The Eye in the Storm

Andrew Sullivan takes on love, loss, friendship and sex

November 1, 1998 By Andrew Sullivan

Andrew Sullivan has spent a good chunk of his career playing the homosexual-next-door. To a media often unnerved by the bombastic likes of Larry Kramer, he has usually offered a more palatable public face for gay men and more recently, for people with HIV. But his new book may change all that. *Love Undetectable* (Knopf) is a searingly personal and sometimes gritty meditation on life in what Sullivan describes as the penultimate days of the plague. The first of the book's three mostly unconnected essays is a slightly expanded version of an article that first appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* in November 1996, a much-maligned piece that heralded the end of the plague and chided AIDS groups for refusing to concede that for a sizable group of gay men (white, Western, wealthy), AIDS was no longer a death sentence but a manageable chronic illness. The second, an examination of homosexuality, casts aside fashionable genetic explanations in favor of old-fashioned Freudianism. In the last third of the book, Sullivan muses on friendship, which he posits as the purest form of human love. In *Love Undetectable*, Sullivan puts himself on the couch, a process he compares to being conscious during surgery. The rest of us cannot help but pay attention to a man who maintains the courage of his convictions.
—Maer Roshan

EXCERPT

I would like to write about all this without writing about sex, but it would not be honest. In one important sense, AIDS was, for the better part of a decade, a plague. It affected large numbers of people, who could do little or nothing about it, and it slowly killed them. For a while, it had a subcultural democracy about it. You couldn't buy your way out of it or easily avoid it. And the treatments were, to a greater or lesser extent, useless. But in another sense, it wasn't, strictly speaking, a plague. Unlike the Spanish flu or the Black Death, it was not entirely random because it was spread by sex, and sex has rarely been understood to be as neutral an activity as shaking hands or breathing the air. Nor, of course, should it. The meeting of two human beings in a sexual encounter can never be a neutral or a casual phenomenon. It has meaning, and danger, and promise. It betokens a particular form of responsibility, as well as liberation. And when it also involves the risk of death, that responsibility—and that meaning—is even more profound....

Yes, of course, the gay population dramatically changed its behavior in the early years of the epidemic; and even now the strictures of safer sex remain largely in place, and what has been

called the “condom code” prevails. Gay men are not suicidal. But they are certainly not prepared to abolish all risk. The condom code is about as effective in combating infection as it is in combating unwanted pregnancy, and yet it remains the primary firewall against mass death. In fact, as the epidemic has “matured,” we seem to have come to a kind of equilibrium in which a steady, if small, number of gay men continue to be infected and in which, because many HIV positive men are living longer and longer, the proportion of all homosexuals infected with HIV grows larger still. Just as an acceptable level of violence becomes ingrained in societies beset with terrorism, so an acceptable level of disease seems to have become ingrained among gay men. And that can hardly fail to worry, if not terrify.

This applies, of course, as much to me as anyone else. I contracted the disease in full knowledge of how it is transmitted, and without any illusions about how debilitating and terrifying a diagnosis it could be. I had witnessed firsthand a man dying of AIDS; I had seen the ravages of its impact and the harrowing humiliation it meant. I had written about it, volunteered to combat it and tried to understand it. But I still risked getting it. And the memories of that risk and the ramifications of it for myself, my family and my friends still force me into questions I would rather not confront, and have expended a great deal of effort avoiding. This is, of course, an understandable reaction, if not a defensible one. I remember in particular the emotional spasm I felt at the blithe comment of an old and good high-school friend of mine, when I told him I was infected. He asked who had infected me; and I told him that, without remembering any particular incident of unsafe sex, I didn’t really know. The time between my negative test and my positive test was over a year, I explained. It could have been anyone. “*Anyone*?” he asked incredulously. “How many people did you sleep with, for God’s sake?”

Too many, God knows. Too many for meaning and dignity to be given to every one; too many for love to be present at each; too many for sex to be very often more than a temporary but powerful release from debilitating fear and loneliness. My heterosexual friend, of course, instinctively saw my sexual life as a concession to carnality, an unthinkble lapse into irresponsibility—and I do not wish to deny that at some obvious level, it was. And I don’t want to disclaim responsibility for it. But at a deeper level, it was also something more complicated than that, something that is as hard to understand dispassionately as it is to experimentally escape. But understanding promiscuity is a necessary first step to transforming it, and transforming it into something more meaningful and dignified and loving is, perhaps, the most difficult bequest of the last two decades....

