

# Let's talk about sex



IN A GROUP DISCUSSION ABOUT SEX THAT I WAS part of with about 25 other guys, the moderator began by asking us to think back to our closeted adolescence. He wanted us to describe what we imagined our sexual lives would be like as openly gay adults.

The guys in the circle were black, white, Latino, Asian. Some were middle-class, others poor, some from Ozzie-and-Harriet families, others the products of broken or abusive homes. But practically everybody described a similar dream—a dream that some might now deride as a mimicking of straight norms and that others might praise as a Walt Whitmanesque vision of humane sexual brotherhood: We would come out of the closet; find a nice, sexy guy; settle down; and try to build a satisfying life in a supportive gay community.

Then the moderator asked us to describe the gay sexual culture that actually met us when we came out. Plenty of men said they found the bar and cruising scene to be exciting, adventurous, liberating. But practically everybody also described it as a scene that profoundly undermined their romantic teenage expectations: a scene of competitive sex and instant gratification, in which younger men are too often treated like pieces of meat, older men like scraps of refuse; a scene of widespread drug and alcohol use; a world with relatively few people in long-term relationships and where men are appreciated more for their looks and pecs and penis size than for their compassion, loyalty, talent, or friendship—in short, a world you wouldn't want to grow old in. Yet even most of those who at first found this world a bit scary and alienating eventually dived right in. Because, as one reasoned, "I figured this is what it means to be gay."

For most men, the gay world is—warts and all—a paradise of freedom when compared with the heterosexual wasteland we came from. But it's nonetheless a world with a lot of pressure and a lot of problems, and you'd think gay men would spend more time debating it and analyzing it and trying to make it better. Yet we rarely do.

Our meek acceptance of the sexual status quo contrasts sharply with the way lesbians challenged their own sexual culture in the early '80s, when the dyke world was rocked by the great lesbian sex debates. Back then, women stepped forward and boldly challenged the prevailing lesbian sexual ethic as stifling, monotonous, hostile to pleasure. They promoted instead the validity of sex for pleasure's sake, butch-femme role playing, and S/M. Dykedom has never been the same.

Gay men are badly in need of our own great sexual debate, but it's not happening, and there are lots of rea-

sons why. A major one is that any genuine debate would almost certainly originate from a position opposite the one that lesbian sex radicals took in the '80s. Lesbians' problem was self-repression; their solution, more liberation. For gay men, most of the problems stem from sexual consumerism and excess. Solutions would tend to encourage more connections between sex and love, spirit, and family, things that some consider—gasp!—conservative. Supporters of the status quo might make little distinction between a gay man who makes such an argument and a homophobe who argues for "family values"—even if the gay man's position stemmed from love and the right-winger's from homophobic hate.

Then there's the genuine fear that it's impossible to criticize gay sexual ethics without appearing to stigmatize the people who practice them. Few guys relish even giving the appearance of stigmatizing anybody, especially

about sex. That fact manifests itself every time somebody criticizes S/M outfits in gay pride parades. Those criticisms are usually more about public relations than sexual culture, but they do seem stigmatizing, and that probably turns off a lot of people who might otherwise have valid, nonaccusatory criticisms about gay sex culture. Yet it's got to be possible to have a debate about culture without being

stigmatizing and to have a debate about sex itself without being sex-negative. Indeed, a basic challenge of such a debate would center on how to incorporate gay men's sex positivity and aversion to stigma into a more humane vision of life, sexual and otherwise.

Such a debate would have no shortage of targets: the psychic toll of sexual competitiveness on gay men, how the idealization of youth oppresses both the young and old, how body culture oppresses both the pumped and the unpumped, how the subtle equation of relationships with heterosexism affects the chance of forming a lasting emotional commitment, how bars and discos encourage drug and alcohol abuse and connect them with expressions of hot sexuality, and how all the above contributes to unsafe sex in the '90s.

The funny thing is, there's an abundance of compassion and emotional connection in gay male life. You see it in our art and literature, our fierce friendships, our volunteer and community and activist organizations. The disconnection between the way we are in general and the way we are in our sexual pursuits sometimes seems like night and day—or Jekyll and Hyde. A debate might not be able to change all this very quickly. There are some who argue that, guys being guys, we can't—or shouldn't—change it at all. But it would be nice if we were talking about it.

**Like lesbians in the '80s, gay men are badly in need of our own great sexual debate.**