We Are Not Crumbs, We Must Not Accept Crumbs

Remarks on the occasion of the 20th Anniversary of ACT UP NYC's LGBT Community Center
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March 14, 2007 By Larry Kramer

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Rodger McFarlane, Eric Sawyer, Jim Eigo, Peter Staley, Troy Masters, Mark Harrington, David Webster, Jeremy Waldron, and Hannah Arendt contributed to the following remarks.

One day AIDS came along. It happened fast. Almost every man I was friendly with died. Eric still talks about his first boyfriend, 180 pounds, 28 years old, former college athlete, who became a 119 pound bag of bones covered in purple splotches in months. Many of us will always have memories like this that we can never escape.

Out of this came ACT UP. We grew to have chapters and affinity groups and spin-offs and affiliations all over the world. Hundreds of men and women once met weekly in New York City alone. Every single treatment against HIV is out there because of activists who forced these drugs out of the system, out of the labs, out of the pharmaceutical companies, out of the government, into the world. It is an achievement unlike any other in the history of the world. All gay men and women must let ourselves feel colossally proud of such an achievement. Hundreds of millions of people will be healthier because of us. Would that they could be grateful to us for saving their lives.

So many people have forgotten, or never knew what it was like. We must never let anyone forget that no one, and I mean no one, wanted to help dying faggots. Sen. Edward Kennedy described it in 2006 as "the appalling indifference to the suffering of so many." Ronald Reagan had made it very clear that he was "irrevocably opposed" to anything to do with homosexuality. It would be seven years into his reign before he even said the word "AIDS" out loud, by which time almost every gay man in the entire world who'd had sex with another man had been exposed to the virus. During this entire time his government issued not one single health warning, not one single word of caution. Who cares if a faggot dies. I believe that Ronald Reagan is responsible for more deaths than Adolf Hitler. This is not hyperbole. This is fact.

These are just a few of the things ACT UP did to make the world pay attention: We invaded the offices of drug companies and scientific laboratories and chained ourselves to the desks of those in charge. We chained ourselves to the trucks trying to deliver a drug company's products. We liberally poured buckets of fake blood in public places. We closed the tunnels and bridges of New York and San Francisco. Our Catholic kids stormed St. Patrick's at Sunday Mass and spit out Cardinal O'Connor's host. We tossed the ashes from dead bodies from their urns on to the White House lawn. We draped a gigantic condom over Jesse Helms' house. We infiltrated the floor of the New York Stock Exchange for the first time in its history so we could confetti the place with flyers urging the brokers to "SELL WELLCOME." We boarded ourselves up inside Burroughs-Wellcome, (now named GlaxoSmithKline), which owns AZT, in Research Triangle so they had to blast us out. We had regular demonstrations, Die-Ins we called them, at the Food and Drug Administration and the National Institutes of Health, at City Halls, at the White House, in the halls of Congress, at government buildings everywhere, starting with our first demonstration on Wall Street, where crowds of us lay flat on the ground with our arms crossed over our chests or holding cardboard tombstones until the cops had to cart us away by the vans-full. We had massive demonstrations at the FDA and the NIH. There was no important meeting anywhere that we did not invade, interrupt, and infiltrate. We threatened Bristol-Myers that if they did not distribute it immediately we would manufacture it ourselves and distribute a promising drug some San Francisco activists had stolen from its Canadian factory and had duplicated. (The drug, now known as Videx, was released. Ironically Videx was discovered at Yale, where I went to school and with whom I am still engaged in annoyingly delicious activist battles to shape them up; they too are a stubborn lot.) We utterly destroyed a Hoffmann-LaRoche luncheon when they delayed a decent drug's release. And always, we went after the *New York Times* for their shockingly, tragically, inept reporting of this plague. We plastered this city with tens of thousands of stickers reading, "Gina Kolata of the New York Times is the worst AIDS reporter in America." We picketed the Fifth Avenue home of the publisher of the Times, one Arthur Sulzberger. We picketed everywhere. You name a gross impediment and we picketed there, from our historic 24-hour round the clock for seven days and nights picket of Sloan Kettering to another hateful murderer, our closeted mayor, Edward I. Koch. 3000 of us picketed that monster at City Hall. And, always we protested against our ignoble presidents: Reagan. We actually booed him at a huge AmFAR benefit in Washington. He was not amused. And Bush. 2500 of us actually tracked him down at his vacation home in Kennebunkport, Maine, which did not know what had hit it. And Clinton. I cannot tell you what a disappointment he was for us. He was such a bullshitter, as I fear his wife to be. And Bush again. The newest and most evil emperor in the fullest most repellant plumage. We can no longer summon those kinds of numbers to go after him.

