

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 ordinary life."

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"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.

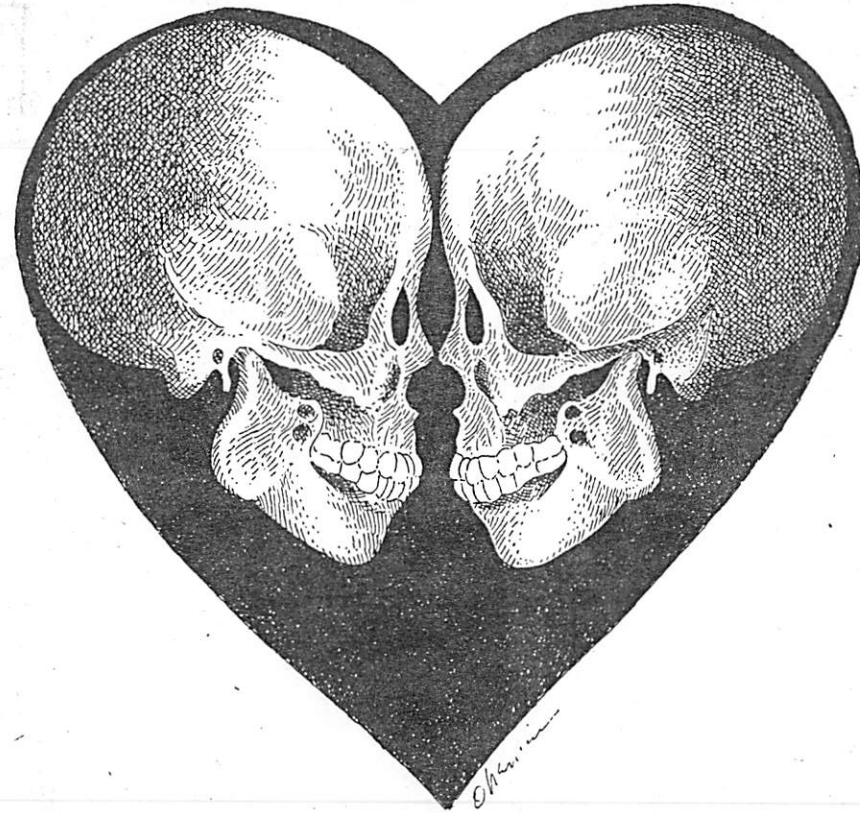
Mr. Warner cites a book by San Francisco therapist Walt Odets, who writes that HIV-negative gay men often try to live "as a dying man does, without a belief in or sense of responsibility about the future, existing within the scope and scale of a life that may end any day."

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.

*Jeffrey Hart is a nationally syndicated columnist.*