Larry Kramer, With Sugar On Top

We all know Larry Kramer, or think we know him.

May 12, 1995 By Andrew Sullivan

We all know Larry Kramer, or think we know him. The father of AIDS activism, the writer of the groundbreaking play, The Normal Heart, the founder of Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) and then ACT UP, the pain in the ass of most AIDS organizations, the hysteric seer. I'd read his stuff before and found most of it unconvincingly shrill. But his early novel, Faggots, had struck a chord. It exuded a sense that gay men could do better if they understood themselves as fully human, if they could shed their self-loathing and self-deception. In Kramer's later work, I found—between the hyperbole and irresponsibility—a stark belief in the equality of lesbians and gay men and a conviction that AIDS was allowed to spread because of the people it first attacked. Both beliefs carried the unmistakable mark of truth. It was truth we all knew, but few of us had the clarity of mind or facility with words to state it so baldly. Whatever history makes of Larry Kramer's role in this epidemic, it will have to record that on these central facts, Larry Kramer was right. Like Randy Shilts, he was right.

I'd met Larry Kramer twice before. First from a distance at an ACT UP/ New York meeting where I was alternately sickened and intrigued by his theatrical extremism, by the way in which this *mater familias* held sway among so many young, angry children. Second in a dark corner of Spike, a gay bar in New York City, where he accosted me about my own indolence in the time of the plague. Both times, I'd sensed an urgency I couldn't begin to hold. Not that I'd been unaffected by the plague. I had just been bewildered by it. I had tried to understand the epidemic, and tend. So far as I could, to the wounded; but Kramer had clearly tried to end it. On Super Bowl Sunday in his Fifth Avenue apartment, I set about trying to understand a conviction that I couldn't yet share.

Andrew Sullivan: Let's begin with where I live. You grew up in the Washington, D.C. area. A few years ago you tried to live there again.

Larry Kramer: I got very depressed. I went down there to try to make everything go faster, and I know most of those people. But when you see them in their own environment, you see how entrenched the bureaucracy is, how hard it is. What made me even angrier was to see so many people not even fighting—not being particularly closeted but certainly not thinking of themselves as gays first and bureaucrats second.

AS: Of course, Washington is an incredibly gay city.

LK: Yes. Walking through Dupont Circle on a Sunday afternoon is like walking through Vienna. At first, I thought it was wonderful, but then it used to drive the shit out of me. I'd go to an ACT UP meeting and there would be three people there. There's this whole refusal to be active—and I understand why, and ACT UP is not the answer for them—but these other organizations are no better and its just drives you nuts. It's something to do with the proximity to power.

AS: Not to power. The trouble with Washington is not that it's not like the country—it's too like the country. People don't realize that. Half the Midwestern states have big staffs there, and it's very hard to get a critical mass of your own identity in such a context.

LK: But do you think there are really intelligent people there? There is a marked difference with New York City.

AS: What do you mean?

LK: Well, we're much smarter here! People there are so corseted—that's the word I would use. The same straightjacket that keeps the gay person from joining a cause he believes in is the same one that keeps people from really expressing their opinions. You probably don't come across that because it's your job to express an opinion; but you talk to anybody in a government office and they're very careful in what they say The saddest thing that I came to realize—and maybe I'm overdue for this realization—is that it doesn't really matter who's in office because the system stays the same. The system is the bureaucrats and they're the ones who do all the work and it doesn't matter who you chuck out, until you remove that bedrock which has become Byzantine. They stay.

AS: You're right, of course.

LK: It takes two years to requisition the money to do research on a drug and Donna Shalala or Patsy Fleming or Phill Lee don't bother with such an issue. America didn't use to be like that. When I was growing up, my father worked for the government.

AS: What did he do?

LK: He was a lawyer. He was out of work during the Depression and things were very bad. In 1941, he got a job in the Treasury Department and he worked until he died—for 20 years or so—and he was grateful to the government. It was an honorable calling, public life. Back then, Washington was a different city. If you went to a gay bar, you couldn't move your drink. You sat at a table and if you wanted to get up and go to another table, a waiter would have to take your glass. You were not around to move around freely.

AS: One of the interesting things about your rhetoric is that it's so gloomy today and yet when you describe that period…

LK: Haven't we come a long way?

AS: Isn't it an extraordinary irony that during this period when we have moved so far forward, we've also had this plague. When we've moved forward, we've also moved back—like that passage in Ivan Ilych—you get into a train and you're expecting to move forward and the thing lurches in the other direction.

