Brats ’R’ Us

Bullying and bawling are the MO at the PWA playground. Emily Carter has just two words for us: Grow Up!

May 1, 2001 By Emily Carter

I mused in my last column about the idealization of children in this society. I came down squarely neither for nor against it, but now I need to declare myself stridently in favor of grownups.

Roe v. Wade to the fetus-worshippers on the steps of the Capitol. Then he started making noise about eliminating the AIDS czar position, but some advisor must have threatened his Playstation privileges because he took it back. Of course, Bush got into office on such a slim electoral-college margin that the few Green Party voters might have made a difference -- at least by refraining from re-enforcing voter apathy with their ceaseless droning about both parties being exactly alike. Sure, I would have liked Ralph Nader to be president. I would also like Jesus to be president. Or Peter Pan.

Meanwhile, in our own “diseased pariah” playground, the so-called HIV dissidents refuse to heed the “recess over” bell. ACT UP/San Francisco says it’s anti-HIV meds, not HIV, that cause people to get sick and die. Not that people weren’t getting sick and dying before the meds came on the scene. Not that people aren’t getting sick and dying all over the developing world who are not, due to the greedy behavior of another set of children, likely to be taking these meds any time this century. Anyone who disagrees with them, by the way, is a big, fat babyhead. And safer sex? Nobody’s going to tell these self-important “gay liberationists” to use condoms.

But it gets worse. Temper tantrums and name-calling are increasingly the behavior of the entire AIDS community. With the media blaring the news that one third of all young, gay, black men are HIV positive, you might think we would all stand as one calling upon Mr. Compassionate Conservative to show some. Instead the alarming stats have set off a schoolyard scuffle among AIDS service providers over who’s to blame, with black groups and white groups smacking accusations of racism and homophobia back and forth as if what’s at stake were a tetherball game rather than a lethal virus. Yes, people are getting infected and dying right here on our doorstep, and along with an extremely childish lack of gratitude for our own relatively good health, AIDS activists seem to be suffering from arrested development -- stuck in the “Peace Corps” phase and unable to focus on the less “exotic” and far-away deaths occurring in places as pedestrian as Newark, New Jersey. Sometimes being an adult means fixing the hole in the wall with the tools at hand, rather than day-dreaming about the power drill you might get for Christmas. If there’s a malevolent force conspiring against us PWAs, its first agenda is “divide and conquer”: Keep the

kids shrilling "No, *you* are!" and squabbling about nasty side effects to distract us from our own destruction.

For the record, the AIDS meds do make me sick. They sometimes make me tired, and dizzy, and my face feels like it's burning, and my mouth like it's full of soap and ashes. Sometimes I can't think straight. I throw up. I spend entire evenings on the couch watching my legs twitch as if evil pixies are dancing in my sinews. What the meds don't do is give me virulent opportunistic infections involving stratospheric fevers, or blind me, or cause me to lie in a hospital hooked up to a respirator fighting for breath. Do I really need to remind anyone that this was what Santa used to pack in his bagful of gifts for PWAs?

Of course, my own inner child rebels at this choice, which seems to boil down fairly often to either *feeling* sick or *being* sick. "Tough luck," I tell my inner child. Sometimes being an adult boils down to accepting the lesser of two evils: Side effects rather than death. Gore not Bush. You know, the non-Quixotic, tedious grownup stuff.

Meanwhile, the tots at the top are fast losing interest in us. Funding for treatment, prevention and research is not like unconditional love, and keeping it is a matter of life and death, not child's play.

Oh, but we HIVers never grow up, never give in. We're rebels with a cause. We're forever young. We defy authority. We buy Nike.

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