# Be Very Afraid

Activists are sellouts. Drugs won't save us. The pipeline's full of shit. In Stephen Gendin's death, Larry Kramer sees every HIVer's future. And the reason for us to be heroes again.

October 1, 2000 By Larry Kramer

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**What can we do to honor Stephen?** And to honor ourselves? I feel distinctly bereft of anything honorable about my life, and Stephen's death only makes me feel worse. He was a gentleman, a soft-spoken, kind-hearted, very, very sweet and very, very smart young man. No, we didn't always agree with each other, but I don't want to talk about that. We never fought about anything. If we disagreed, we disagreed. A disagreement with Stephen did not require, or demand, that the AIDS activist movement be rent into pieces.

This fine young man is dead now. In his death we see what awaits us. He went on the very first drugs, and he took every drug and pill and treatment there was for him to take. **Look into your future,** boys and girls, and have a little more fear and trembling than you've been showing these past few years. Why, at Durban, even Dr. [Anthony] Fauci said that taking these drugs for the rest of our lives is "not an option." Interesting choice of words, option. We now officially know we can choose which way we want to die.

Stephen was a poster boy. You looked at that open and kind and interested face and as it smiled at you, you felt good. He and Mark Aurigemma and their friends were "the look" of that new organization coming into being called ACT UP. Because of how they looked, and how they acted, and how they talked and what they said and did -- smart thoughts came out of their mouths and they spent a lot of time doing deeds beside dancing -- other smart young people flocked to ACT UP to be like them. **This was the new activism. Do you remember it? It's almost as dead as Stephen.** Well, like Stephen, it was wonderful while it lived. Fighting the enemy with devoted comrades-in-arms makes you feel wonderful. And clean.

Is your life wonderful now? Do you feel clean? Have all these shitty drugs we fought so hard to get made you feel wonderful and clean?

A few years ago we were having some sort of think-tank bull session at Sean Strub's, trying to decide what we should do. God, haven't we had a lot of those! With no great ideas forthcoming and everyone weary of the exercise, Stephen looked at me and said softly: **"You started all this and now you've abandoned us."** It didn't register at first. I was walking home before it hit me. I've never been able to forget that. It made me feel shitty. Still does.

Sean said this to me about today's memorial: "I want to slam Stephen's death up the butts and down the throats of the whole fucking world to try and get people to do something about it." I suspect that's why he asked me to speak. Somehow I have a reputation for getting people off their butts.

People ask me why I wear overalls all the time now. You want to know the real reason? **I don't have a butt anymore.** Pants fall off me when I wear them. I have to walk down the street with my hands in my pockets holding them up. Unless I have my hands in my pockets hiking up my underpants. Or my Pampers. Stephen and I had an inimitable conversation not so long ago exchanging stories about shitting in your pants before you could get to a john. Yeah, I feel dirty and shitty in lots of ways.

No , I, and you, all of us, **never finished the job.** We started something and when a bunch of rebels left us we let them get away with it, almost grateful that somebody else was going to be doing the work now. Let them have their turn, even if they shut out everybody who didn't think the way they did. After all, we'd been rebels ourselves once, hadn't we. But in their leaving, ACT UP pretty much fell apart.

The new rebels haven't turned out much better. They can't finish the job either. They're on the same shitty drugs we are and feel just as shitty as we do.

Maybe we can't do it, either side, without the other. Has anyone thought like this recently? Not so I've heard it.

I believe **the main thing that makes a person a good activist is fear.** When you're afraid enough and you want to live enough, you find your butt and get off it. I'm not so certain, though, that we all want to live anymore. We're so sick of feeling sick that in some deep part of our souls we almost wish it all would be over. Hush [McDowell] says among the last words Stephen said were: "Please, I'm tired. I really want to rest." He didn't want to die, of course, and he expected to get up the next day feeling better and fight some more. But he really was tired, as we all are, tired of not quite making it to the toilet before it's too late.

"We're turning AIDS into a manageable disease, like diabetes." What bullshit. It's dangerous to think and talk like this. AIDS is not manageable. **"Living with AIDS" is a bigger bullshit expression. As Stephen can tell us, you can't live with AIDS.**

I spoke to some big-deal NIH [National Institutes of Health] scientist today. 2050. That's a year. 2050. That's the year he thought this might be over by. That's how fast those fuckers work.

Research, very little of it very original, is still in the hands of only a few people. We know who they are. **We kiss their asses and pal around with them** and go to conferences with them and pretend they're our friends and we're their friends. Where has it got us? Here.

Oh, another thing this scientist told me: one billion people? That figure is going to turn out to be low. Low.

Betrayal. We have been betrayed at every turn. Getting inside the NIH got us dipshit. The drug companies? **We gave them our bodies, an army of bodies, to be their guinea pigs,** so they could develop decent treatments that could then be exported to the rest of a desperately needy, dying world. We got them fast track so they could make billions instead of finishing their work, refining their product. They used our bodies to create poisons that kill HIV and kill us too, and then they decamped without improving their wares, and without any consideration for all the dying people everywhere. This is immoral. Can't you **feel hate in your heart for every greedy slimy bastard** who works at a drug company?

Isn't this a good time to scare the shit out of them because now they need us desperately? We're a huge market now, one they count on for huge profits. If we don't buy their product, if we bad-mouth their product, if we tell the world DuPont's Sustiva is one of the most inhumane medicines ever launched into the bloodstream of man, maybe they'll become so afraid of us they'll start behaving like scientists and not like Nazi experimenters. Why, if we all stopped our drugs every other month, their profits would be halved. That would be a strategic drug interruption indeed! Yes, we're in a wonderful position of bargaining now, better than ever before.