LK: Maybe we need the plague to have the movement.

AS: Do you think?

LK: Ironically, it helped. The answer if you ask, "Has there been progress?" is, of course, "Yes." But if you go back to ancient Greece, the answer is, of course, "No." But I don't look at it that way. I look at what's available to us, which is an incredible population—exceedingly vital men and women—and that's what makes me angry.

AS: When they die?

LK: Yes, but also that from a political point of view, they don't participate.

AS: But why should they participate? I mean, where does your impulse for them come from? What do you want for them?

LK: I hope I want for them what they want for themselves, which is to be equal. We don't have the rights we deserve and we have to look first to ourselves to see why, rather than blame an obviously culpable system.

AS: Obviously both are true.

LK: Is Gingrich homophobic?

AS: Newt Gingrich is a closet libertarian.

LK: What do you think we should be doing down there?

AS: I gave a talk to the Human Rights Campaign Fund in Washington two years ago. It was just after we lost the military issue and there were 800 people in the Washington Hilton in black tie, and I said, I just want to ask all of you who are out to your employers to put your hands up, and all of you who are out to your parents to put your hands up. And there was a scattering of hands, and I said, Will all the rest of you please leave now and come back when you've done that because I don't know what the fuck you're doing here at a dinner for gay rights when you haven't done the first thing that's necessary.

LK: So our organizations are useless down there?

AS: Yes, I think they are. Because they don't have the power. The reason they don't have the power is because gays don't give them the power. The reason they don't give them the power is because they're not visible. And they're not visible because they're scared.

LK: I don't buy this scared thing.

AS: I don't think there's any shortcut between that and power.

LK: I agree with you totally.

AS: People in Washington understand power and they can sense that our representatives don't have it.

LK: That's why everyone is ganging up on us right now. Because they sense we're not powerful at all. So what should our leadership do?

AS: The leadership of the gay community should aggressively confront the gay community.

LK: What leadership? Who are the leaders?

AS: You? Me?

LK: There you are. You can name the people on one hand who are pushing the envelope.

AS: The envelope is not hard to push. But isn't it also a feature of the gay community that there's a very high level of infighting and bitterness?

LK: But that exists in any community.

AS: No. The others don't engage in the constant kind of personal attacks that we do. Our foes have more discipline.

LK: I guess I come out of the Jewish community, the movie business, publishing. The worst group in this regard are doctors. I don't know why it's so common in the gay community. It's naïve to think it will go away. I think we just have to learn to deal with it. It's money: If you were able to make a living at it, you'd feel less strongly about it. The best person I knew who was good at handling people was Ginny Apuzzo. Jeff Levi Had it, too—although I'm not too fond of Jeff—but he could defuse a barb with humor. I mean, I see red like a bull.

AS: Where does that come from?

LK: Insecurity, I don't know. W do you think it comes from?

AS: Reading your stuff, I was struck by the lack of, or rather the consistency of, its tone. All of it has the same tone. Of anger. To me that world does not seem real—the hopelessness of it—just as it doesn't seem real to me that AIDS could become a survivable disease. I don't have the imagination to conceive of that. Or rather, not that I don't have the imagination. I just don't have the hope.

LK: Oh, I have no doubt that there's already a lot of us living longer, and if each new set of new drugs continue, to give us more…

AS: Bridges?

LK: Yes, they're bridges, but they give us time, time for whatever has to be done. That's why I've spent my time trying to push it to go faster.

AS: You saw where you were going? Because frankly, I feel bewildered.

LK: I've never felt bewildered. Maybe it's my nature.

AS: I don't know whether it's my Catholic upbringing, but I regard these natural events as "Oh, well, we're all fucked." There is no cure to anything. Life is a series of calamities which we survive with whatever serenity we can muster. And I listen to your voice and there's this rationalist conviction that of course there's a cure and of course it can be done.

LK: I'm glad I've been so beneficial to you. It certainly doesn't come from my Jewish upbringing.

AS: Where does it come from?

LK: I don't know. My father was depressed, my mother was a Pollyanna. Again, I think things like that are by nature genetic. Or maybe it's just because I know what I've been able to do with myself. I was a really miserable child. I tried to kill myself when I was very young and I've had a zillion years of therapy and I was very shy and withdrawn and I wanted to write and I couldn't write and it seems to me that I've been able to pull myself together and climb a lot of mountains that I've wanted to climb. And I guess I figure that if I can do it, a lot more people can do it.