A lot of us got arrested a lot of times. A lot of us. A lot of us. We kept our lawyer members busy. It actually was a wonderful feeling being locked up behind bars in cells with the brothers and sisters you have fought with side by side for what you fervently believe is right.

Slowly we were noticed and even more slowly we were listened to.

Along this journey some of our members taught themselves so much about our illness and the science of it and the politics of it and the bureaucracy of it that we soon knew more than anyone

else did. We got ourselves into meetings with drug company scientists who could not believe our people weren't doctors. I took a group to a meeting with Dr. Anthony Fauci, whom I had called our chief murderer in publications across the land. Dr. Fauci was and still is the government's chief AIDS person, the Director of Infectious Diseases at NIH. We were able to show him how inferior all his plans and ideas under consideration were compared to the ones that we had figured out in minute detail. We told him what they should be doing and were not doing. We showed him how he and all his staff of doctors and scientists and researchers and statisticians did not understand this patient population and that we did. By then we had located our own doctors and scientists and researchers and statisticians to talk to, some of them even joining us. When our ideas were tried, they worked. We were consistently right. Our "chief murderer" Dr. Fauci became our hero when he opened the doors at NIH and let us in, an historic moment and an historic gesture. Soon we were on the very committees we had picketed, and soon we were making the most important decisions for treating our own bodies. We redesigned the whole system of clinical trials that is in use to this day for every major illness. And of course, we got those drugs out. And the FDA approval for a new drug that once took an average of 7-12 years can now be had in less than one. ACT UP did all this. My children—you must forgive me for coming to think of them as that—most of whom are dead. You must have some idea what it is like when your children die. Most of them did not live to enjoy the benefits of their courage. They were courageous because they knew they might die. They could and were willing to fight because they felt they soon would die and there was nothing to lose, and maybe everything to gain.

And of course funeral after funeral after funeral. We made funerals into an art form, too, just as our demonstrations, our street theater, our graphics, many of which are now in museums and art galleries, were all art forms as well. God, we were so creative as we were dying.

It is important to celebrate. But it is hard to do so when so many of us aren't here. At least that is the way for me. I know we are twenty years old. It seems impossible to me that it has been so many years. I remember much of it as if it were yesterday. It is difficult to celebrate when one has such potent, painful tragic memories. We held so many of each other in our arms. One never forgets love like that. Make no mistake, AIDS was and is a terrible tragedy that need not have escalated into a worldwide plague. There were 41 cases when I started. There are some 75 million now. It takes a lot of help from a lot of enemies to rack up a tally like that.

Rodger McFarlane made this list of ACT UP's achievements: accelerated approval of investigational new drugs; expanded compassionate use of experimental drugs and new applications of existing drugs; mathematical alternatives to the deadly double-blind-placebo-controlled studies of old; rigorous statistical methods for community-based research models; accelerated and expanded research in basic immunology, virology, and pharmacology; public exposure of and procedural remedies to sweetheart practices between the NIH and FDA on one hand and pharmaceutical companies on the other (now, with our own decline, unfortunately out of control again); institutionalized consumer oversight and political scrutiny of FDA approvals for all drug classes and for vast NIH appropriations for research in every disease; state drug assistance programs; and vastly expanded consumer oversight of insurance and Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement formularies. Each of these reforms profoundly benefits the health and survival of hundreds of

millions of people far, far beyond AIDS and will do so for generations to come.

To this I might add that out of ACT UP came Needle Exchange and Housing Works and AID for AIDS and The AIDS Treatment Data Network and the Global AIDS Action Committee and HealthGAP and TAG, too, the Treatment Action Group.

Perhaps you did not know we did all this. As we know, historians do not include gay anything in their histories. Gays are never included in the history of anything.

Dr. Fauci now tells the world that modern medicine can be divided into two periods. Before us and after us. “ACT UP put medicine back in the hands of the patients, which is where it belongs,” he said to the *New Yorker*.

How could a population of gay people, call us the survivors, or the descendents, of those who did all this, be so relatively useless now? Maybe useless is too harsh. Ineffectual. Invisible. No, useless is not too harsh. Oh let us just call ourselves underutilized. As long as I live I will never figure this out.

