Learning how the

other half survives

**When I tested HIV-positive,** I swore that this was the biggest issue in the world.

Bigger than world peace or the price of gas. All my energies were concentrated on

my nagging issue. I would have told you to go to hell if you had tried to tell me that

there were other pressing matters in the world.

Part of this was due to the fact that HIV was perceived as a matter of life and

death. The diagnosis turned one’s life topsy-turvy. You woke up and went to bed

agonising about it. What sent most folks to their early graves were stigma and discrimination;

not to mention lack of effective care and support systems.

It’s no wonder that I ate, drank and slept HIV. When I started living positively, it

took me time to put this big enchilada on the back burner.

It’s easy to see everything through the HIV prism because for the past two decades,

my daily job has singularly been in the HIV field. Over time, I have come to

be encouraged by the experiences of other women who are going through tough

times. These are not people living with HIV (PLWHs) per se, but folks who are dealing

with other challenges.

We in the HIV trenches can become so preoccupied with advocacy that we tune

out the voices of fighters in other trenches.

When I went to London, this

was brought into sharp focus. I

heard stories from near and far,

and some made my experience

pale in comparison. I’m reminded

of Juliette’s story.

“Juliette’s passion for running

started when she was a little girl

and continued through high school

and college. After being diagnosed

with cancer eight years ago, she

vowed to be a living testament to

faith in God, the benefits of good

medical treatment and the power

of a positive attitude. She also

decided that when she was strong

enough to restart her workout

regimen, she would participate in

races that support great causes.

Three months after completing

chemotherapy and 37 rounds of

radiation, she participated in her

first Susan Komen 5km race and

has been going ever since!”

That was my “aha!” moment.

**The re-education of Asunta**

Like I said, most of my “education”

has been courtesy of the HIV virus and PLWHs. This is where I’m supposed to serve

humanity. Still, I am being educated and given more life lessons by other people

who may seem to be outside the scope of my “syllabus”.

This reminds me of a programme I once watched on a local TV channel. They

were talking about things we used to champion years ago, like urging the media

and general public to use appropriate language when referring to PLWHs.

For instance, we discourage the use of such demeaning terms as “sufferers” or

“victims”. That’s because we believe that PLWHs have the God-given ability to chart

their own destinies. We like to say that this virus has only messed our immunity, not

our humanity.

In the TV programme, they were talking about persons living with physical disabilities.

The panellists argued that some of these folks are made to feel like inanimate

objects. They gave the example of the word “viziwi”, which, with my limited

knowledge of Kiswahili, I always believed was the plural for persons with hearing

disabilities.

“The *ngeli* of *ki-vi* is for inanimate things like *kisu-visu*,” the panellists argued, giving

the example of knife-knives.

It’s something I always do without knowing. Like they say, the road to hell is

paved with good intentions. I took something home, and nowadays I watch my

tongue.

Knowing how the other half survives is making me a better mother, sister, friend

and PLWH. I now know that it’s not just about HIV and how PLHWs are getting a

raw deal.

If the world becomes a better place only for PLWHs, then it really isn’t a better

place, is it? I cannot change the world, but I’ll endeavour to change any patch I

come across. That’s the least I can do. Because we’re in this beautiful thing called life

together.

THERE’S MORE TO LIFE THAN OUR PERSONAL CHALLENGES

This is the diary of Asunta Wagura, a mother-of-three who tested HIV-positive

23 years ago. She is the executive director of the Kenya Network of