AS: I feel some of that too.

LK: But your religion is in the way.

AS: But, in a way, I could not have survived the last four years of my life with sick friends and watching people die, without a sense that, ultimately, you cannot control this. You have to have a part of yourself that just accepts a certain amount of what occurs to one and find some serenity.

LK: Why do you need serenity? What's so damn great about serenity?

AS: Serenity at its best is acceptance of the human condition.

LK: The human condition is eight billion things. How can you accept wrong?

AS: Well, let me tell you one thing you have to accept—death.

LK: Oh, but what a defeatist attitude! Of course we're all going to die but if it's a question of most of us dying young or most of us dying older, when we've been able to contribute to the beneficence of the world, how can you be so…?

AS: Now you deny that this is a Jewish cultural notion, but of course it is. Part of the ethnic Judaism is promoting the benefit of mankind when we are on earth; and part of the Christian notion is that this earth is not that important. All I'm saying is that something that has helped me survive this death environment is the notion that life is not an accumulation of certain things or even of good acts. It's living now. It's "present-living."

LK: I am not a good Jew and I was never a good Jew. I grew up in a mostly Gentile environment and I've never suffered any anti-Semitism. I am not a student of Judaism as you are of Catholicism, but my other certainly went out there to be Mother Teresa and I'm grateful to her. But that's not why I do things. It just makes me angry that I can't have what everybody has. If I want to walk down the street and hold my boyfriend's hand, I don't want anybody calling me Barney Fag.

AS: Why not? Fuck them.

LK: Of course, fuck them. But in North Carolina, they put a knife in your back.

AS: But what about AIDS? When I wrote down the questions I wanted to ask you, the first question I wrote down was about death.

LK: I'm terrified of death. You're prepared for it.

AS: I was always told it could come at any minute. AIDS is not a unique phenomenon to humankind. People die of many things. Don't get me wrong—I don't think it's normal for half my generation to die before they're 40—but half of humankind lives in conditions in which that's true for other reasons. Every human being who's ever lived has faced death. When the assholes in Congress say nine times as many people die of cancer, they're right.

LK: But if they die of cancer because of stupid dumb assholes who run NIH with red tape, that's another thing—and you can do something about that!

AS: But it's all a distraction from the basic problem, which is that you're going to die.

LK: Well I'm not going to sit down and wait for it to shake my hand.

AS: What do you think happens when you die?

LK: Why do you edit a magazine?

AS: It’s a good question. Part of me thinks I should be in a monastery, but I still want to ask you: What do you think happens when you die?

LK: I happen to have a lover who agrees with you. He’s not afraid of death at all and when it happens, it happens. You are blessed.

AS: When a friend entered the last stages of this disease, I read that essay by Montaigne: “To philosophize is to learn how to die.” It’s a hysterical essay. It’s about all those people who dropped dead while they were on the john, who had a tree fall on them.

LK: You read Montaigne and I would have sung “Climb Every Mountain.” You see, I didn’t believe all this. You are as interested as I am, to change the way people think about things—and if change is too hard a word—to affect the way people think about things, and if you didn’t care, you wouldn’t be in a monastery.

Larry Kramer, Styling by G.K. For 8co, New York City; Hair and grooming by Jacqueline Colligan for Ellizabeth Watson, New York City; Coat by Hugo Boss; Trousers by Comme Des Garcons; Sweater by APC; Shoes by Dolce & GabbanaAlbert Watson

AS: I do care.

LK: Then you’re conflicted more than directed.

AS: Of course I’m conflicted. We’re all conflicted.

LK: I've got a pretty clear path.

AS: Well you don't. Because you still haven't answered the question: What do you actually think happens when you die? Literally.

LK: I know what I would like. I'm not so much afraid of the moment of death than the godawful shit I have to go through to get there. That's what we've seen particularly with AIDS. I don't want to lose control of my mind, and I don't want to lose control of my bowels, and I'm writing a long novel and I want to have enough energy to do it. I've got a lover for the first time in a long time and I want to spend time together and I don't want any of that interrupted That's what I'm afraid of. I'm not afraid of it because of cosmic reasons. I don't understand why—I know exactly how you are going to answer this—I don't understand why one would want to belong to a church that doesn't want you.

AS: I'll tell you why. The answer to the question is I do not want to belong to a church that doesn't want me, but the church is not the issue for me. The issue is the truth. The church is merely a human institution attempting to purvey the truth.

LK: You've already lost me because I don't know what you mean by the truth.