Then, we only had the present. We were freed of the responsibility of thinking of the future. So we were able to act up. Now we only have our future. Imagine thinking that way. Those who had no future now only have a future. That includes not only everyone in this room but gay people everywhere. We are back to worrying about what “they” think about us. It seems we are not so free, most of us, to act up now. Our fear had been turned into energy. We were able to cry out fuck you fuck you fuck you. Troy Masters, the publisher of LGNY, wrote to me: ACT UP recognized evil and confronted it loudly.

Yes, we confronted evil. For a while.

We don’t say fuck you, fuck you, fuck you anymore. At least so anyone can hear.

Well the evil things that made me angry then still make me angry now. I keep asking around, doesn’t anything make you angry, too? Doesn’t anything make anyone angry? Or are we back in 1981, surrounded and suffocated by people as uninterested in saving their lives as so many of us were in 1981. I made a speech and wrote a little book called The Tragedy of Today’s Gays about all this. That was about two years ago. Lots of applause. Lots of thanks. No action.

There was a Danish study a few weeks ago. The life expectancy after infection by HIV is now thirty-five years. Thirty five years. Can you imagine that? That is because of ACT UP. A bunch of kids who learned how to launch street actions and release a propaganda machine and manipulate media masterfully, and use naked coercion, occasional litigations, and adept behind-the-scenes maneuverings that led to sweeping institutional changes with vast ramifications. We drove the creation of hundreds of AIDS service organizations across the country, leveraging hundreds of millions of dollars a year and fielding tens of thousands of volunteers, all the while amassing a huge body of clinical expertise and moral authority unprecedented among any group of patients

and advocates in medical history.

We did all this. And we got all those drugs. The NIH didn't get all those drugs. The FDA didn't get all those drugs. We got all those drugs. And we rammed them down their fucking throats until they approved them and released them.

It was very useful, old ACT UP.

It is no longer useful. The old ACT UP is no longer useful enough. There are not enough of us. Few people go to meetings. Our chapters have evaporated. Our voice has dimmed in its volume and its luster. Our protests are no longer heard.

We must be heard! We must be.

We are not crumbs! We should not accept crumbs! We must not accept crumbs! There is not one single candidate running for public office anywhere that deserves our support. Not one. Every day they vote against us in increasingly brutal fashion. I will not vote for a one of them and neither should you. To vote for any one of them, to lend any one of them your support, is to collude with them in their utter disdain for us. And we must let every single one of them know that we will not support them. Perhaps it will win them more votes, that faggots won't support them, but at least we will have our self-respect. And, I predict, the respect of many others who have long wondered why we allow ourselves to be treated so brutally year after year after year, as they take away our manhood, our womanhood, our personhood. There is not one single one of them, candidate or major public figure, that, given half a chance, would not sell us down the river. We have seen this time after time, from Bill Clinton with his Don't Ask Don't Tell and his full support of the hideous Defense of Marriage Act (talk about selling us down the river), to Hillary with her unacceptable waffling on all our positions. The woman does not know how to make simple declarative statements that involve definite details. (Read David Mixner on Hillary and Bill. It's scary. Go to his site: DMixner@AOL.com). To Ann Coulter calling people faggots and queers and getting away with it. As Andrew Sullivan responded to her: "The emasculation of men in minority groups is an ancient trope of the vilest bigotry!" To this very morning's statement to the world by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Marine Gen. Peter Pace, that he believes the 65,000 lesbian and gay troops fighting right this very minute for our country are immoral. That our country's top soldier can say something like this out loud and get away with it is disgusting.

If I am going after Hillary and Bill Clinton it is because I think she just might win, or should I say they might win. Two for the price of one will prove irresistible. Thus it is important to go after the Clintons now, while it still might be possible to negotiate their acceptance and support of our concerns, nay our demands, instead of climbing on their bandwagon that is akin to a juggernaut smashing all in their way as David Mixner describes. Too many gay and lesbians and our organizations are giving her fundraisers and kissing her ass too unreservedly and way way too early. As for Bill, yes, he is at last doing great work for AIDS in Africa but it sure would be nice if we had his generics in America for all those who fall through the cracks of the Ryan White Drug Assistance Program. Have you noticed how fashionable it is for foundations and the two Bills,

Gates and Clinton, to do AIDS good deeds in Africa and obviously much too unfashionable to do them in America? I don't like this woman, but I could, if she wasn't cockteasing us just like her husband did.

