S.O.S.—March 1999

March 1, 1999 By Sean Strub

Do you ever worry that you've infected someone with HIV? I do. And no matter how I rationalize it, the fact remains that I—and I suspect many others with HIV—have almost certainly infected people. We've done this before we knew we had the virus or how to avoid transmission, and sometimes we've done it after. We've sent strangers to their deaths, and those we loved more than life. And no matter how "innocent" we were, awareness that we may have done this brings not only shame and guilt, but a weird feeling about our bodies, as if we're toxic, radioactive.

In the first months after my diagnosis, I remember feeling acutely self-conscious about using the guest towels in a friend's bathroom, about holding my infant niece, kissing my mother or coughing too close to a business associate. I felt oddly embarrassed about picking a piece of food off my sister's plate, reluctant to share a soda with my father.

I doubt that many people who do not have HIV know what this feels like. Surely they understand their own fears of infection, but how could they understand watching scores of friends die and wondering *Am I responsible*? They know that flash of fear—for themselves—wondering if a long, deep kiss was *too* deep or *too* long, but few can appreciate that flash of fear for their partner.

When I first found out I was positive, I placed the women I'd slept with in one category of "HIV responsibility," the men in another. In this homophobic hierarchy, I was vastly more concerned with the health of the former than of the latter. Promiscuity, disease and death simply came with the territory if you were gay.

None of this is rational. But it is unique. While many diseases are behavior-related (smoking causes cancer) or contagious (TB is airborne), only STDs are both, and of these, only AIDS ties such irreconcilable forces as desire and death, pleasure and danger into so tight a knot. And on such a scale: *I slept with him, then he slept with her, and they each slept with....* No amount of therapy, prayer or soul-searching can ever expunge the oppressive knowledge of your own infectivity.

What would make it less oppressive is if rather than pointing fingers at us, the uninfected acknowledged the responsibility we take for protecting others from the virus—and the shame and guilt we feel when we fail. Maybe then our critics would not rush to judge when they hear us talking honestly and insistently (they say obsessively and desperately) about drugs, promiscuity, prostitution and other behaviors that tempt the virus and attract condemnation. If what we say makes others uncomfortable, it's because *we're* uncomfortable. Living with a sense of your own

infectivity does that. If our talk about, yes, barebacking sounds driven, it's because *we're* driven to find the truths—no matter how painful—of why we do what we do. But what drives us is bigger than self-interest or fear for ourselves. Call it love and respect for the greater community. Those who doubt us haven't had their priorities adjusted by life under a death sentence.

In the few days since the February "Boys Who Bareback" issue of *POZ* hit the newsstands, we've received much support for opening a controversial debate. We've also received much criticism—for being transgressive for transgression's sake, and selfish, reckless hedonists endorsing barebacking, and wily entrepreneurs determined to spread HIV so our readership, jobs and business are secure.

In the early days of the epidemic, people with AIDS defined, funded and put prevention strategies into practice. We tried, and failed, and learned what was safe and what wasn't. But as time passed, the experience and wisdom of PWAs—and those they were having sex or shooting drugs with—played an ever smaller role in policymaking, giving way to the political, social and religious agendas that now dictate funding priorities. If anyone doubts that as time passed, prevention also became less effective, they need only consider the current state of the condom code. I regret that what *POZ* says about barebacking—and how it says it—fails the judgment of some, but like many uncomfortable conversations, it is born out of a combination of community concern, genuine conviction and personal pain that, if nothing else, demands respect.

Escaping our hierarchy of HIV responsibility is harder for us as a society than it was for me as a self-hating gay man. Our gallery of AIDS villains and victims is bigger than ever. But we also have a growing number AIDS victors—those who have gone beyond the innocent/guilty politics and rhetoric. Not just those who have faced death and risen again, Lazarus-like, thanks to new therapies, but anyone who makes the most of their gifts and burdens, dares to be driven, stays fresh and open to truths—no matter how painful and no matter what their T-cell count or how others judge them. This is all *POZ* aspires to.

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