Editor’s Letter

The two hardest tasks for POZ Publisher Brad Peebles and POZ Editor in Chief Walter Armstrong are deciding on a cover and writing their letters for this space. Some months, however, as they put the issue to bed, they suddenly realize only the first job got done. This deadline-night conversation may explain matters.

November 1, 2001 By Walter Armstrong

Walter: Well, we’re late again, Brad. But this month we had an even harder time than usual deciding what to put on the cover. I wanted to go with the September 11 terrorist attack, but you were opposed -- strongly.

Brad: I feel that the rest of the media is covering it “to death.” Seeing it on the cover of *POZ* is not going to make me -- or the reader -- feel better. I also think that it doesn’t have anything to do with AIDS. We don’t need to have the World Trade Center crumble before our eyes to know that we are grief stricken. We should never be so self-pitying as to say to the world, “See, now you know how we feel.”

W: On Sept. 11, I thought about my best friend, who died from AIDS in 1996, and how he was missing this world-changing event. I knew he would see the tragedy as a chance to transcend, to grow. He learned that from AIDS. I felt other HIVers might have a similar contribution to make to the discussion. And they do.

B: To connect it to AIDS means acknowledging the pain that both have caused, and I just can’t do that right now.

W: It’s easier for me because I’m HIV negative, and I don’t have to live AIDS the way you do. Anyway, we had two other cover choices. One was about ACT UP/Philly, the only thriving street-activist group left. Given the grim prognosis for the issue of AIDS in the wake of our new war, this seemed pressing.

B: Again, the frustration I feel in “Are we so pathetic that it takes sudden mass death to connect us to the reality of AIDS?” I feel when we report on the relic of activism. What do you have to do to get people to want to change the world now? Osama bin Laden and his terrorists want to change the world. For a moment, I even envied their commitment and sacrifice... If the root of activism is desperation, we’re beyond it. So to put ACT UP on the cover, I wondered, “Will anyone care?”

W: Well, there’s another AIDS/Sept. 11 connection. In ACT UP, some of us had an ongoing discussion about “taking things further,” of committing terrorist acts. Change -- drugs and a cure -- was not happening fast enough, and we felt that if we loved our friends, we should risk our lives --

and our “enemies’” lives. Looking back, I think it says a lot for the heart and soul of AIDS activism that we never did stoop to terrorism. AIDS is, in the end, a disease more than a cause. How could people who are going through that ever allow themselves to be agents of death?

B: What I liked for the cover from the beginning was the superinfection feature. I know from my own experience that gay men refuse to believe in reinfection. And yet doctors keep insisting that it is a proven risk. When two groups are saying opposite things, we have the opportunity to shed light and provoke a debate.

W: I came around to the superinfection cover...eventually.

B: It’s the magazine-as-provocateur test: Is this issue going to piss someone off? If yes, we’re onto something; if no, we’re irrelevant. The superinfection story is a wake-up call for HIVers having unprotected sex without thinking.

W: As a provocateur, we walk a fine line. On the one hand, we have a responsibility to call the community on its shit; on the other, to make sure our intentions are constructive. But I am often surprised by the sense of betrayal readers express, as if their trust in *POZ* can be destroyed by a single article. You like to say that if we aren’t making every reader a *little* mad, we aren’t trying hard enough.

B: Well, if ever we wondered whether anyone pays attention to *POZ*, tonight we know. Our e-mail service is down because we’re getting e-zapped by readers over last month’s cover story about female-to-male transmission.

W: It’s good to finally hear from angry straight men. Let the debate begin.

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