We are not crumbs! We must not accept crumbs!

The CDC says some 300,000 men who had sex with men have died during the past 20 years. If I knew at last 500 of them, I know this CDC figure is a lie. Just as I know the CDC figure of gay people as only several percentage points of the population is a lie, instead of the at least some 20% of the population that the Williams Institute at UCLA Law School calculates it is possible to maintain. Who says that intentional genocide of "us" by "them" isn't going on? They don't want us here. When are we going to face up to this?

We are discriminated against at every turn. As we prepare to die the older among us will be taxed beyond belief. That prevents us leaving our estates to our lovers or to gay charities. God forbid the latter should happen, that gays with any money should endow gay organizations with all their gay riches. Do you think I am being too elitist in this concern? Well, you are using this gay and lesbian community center now. How do you think it supports itself? Taxation without representation is what led to our Revolutionary War. Well, way over two hundred years later gay people still have no equality. Gays are equal to nothing good or acceptable in this country. It is criminal how they treat us. We get further and further from progress and equality with each passing year. George Bush will leave a legacy of hate that will take who knows how many eons to cleanse away. He has packed every court in the land with a conservative judge who serves for life. He has staffed every single government job from high to low with a conservative inhabitant who, under the laws of Civil Service, cannot be removed. So even with the most tolerant of new Presidents we will be unable to break free from this yoke of hate for as long as most of us will live. Congresspersons now call judges to pressure them, which is illegal, and if the President doesn't like a judge's record, he fires them, which is also illegal. The Supreme Court is not going to give us our equality in any foreseeable future, and it is from the Supreme Court that it must come. They are the law of this land that will not make us equal. If that is not hate, if what I am talking about does not represent hate, I do not know what hate is. We are crumbs to them, if even that.

This is not just about gay marriage. Political candidates only talk about gay marriage, making nicey-nice maybes. But they are not talking about gay equality. And we are not demanding that they talk about the kind of equality I am talking about, marriage or no marriage. Gay marriage is a useful red herring for them to pretend they are talking about gays when they are not. For some reason our movement has confined its feeble demands to marriage. Well, my lover and I don't want to get married just yet but we sure want to be equal.

I wish I could make all gay people everywhere accept this one fact I know to be an undisputed truth. We are hated. Haven't enough of us died for all of us to believe this? Some seventy million cases of HIV were all brewed in a cauldron of hate.

Mark Harrington said to me last week that one of the great things about ACT UP was that it made

us proud to be gay. Our activism came out of love. Our activism came out of our love for each other as we tried to take care of each other, and to keep each other alive.

No one is looking out for us anymore the way ACT UP looked out for us once upon a time.

ACT UP is not saving us now. This is not meant as finger-pointing or blame. It just is. No one goes to meetings and our chapters all over the globe have almost disappeared. And we must recognize this, I beg of you.

I don't want to start another organization. And yet I know we must start another organization. Or at the very least administer major shock therapy to this one.

And I know that if we do go down a new road, we must do it right and just accept this fact that the old ACT UP we knew is no longer useful enough to the needs that we have now and move on to reparative therapy.

I also know that any organization that we start now must be an army. You have resisted this word in the past. Perhaps now that the man in charge of America's army is calling you immoral you won't resist it army anymore. We must field an organized army with elected leaders and a chain of command. It must be a gay army with gay leaders fighting for gay people under a gay flag, in gay battle formations against our common enemies, uncontaminated by any fear of offending or by any sense that this might not be the time to say what we really need to say. We must cease our never-ending docile cooperation with a status quo that never changes in its relationship to us. We are cutting our own throats raising money for Hillary or Obama or Kerry or, God forbid, Giuliani, or anyone until they come out in full support of all the things I am talking about, not just some tepid maybe-maybes about second-class partnership pieces of worthless paper. Immigration. Taxation without representation. Safety. Why aren't they all supporting Hate Crimes bills that include us? Twenty-thousand Christian youths now make an annual pilgrimage to San Francisco to pray for gay souls. I am sorry but this is not free speech. This is another version of hate. If any organization sent 20,000 Christian youths to pray for Jewish souls they would lose their tax-exempt status, or they would have before George Bush. Do we protest? It is very wearying to witness our carrying on so passively year after year, particularly now that all of us—and I mean all of us—have been given the gift of staying alive. I know that young gays don't think this way, but many of us died to give you this gift of staying alive. You are alive because of us. I wish you would see this. And we all owe it to the dead as well as to ourselves to continue a fight that we have stopped fighting.

