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**Breaking the silent vow of complicity**

By ASUNTA WAGURA

PHYLLIS\* ISN’T IN MY inner circle of close friends, but our closeness has been growing. I’m careful how I talk to her because I don’t want to impose my values on her.

I met Phyllis not so long ago at a graduation party. She was quick to notice my arrival, and immediately showed me where to seat then introduced herself.

“I religiously read your newspaper column, but that’s not what I want to talk about. There’s something I want to share with you.

“I have had HIV for 12 years. I only knew of my seropositive status after my husband died. Not so long afterwards, my daughter who was only months old, also died. That’s when my husband’s doctor called me and informed me that it would be better if I was tested for HIV. He didn’t disclose any other information.”

**Living large, but empty**

When Phyllis tested HIV positive, one of her sisters-in-law was called, without her approval, to “handle the situation”. Phyllis was surprised that the doctor didn’t want to discuss anything before her sister-in-law came. His reason? The family was valued more than her as an individual.

“I was immediately told to start on medication. I only came to learn that I had been given antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) later.

“I was also given other instructions. My HIV status was to be a top family secret because my in-laws are a high profile family. Disclosure of my HIV status would reveal what killed my husband, and soil the family’s reputation.”

Phyllis was told not to worry as her in-laws were committed to give her whatever she wanted. She only needed to tow the line.

“But I feel like I’m breaking down. I’m living large … in a seven bedroom house with two house-helps, but I’m still empty inside because there’s no one to talk to.”

**Living someone else’s life**

“I’d rather live in a makeshift structure where I feel complete, than live in a mansion that’s devoid of so many things,” Phyllis told me.

She is 30, and she feels like time isn’t on her side. I know Phyllis doesn’t want to live someone else’s life, but it’s up to her to make the tough choice and break this silent “vow” of complicity.

“I don’t talk to anybody about my HIV status, apart from the doctor … and he doesn’t have the time of the day for me. He only packs the medicines and gives me the day for my next appointment.

“Asunta, I need to talk to people who can understand me and what I’m undergoing.”

Phyllis told me that her only means of interaction on issues of HIV is through this weekly column: “I read and reread it.”

When Phyllis comes to see me, she wants to discuss how she can get a baby. I don’t have a manual to refer to for her case.

As the party speeches began, we postponed our tête-à-tête.

I feel like Phyllis lives in the shadow of this “royal” family. When we next meet, I will encourage her to choose what suits her best, because it’s her life.

**Living a lie**

If I were to bring in my own values, I’d look at it this way: why should I live in the shadows of someone else’s affluence? Of course I would be rolling in it, yet deep inside my heart I’d know I was living a big fat lie.

I would want to have my own life, in my own space, without the interference or directives of “tall” relatives. These folks only care about their reputation, not the issues that are near and dear to Phyllis.

Life is more than eating and drinking or living in a good house. What counts most in our lives are the relationships we have established.

That’s what our group therapy sessions are about. And it’s what Phyllis is missing out on: folks who are in her shoes and genuinely feel her.

*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 Women with Aids (KENWA). Email: asuntawagura@hotmail.com*