

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

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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.

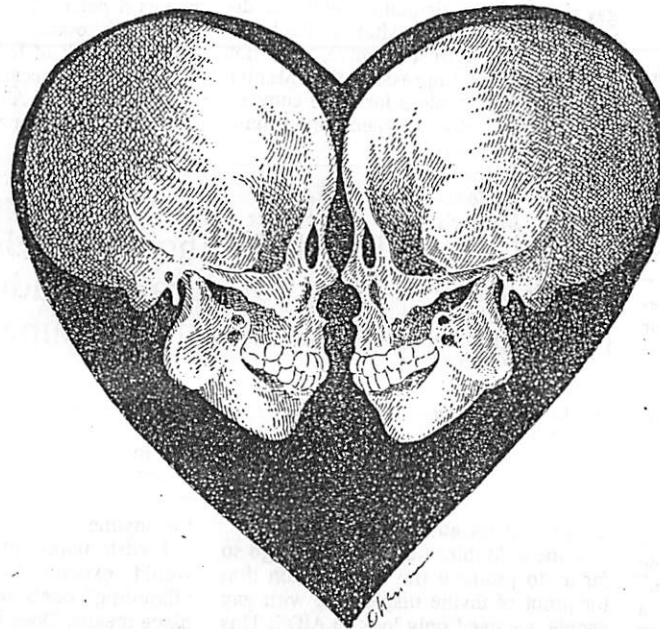
Mr. Warner cites a book by San Francisco therapist Walt Odets, who writes that HIV-negative gay men often try to live "as a dying man does, without a belief in or sense of responsibility about the future, existing within the scope and scale of a life that may end any day."

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.



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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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."

# Targeted for hate — without reason

## A simple plea for justice from someone much like us

The writer, who lives in Louisville, is a former reporter for *The Louisville Times* and a former *Courier-Journal* editorial writer.

IMAGINE my surprise when I opened *The Courier-Journal* the other day and discovered that Southern Baptist Seminary President R. Albert Mohler has pinpointed the heart of our country's social problems — and no, it's not the state of public education, or economic injustice, or drugs, or racial prejudice, or corrupt politicians, or greed. Nope, it's me.

Oh, my.

To be fair, Mohler didn't name me specifically. But he might as well have. He was referring to what some people call my "lifestyle." Now there's a word that's always intrigued me: Just which part of my life is my "lifestyle"? The fact that I pay taxes



Martha Barnette

and contribute to charities? That I work hard at my job?

That I go grocery-shopping at Kroger and recycle my glass and newspapers? That I walk my dog in our city's magnificent parks? That I help out elderly neighbors? That I love my family?

No, what Mohler and others are all hot up about — the thing that apparently confers "style" on my otherwise ordinary

life — is the fact that the person dearest in the world to me, the person I've loved and lived with for more than six joyous years, is a woman.

Frankly, I'd like to think people have more important things to think about than what other grownups do in the privacy of their own bedrooms.

I also find it curious that when Mohler invoked the Apostle Paul to demonize gay people, he neglected to demonize divorced people as well. After all, Paul certainly railed against divorce. It's not hard to get the impression that Mohler considers gay people a far more convenient and politically expedient target than,

say, millions of divorced Americans. In fact, if Jesus shared Mohler's belief that homosexuality is at the very root of moral decay, wouldn't you figure that He might have found time to say at least one brief sentence to that effect?

But according to the Scriptures, Jesus never mentioned homosexuality at all. Apparently He had more important things to think about, too.

Some at Mohler's seminary even go so far as to promote the naive notion that for proof of divine displeasure with gay people, we need only look to AIDS. This hate-riddled argument crumbles under the weight of logic: AIDS first appeared in, then ravaged, the heterosexual population in Africa before spreading to this country. It's a disease, period.

Besides, if AIDS were really God's judgment, why is it that lesbians are among those least at risk for the disease? We're in a risk category far lower than heterosexuals — in fact, we're right down there with nuns.

I certainly respect Mohler's right to his religious beliefs, just as I hope he respects mine. Despite the fact that countless other religious leaders and lay peo-

ple strongly disagree with him, he's certainly free to interpret my lifetime commitment to my partner as a "sin."

But kicking a gay person out of a religious institution (as has already happened at the Baptist seminary) is quite different from firing otherwise competent employees in the workplace solely because they are gay, or merely presumed to be. It's different when city law makes it perfectly legal to rob people of their livelihoods, their homes, even the simple dignity of being served in a restaurant, solely because they are gay.

If the Board of Aldermen passes legislation to protect people from job dis-

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crimination based on sexual orientation, it will extend that protection to gay and straight people alike. No special rights for anyone.

I wish opponents of this ordinance would explain to me exactly what "flaunting" one's sexuality in the workplace means. Does it mean being honest when your well-meaning boss tries to fix you up with a date? Answering truthfully when a co-worker asks who went with you to that terrific movie?

Is it "flaunting" to bring your loved one to the company Christmas party, to keep your sweetheart's photo on your desk, or to explain that the reason you're upset today is because your partner's mother died last night? Or are all those special rights for heterosexuals?

If Mohler and his ilk are truly concerned about the breakdown of the family, they should consider how their rhetoric tears apart loving families by leav-

ing gay children and their parents estranged from one another.

They should consider how their fear-mongering is causing children to be taken away from their mothers for no other reason than the basest kind of ignorance and prejudice. (Children of gay parents, by the way, grow up just as happy and well-adjusted as anyone else's, studies show. For what it's worth, they also turn out overwhelmingly heterosexual; it's straight parents who raise the vast majority of gay people, after all.)

Mohler's decision to scapegoat a minority for our society's terribly complex problems would be laughable if it weren't so dangerous. All over this country, gay-bashers now use such inflammatory talk from religious leaders to justify vicious, even murderous, hate crimes — eight such killings in Texas alone in the past 22 months.

But such attempts to demonize gay people may not be effective much longer, not if more of us speak up and "tell the truth" about who we are.

I'm telling the truth right now, President Mohler. So is Bronze Star Winner Col. Margarethe Cammermeyer, who was discharged from the Army for her honesty about being a lesbian. As she writes in her book, *Serving in Silence*: "We are your daughters, your sisters, your sons, your nurses, your mechanics, your athletes, your police, your politicians, your fathers, your doctors, your soldiers, your mothers. We live with you, care for you, protect you, teach you, love you, and need you. All we ask is that you let us.

"We are no different. We ... need love, like you. Feel pain, like you.

"And we deserve justice, like you." To which I can only add: "Amen."

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