Editor’s Letter

December 1, 2003 By Walter Armstrong

“It should piss you off,” Bill Krutch SAID when I phoned to tell him what I thought of his new Seattle Manifesto, a prevention call-to-arms that has gay men up in arms. “But so should the fact that positive men are infecting negative men. We wanted to piss people off, to spark a controversy that gets to our real feelings. The gay community has been drowning in political correctness for too long.”

Forty self-defined “researchers, educators, activists and instigators” wrote the document, alarmed by last year’s 40 percent rise in HIV infections among Seattle gay men—one in seven is positive. It calls for “desperately needed community norms and actions to stop these needless infections”—regular testing, serostatus disclosure and consistent safe sex (who can argue with that?)—but in profoundly moralistic language. *“Our sexual relationships should be passionate, healthy, consensual, honest and respectful,”* the manifesto declares, empoweringly enough. But then: *“We are accountable for our behavior to…our community: Knowingly transmitting HIV is avoidable; its transmission is unacceptable. Disclosing HIV/STD status does not negate the necessity to practice safe sex….”* And finally: *“Transmitting HIV knowingly is an act of violence.”*

You see why I had to call Bill Krutch. Despite his angry harangue, the human Krutch has the thoughtful, listening way of a therapist, which is what he is. (He is also an openly HIV positive researcher at the University of Washington.) But he hammered home why the Seattle group used words like *responsibility* and framed unprotected sex in ethical terms: because of the gay community’s approach to prevention. “Good people infect others with HIV,” he said. “How can that be?”

In a word, self-hatred. Krutch insists that effective prevention must address the painful truths that HIV negative gay men do not love themselves enough to stay uninfected and that their HIV positive brothers care so little about them—and themselves—that they infect others. He doesn’t downplay any contributing depression, drinking and drugs or, for that matter, fear (of disclosure, of rejection, of intimacy). Our abiding problem, he says, is that having been hated, we’ve learned to hate ourselves.

“We know we are a very moral people, and if anything, AIDS has taught us the value of human life. But why, in this one area of sex, can’t we live up to our values?” Krutch pressed. “It feels strange to gay people to use *right* and *wrong* in a discussion about sex and prevention. But what is even stranger is that we have made it OK to infect each other. I believe we want to do better.” Listening to Bill Krutch, I understood that the Seattle group spoke the moralist’s language of

“responsibilities” rather than the activist’s language of “rights” to reach what they see as our community’s buried desire to change here.

I hung up the phone strangely sympathetic. But now I wonder. As one 23-year-old HIV negative gay man told *The Seattle Times*, “This manifesto is a hell of a lot of preaching that would do nothing but alienate [the community]. It does not invite change, it invites finger-pointing and judgment.” In a further provocation, the manifesto is running in local press and on websites with an explicit invitation to sign it. Then, on World AIDS Day (Dec. 1), the list of signers’ names will be publicized.

Now, this public list seriously raises the stakes. We all care about our reputations, so dismissing the exercise is risky: Refusing to sign could be seen as opposing safe sex, a “bad” gay on the black list. Yet signing it could be construed as supporting language that may stigmatize, even incite violence against, HIVers. But whether the manifesto makes you want to reach for your gun or your pen, it’s being read and debated—and that’s Krutch’s goal. Sign or malign it at www.metrokc.gov/health/apu/taskforce/manifesto.htm.

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