

The Day Bobby Helped Me Die

Kyle Hedquist

When I was 18 years old the only thing I knew about AIDS was that it was something drug users and faggots got I was neither so I didn't care about AIDS, HIV, or whatever else it was called. I was still getting used to the idea of being around dying men. I liked doing the work but I sometimes didn't like the men asking for my help, they had crimes that made me feel dirty, I didn't want to know the "why" behind their decisions, I didn't care!

Why I continued to come to work everyday in the infirmary was something I asked myself often. Maybe I was trying to make myself "feel" better. I told myself I was serving my community that sounded noble somehow. I was a "good dude" because I "cared" for the sick and dying. Those were the things I told myself; the truth was not so selfless or noble. The truth as I came to understand it was selfish, I felt ashamed and guilty for taking another life. I had caused unknowable pain to a mother and father and robbed my community of a life, this wasn't a choice that I had the right to make, I was selfish then and I was still being selfish in prison. I tried to give the impression to others that I was not as bad, that I was just a kid, none of that mattered I had to come to terms

with what I had done and who I was. Hospice challenged who I thought I was. It made me uncomfortable; it challenged my beliefs about myself, and what I had thought about the world. Being a Death Dealer meant at some point, on some level, I would have to die myself, die to the beliefs I once held onto, die to what society said of me, a criminal, I had to die to the prejudices I believed in, I had to die to live. I couldn't continue to do this work without dying to myself. I didn't know how to do it, there was no manual, and I was too embarrassed to tell others. So many ideas I thought I knew about this life were somehow incorrect, I had to learn on my own that I was looking through the wrong lens; I chose to look through the lens that placed me at the center of my life. I was the most important person in my life. Every choice I made in my life had one beneficiary, me. What a miserable lie I told myself. I spent years and untold hours focused on myself, I missed out on investing in the lives of those around me those whom I thought I cared for, those individuals who said they cared for me even loved me. I discarded their feelings and manipulated them in service to meet my own needs. What kind of person was I? I was exactly where that thinking gets someone, living in the cellblocks of the Oregon State Penitentiary. We were all a bunch of selfish, ego-centered rejects of society. But here I was dying; dying to the thoughts that I had held onto so dear, just because I believed them didn't make them true. The truth is always true to itself.

Bobby helped me die. Our team met that morning to discuss our newest client on his way from the hospital. Bobby was very sick and not expected to live long. We discussed universal precautions, a fancy way of saying wear gloves and be sanitary. You see Bobby had AIDS, I thought to myself; I don't want to take care of a fag. He arrived later that

day, very thin and small, his long hair covered his face. Seeing this diminutive man I couldn't conceive what crime he could have been guilty of. He couldn't get up without assistance. I didn't know what I was going to do. In a prison surrounded by men queers stand out some are vocal and loud others hide in the shadows, but I didn't care about any of them I just didn't want their advances. Coming to prison as an 18 year old I was uncomfortable being around gay men and hearing their remarks about my naked body in the communal shower room. Advances were grounds for fighting, but no one wanted to get beat up by a sissy faggot or worse get raped by one. And here lay Bobby, asking for my help.

I didn't want to touch Bobby, none of us did, and we had no experience with an HIV+ client. I had to decide that I would help and I'm thankful I did. Bobby stayed around for a few months and we shared great stories, like most other clients we spent hours watching TV talking about music and movies and family stories.

Death was on his way, Bobby's body would not last long, his immune system was shot and his body was breaking down in front of us. His flesh was shrinking, His skin was cracking, very dry and scaling off, he lost all muscle and looked like a skeleton covered in skin. His body odor was horrible and I was still scared of his blood. He puked and coughed up chunks of blood and mucus.

I didn't realize Bobby's affect on my life until Death took him. My work at times is routine and mundane, I find myself going through the motions not always present in the

moment. But when Bobby was gone I felt emptiness inside, I couldn't place it or identify exactly what it was. My heart was troubled over this for months. Why did I feel this way?

Bobby was just another in a long line of condemned men who have allowed me to die a little bit so that I can be the truest version of myself. I don't believe that I ever thought Bobby was gay, he never indicated it to me, I guess it never really mattered. What did matter was that he needed help on his journey toward death and I was there, I accepted his invitation to join him on this one-way trip. It was less about me and more about him. Bobby helped me realize for the first time that I wasn't the most important person in my life. Why did I feel so strange when Bobby met Death? Because a part of me went with him, he took some of my prejudices with him to the grave they died with Bobby. The more I invest in the lives of others the more those lies I told myself will die until hopefully all that's left is truth. I never thought being a Death Dealer would include dying but I'm glad I chose to help Bobby.

All my best,
Lyle Hedquist
#11230424
Oregon State Penitentiary