S.O.S.—October 1999

October 1, 1999 By Sean Strub

I recently spent an afternoon with an old friend, someone I have known for 20 years. We moved to New York City at the same time, he from small-town North Carolina, I from Iowa City (with a pit stop in Washington, DC). We met at the opening of Bond's Disco in Times Square, saw each other from time to time at Studio 54 and later in ACT UP, and have stayed in casual touch since. We never hung out a lot, never dated—just remained familiar, friendly, trusted markers for the progression of each other's lives.

He and I walked to Tompkins Square Park in the East Village, speaking of old friends, dead and alive, and reminiscing about the pre-AIDS days, the early years of activism, the incalculable personal losses and how our lives have evolved. He lamented that he viewed his life as "all fucked up" and not fulfilling of the hopes he had or the promise he showed as a young photographer in the early '80s.

My friend is HIV negative but has carried other burdens. Having known him for two decades, I was surprised to learn that afternoon that he was born with a foot without toes. He was stunned that I never knew. I had noticed that he limped occasionally, but had never viewed him as someone whose identity was influenced by an imperfection.

But it is. His childhood years left memories of schoolyard torment and fundamentalist relatives taking him to a Pentecostal church where congregants took turns rubbing their hands on his foot, saying prayers for his toes to grow. All of this left emotional scars that never healed.

My friend entered adulthood with a deep understanding of stigma—and the burden of its weight—that helped to give him the compassion to care for so many loved ones as they died of AIDS.

For me, burying friends was numbing. After a while, I developed a hard coating that separated me from my grief. With disturbing regularity, by the early '90s, I even experienced a guilt-filled, selfish epiphany of survival ("I outlived *him!*") when informed of another's passing. I deflected the pain with my career and activism.

My friend was less successful in building a protective shell. Sitting in Tompkins Square Park, I realized that instead of becoming desensitized, he found every new death increasingly difficult. The pain only mounted. Like many activist New Yorkers in the mid-'80s, my friend became preoccupied with giving time and love to his dying friends, dealing with his own growing

substance-abuse problem and, of course, just trying to pay the bills. Loss immobilized his dreams and ambitions.

When he blurted out the fear that his life was “all fucked up,” I wanted to grab him and shake him. He may have “lost” two decades tending to those he loved, but those years were an expression of his humanity and values, not a lack of accomplishment. If he can break free of the immobilizing effects of the pain, the underlying strength he’s maintained for others could serve him well.

Some people have found identity and purpose under the oppressive but protective umbrella of AIDS. But more pronounced is the isolation and grief of those who have endured an entire adult life of this in the midst of a society that still despises—and, depressingly, a fin-de-siecle gay culture that disregards—much of what we and our lost generation of friends stood for. We were all supposed to grow old together. My friend was not supposed to scoop parts of our mutual friend Michael’s lungs off his bib moments before he died. We were not supposed to bury one another.

We who have personally witnessed the epidemic from the beginning are declining in number. Not just from death, but from the loss of those who have been able to shove AIDS into their past, hidden away in a special memory box rarely opened. Even though they have survived, in a way I mourn them as well.

Those who have not forgotten occasionally reach each other in moving ways. Like that afternoon with my friend, in an embrace of shared memories and shared love overshadowing the suffering, pain and injustice. We remember the fraternity of love we invented and nurtured, which gave us a pride our lives had never before had. In those moments, we are back with everyone we lost, bound by a common history and an uncommon love. We are lucky. And we have a future.

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