We do not seem to realize that the more we become visible, the more that more and more of us come out of the closet, the more vulnerable we become to the more and more increasingly visible hate against us. In other words, the more they see us, the more they hate us. The more new gays they see, the more new ways they find to hate us. We do not seem to realize that the more we urge each other to come out—which indeed we must never stop doing—the more we must protect ourselves for and from our exits from our closet on to the stage of the world that hates us more and more. I don't think we realize this and we must. We must.

Why do I think we need the word “army”? Because it connotes strength and discipline, which we desperately need to convey. Because it scares people, and God knows nobody is all that scared of us. Which they were for a while. The drug companies were afraid of us. The NIH and FDA were afraid of us. Closeted everybodies were afraid of us. No more. Our days of being democratic to a flaw at those endless meetings must cease. It has been a painful lesson to learn but democracy does not protect us. Unity does. United commitment to confront our many foes.

We never consider the establishment of a gay army, just as in the approach of the Holocaust the Jews did not consider one, even though urged, no begged, no implored to do so by their great philosopher, Hannah Arendt, who had the tragic misfortune to see what was coming and to not have her warnings heeded or even believed. Why only last week Mr. Obama implored his people, albeit with a certain timidity: “Put on your marching shoes! Go do some politics! Change this country!” If all the blacks in this country did all that, he would not only win but they would have the power they never have.

What we refuse to see is what is going on around us, believing it is happening to others but not believing that it can happen to us: the use and defense of torture, concentrations of prisoners regarded as threats to America in camps where they languish indefinitely beyond the reach of law; hidden “duplicate” governments existing under the auspices of the homeland security state, shadowing the constitutional government but secret and free of legal constraint.” (Waldron). You don’t think any of this can happen to you. I do. You don’t think that any of those “political” prisoners shipped off to camps are gay? You’re wrong. Much of the Episcopalian church is now aligning itself with Nigeria. Homosexuality is a punishable crime in Nigeria, in Ghana, in Iran, in Saudi Arabia, in a hundred different countires, as is any activism on behalf of it. Punishable means prison. Punishable means death. The Nigerian head archbishop of the Episcopalian church believes we should be put in prison. Episcopalians! Whoever thought we’d have to worry about Episcopalians. Well, whoever thought we’d have to worry about Wyoming. Matthew Shepard was murdered in Wyoming.

When will we acknowledge that we are constantly being lied to? We must have fiercely observant eyes. We must understand and confront the unprecedented, with “attentive facing up to, and resistance of, reality—whatever that might be.”(Arendt) Intelligent people—and gays are certainly that—have proved more than once that we are less capable of judging for ourselves than almost any other social group. When a conservative columnist can get away with calling presidential candidates “a faggot” and “a queer,” without any serious reprisals, than why can’t we see that we are in trouble? When the *New York Times* does not run an obituary on quite possibly the most famous lesbian in modern times, Barbara Gittings, than we are in trouble. When I can’t get US News and World Report to publish a letter about an insidiously homophobic cover story they wrote on Jamestown, we’re in trouble. When our country’s top military officer can call us immoral, we’re in trouble.

No, ACT UP is not saving us now. No one is saving us now.

We all think we have straight friends. We think if we have straight friends then everything is OK.

But these friends are not protesting with us. They aren't fighting with us. They enjoy the freedoms they have with their marriages and all their fringe benefits. Yes, they like us but are they going to sacrifice any of their freedoms to get us ours? Of course not. And what's more we should not expect them to. Even though it sure would be nice; we've fought for them and theirs often enough.

The old ACT UP model served us well but it is time to take the next step. I am not saying that there are not more fights to be had for AIDS. There are and we must continue to fight them. Infections are up again. Prevention efforts are not good enough. It is still illegal for HIV foreigners to enter America. But these issues no longer appear to excite sufficient participation. Few people come to meetings and our chapters have disappeared. Many of us have tried to figure out what happened to us and why we ceased to be what we were. We all have thoughts about what happened but as I said I think its time to stop trying to figure it out and just move on. Expanding our demands will hopefully not silence our past concerns but invite increased numbers to meld these newer concerns I am talking about into a stronger, total mix.

