

Richard Sweeney

COMMENTARY

JEFFREY HART

# Beckoned by the lure of a shared mortality?

The Jan. 31 issue of The Village Voice carries an article of great interest and possible importance. The article, written by a homosexual named Michael Warner, an intelligent fellow who is HIV-negative, is called "Why Gay Men Are Having Risky Sex."

On the assumption that the Voice — a New York City weekly — is not part of your regular reading list, I will give a brief outline of Mr. Warner's startling article.

Mr. Warner reports that among large numbers of homosexuals the risk of death is now part of the emotional appeal of sex, as something experienced and shared, and that sex under the threat of death is, well, better sex.

He cites a new San Francisco study that indicates that new human immunodeficiency virus infections are now nearly four times what they were in 1987. He estimates that about half the homosexual men in his age group in New York City are HIV-positive.

And, crucially, he recounts an experience of his own in having unprotected sex, deliberately having it, and finding that "the danger was part of the attraction." Yet, "I recoiled so much from what I had done that it seemed to be not my choice. A mystery, I thought. A

monster did it."

Mr. Warner is a reasonable man, and naturally he was startled to discover this perverse "monster" within him. It flew in the face of common sense. It certainly defied all those "educational" programs that counsel "safe sex."

With the odds of a sexual partner being HIV-positive at 50 percent, there is an HIV-colored culture among homosexuals. Mr. Warner says a major motive for deliberately practicing unsafe sex becomes "a deep identification with positive men, ambivalence about survival, and the rejection of ordi-

nary life."

"Our own lives are bound up with positive friends and lovers to such a degree that gay men are unwilling to say openly that they are negative," he writes. "It wounds like an affront, a betrayal of the men with whom we identify, and in comparison with whom our troubles will seem trivial."

This strikes me as highly plausible. The fact of facing death is undoubtedly a special bond among soldiers. There is plenty of evidence it increases their pleasure in even

ordinary things. The same is probably true of men in high-risk occupations. I suppose among homosexuals "safe sex" is a psychological equivalent to "draft dodging" among combat men.

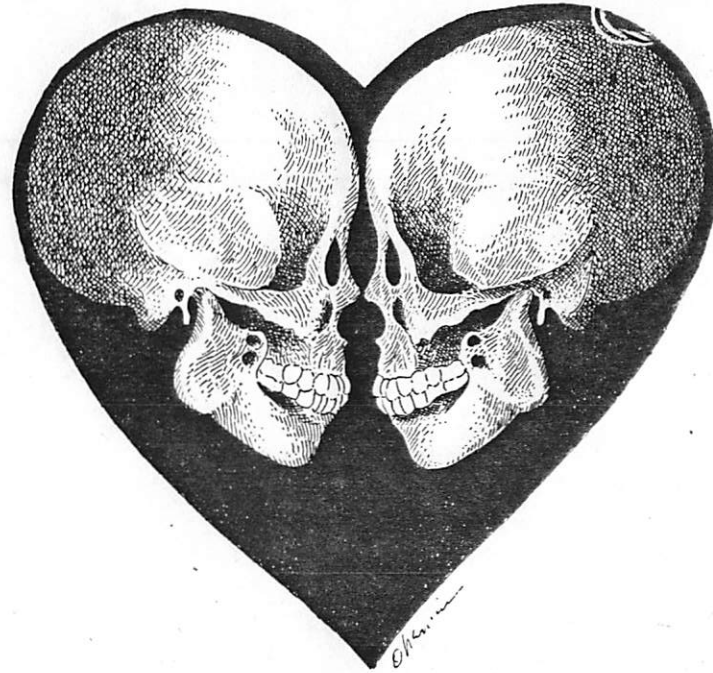
Mr. Warner cites a book by San Francisco therapist Walt Odets, who writes that HIV-negative gay men often try to live "as a dying man does, without a belief in or sense of responsibility about the future, existing within the scope and scale of a life that may end any day."

Mr. Warner says he is skeptical about seemingly common-sensical programs involving condoms, "safe sex" and so forth. They are beside the point. For men living on the edge, and desiring to do so, they can even appear laughable.

Yet Mr. Warner has another reflection, going deeper, a reflection that sticks in the mind:

"The appeal of queer sex, for many, lies in its ability to violate the responsabilizing frames of good, right-thinking people." That is, the appeal of homosexuality "for many" lies precisely in its rebelliousness against the norms of human behavior.

Right there, it is possible to see, all the talk that aims to normalize homosexuality, treat it as just another "lifestyle," is as beside the point as are the "safe sex" programs.



If the point of homosexuality is a rebellion against what is right and good, what point is there in normalizing it or pretending to do so?

Mr. Warner writes gently, but he cannot conceal the humorous view he takes of "normalizing" approaches.

"One campaign from the San

Francisco AIDS Foundation urges men to treat sex the way you might buy municipal bonds: 'Playing it safe, making a plan and sticking to it,'" he writes, adding, "Most efforts to encourage us to take care of ourselves through safer sex also invite us to pretend that our only desire is to be proper and good."

