Hymn to a Gym

A defense of beauty and brotherhood, muscles and manly love

May 1, 1997 By Michael Denneny

The first time I walked into the Chelsea Gym in 1983, I felt much as Alice must have when she stepped through the looking glass. It seemed to me I'd walked into a Tom of Finland drawing: The pornographic dreams his images had sparked in my soul as an adolescent had become a reality--a sweating, straining, gorgeous reality on a bench five feet away. With the sound system pumping in "I Will Survive" and the last light of day bouncing off the mirrors that covered every wall to illuminate some of the more outrageous workout costumes outside an *International Male* catalog, this was a disorienting, not to say intimidating, experience.

By 1983, a large number of us had walked through the looking glass: Dweebs, loners, sissies and fatties, one by one we had passed through the narrow gate of the gym and emerged on the dance floor and the beach looking like porn stars. Indeed, as the second decade of gay liberation opened, it seemed that gay men were embarking en masse on an unprecedented social experiment and using the gym to do it: We are attempting to unleash the erotic into our everyday lives by becoming our own objects of desire. Beauty and brotherhood, muscles and the manly love of comrades would define this new Wonderland, with brunch thrown in for good measure.

Those days, to work out at the Chelsea during peak hours was a remarkable experience, as crammed with the erotic--and as crowded--as the dance floor at the Ice Palace in Cherry Grove on a July weekend. There on the incline press, surrounded by friends, was the most stunning blond on the beach, a tall, perfectly proportioned and gorgeous boy-man whose beauty was almost beyond belief. "Pinch me," whispered Bambi, my longtime gym buddy. "I want to be sure this isn't just a drug flashback." On the bench press was a young Latino who looked like a painting by Quaintance, sweat sliding down his arms, arteries throbbing as he pressed 240 pounds. In the beginning our workouts were almost as hard on our egos as they were on our bodies.

In the early '80s the gym was well on its way to replacing the bar as the central institution of gay life for a large number of guys in New York City. For many of us the gym had become a kind of community center, the hub of overlapping circles of friendship, sex and romance, a way of keeping track of events in our social milieu. One might even say the gym had become what Joseph Campbell called a sacred space: "A room, a certain hour or so a day, a place where you can simply experience and bring forth what you are and what you might be, a place of creative incubation." Like the beach and the dance floor, the gym had become a place where we called forth the ideal,

actualized the images that stirred our souls and celebrated the values that made us gay in the first place.

But the gods are fickle. First came that small report on page 38 of the *Times*--some kind of “gay cancer”--and then Larry Kramer started yelling at us. Who could believe this disease? It was like an evil metaphor: A disease that not only targeted gay men but zeroed in on sexual activity? Give me a break! But, of course, no one gave us a break, and by 1985 you could look around the Chelsea between pec sets and spot the telltale lesions, hear the plaintive beepers go off, calculate the weight loss of the most beautiful blond on the beach. Slowly the full magnitude of the catastrophe dawned on us as death began to sweep away our friends and lovers and buddies and tricks.

I remember one night in 1987 coming into the Chelsea late after spending several hours in the hospital trying to coax a pathetic amount of food down an ex-boyfriend’s throat, surveying the scene and wondering if this gay worship of the body and its beauty that we had embraced with such intensity would vanish like the morning dew. Perhaps Tom of Finland’s vision was nothing but a *fata morgana,* a mirage our desire had conjured up amid the aridity of straight culture. At this rate, I thought, the Chelsea gym would be empty a decade hence, a mere memory of a wildly optimistic time.

But this did not turn out to be the case at all. The notion that these circles of gym buddies and disco friends would be scattered by the first winds of winter proved utterly untrue. These were the men who appeared in hospital rooms to rally round sick friends, creating ad hoc care groups that were remarkably effective. The social networks we had forged at the beach and on the dance floor, at brunch and in the gym proved to be strong and supportive in this time of crisis.

At the gym itself people were fairly open about their illness and were quite prepared to work out with a Hickman catheter, even if that did make benchpressing a bit tricky. At the Chelsea one saw KS and weight loss to be sure, but what was more impressive--and surprising--was the dedication these guys showed to working out. Only days out of the hospital they would be back in the gym, tentatively exploring what their bodies could still do as they eased back into a lighter routine. *Village Voice* writer Robert Massa worked out right up to the end, and when the gym posted a copy of his ID photo and an obituary on the bulletin board over the water cooler, as had become their custom for any member who died, it startled those who had seen him at the gym scarcely a week before.

Now, one could say this only shows that gay men are afflicted with terminal shallowness in addition to this miserable disease, but that misses an important connection my “current” ex-lover brought up recently: "One of the reasons I’m still healthy is my vanity. *That*’s why I work out--not for all the ’good’ reasons. The gym taught me what feeling healthy felt like, and that useful when I got sick. It taught me health is an act--something you *do.* And for people with AIDS, muscle mass is money in the bank."

The values that touched our gay souls in Tom of Finland’s drawings, the celebration of the male body in all its erotic beauty, the exuberant and playful enjoyment of male camaraderie, have

survived this medical catastrophe. And they still point to the deepest roots of the gay male psyche. These are not superficial values at all; or, rather, they are values that ennoble the surface, that remind us that life itself is lived on the surface, the point of intersection between us and the world.

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