ACT UP requires a new model to do this. A new model that will allow for different kinds of actions, tactics and issues, not just HIV. I am not asking you if you even want another organization. I am hoping that you are smart enough to realize—eureka!—that the great deeds we once accomplished which changed history can be accomplished again. For we are still facing the same danger, our extermination, and from the same enemy, our own country, our own country's "democratic process." Day after day our country declares that we are not equal to anything at all. All the lives we saved are nothing but crumbs if we still aren't free. And we still aren't free. Gay people still aren't free.

Go to Queens, go to Jamaica, go to Iran, go to Wyoming, we still aren't free. How many places in this country, in this world, can we walk down a street holding a beloved's hand? I went to my nephew's wedding in Jamaica twenty years ago. They are out for blood against gay men in Jamaica now. They do it to you the minute you get off the plane. There are men with iron crowbars waiting to maim you at the airport. Does our government protest? Of course not. Who cares if a faggot dies. They are actually beheading gays in Iran. This is progress? The European Parliament which in the past had played a key role in advancing gay rights worldwide, is about to be taken over by conservative delegates that will strengthen their neo-fascist bloc, which will actually call for capital punishment for homosexuals. You don't think that any of this can't happen here? I do. Our country's top soldier said so this morning. We are immoral. The Mayor of Moscow calls us dirt. Polish leaders call us scum. Ann Coulter calls us sissies. General Pace calls us immoral. Who cares if a faggot dies. A gay person murdered in Iraq or Libya or Nigeria or Jamaica or Ghana or Saudi Arabia is the same as a gay person murdered here. Why do I harp so on gay murders in foreign countries. Because gay murders in Iran have a way of becoming gay hate in Paris and London and Chicago and in the highest rank of US Army. Particularly when our own government ignores all attacks against us anywhere. Who cares of a faggot dies. It is all one world now. The disposal of gay people is an equal opportunity employer and hate is a disease that spreads real fast. I repeat: a gay kid murdered anywhere is a gay kid murdered here.

Yes, we have many things to worry about now besides HIV.

You can get married now in New Jersey but New York judges handed down some of the most bigoted “legal” hate outside of Iran, where as I have just said they are now actually decapitating gay men. They are stringing up gay boys and putting masks over their heads and hanging them as Saddam Hussein was hanged. For being gay. Does our government protest? Does any government protest? Of course not. Who cares if a faggot dies. Do you have friends in love with partners forbidden from entering America? To be separated by force from the one you love is one of the saddest things I can think of. What kind of police state do we live in? This is not right. This is wrong. It does not happen for straight lovers. It can only happen to gays who live in a country where we are hated. How many years do we have to endure being treated like this? If countries like Australia and New Zealand recognize relationship residencies for mixed nationalities, why can’t we? There was not one single demonstration against those New York judges, or indeed against any judges who are such dictators of our lives, where they work and live and sleep each night. They cannot be allowed to continue to hate us so legally. America cannot be allowed to continue to hate us so actively. It is not right. It is wrong. Don’t right and wrong mean anything anymore? Why are we not specifically included in Hate Crimes laws in many states? How many Matthew Shepherds must there be before we are specifically included in Hate Crime laws in every state?

We have right on our side and we must make everyone know it. If ACT UP is to stand for anything, let it stand for our Army Corps to Unleash Power.

Think about it. Think about all of this. Please.

We are the only people in America that it is socially acceptable to hate and discriminate against. Indeed so much hate of us exists that it is legally acceptable to pass constitutional amendments to hate us even more. This is democracy? This is how our courts and laws protect us? These are the equal rights for all that America’s Bill of Rights proclaims for all?

The biggest enemy we must fight continues to be our own government. How dare we stop? We cannot stop. We are not crumbs and we must not accept crumbs and we must stop acting like crumbs.

ACT UP is the most successful grass roots organization that ever lived. Period. There never was, never has been one more successful that has achieved as much as we. We did it before. We can do it again. But to be successful, activism must be practiced every day. By a lot of people. It made us proud once. It united us.

I constantly hear in my ears the refrain: “an army of lovers cannot lose.” Then why are we losing so? We must trust each other to an extent we never have, enough to allow the appointment of leaders and a chain of command to stay on top of things and keep some sort of order so that we not only don’t self destruct as we seem to have more or less done, but also, this time, as we did not do before, institutionalize ourselves for longevity.

