Mailbox

May 1, 2001 By Staff

Faith Full

When I came across my first issue of *POZ* in 1996, I was at the doorstep of death in a nursing home in Hyattsville, Maryland. I knew there was something special about your publication. It gave me a feeling of being alive -- unusual for an AIDS patient.

I had that feeling again when I saw the February/March 2001 issue ("Keep the Faith") with a Muslim, John Muhammad, on the cover. You killed two birds with one stone: You helped take the message of HIV to the Muslim community while helping people better understand the nature of the appeal of Islam to a growing number of Americans. That's a big accomplishment.

One of the sayings of Prophet Muhammad is "If you save the life of one Muslim, it is as if you save all humanity." On Judgment Day when God questions you about your accomplishments, you can proudly say, "Well, I saved all humanity back in 1996."

-- Terry Tahir, Washington, DC

Thank you for sharing stories about the other "F" word, *faith*, in the February/March issue. Spirituality and religion often come up in interviews and articles in your magazine, but it was good to get a larger dose. Andy Humm asked what would happen if God had AIDS ("Dogma and Devotion"). The body of Christ *is* HIV positive, and this gives clergy the continued challenge we need in order to serve. Our brothers and sisters living with HIV must not fall through the cracks. It is the balance of mental, physical, emotional and spiritual fitness that keeps HIV positive people sane and living well. Keep sharing the stories.

-- Joseph I. O'Brien, OP, Saint Therese Center, Henderson, Nevada

Religion and divinity, not philosophy and humanity, were the emphasis in "Keep the Faith." The implication is that when one thinks about death, one had better get religion. The contrary, however, is understood by those who have rejected the views of the cult in which they were raised, such as: There is a God; life exists after death; someone can walk on water; Adam was the first man. Free-thinkers who are nontheistic are found at the Unitarian Universalist and Ethical Culture Society and other groups. Admittedly, those without a college education are ripe candidates for shepherds who need flocks to support their tax-exempt status.

When we die, we die. And then, as Sir Bertrand Russell observed, we become food for the worms. The goal of any HIVer who is a naturalist, not a supernaturalist, is to live life to its fullest now, not

believe in some big rock-candy mountain in the skies. People with independent minds need not associate death and dying with religion.

-- Warren Allen, New York City

Brain power

Your February/March issue was superb. I especially liked the theme of spirituality and its many facets, as well as Bob Lederer's article on HIV-related dementia ("Brain Drain"), which I intend to use to educate my caregiver. I appreciate the efforts of everyone who contributes to *POZ* -- you get up every morning and work to help HIVers such as me.

-- Mike Petta, Via the Internet

Pig in pokey

In response to the letter from Samuel McCormick, who said he'd been a guinea pig in drug trials (Mailbox, January): Thank you for helping extend my life and the lives of others with HIV.

-- Lester Roach, Mountain View Correctional Institution, Spruce Pine, North Carolina

Plot lines

Working for 20 years now on HIV prevention and harm reduction in the black community, I was intrigued and pleased by LeRoy Whitfield's "The Secret Plot Against African Americans" (December 2000). It was refreshingly considerate and nonjudgmental of the justifiable (though not always helpful) views on AIDS held among black people. By the late 1980s, the media had already created a barrier to black folks dealing meaningfully with the issue of HIV. Along with white gays, black people were blamed for AIDS, though all the myths that perpetuated these lies were later disproven. By then, however, the fear of being stigmatized yet again created a barrier to AIDS education and prevention.

To resolve these issues, it is important to consider seriously what causes apprehension in the black community. *POZ* and Whitfield respected and illuminated valid black voices -- voices typically ignored by the predominantly white AIDS machine.

-- Cleo Manago, Executive Director, AmASSI, (African-American AIDS Support Services and Survival Institute), Los Angeles

Hard Cell

Like Jennifer Poteet, I have a 5 x 9 cell of my own ("A Cell of One's Own," December 2000). I also have a CD4 count below 100, so I know about cells. In this prison, more than half of the 1,800 prisoners are immigration detainees, and the HIV rate is huge. We have no support group, no HIV specialist and little else. When I requested extra nutrition in the form of double portions, I was told that was impossible because of "confidentiality": Extra portions would signal my HIV status to other prisoners. Meanwhile, I get my AIDS meds at pill line, which means everyone knows I'm positive anyway.

Writer Jennifer Poteet (who also happens to be my wife) is right: *Knowledge is power.* I am learning all I can and trying to teach others, too.

-- Howard Poteet, York County Prison, York, Pennsylvania

Correction: *The title of the new book by Paul Borja and Krandall Kraus was misquoted in "Choosing Our Religion" (February/March). The correct title is:* It's Never About What It's About: What We Learned About Living While Waiting to Die *(Alyson Publications).*

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