They blame us, you know, for their crappy drugs. We're not compliant enough. What kind of medicine requires 95 percent adherence? Stephen was 100 percent compliant. Stephen is dead.

**There has to be a way to make all these bastards work for our money,** harder and faster.

The other type of doctor is the kind who doesn't see many HIV patients; the few he or she has are just part of a larger practice. These doctors don't know enough about HIV. They practice by recipe, do what they've vaguely heard or read about. They really shouldn't be seeing PWAs. Do you go to one of these doctors? Of course you do. There aren't any other kinds.

Like most of our best activists, most doctors have been co-opted by the drug companies. I guarantee that 95 percent of you go to a **doctor who pimps for a drug company.** And the more hard-up doctors are becoming on managed care, the more they sign up for a drug-company assignment.

What does it take for us to learn once and for all that we mustn't be co-opted, that we only fool ourselves when we think that having so many of our people on the inside will save Stephen?

You people on HAART, for whom HAART is working now and who get angry when anyone says anything against HAART -- you're being selfish, thinking only of yourself. You feel OK now. You're not going to for long. Stephen was one of the first to take every drug you are now taking. **How long do you think you have?** Dr. [David] Ho has disappeared into the miasma of never-never land and Dr. Fauci says taking these drugs is "not an option." How good and clean and wonderful can you feel?

I would like to say a few words to those of you who are HIV negative. Where are you? **You are shits.** Mass genocide is going on. This is no longer just the opinion of a crazy man but a fact. Entire populations are being eliminated. This is mass genocide we have never seen the likes of in

the history of the world, on a scale unrivaled in history. It is population control on an enormous scale. Yes, you are total and utterly useless shits. At least we know what it feels like to be dying.

This puny little virus, which can be killed with alcohol when it's on a needle, is outsmarting us every single second of our lives. It simply should not take so long to outsmart it. **That is the opinion of this crazy man.** It is taking so long because too many people want it to take so long.

We're here at Stephen's memorial. No one fought harder to live than Stephen. Isn't it time we faced up to the fact that we have to do something whether we want to or not? We cannot walk so obligingly into the arms of death. Tired as we are, reluctant as we are, powerless as we feel, **we must stay alive for those we love and for those who love us.** And so that the future will not be able to say: They fought hard but not hard enough.

I do not want to start another organization. Marching all the time is only an endless list of righteous grievances that the media bores of quickly.

**But I do not want to go gently into that good night.**

If we no longer have enough rage left in us, we have something else. We have learned, have we not, how to be clever and crafty. With this we can forge a quiet activism that could be much more sinister. Speaking softly without smiling can be scarier than chants and screams.

Do you know what a cell is? Cell is a revolutionary word. A cell is a unit of a few people who know each other secretly and decide their activities secretly and tell nothing to anyone else, nothing. **They swear secrecy and pledge complete trust** to their cellmates. The French Resistance and the Israeli Irgun were made up of cells. The use of cells is the next phase of any movement when progress has stopped, when a dead end has been reached, when death stares you in the face unless, when the only next step can only be revolutionary acts. Remember, America itself was started by a revolution. There were many cells indeed then.

Remember the "affinity groups" ACT UP once used to stage zaps and actions? Take this idea one step further. Cells can do anything. Cells of lawyers can threaten class-action lawsuits against drug companies not dissimilarly to what is happening against tobacco. Cells can plaster cities to tell people to stop taking their drugs every other month. Cells can **play havoc on the Internet,** the most valuable tool ever put in the hands of activism. Yes, cells can do anything they want to. That is the beauty of the cell. It is a secret and private place. It has many, many lives. Lewis Thomas called his famous book The Lives of a Cell.

I challenge each and every one of you to form a group of your own and pick things you can accomplish to ruin a pharmaceutical's day. The drug companies are our main target. They are rich beyond belief. This is the only country in the entire world where drug companies are free to charge what they want. **Scare the shit out of them.** Scare their stockholders to death. For every slimy pill of shit they pump out for us to pump in.

I challenge each and every one of you to form a group of your own and pick things you can

accomplish to ruin a politician's day. Have you heard Al Gore or Junior Bush tell you what he's going to do to save us? I haven't. If they haven't heard us, let's see to it that the world doesn't hear them either. Make every appearance of either of these dangerous simpleton turds a nightmare.

Find the things you can do exceptionally well and that will drive people crazy and do them. Stop going to all those meetings with the FDA and the NIH and the CDC and Abbott and Glaxo and fucking DuPont. That is conspiring with your murderer.

**Form a cell, like the Mafia,** like the Irgun, like the French Resistance, and keep them small and secret and only tell the people in your cell what each of them needs to know to do a specific job. Thus if one person or cell goes too far, we are able to deny knowing anything about it.

There is only so much that can be said about this publicly. I have given you a blueprint. A road map. Plan your own route. I think you get the general idea.

I hope this plan pleases Stephen and that he will no longer think that I, and you, have walked away from him. He is watching us, you know. **I have never stopped believing two things:** That there is a cure. And that we will all meet again.

I'm afraid this idea won't catch fire. I'm afraid I must live through another patch of being called crazy. I'm afraid not many of us are going to live as long as, just a few years ago, we thought we would. I'm afraid it is time for us to be heroes again. I'm afraid you are not afraid as much as I am afraid. You must be afraid to be a useful AIDS activist.

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