There’s no convenient time for death, taxes or disclosure

October 11, 2006 By Mark de Solla Price

As we go through life, each of us assembles our own unique survival kit to cope with our life. To cope with major pieces of news like medical diagnosis and figuring out new facets of who I am, my modus operandi tends to be a 3-2-1 countdown:

I start by doing my homework. Like a lot of writers, I’m a voracious reader. I research on the internet; buy books; find the esoteric, niche magazine for whatever it is. Although I’m a high tech guy, I also have dyslexia, so it’s a lot easier for me to read and make notes on paper. I print out a lot and read with a highlighter and post-it notes.

Next step is introspective. I let it sink in. I see what makes sense and feels right for me. Being an extrovert, I talk and e-mail about whatever it is with my family and friends. The Quakers would call this step “coming to clarity” -- accepting and loving myself for who I am today, warts and all. Actually, there are no good parts and bad parts, there are just parts. That’s the goal, anyway.

Once I know the facts and know what’s right for me, one of the best ways to feel good about who I am is to talk about whatever is going on. Talk to friends. Talk to groups. Go on TV. Write about it.

Maybe I’m just a media whore. It seems to runs in my DNA - it’s certainly been a family tradition for generations, especially with my parents and brother. My father is still on TV pretty regularly as the great scholar and science policy diplomat, even though he’s been dead since 1983 - check out his Wikipedia page.

Once I finally figured out I was gay (at 17), I was photographed at gay pride marches and gave my name for the caption. When I found out I had HIV, I was an early face of the disease in the press and on TV. It’s part of my tool kit for life: Be proud of who and what I am, and be honest and open about it, because it can really help a lot of folks in similar situations who aren’t able to “come out.”

My advice to others about disclosure, whether it’s HIV or hepatitis or anything else, is to avoid the first (or perhaps second) reaction of wanting to tell everyone. DON’T! Let the information,

knowledge and feeling combine and mellow together for a while first. Personally, I never take this advice. I'm just not wired that way.

Having let all this mellow for at least 12 hours, I was ready to come to work and disclose. I knew I was lucky because the folks at work had the knowledge to know that I wasn't a physical risk to them. I knew I wouldn't face any discrimination because of this, but I knew that it was going to be an emotional bombshell for each of these people, some of whom I had worked with for almost a decade. There were practical worries about who was going to do the various jobs I do. When was all this going to happen? What paperwork had to be filled out and when? How was money going to work out? And on...

I sat folks down separately and each telling was emotionally difficult and remarkable different. I started with Dennis Daniel who is the Comptroller and human resources guy. He's been a long time friend and was pretty shaken up by my news, but had lots of practical ideas and answers. Jeremy Grayzel, the CEO, who I've only known for two years and don't socialize with outside the office was visibly emotional and concerned for my well being. Megan Strub, the publish and sister of POZ's founder, Sean Strub, was very funny in a black humor way (much like my own sister) and she kept worrying that she was being inappropriate.

Megan made me laugh and laugh, and it was just what I needed. I ran out of emotional oomph before I got to every staff member. I felt bad because I didn't want anyone to hear it second hand, but they might have to.

I remembered why I started the "Mark and Vinny E-mail Update" in the first place -- it was just too draining to tell and re-tell what was going on to all the folks that loved us.

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