Well, that is some cat to let out of the bag. That is a difficult sentence, but Mr. Warner seems to be saying homosexual desire defines itself against the "proper and good." And that holds true whether the "proper and good" represents customary norms or the advice of the silly "safe sex" people.

Mr. Warner concludes that line of thought with an even more difficult sentence:

"Abjection continues to be our dirty secret."

I wish he had expanded upon that, but he moved on to other things.

"Abjection" means abasement, a feeling of unworthiness, of being low, of being a suitable object of scorn.

Is Mr. Warner saying that — some? many? all? — homosexuals in their desire are seeking some external acting-out of a feeling of "abjection"?

If that is true, it goes far beyond the nice "education" programs, the cheerful distribution of condoms, the grade-school books about "Hank Had Two Daddies" and other well-intentioned stuff.

It would also explain why HIV infections apparently have quadrupled in San Francisco since 1987, and why we now face what some epidemiologists are calling a "second wave" of acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

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## COMMENTARY

JOHN LEO

**T**he days when body-piercers could draw stares by wearing multiple earrings and a nose stud are long gone. We are now in the late baroque phase of self-penetration. Metal rings and bars hang from eyebrows, noses, nipples, lips, chins, cheeks, navels and (for that coveted neo-Frankenstein look) from the side of the neck.

"If it sticks out, pierce it" is the motto, and so they do, with special attention to genitals. Some of the same middle-class folks who decry genital mutilation in Africa are paying to have needles driven through the scrotum, the labia, the clitoris, or the penis. Many genital piercings have their own names, such as the ampallang or the Prince Albert. (Don't ask.)

And in most cases, the body heals without damage, though some women who have had their nipples pierced report damage to the breast's milk ducts, and some men who have been Prince Albert-ed no longer urinate in quite the same way.

What is going on here? Well, the mainstreaming-of-deviancy thesis naturally springs to mind. The piercing of nipples and genitals arose in the homosexual sadomasochistic culture of the West Coast. The Gauntlet, founded in Los Angeles in 1975 mostly to do master and slave piercing, now has three shops around the country that are about as controversial as Elizabeth Arden salons. Rumbling through the biker culture and punk, piercing gradually shed its outlaw image and was mass-marketed to the impressionable by music videos, rock stars and models. The Gauntlet says business has doubled every year for the past three years.

The nasty, aggressive edge of piercing is still there, but now it is coated in happy talk (it's just body decoration, like any other) and a New Age-y rationale (we are becoming more centered, reclaiming our bodies in an anti-body culture). Various new pagans, witches and New Agers see piercing as symbolic of unspecified spiritual transformation. One way or another, as Guy Trebay writes in the Village Voice, "You will never find anyone on

# Piercing the norms

the piercing scene who thinks of what he's doing as pathological."

The yearning to irritate parents and shock the middle class seems to rank high as a motive for getting punctured repeatedly. Some ask for dramatic piercings to enhance sexual pleasure, to seem daring or fashionable, to express rage, or to forge a group identity. Some think of it as an ordeal that serves as a rite of passage, like the Plains Indians' Sun Dance ritual, in which males were suspended from hooks in their chests.

Piercing is part of the broader "body modification" movement, which includes tattooing, corsetry, branding and scarring by knife. It's a sign of the times that the more bizarre expressions of this movement keep pushing into the mainstream. The current issue of Spin magazine features a hair-raising photo of a woman carving little rivers of blood into another woman's back. "Piercing is like tooth brushing now," one of the cutters told Spin. "It's why cutting is becoming popular." One of the cutters has a bland justification for back-slicing: People want to be cut "for adornment, or as a test of endurance, or as a sacrifice toward a transformation." Later on we read that "women are reclaiming their bodies from a culture that has commodified starvation and faux sex." One cuttee says: "It creates intimacy. My scars are emotional centers, signs of a life lived."

But most of us achieve intimacy, or at least search for it, without a knife in hand. The truth seems to be that the sadomasochistic instinct is being repositioned to look spiritually high-toned. Many people have found that S&M play "is a way of opening up the body-spirit connection," the

high priest of the body modification movement, Fakir Musafar, said in one interview.

Mr. Musafar, who has corseted his waist down to 19 inches and mortified his flesh with all kinds of blades, hooks and pins, calls the mostly twentyish people in the body modification movement "the modern primitives." This is another side of the movement: the conscious attempt to repudiate Western norms and values by adopting the marks and rings of primitive cultures.

Not everyone who pierces a nipple or wears a tongue stud is buying into this, but something like a new primitivism seems to be emerging in body modification as in other areas of American life. It plugs into a wider dissatisfaction with traditional Western rationality, logic and sexual norms, as well as anger at the impact of Western technology on the natural environment, and anger at the state of American political and social life.

Two sympathetic analysts say this about the body modification movement: "Amid an almost universal feeling of powerlessness to 'change the world,' individuals are changing what they have power over: their own bodies. . . . By giving visible expression to unknown desires and latent obsessions welling up from within, individuals can provoke change."

Probably not. Cultural crises can't really be dealt with by letting loose our personal obsessions and marking up our bodies. But the rapid spread of this movement is yet another sign that the crisis is here.

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