# The Way We Live Now: Richard Goldstein

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This time, I take his dick into my mouth without flinching, relishing the fleshy sensation. He says he's negative, but the sincere look in someone's eye has never before been enough to wean me from my fears. Even with a rubber, I might wake up afterward, in the middle of the night, with an image of my partner as a killer and me as his victim, murdered because I've allowed my usual precautions to slip. This time, it's different. I drift off to sleep against his body, fragrant of sex sweat, without bothering to scrub off the clumps of semen or perform any of the insane ablutions I would undertake in a vain attempt to banish the thought that I'd let a drop of precum past the wall of "protection" that has kept my body from giving itself fully to desire for 15 years.

Of course, many safe-sex counselors would regard what I did with this honey as an acceptable risk. And I concur: having followed the debate about HIV and fellatio, I concluded long ago that the chances of becoming infected from performing oral sex without ejaculation are minimal. But until recently, I've been unwilling to act on my reasoning. What's changed is not my assessment of sexual safety, but my psychic response to the epidemic. Every time I relax the rules to bring them in line with my judgment, I celebrate a seismic shift in my feelings about AIDS.

I know that people are still dying, especially people of color, but AIDS no longer ravages my white, middle class community. I haven't been to a funeral for several years. While I'm aware that the new HIV therapies may be only a stopgap measure, all my friends are doing well. The rail-thin young men with dark blotches on their bodies have vanished from the streets of my neighborhood. This is the evidence of my senses, and though it may be misleading, it has resonated with the rough beast I've kept so assiduously leashed. That monster from the id has begun to reemerge, and one crucial step is forgetting AIDS.

This is something I would have thought impossible -- and unforgivable -- just a few years ago. Yet now, my eyes glaze over when I read about treatments, until I pinch myself with guilt. Though I once vowed to remember every one of my friends who have died, the truth is that I rarely think of them except to wince in pain at the idea that, if their bodies had held out for the new treatments, they might still be alive.

How can I forget what I once regarded as the greatest trauma of my life? How can the rage, the

helplessness, and the imponderable sorrow I once so keenly felt now seem like part of a different era? I can't point to a moment of transformation. I only know that, while I'm still committed to the interests of people with AIDS, I'm no longer capable of the intense empathy that made me ready to march anytime, anywhere. I've lost the ferocious militance that, I now realize, was a response to dread. The terrifying thrill is gone.

This is the downside, I suppose, of the gap between merely treating AIDS and truly managing it. Even as the epidemic continues, its sights and sounds are so muted as to be inaudible in the din of daily life. The epidemic has come to seem like another of those orderly emergencies that barely intrude on those who don't have to live it -- and that means me. I may prefer to think I'm still implicated, but my fantasies say otherwise. I no longer see myself on a respirator every time I get a stiffie, or imagine my lover lying between white sheets, his cold hand reaching out to me like a bare birch twig. These days, we fight like cats and dogs again, and in our "issues" I sense another sign of rebellion against the peculiar devotion that comes with living through a plague.

Activists who are bitter and baffled by society's fading interest in AIDS need to understand why even people like me -- who once demanded that an indifferent gay activist "wake up and smell the corpses" -- have chosen to let the epidemic go. It's not just selfishness or a short attention span, though I own up to both. Forgetting AIDS is a personal intifada, a sloughing off of oppression, a reawakening of what I had to shut down in order to survive.

Since the early '80s, safe sex has been a compulsion for me. Despite the best advice to make a game of it by mastering the art of dirty talk, the only way I could enforce this bitter sublimation was to inflict upon myself a torment so severe that no sensation would be worth the psychic price. Any deviation from the strict regimen of rubber and rubbing brought a blast of self-recrimination culminating in the thought that I'd given up the ultimate cherry -- my life -- for a gust of passion. All the fear and loathing I thought I'd forsaken when I came out became a weapon I wielded over myself. But the price was higher than I dared imagine.

In order to keep control of my libido -- that invisible ocean flowing deep within my personality -- I had to sever it from the rest of my consciousness. The very struggle to integrate myself, which was why I had come out in the first place, had to be abandoned, or at least altered. For me, that meant transferring the power of sex to activism. The AIDS movement was a way to tap my libido without putting myself at risk. But militancy is a poor substitute for sexual gratification, and I soon realized that every political funeral was part of a larger process of mourning for the dark waters of my desire, which had gone dry. I still haven't come to terms with the consequences of this fearsome drought, but now that I can feel the wet again, my senses have returned to the source. I still care about politics, but not as much as sexual connection that isn't monitored by an avenging angel.

Of course, I don't do barebacking with my butt -- or anyone else's. That will have to wait until the day when HIV is truly a manageable virus. But as someone who has passed through the epidemic physically unscathed so far -- saved by my neurosis, I ruefully reflect -- I feel qualified to callibrate the ratio of pleasure to risk. If that calculation has changed, it's because I've recovered the

stability that's crucial to behaving rationally, and this primal sense of continuity was one of the first things AIDS shattered. There's nothing rational about what Albert Camus, the philosopher of plagues, called "death from a clear blue sky."

Yet even Camus, who insisted on the need to face life's inherent absurdity, had to acknowledge that, when a plague ends, people rush to restore the illusion of normalcy. AIDS is no different from any other epidemic in that respect. Though there are war memorials in nearly every city, we never celebrate surviving epidemics, or commemorate their power to shape society. There are no monuments to the great Spanish Flu outbreak of 1918, which killed 20 million people before it passed, leaving my own mother a fatherless little girl, and thereby affecting my psyche every bit as much as AIDS has. Like a character out of Camus, my mother has forgotten that formative experience, which she once blurted out almost in passing. I've chosen a similar strategy, consigning AIDS to the bottom of my ocean, a Titanic of trauma I may never dare to raise. Though it feels like forgetting the dead and forsaking the living, at some point, life pushes us to embrace oblivion, perhaps the only antidote to tragedy.

I see this in young gay people, who take AIDS as a given. The subject rarely comes up, except when I'm asked by a curious 20-something what it was like to go through the devastation, and I'm suddenly made aware that this kid has no idea what it's like to lose a lover or a friend. The feeling is not unlike the odd pleasure I get from gazing at a field of April grass. Its pale intensity is an undeniable reminder that, no matter how killing the frost, a new generation eventually forces itself upon indifferent earth, and there's no room for reminiscence about the dead in the riot of life.

I realize that, if I were HIV positive, it would be harder to reconcile my rational sense of safe sex with my morbid fantasies of infecting others and getting reinfected with a drug-resistant strain. Yet if people with HIV could unblock their erotic energy, they'd be far less tempted to abandon physical barriers. After all, it's not rubber that inhibits feeling; it's dread -- and dread is inevitable in a crisis, when the id must retreat before the need to maximize the odds of survival. Now that the odds have changed for the better, perhaps it's time to let the terror go.

It may be the height of presumption, but I'm about to suggest that even people with HIV forget about the virus -- not its reality, of course, but the radical instability and uncertainty it creates. I'm not talking about having a "positive attitude," which Camus tells us is possible only at the cost of clarity. I mean something more existential: relaxing in the face of dread, bursting through the permafrost despite the fragility of the enterprise. In order to engender this sort of growth, it may be necessary to banish the memory of catastrophe, and to accept that every corpse is covered over by new grass. Life is like that, and it only seems otherwise when a crisis shatters the cycle.

May we all find the fortune to forget.

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