AS: The force behind the world is not evil. Do you believe that? Are you Job?

LK: I don't believe in God, so we have to leave him out of it. But I didn't think that the world was evil until the last few years. I've been unwilling to even think of that notion of evil. But I now think that the fact that this plague has been allowed to go on, that so many people have been allowed to die is just evil. You exist in Washington. You know how slow everything is. You know how fast everything can be made to co when you have someone who can make it go that fast and we're now on the third asshole in a row in the White House who simply doesn't want to do anything about it.

AS: Why? What is at the root of evil? You know, I've always felt you're a very traditional thinker. When I read Faggots, I have to tell you, I loved it. I thought this man's beef with all these people is my beef, but I thought he was supposed to be this radical.

LK: I don't know whether I'm radical or traditional or conservative. It depends on the day, it depends on who's looking at me.

AS: Do you mean that? Now you're doing theater again.

LK: You want to know something? Evil has been the hardest thing I've ever had to research. I can't find anybody who writes about evil that makes any sense to me. I talk about evil as evil, not as evil in relationship to God, not evil as the opposite of good. Everybody brackets the two. I want to talk about evil. I want to talk about evil, per se. Nobody writes about it that way.

AS: Hanna Arendt?

LK: She has come closest to it. All the evil I have seen has been perpetrated by people who are essentially decent. I know Hanna Arent talks about that—the good family men are the ones who executed all of Hitler's orders.

AS: Or Bill Fucking Clinton?

LK: Or Bill Fucking Clinton. Or Tony Fauci. I've come to truly love the man, but I think that because he has not done what he was capable of doing opens him up to very acceptable charges of evil. I certainly think Donna Shalala is evil. Evil, evil, evil.

AS: Why just this plague? Why not starving children?

LK: But little starving children cannot get up and fight for themselves! Gay people can. Breast cancer has been around for a long time. We don't know much more about it now than we did 30 years ago. Where the fuck are the women of this world? If I were a woman and had breast cancer, I'd be screaming and shouting just the same. Ladies, if you want to keep your tits, fight for them! People say to me, "Oh, you're only a single-issue person," and I say, "Yes, that's right, I am." This is what makes me mad. This is what gets me going. I have lost a lover. My lover has lost a lover.

AS: Let's move on to you and the gay community. Why have you been so controversial? Why so many enemies?

LK: Well, the same could be said about you.

AS: Well, I don't think people know what to do with me.

LK: That's like me. They think we've only got one schtick. You know, I found myself saying recently that as far as AIDS research is concerned, we were better off with George Bush.

AS: Do you really think that's true?

LK: Of course it's true.

AS: But you have said some things in the past that are clearly untrue. Like AZT is no good. Why did it take you so long to take AZT?

LK: I didn't say it was no good. I said it was shit. And it is shit.

AS: Well, aspirin is shit.

LK: No, I said it was unsatisfactory.

AS: That's different than shit.

LK: It is shit. But it's the only shit we've got. Anyway, I don't take AZT as an anti-retroviral. I take it for my platelets. That's the irony of it. I take it because I have low platelets.

AS: But hold on. You're a leader. You have real impact on the AIDS community and on people with HIV. And here's an important drug that, for all its flaws, clearly seems to have some use for most people and you—talk about people dying sooner than they might have done!—do you not bear some responsibility? If other people are murderers, why are you not?

LK: You've left all this until now? You have not read my book carefully because I discuss this very issue. I have said several times in the book I am very nervous about all of us giving treatments and information out as if we were doctors and we have to be careful about all of that. But also you have to call them as you see them and with the information you have at the time, you do the best you can. If information changes, you can't be responsible for something you said before, and when I've been wrong, I've admitted I was wrong.

AS: So you admit you were wrong about AZT?

LK: I don't think I told anybody not to take it. All I've said is that it's a very problematical drug and it's only useful to some people some of the time and I think those are exactly the words I use in the book. Ironically, I don't think it's poison. I don't think it's strong enough in the proper ways. The real danger with AZT is the danger with chemotherapy. If you get married to the first link in the chain, you're stuck with it for the rest of everybody's lifetime.

AS: But you're not. The protease drugs…

LK: No, the protease will be done in combination with AZT or D4T and you'll never be free of it, so I don't think it was harmful that we were completely suspicious of the drug.

AS: You know the New York Native?

LK: The Native is a rag. Print it. I don't think anyone takes the Native seriously, so I don't think you can call them murderers. But I don't think I've said anything that I thought was untrue when I said it.

