Editor’s Letter

June 1, 2001 By Walter Armstrong

Let me be the last to remind you that June marks 20 years since the first sign of AIDS was recorded. *What does this moment mean to you? POZ* asks, in different ways, on every page. Michael Musto’s short answer -- “Happy Birthday, AIDS, you fucking freak” -- says it all. I have nothing to add but some tears (Stephen, Randy...). And a confession. Right now, as others look back in anger and grief at this earthly holocaust, or in pride and confidence at their own blessed survival, I’ve turned away. In the middle of the dark wood, for the first time in 14 years, I find myself in a place of safety and light. I’m looking at the stars, dreaming of a future. Yes, I’m in love. Also, my boyfriend and I have entered the brave new world beyond condoms.

This isn’t a political statement. We’re just two negative guys in a monogamous relationship practicing safe “unsafe sex.” While we didn’t follow every step of the approved “negotiated safety” programs (“Draw up and sign a contract” isn’t our style), we talked and waited, talked and tested -- and finally, reassured by science but convinced by love, we slipped between the sheets of normal, natural sex. Of course, with HIV hiding under beds and no cure or vaccine on the horizon, fucking raw isn’t *normal* or *natural*. For lucky negatives, it’s a privilege; for unlucky HIVers, a crime. And it turns out that fucking skin to skin is indeed electric, but the pleasure, as deep as it is, is not the point. The shared sensations, intimacy and trust, the seriousness of the commitment and the faith in the future are.

Safe “unsafe sex” sounds like a Mad Hatter paradox, but turn it upside-down and out fall the denials and contradictions of two decades of HIV prevention. When I came out in the late ’80s, safe sex -- a broad agenda including fighting the death seed, homo hatred and AIDS phobia -- defined “responsible.” To have unsafe sex made you mad, bad and dangerous to know. But in our “every time we fuck we win” fever, that rigid morality itself proved unsafe as negative guys began to take “irresponsible” risks with positive guys. Were we crazy? No. We were hot for them. But we were also increasingly driven by fear of getting infected, guilt over not being infected, desire to fulfill a “gay” fate or despair over the inevitable -- risky emotions that the community’s multimillion-dollar prevention machine still has no poster or slogan to explain. It’s thanks to plain dumb luck that I’m still negative.

For my boyfriend and me, taking emotional risks, and testing negative, opened up a state of physical safety. Now, when we’re together in sex, *HIV doesn’t exist*. And I’m ashamed to admit that this trust, this miracle, sometimes makes me fantasize that *AIDS is over*. But the joke’s on me. The first time we fucked skin to skin, I had a bittersweet anti-Eureka! moment. The sudden presence of this long-gone pleasure made me suddenly bereft over all the years and tears and

dreams deferred. Also, I haven't, I can't, come inside my boyfriend yet -- old fears die hard. You can't free yourself from the ratball of AIDS any more than you can command the virus to flee your body.

"If you don't keep everything exciting day to day," says Marsha Burnett, one of the long-term HIVers on our cover (they've racked up a total of 62 years against HIV), "you won't do well." *Keep it exciting*. When my best friend was being slowly dismembered by AIDS, unable to walk, then talk, read, eat, he never once surrendered to despair. He accepted every day as a gift, even when consciousness was his only excitement left, and he truly went out laughing (and drooling). From him I learned that the worst thing in life certainly isn't getting HIV or dying of AIDS; it's living every day in fear that you will. This spirit of survival won't bring back the dead or speed up better treatments. Still, it's exactly what's at stake day to day as, alone and together, we leap through the flaming hoops of risk. And it beats even "unsafe sex" -- safe or not -- when it comes to giving AIDS the bird.

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