Oink, Oink

Columnist Emily Carter used to settle for getting healthy off the fat of activism. Now she wants to bring home the bacon.

January 1, 2000 By Emily Carter

Like many American schoolchildren, I was handed a copy of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* in my eighth-grade English class. Perhaps because I was still half-asleep at 8 a.m., the book seeped into the very structure of my perceptions, forming a template of belief into which I pressed everything I later learned about history, current events and human nature. Like the pigs on the farm, the people on the planet consistently rise up from a state of oppression only to become the oppressors. Meet the new pig, same as the old pig.

This cynical worldview was reinforced every time I read the paper. When I got my HIV test back in 1989, it had been a long time since I expected anyone with even the smallest bit of power to become anything but a bully. Still, I ferreted out news about the doings of ACT UP. In spite of my deep-seated distrust of any organized group with any agenda whatsoever, I was awestruck by the sheer intelligence, determination and grasp of details that enabled ACT UP to take on huge pharmaceutical and legislative bodies. And, it seemed, to sometimes even win. At a time in my life when fatigue and depression were my main obstacles, following the struggles of AIDS activists was like grasping a rope thrown out from a bright, shining place where the outcome of one's endeavors was anything but preordained.

As my HIV status became common knowledge in my community, I began to receive invitations to participate in group activities. I became an expert at excuses, a maven of procrastination, an exemplary oversleeper. Part of this was my own sense of shame: I was an asset to no one, I believed, appearing to myself the very definition of addle-brained hedonism, as prone to angry, tearful outbursts as to rational debate. Given a placard, the chances were good I would smack someone over the head with it.

However, as I began to let go of the self-loathing imminent in my chemical dependency, I felt ready to stop thinking about myself long enough to get active in the realm of good works. I was fairly certain that my access to the medications that were keeping me healthy—not to mention the fact that these medications existed at all—was due in part to pressure groups keeping the pressure on. It was time to give something back, I decided, so I went on a few of The Walks. But two years ago I made the mistake of attending a serious meeting of an activist group: *Animal Farm* all over again. Besides a definite hierarchy made evident by who interrupted whom, there was a

stridency in the room, a reflexive slinging of jargon, that called up images of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. A young woman who dared to dissent on tactics was mocked until I thought they might make her wear a giant dunce cap. At one point she stammered, “I just thought…” The group leader broke in: “You clearly can’t think at all.” When I suggested not publishing a denunciation of a certain gay writer for writing a poem in which an HIV positive character reveals himself as a fallible human being, I was told that my intentions were “genocidal.” Intimidated and furious, I didn’t understand what all of this had to do with getting reverse-transcriptase inhibitors onto the list of medications the health department distributed to people on medical assistance.

In the end, I had to think not only about *Animal Farm*, but about the author’s reasons for writing it. Looking at human nature clearly, Orwell never sentimentalized The Revolution or romanticized The Proletariat. If he believed that social change was possible, he was also in the business of outlining its many pitfalls. Groupthink and the microbe-like proliferation of charismatic personality cults are the permanent perils of any community effort. Human beings are indeed fallible and infuriating. But the fact remains that along with all the horrific bedtime stories history whispers in our ear, it also tells the tale of progress. Things we used to accept, we now know to be evil: witch-burning, slavery, an 80-hour work week. It’s safe to say that some of those abolition meetings were populated by overbearing, humorless bullies.

The next great struggle for AIDS activists will take place in Africa and Asia. The obstacles, both financial and cultural, are huge. There is a part of me that would like to sleep through it. I don’t want to observe the petty squabbles and ideological flimflam that will certainly accompany any concerted effort to make things better. But there’s no alternative. Human beings are the only ones who can effect changes for the better in the human condition. Even if we do tend to act like pigs.

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