For far too long, the gay liberationists promoted the tragic lie that no avenue of sexuality was any better or nobler than any other; that all demands for responsibility or fidelity or commitment or even healthier psychological integration were mere covers for “neoconservatism” or, worse, “self-hatred”; that even in the teeth of a viral catastrophe, saving lives was less important than saving a culture of “promiscuity as a collective way of life,” when, of course, it was little more than a collective way of death.... These insiders not only rationalized away a communal bloodbath; they justified the means for its continuance.

Perhaps this too was a response to guilt. There is little doubt that the ideology that human beings are mere social constructions and that sex is beyond good and evil facilitated a world in which gay

men literally killed each other by the thousands. And there's little doubt that, for at least one generation, many gay men responded to the vacuum into which their families and their churches and their communities had thrown them, by internalizing this other vacuum of meaning and seeing in it an identity that could rescue them. Once this mechanism had started, once this trigger had been pulled, once every gay man had been absolved from responsibility for giving HIV to another gay man, then it was very hard to go back and admit a mistake. Because the crimes of this regime were so enormous, and their consequences so grave, it became unimaginable to address, let alone confront, the moral responsibility they entailed.

I do not want to excuse myself from this as well. Although I never publicly defended promiscuity, I never publicly attacked it. I attempted to avoid the subject, in part because I felt, and often still feel, unable to live up to the ideals I really hold. I argued instead for the ennobling and critical institution of marriage without which I felt any argument against promiscuity would simply collapse against the mountain of social and psychological incentives against it. In this, I suppose, I am not atypical of many gay men. During the plague, we tried to exercise responsibility. Most of us, once the risks of transmission were known, never wittingly subjected another man to intolerable risk. After my infection, as before, I followed the condom code to the letter, did my best to be public about my HIV status and to tell most, if not all, of my sexual partners. If asked, I never lied. But it was amazing, perhaps, how infrequently I was asked.…

In plagues, as in wars, liberation is a particularly engrossing idea. It comes to symbolize not only an end to the horror but a transcendence of it. As the years passed and the deaths mounted and my own immune system ticked vulnerably away, it was hard not to long for a liberation not just from part but from all of what the plague enforced. Perhaps, in other times, it would not have been necessary to grasp for such a complete liberation, or to feel its necessity so closely, or to try to figure out what exactly real liberation could mean. Before the plague, we had felt content to think of it as merely the temporary occasions of desire snatched in shadows, or the fleeting moments of cultural rebellion we had come to mistake for progress, or simply the quiet calm of an unexpected, public embrace. But as the plague grew, the depth of the experience intimated a different depth of liberation. It was not enough any longer to experience love or to capture it. It was necessary to own it, and to have the love acknowledged.…

I don't think I'm alone in thinking that the deepest legacy of the plague years is friendship. The duties demanded in a plague, it turned out, were the duties of friends: the kindness of near strangers, the support that asks the quietest of acknowledgments, the fear that can only be shared with someone stronger than a lover. In this sense, gay men were perhaps oddly well prepared for the trauma, socially primed more than many others to face the communal demands of plague. Denied a recognized family, often estranged from their natural one, they had learned in the few decades of their free existence that friendship was the nourishment that would enable them to survive and flourish. And having practiced such a virtue in good times, they were as astonished as everyone else to see how well they could deploy it in bad.

It certainly came easily to me. For me, friendship has always been the most accessible of relationships—certainly far more so than romantic love. Friendship, I learned, provided a buffer in

the interplay of emotions, a distance that made the risk of intimacy bearable, a space that allowed the other person to remain safely another person. So, for most of my life, for a variety of reasons, I found it far simpler to make friends than to find lovers. No doubt, this had something to do with my homosexuality (since friendship is the only gay relationship that is socially acknowledged) and something to do with my haphazard romantic history (for want of a lover, a friend often filled the emotional spaces in my life). But friendship, although it may come more instinctively to some than to others, is not a relationship anyone has a special claim to. Gay men have sustained and nourished it in our culture only by default. And they are good at friendship not because they are homosexual, but because, in the face of a deep and silent isolation, they are human. Insofar as friendship was an incalculable strength of homosexuals during the calamity of AIDS, it merely showed, I think, how great a loss is our culture's general underestimation of this central human virtue.

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