The Necessity of Excess

October 1, 1998 By Patrick Califia

More and more of late, as we endure yet another round of controversy about unsafe sex, promiscuity and bathhouses, monogamy and marriage, I find myself thinking about the late ’70s and early ’80s. During that time, I was a lesbian with separatist tendencies, in San Francisco and yet a quandary: Even though I kept myself in school and earned a living, being able to have the kind of sex I wanted was my true obsession. I went hunting along the fringes of leathermen’s territory because they had built a culture around that obsession. The stark extremism of gay-male S/M iconography echoed my own fantasies. The ethos of erotic risk-taking helped me to escape from feminine conditioning that sees every sexual opportunity as a threat. The tidy practicality of trick towels and no-spill popper bottles was endearing. I learned that lust has everything and nothing to do with love, and that love has a million equally alluring faces.

Back then I was privileged to hang out with Steve McEachern, who ran the Catacombs, a fist-fucking club, in the basement of his Victorian house every Saturday night. This connection was made through a bisexual woman who was a lover of mine, Cynthia Slater. Gay leathermen took pity on Cynthia and included her in their games because they recognized her appetites as kindred to their own. Her prodigious boozing and drugging, outrageous masochism, gutter-gums style of dirty-talk topping and shameless exhibitionism were all as legendary as her tiny hands. The straight S/M scene barely existed, and it certainly wasn’t a playground big enough for Slater’s dramatic abilities. To some leathermen of that era, the fact that a few women shared their predilections was just affirmation. The consensus was, if you try a new drug or a new kink and don’t like it, try it again under slightly different circumstances. Yet along with the orgiastic encouragement, a firm sense of balance existed: You could be as big a sexual outlaw as you liked on Saturday night, but come Sunday, cooking a fabulous brunch was every bit as important.

And so I am puzzled by that demagogic playwright who urges gay men to be more like lesbians. Perhaps his experience does not embrace lesbians who envy and emulate the outrageous, go-for-broke quality of the unfettered gay male libido. The sad fact is that if all gay men settled down into pairs like animals clambering into Noah’s ark, a world of possibilities would disappear. A culture that embraces nonmonogamy, casual public sex, erotic art, sex toys, costuming and a theatrical attitude toward pleasure is a national treasure, not a shameful anachronism.

Twenty years ago, who could have predicted that any gay activist worthy of the name would be preaching the same values as Anita Bryant? It was a mad time, both wonderful and terrible. Gay men had decided they were not going to repress themselves any more; they were so sick of being discriminated against, beaten up, ridiculed, pathologized, murdered, arrested, excommunicated

and disowned that they rose up like fireworks. This was a frenzied period of creativity, lust, intoxication, activism and brotherhood. Sadly, there was fierce opposition to this struggle for liberation, and many of us starving for freedom could not allow ourselves to eat and drink at the table of self-acceptance. So it was also a time of violence, disease and suicide in all its urban guises.

AIDS has erased the vibrancy and beauty of that decade, taking Cynthia, Steve and the Catacombs and leaving us survivors ashamed of the place where we came from. How could we help but interpret something this devastating as a punishment that we deserved? It's easier to believe there's a reason why we've died in such huge numbers, even if it reinforces our self-hatred, than to comprehend that we were mowed down by a force of nature that has no intention or purpose.

And so now there are gay activists who say we need to shut the bathhouses, stop partying and devote our efforts to winning a legal right to gay marriage. They tout marriage as a means to maturity, monogamy, membership in the mainstream and, ultimately, as an escape from the epidemic, and they have little faith in condoms, safe sex or a vaccine. This strategy has been bolstered by recent reports that STD statistics are on the rise again, apparently the result of a large-scale return to unsafe sex by those who falsely believe AIDS is no longer a terminal illness.

Same-sex couples absolutely ought to be allowed to marry. And for those who choose it, monogamy is a valid boundary to set. But the gay men advocating marriage and monogamy as our only hope of salvation from the scourge of AIDS haven't done their homework. They act as if AIDS were the only sexually transmitted, fatal disease that ever existed. But what about syphilis? This disease ravaged Europe and America a mere century ago.

Take note: Syphilis cut a deep swath through the heterosexual population. Easy access to legal marriage was no barrier to the spirochete. No more vigorous attempt to control disease with the braided flail of self-control was ever made than that of the Victorians. In England, the Contagious Diseases Act allowed police to detain for an indefinite period any woman suspected of being infected. In America, police departments tried to eliminate prostitution by cracking down on red-light districts. Even after a primitive form of treatment for syphilis became available and latex condoms were invented to prevent its transmission, the epidemic continued because religious organizations lobbied to prevent public education about prevention and treatment. Why? To protect the sacred state of matrimony. Syphilis was seen as the just punishment of the rake; the fact that he would also infect his innocent wife was ignored. When penicillin was discovered, it took a fierce battle before health departments were authorized to test and treat venereal disease. Moralists feared that without the threat of illness, sterility and death, people would become licentious.

