

AIDS: still the issue



AFTER YEARS OF TRYING TO FIND A SILVER LINING with each consecutive AIDS death, I felt despair quietly creep into my own life after the international AIDS conference in Berlin last year offered no medical hope. Reflexively, many of us redirected both energy and money to other issues we felt we could do something about—thus, we've been

“de-AIDS'ing” national gay and lesbian politics.

Then I heard this statistic: 30% of gay and bisexual men in America age 20 today will be dead or HIV-positive by the time they're 30. Horror set in, and I felt my capacity for anger evaporate. I began to sink into hopelessness for the first time in 25 activist years.

But once again I discovered that the personal is political. At a recent American Association of Physicians for Human Rights conference in Dallas, delegates unblinkingly confronted the terrifying “second wave” of HIV infection: high rates of new infection among young gay and bisexual men and people of color, a new wave of infection among older gay men who have abandoned safer-sex practices, and increased infection rates among lesbians. My private AIDS despair, I discovered, reflects a mass phenomenon among urban lesbians and gay men as we grapple with the terrible truth that AIDS is not a short-term war. AIDS is a permanent catastrophe.

The horrifying AIDS-related psychic landscape of gay and lesbian life includes a massive psychological epidemic among uninfected people. Living in a traumatized state of untreated distress, many HIV-negative people experience widespread depression and anxiety, syndromes similar to post-traumatic stress disorder, and immense amounts of survivor guilt. There is a pervasive sense of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and inability to envision a future for gay life. Research shows that HIV-negative gay men perceive that support and a sense of community exist for HIV-positive men but not for them. In horrible irony it has almost become more acceptable in this sick, homophobic society to have AIDS than to be gay. Added to that is a widespread sense among gay men of the inevitability of HIV infection.

The message of the Dallas summit was blasted out loud and clear: Continuing to lose 40% to 50% of our gay men—and soon women—to HIV is not acceptable. And as we fight like hell for longer and richer lives for those who are HIV-positive, we have to change our community radically so that HIV-negative people have

enough self-esteem, hope, and meaning in their lives to want to survive this holocaust.

But we must first reverse the homophobic “degaying” of AIDS; while gay men represent 80% of those infected, only 8% of prevention dollars are allocated to them. And we must “re-AIDS” gay and lesbian national politics to reclaim AIDS as a top national agenda item. It's clear that fighting despair and replenishing hope within our traumatized community will require massive organization. We need a decentralized movement that will include small peer-support groups for HIV-negative gay and bisexual men and promote nonjudgmental and realistic safer-sex messages. We need healing circles, teach-ins, and town hall meetings to acknowledge and discharge the pain we feel. We must engage every possible community-based group to mobilize around a central principle: To affirm our right to survive, we must affirm our right to a future.

Gay liberation—contrary to queer pop mythology, which equates it with sexual freedom—used to share with the women's liberation movement a broad social vision of transformed human relationships. Over the past 15 years, our fierce reaction to the sexphobia of the vanquishing Right along with a dissolution of the dialogue between gay politics and feminism have enshrined sexual self-expression as our underlying community ethos. The radicals won the “sex wars,” but we lost the truly radical vision of full human liberation in the process. The idea of sex as salvation and as self, which dominates gay male—and now young lesbian—culture, holds no promise for real change; it is consumeristic and ultimately hollow.

Our actual experience tells us that love and intimacy, family, parenting, mentoring, connection to community, and activist engagement, the collective process of changing the conditions of our lives—are what give the greatest meaning to life. They nurture self-worth, shape future vision, and transform behavior over the long term.

Clearly, we won't survive as a community without an articulated public community ethic that goes well beyond sex-positivity and without a politics of meaning well beyond the AIDS rage that sustained us for the first decade of this epidemic. Crafting new values and visions will demand great emotional bravery, mutual respect, and a reintegration of feminist thinking into our work. It will involve an immense mobilization of something we have a lot of but also seem to fear: faith, including faith in our own power as leaders, healers, and teachers. As we grope toward a necessary and healing hope, we may design a vision that can also help others in our hungry, hurting larger world. It's time for the politics of love.

We must reverse the homophobic “degaying” of AIDS and “re-AIDS” gay and lesbian politics.