ASUNTA WAGURA

If there is one thing that HIV has taught me, it is to appreciate and show love to my loved ones while they are still alive. I have seen the grim reaper take away so many of those that I care about, at times days apart, that nowadays I treat them as though I will never see them again.

During my work-related stay in Southern Sudan, I met and made friends with a certain woman called Virginia, who was kind enough to show me around. She was a hawker, therefore she knew Juba well. We became fast friends and both of us opened up about what had brought us to this land. She had traveled there in search of greener pastures.

She also told me that her mother had been taken ill, and that she wanted her to travel back to Kenya to see her. According to reports from home, she did not have long to live.

The news had unsettled Virginia, and she had promised to go home as soon as she had raised enough money for fare as well as to buy some goodies for those back home. This would convince everyone that she had made the right decision to travel to Sudan.

Virginia’s story calls for a personal experience. HIV-infection is, to some people, akin to a death sentence. So, when a bedridden PLWH sends a message to a fellow PLWH that they are ill and will not live for long, making promises and postponing them can lead to regrets.

This happened to me two years ago when Lawrence Lenya, a PLWH who had mentored me, was hospitalised.

“I will visit him as soon as I’m back from my Tanzanian trip,” I promised myself.

It was not to be because he died before I visited him. I have never felt so bad. Death was so far away from my mind, yet it’s the very thing that I fight against every moment I’m awake. When I arrived in Tanzania, I received an SMS that informed me about Lenya’s passing.

A week before I was due to visit my mother, Virginia sent me a text message informing me that her mother had died.

“I felt like I wanted to commit suicide because all along I had been promising her that I would go as soon as I raised enough money,” she wrote. This postponing had gone on for close to three years.

Now the rubber had met the tarmac, and she had to go home, with or without money and goodies from abroad.

The last message her mother sent to her was very disturbing. It read, “I’m sick, my daughter. I want you to come and say goodbye because I feel I cannot make it to December.”

I’m sure this message will haunt her for a long time, just like the last messages I received from friends who slipped through my fingers.

I think this is one of the tragedies and beauties of life. If, for instance, I knew when death would strike, I would put on shows and make an effort to get into the good books of the person who is about to depart. Not knowing, however, motivates me to hold each moment dear and to treat fellow human beings with love and appreciation at all times.

I once lost an orphaned HIV-positive blind wheelchair-bound child in, of all things, a fire accident. With such a child, you would think that he would pass on due to HIV-related complications. I regretted not taking advantage of all the chances I had to go and visit the children to hear them sing and see the hope and love in their eyes.

I have learnt that showing love is not something I do; it is something I live. And it’s something I live, not just when the need arises, but every minute I breathe because death is a capricious bugger.

Showing love when our loved ones are alive motivates us to live a life free of regrets when the time comes to say the final Godspeed.

*This is the diary of Asunta Wagura, a mother of three who tested HIV-positive 24 years ago. She is the executive director of the Kenya Network of Women with Aids (KENWA).*

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