Editor’s Letter

June 1, 2002 By Walter Armstrong

“We are an army of lovers because we have to be. We have so much to fight for -- we are the most precious of endangered species,” a friend wrote in a broadside ACT UP handed out on Gay Pride Day in 1990. “We come out of the closet, face the rejection of society, face firing squads, just to love each other! Every time we fuck, we win.” Like many back then, my friend was young, dying and falling in love all at the same time, so he can be forgiven his grandiose rhetoric. Now, from this distance of 12 years, the fact that we said such things -- and meant them -- seems almost unimaginable. For that, we should ask forgiveness. In 2002, with Pride approaching, gay men are not exactly an army of lovers.

In fact, a self-imposed system of sexual apartheid has increasingly divided negative gay men from their positive brothers. An example: This week, a friend, also an ex-ACT UPer, told me about a first date he had the night before. After dinner, they went walking in the warm, soft April night. The trees were in flower, white and pink and trembling. The guy had taken my friend’s hand even before they got to his apartment. Upstairs, sitting on the couch, talking, the guy “popped the question,” as my friend refers to being asked if he has HIV. “He tried not to freak when I told him I was positive,” he said, "but if it had been a movie, the music track would have suddenly changed. And the colors would be *Wizard of Oz* in reverse -- from playful technicolor to film-noir black-and-white.“ I told my friend not to assume the worst, but he only laughed. That first date was in fact the last. ”I should have lied,“ he told me later. ”That’s my usual policy -- to lie and use a condom."

Add it up, and sexual apartheid offers the worst of both worlds: bad faith between the serostatuses and no faith in safe sex. All the collateral damage that this “I don’t have sex with positive guys” approach causes might even be worth it if it were an effective form of prevention. But it’s an unmitigated disaster. In reality, negative guys are having plenty of sex with positive guys, but they prefer not to know it (and their positive partners prefer not to disclose, for obvious reasons). This “don’t ask, don’t tell” agreement has these results: It keeps both camps in the dark, releasing the positive guy from a sense of responsibility and the negative guy from confronting his fear; it supports that denial so crucial to not using condoms (“I assumed he was positive/negative like me”); and it guarantees an annual HIV infection rate (currently one out of 10) that will make lifelong HAART and lipodistrophy as common a feature of gay life as Rainbow flags and nipple rings. These days, when we fuck, we lose.

I don’t pretend to know how we got into this mess or how we get out of it. All I know is that once we were better. Strangely, it was when we were most in trouble, with real enemies (HIV often seemed the least of them) and needs to the point of desperation. Two were paramount: First, to

support people with AIDS and their right to full lives (health, respect, sex, etc.); second, to keep the HIV negative uninfected. (That these two needs could be in conflict was a problem the community had no time to acknowledge, let alone solve. PWAs took priority, and it was un-p.c. to argue.) Because many men had not yet "gone for the test," there weren't two opposing sides. If you were negative, you just assumed that one of every two guys you went home with had HIV. You took the risk, used a condom, freaked out, got tested, got the results (negative) and got over yourself. Sooner or later you also got over your fear of HIV. Safe sex worked! For a late-blooming self-hater like me, to learn that touching a man both was worth risking your life for *and* would not kill you was empowering, to use a word from that time. And our customs being as queer as they are, a positive guy you slept with could become someone you got to know, love, even have your heart broken by. The sky may have been falling, but life could be so sweet.

Well, enough middle-age bitterness. In closing, all I have to offer is my dead friend's vision from that long-ago Gay Pride manifesto: "We must look at our lives and see what's best in them, see what is queer and what is straight and let that straight chaff fall away! Remember there is so, so little time. And I want to be a lover of each and every one of you. Next year, we march naked."

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