Moral panics do not prevent disease. Instead, they hamper public health education and derail funding for medical cures. Syphilis was taken down by penicillin, not by romantic love, antiprostitution campaigns or fear of insanity and death. And AIDS is killing millions more than it had to because we continue to allow what should be private moral standards to dictate public policy.

The epidemic will not end until we find a vaccine that prevents infection and a treatment that eliminates the virus from the body of an infected person. Until then, our best bet is to saturate every at-risk population with explicit, sexy and humorous prevention education and lobby for an end to restrictions on needle-exchange programs. When there is a vaccine or an effective treatment or, please Goddess, both, some will return to pre-AIDS sexual behavior. And that's as it should be. Because there was nothing wrong with that behavior in the first place. In fact, sexual excess has intrinsic value and a spiritual meaning that makes it a vital part of the human experience.

It makes all the hairs on my body stand straight up in awe: That illusion of holding another person's beating heart in the palm of my cupped hand. The first time, I was very stoned and following the terse directions of a thoroughly debauched fag who thought it would be a giggle to see the look on my face when my whole hand went up inside him. So many contradictory insights washed over me that I could barely keep my forearm moving in its hot sheath of Crisco and intestinal membranes. I knew that without the MDA, pot, acid and poppers I'd ingested, this never would have happened. But I also knew that there was something sacred about our deep intimacy that was higher than any chemical could ever get me, perhaps as high as heaven itself.

The man I was fucking was not a nice person, nor did he have any particular affection for me; after we were done, he would move on to someone with a bigger fist and a thicker arm, or simply line up dildos in order (from large to gargantuan) and perch till daybreak. And yet I felt such great love for his body, which had opened, accepted and blessed me; and from his body, waves of gratitude for the pleasure. I was utterly aware of the vulnerability of this man whose legs were locked up and back, his feet waving around his ears, but I was also in thrall to the power of his piggishness, enslaved by the aggressive strength of his wanton hole. There we were, one man and one woman, locked in sexual congress -- but nothing could be queerer.

The body is like the "you are here" X on a map of a shopping mall. It is the place where we have to begin. Despite our mortality, the flesh is the only route we can take to glimpse eternity. Desire for another's touch is our first protest against the existential loneliness that dogs human consciousness. We reach for another person to provide us with reassurance, distraction, the wince of erotic gratification. For a few seconds, perhaps, we sense what it might be to welcome another, then return to a state of longing and emptiness. And we repeat the cycle, again and again, until perhaps we also begin to look for a more sublime partnership with our Creator, who has the power to turn our most painful questions into peace and meet our anger and fear with unflinching love.

Desire was made a part of our nature not only to draw us closer to one another but to urge us on to our ultimate source and rest. When we shelter one another's desires, even those that are strange or degrading, we borrow a little divine grace and provide a smaller version of the shelter of that transcendental love. After all, is this not where life began, in mud and blood, spit and cum? Are they not holy? The man who arranges himself in a sling, awaiting anointing with Crisco, has come in perfect love and trust like a child to baptism. Lust can be a sacrament that washes us clean of envy, pride and anomie, and returns us to daily life with a satisfied heart, renewed hope and greater compassion. The mouth is not the only orifice that generates poetry; we must learn to

listen to the hymns of our other openings, other lips. If “gay literature” did no more than rescue our genitals from revulsion, and celebrate them instead, it would be heroic.

My friend Skip Aiken, an Old Guard leatherman if there ever was one, used to say, “Men ought to share cum with one another.” (Also: “I never knew what I wanted in bed until I had sex with 300 different people.”) His doctor would claim that Skip died of a heart attack, not AIDS, but I believe his heart broke from too much loss and grief. Yet he never altered his conviction that there was something important about that exchange, beyond the climax it betokened. Who else, other than gay and bisexual men, are capable of loving men enough to so patiently and carefully change them? We will likely always be a selfish and cruel species, capable of cannibalism, genocide and rape. The heterosexual male’s just fear of other men’s violence has created millennia of suffering. The hatred of homosexuality is twined with violence down to its root. But is there no way to channel that aggression, transmute it into passion and pleasure instead of destruction and death? Someday, a spatter of semen will be a kiss of benediction, not a curse. Let a thousand of those white flowers bloom.

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