Editor’s Letter

January 1, 2000 By Walter Armstrong

AIDS was my generation’s Great War, and ACT UP was our army. For the rest of my life my imaginary inner child will be asking me, “Daddy, what did you learn in the war?” I’d like to respond with lessons of courage, integrity and love, and sometimes I do, but today I’d have to say, “I learned how victims victimize themselves.”

I’m in a phase when much of what I thought, said and did as an activist sets my teeth on edge. Here’s a faded, cracking memory: In 1992, I and some fellow activists wrote, printed and distributed 10,000 copies of an anonymous broadsheet at the gay pride parade. A sequel to our handout two years earlier called “I Hate Straights,” this one led with a piece by me that had as much wit and wisdom as a temper tantrum. The title says everything—“I Hate Gay Men”—but even that was wrong.

The title should have been “I Hate HIV Negative Gay Men.” For the piece was an attack on our irresponsibility in a time of crisis—for caring more about building muscles than building a movement; for escaping into party drugs and dancing rather than demonstrating and fighting for AIDS drugs; above all, for having unsafe sex while our HIV positive comrades suffered and died. On and on I railed, raining down self-righteous rhetoric on the parade. What saddens me now is that I neither knew nor cared that browbeating my brothers was no way to reach them. But communication wasn’t really the point; to provoke, to push buttons—that got the group’s approval.

Despite my “empowered queer” imitation, I was actually at a loss when it came to taking care of anyone, including myself. The night before the march, I had gotten drunk, gone home with a stranger and let him fuck me without a condom. Tempting the virus was an irresistible attraction, and I beat myself up for it even as I was drawn to it. But it took years of therapy for me to make the connection that unsafe sex is bad not because it is breaking the condom code or betraying the community. Unsafe sex is bad because getting infected with HIV is bad. But in 1992, according to the prevailing political correctness, an HIV negative person never said such a thing. Nor did you admit to a fear of having sex with a partner who was positive. You put your body on the line at the barricades and in bed. These denials in service to the cause kept me from seeing that my activism and my unsafe sex sprang, in part, from the same toxic source: self-hatred.

In those years, neither ACT UP nor the gay community was in any better shape to take care of me than I was. As I write this, I can hear voices raised in protest: What about the civil disobedience trainings and affinity groups, the buddy systems and deathbed vigils? Yes, there were many rituals of compassion and fellowship; yes, the fact that such wildly diverse victims and pariahs could

mobilize as an army was a miracle. But finally the AIDS catastrophe was too vast and PWA empowerment too vulnerable to waste resources on anything but immediate life-and-death issues. The problem wasn't that the needs of the HIV positive took priority, but that when those needs inevitably came into conflict with the needs of the HIV negative—as they did most acutely in the project of HIV prevention—acknowledgement of this conflict, let alone analysis of it, was aborted, to be dealt with "after the crisis."

Eventually these unmet needs reached critical mass in a second wave of infections among gay men. Why were we having so much unsafe sex? Did we want to get HIV? The answer was a painful, predictable yes; at last, we were on the agenda, and no amount of browbeating would stop our behavior. In 1993, copies of a manuscript by gay psychologist Walt Odets were circulating, feverishly consumed and passed on like Soviet *samizdat*. *In the Shadow of the Epidemic: Being HIV Negative in the Age of AIDS* was truly a revelation. Odets might as well have been taking my pulse, so precisely did he put his finger on the motives that made becoming positive seem desirable. He identified survivor guilt, a wish for solidarity, a confirmation of gayness, a sense of inevitability and, of course, self-hatred—not exactly the ideal of the empowered queer, but at least proof that I wasn't bad…I was only human. Above all, Odets advocated caring rather than attacking, healing as an alternative to victimhood—everything that was missing in "I Hate Gay Men." These insights went on to revolutionize HIV prevention, but the army of activists that might have benefited from them had largely retired or died.

Between my therapist, Walt Odets and a lot of luck, I've managed to stay negative. I also flatter myself that I learned a few things in the war. One is that "after the crisis" never comes. Another is that as we daily rededicate to keeping the HIV positive healthy and the HIV negative uninfected, we must also address all our unfinished business—especially the anguished but enduring dependency between people who have HIV and those who do not. As the editor of *POZ*, I commit these pages to that healing process—to provoke, to push buttons, even to browbeat a bit, but always with the aim of taking care.

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