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Tearing down the wall of 'otherness'

February 1, 1995 By Sean Strub

Not long ago, I was on a panel organized by the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, entitled "Managing Mortality" and moderated by former PBS commentator Bill Moyers. The panelists, who all face life-threatening illnesses, echoed common themes in discussing their views on life, death and confronting illness.

No one was more eloquent than Bill T. Jones (who was featured on the cover of *POZ* No. 2) when he spoke of the "arrogance of the well." Those of us who are unwell recognize that arrogance immediately.

We see it in politics, where both sides treat us as a political opportunity to be exploited. We see it in the media, which invariably refers to us as terminally ill from a dread-fatal-lethal-incurable disease. We see it in a health care and pharmaceutical system dependent on our illnesses for its own prosperity.

But when we see it in some of our friends, families, co-workers and among our peers, it is most painful. Not so much because it is insulting and dismissive of *our* lives, but because it is indicative of how limited *their* lives are.

Why is our society so desperate for an "other" from which to separate ourselves? A doctor on the panel described a "well" person as a patient who had not been sufficiently worked up by his or her doctor. The point is that we are all afflicted with mortality, whether we acknowledge it or not.

Recognition of one's own mortality is an extraordinary, necessary gift; denial of same -- as reflected in the arrogance of the well -- is an extraordinary, unnecessary and painful burden.

If I could give something spiritual to those I love, it would be this recognition of *their* own mortality, which leads to a disintegration of the "otherness" wall that divides us.

Let's make this new year one where we fight otherness, in all its forms. For we are you and you are us.

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