The Way We Live Now: Pat Califia

Writer, Sex Radical

May 1, 1999 By Patrick Califia

One morning last August I picked up my mail and *The Bay Area Reporter*, San Francisco's gay weekly. When I noticed the headline, I had to sit down on the sidewalk and cry. It read NO OBITS. I was in such sad shape, a homeless man asked me if I was OK. When I could finally read the article, my relief was as sweet as a kiss. For the first time in 17 years, after issues in which as many as 31 obituaries had been printed, none had been sent in. For just one week, I would not have to scan those hateful pages for a name I recognized. Instead, I could savor a little hope that the nightmare was over.

Slowly losing this hope has recently played merry hell with my equilibrium. We had a respite in this disaster, thanks to the invention of protease inhibitors, and priceless years have been added to people's lives. But the dream that these medications could eradicate HIV from the human body is a slaughtered angel. We greeted the drugs with so much joy because we were desperate, not because we were receiving an authentic miracle.

From the first news story about GRID and "gay pneumonia," I kept a list of the people I knew who died. Within five years, there were 200 names, and I had to stop keeping track. My soul flinches at the thought of going back to the time when it seemed that I all I did was visit hospitals, make pudding, arrange memorial services -- and it was never enough.

The only place where I can find enough wisdom or strength to keep on going is in the realm of spirit. It was hard to go there, because I kept tripping over the question, How could a loving god/dess do this to us? But I finally decided that since I was a human being, I should stick to the problem of human evil. I will criticize my creator when my own heart is completely clean.

I have come to see AIDS as something we do to each other. This is not a disease that we catch from our drinking water, or an arbitrary airborne blight. It passes from one body to another, under cover of ignorance, anger and denial. But if human carelessness or selfishness can spread this fatal contagion, being mindful -- becoming nothing less than our brother's and our sister's keeper -- can contain it. That is the spiritual challenge that faces us.

Rather than embark upon this difficult path, we have waited for the experts to save us. But epidemiologists and virologists are unlikely to solve the riddle of HIV in our lifetime. Only by focusing on prevention will we take back our power over AIDS. But we can't change our pleasure-

seeking behavior without a revolution in our values. HIV is pushing us to develop a new morality.

The term *morality* has a long history of being used against many of the communities decimated by AIDS. Christian fundamentalists and a handful of gay conservatives see AIDS as the well-deserved consequence of immorality. But *morality* does not belong to them. It belongs to all of us who have a conscience and want a life consistent with our ideals. Activism is an attempt to disrupt business as usual when it masquerades as morality. The battle to win better treatment for PWAs is a fight about what is right and what is wrong. We can't avoid these terms any longer. I know that the desire to experience bliss or connect with another human being comes from a good place. I've stuck needles in my arm to get there. I've taken cum and blood into my body because I had to get out of that little box called reality or die of loneliness. I will never apologize for any of the risks I've taken. But if those of us who value queer bodies and pagan transcendence do not survive, who will explain the morality that we lived by? If some deity made me, s/he wanted me to have ecstasy, not self-immolation. How do we begin to craft this new morality?

A good first step would be to stop shooting the messenger. We punish people for talking about barebacking or getting high as if silencing them could protect us. We also secretly get off on hearing about all this bad behavior, while tsk-tsking it. Firsthand accounts of risky behavior have become soft-core porn for the self-righteous. They should be jumping-off points for crafting interventions instead. We've been taught to believe that we can only experience ecstasy by doing things that might kill us. The supposed choice between intense but destructive pleasure or a healthy and virtuous but extremely boring life is a false dichotomy. I want to hear about how good it feels to create rapture for yourself or anotherwithout a morning-after tsunami of dread. This takes a high level of intimacy and explicit communication about the nature of your desire -- scary stuff, if fear is your jones. Or perhaps you need to see yourself as a rebel or outlaw. Well, the people who are most at risk of HIV are queers and people of color. Our communities are not supposed to thrive. It is a radical act to take responsibility for your own and another's well-being in the face of hatred and prejudice. Why don't we see the people who do this as sexy, daring outlaws? Why doesn't our community applaud and reward such secular saviors? Why are we more terrified of getting old than of playing HIV roulette?

I don't know how we can accept the fundamental changes that AIDS requires us to make in our sexuality without going through a sea-change in our psyches. Safer sex has always been presented to us as a temporary measure. If we could just put up with the inconvenience and awkwardness of barrier sex for a few months, years, decades, eventually there would be a cure, and we'd doff latex and reconnect with our ribald essence. When I tried to approach barrier sex this way, I think I set myself up for relapse. The idea of safer sex -- and AIDS itself -- as a crisis that will go away soon is as false a promise as eradication. New microbes will always evolve to take advantage of sexual transmission. It would be more realistic (albeit more daunting) to accept barriers as an inescapable part of good-hearted sex. We have framed this as deprivation. We need to see, instead, what we are giving each other and ourselves -- precious years in which we can transgress while upholding and celebrating one another.

We are asked to crash together the seeming opposites of responsibility and hedonism until a new

possibility emerges, a mindful form of erotic abandon. This daily (or nightly) spiritual practice is much more challenging than writing a check or dancing your ass off at a benefit. Call it post-Pasteur tantra, a stewardship of the libido. Instead of looking for wiggle room in safer sex guidelines or romanticizing deliberate infection, no matter how consensual, we need to husband one another's sexual health. There is quite a bit of heroism and romance in that, if we are brave enough to celebrate it.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/The-Way-We-Live-Now-Pat-Califia-1517-3791