I am very aware that as I spin this out I am creating reams of unanswered questions. Well, we

didn’t know when we first met in this very room twenty years ago what we wanted ACT UP to become. But we figured it out. Bit by bit and piece by piece we put it together. We have a lot to thrash out and codify in a more private fashion. Armies shouldn’t show all their cards to the world. Many parts of the old ACT UP will still serve us: the choices of a variety of issues to obsess us in the detail that we became famous for; the use of affinity groups that develop their own forms of guerilla warfare. Our call for Health Care for All must still be sought. I have a personal bug up my ass that gay history is not taught in the schools. Abraham Lincoln and George Washington were gay. It may be up to activists to ram this truth down the throats of America because gay historians are too timid to. Timidity is so boring, don’t you agree?

Much of what I am calling for involves laws, changing them, getting them. We need to cobble together an omnibus gay rights bill and then hold every politician’s feet to this fire until he or she supports it. We’d find out fast enough who are friends aren’t. TAG and AmFAR once cobbled together a bunch of research priorities into a bill that they got through congress.

How about this: Jim Eigo wrote me: “a full generation after AIDS emerged as a recognizable disease, having sex still poses the same risk for HIV infection or reinfection. Having a sexual encounter with another person—a central, meaningful activity in most people’s lives—has been shadowed by fear, by the prospect of a long-term disease and by a whole new reason for guilt for more than a quarter of a century now. How have we allowed this unnatural state of affairs to persist for so long? Where are the 21st century tools for preventing the sexual transmission of HIV: cheap, effective, and utterly unobtrusive. Lovers deserve nothing less. Instead of sinking time, effort, and money into excavating the fossils of its ancient achievement, ACT UP might consider marking its birthday by mounting a fresh drive to remind government and industry that people have a right to sex without fear, without being forced to make a choice between pleasure and health. It’s an issue that might actually speak across the divides of generation, race, gender and sero-status. And it might regain for the organization some measure of the relevance it once had for the grassroots activists that gave of themselves as if their lives depended on it, because they really did.” Jim is calling for nothing less than the reclamation of our sex lives. What an utterly fantastic notion, or shall I now say goal? Why even raising this issue will find us hated even more. I am so ready for another organized fight.

Are you beginning to see how all this that I am talking about can be streamed into one new ACT UP army?

I have asked Eric to convey the main difference of what is available to us now that we did not have to work with in the past:

“In the age of the internet we can do much of what we did in our meetings and on the streets, on the world wide web.

“The information technology available today could help end the need for those endless meetings.

“Creating a blog could, in fact, incorporate even more voices and varieties of opinions and ideas

than any meeting ever could.

“Where ACT UP once had chapters in many cities, we could now involve thousands more via simple list-serves and blogs. We can draw in students and schools and colleges all over the world. It is the young we have to get to once again.

“Creating a blog would allow for expression and refinement of ideas and policies, like a Queer Justice League for denouncing our enemies.

“A well organized website could function as an electronic clearing house for sharing information, for posting problems, for demanding solutions, for developing and communicating action plans.

“List-serves and a website could coordinate grassroots organizing and mobilize phone, e-mail and physical zaps or actions. They could also be used to spotlight homophobic actions, articles, movies and tv, and laws.

“Why aren’t we fighting fire with fire? Where is our radical gay left think tank? We need our own “700 Club” and our own talk radio show. Developing such gay content programming for the LOGO or Here Networks or for streaming on-line is completely possible today. Why are all the shows our community is producing about fashion, decorating or just another gay soap?”

Why even *Time* magazine is now stating as a fact that websites drive the agendas of political parties.

I know that even without these tools we reordered an entire world’s approach to a disease that would have killed us all. Surely with these tools and with all our creativity we can start to take control of our destinies again.

With these tools, and with a renewed commitment to love and support and to fight to save each other, with a renewed commitment to the anger that saved us once before, with the belief that anger, along with love, are the two most healthy and powerful emotions we are good at, I believe that we could have such a historical success again.

May I conclude these thoughts, these remarks toward the definition of a new ACT UP that will hopefully begin to be discussed forthwith, with this cry from my heart:

Farewell ACT UP.

Long live ACT UP.

Thank you.

Click here to discuss the speech in our forums

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