AS: But isn't hyperbole in a plague the equivalent of lying? Isn't there some damage done when you say this person is literally a murderer, this is literally a holocaust?

LK: Oh, please. Everybody I have called a murderer I believe was a murderer. I do not consider that hyperbole.

AS: You make no distinction between sins of commission and sins of omission?

LK: Absolutely not! That's your religion. I think they're the same. And I do think this is a holocaust. I have no hesitation in saying that this is intentional.

AS: Aren't there gradations of responsibility? Is someone who holds a gun and pulls the trigger no guiltier than someone who stands by and watches?

LK: This is much too theological for me.

AS: It's not theological.

LK: It is.

AS: Look, someone's probably shooting someone near here today and we've done nothing about it. Are we murderers? Right now?

LK: Like I say, I'm a one-issue thing. Yes, I suppose we are. We're all murderers. But do you agree with that, too?

AS: No, I think there are many grey areas. And I think it's actually important for a public intellectual like yourself…

LK: Well, but I don't consider myself an intellectual, but go ahead.

AS: …To make those distinctions. Human beings are not all good and all evil. I mean, if we were, I'd give up. I beat myself up enough about everything that I do but I've learned that sometimes I'm better than others. Don't you think that if you keep up this murderer rhetoric people will eventually tune you out or people will not take you seriously because you elide all these distinctions and you lose the ability to be heard?

LK: Well, I don't think that that's been the case. And, funnily enough, I think I'm taken more seriously now than I've ever been, or certainly more seriously than I was earlier on.

AS: Why?

LK: Because I think I've been proved right.

AS: About what?

LK: That it is a holocaust. That it is national. That the people who are in charge of it are ignoring it.

AS: What degree or responsibility do you ascribe to the person who becomes HIV positive in 1995?

LK: Oh, that's a hard question. I don't have much faith in education as a potent weapon in all of

this, and the fact that there are so many infections in people who obviously knew better bears me out. If you notice, all my energies are dedicated to research.

AS: What's your definition of safer sex? What do you do?

LK: That's a personal question.

AS: Would you let someone perform oral sex on you?

LK: No. But I'm sure there's a study that says it's OK.

AS: But those studies are meaningless. I think the most important decision for gay men to make in 1995 is whether to have oral sex without a condom. Isn't it?

LK: I hope not.

AS: It's the issue of whether someone is killing someone or not. It is a big issue.

LK: Do you think people are having oral sex without a condom?

AS: Oh, my God, of course! Ninety percent of gay men regard it as safe.

LK: I think our AIDS organizations have made a major blunder in promoting "healthy sexuality" because I don't know where you draw the line. If you say you can take marijuana, who's to say you shouldn't take cocaine?

AS: If only someone would say publicly: Wear a condom for oral sex.

LK: Well, [New York Newsday's] Gabriel Rotello said it.

AS: It was a brave and important newspaper article.

LK: And I don't think he got anything but shit for it. He got no support from GMHC, that's for sure.

AS: Really?

LK: I mean GMHC passes out ads for hustlers and group sex in their very offices. Anyway, getting back to the question of hyperbole and responsibility, I get accused of two things: Creating a panic on the one hand, and creating false hope on the other. And I've come to say I don't see what's wrong with either. Better to be panicked than to be…

AS: A fool?

LK: A fool or to be docile or to be accepting.

AS: It’s better than no hope. I’m not intentionally giving false hope. I mean I don’t know what’s wrong with having belief in a drug and hoping it’s going to work and it doesn’t, so you move on.

There are many people who don’t think that anything good can happen. I’m always astonished by that attitude. TAG seems to have bought into it.

LK: Doctors too. Anyway, what else have we got to talk about [Singing] Christ the Lord has risen today!

AS: Do you have one last question to ask me? It’s only fair.

LK: Can I write a column for your magazine? What would you like me to ask you? I used to think you looked very cute, but now I’m a married man.

AS: But now I look like a wreck, you mean. I was out too late last night. I’m a little cranky. But, you know, I had a sneaking feeling we’d get along.

LK: I never had any doubt or I wouldn’t have done it. They just say terrible things about us. I guess it’s one way of knowing you’ve done something right. Joe Papp [of New York City’s Public Theater] used to often say that people don’t remember anything except that your name was in print. In the end, it does not make a bit of difference. You’ve got to keep it going. We have the energy; that’s what we have. We’re not lethargic. The secret, Andrew, is sugar.

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