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We've had too many prevention efforts based on lies

November 1, 1997 By Sean Strub

Last spring I read a novel, *Brutal*, by British writer Aiden Shaw and called him up in London to talk about it. Over several months Aiden and I spoke on an almost daily basis. I was fascinated by what Aiden had to say about HIV and, especially, his ambivalence about having acquired the virus. As he writes in his guest editorial in this issue: "I romanticized AIDS: It was tragic and saintlike, rebellious and dynamic. So nothing felt so right as having [unprotected] sex."

My fascination grew when I realized that in "choosing" HIV, he isn't alone: His perspective-free of regrets and remorse-is shared by an increasing number of gay men and others. Aiden's views challenged and influenced me. I became convinced that because of his brutal honesty about the forces that drive us to have unprotected sex, they could contribute to the current debate over how to reduce new infections.

In Aiden's writings I was hearing what I now realize is a new voice emerging in the AIDS community. It speaks to how we are to survive in this new era of the epidemic. This voice is about examining the desire to wrestle free of the viral tyranny that has devastated our lives and our emotional selves. About understanding the search for a way to be whole-to love fully again-and ascertaining which risks are worth taking toward that end.

Right now many of us are grasping for life. Not just survival, but *life* with its full spectrum of joys and intimacies and choices, which we once believed would be ours forever but which were taken away. If we listen closely to this voice, we can learn more about what so many lives lack and use that knowledge to find ways to meet those needs safely.

This issue of *POZ* is a record of this emerging new voice. Please listen closely to what Walt Odets and Scott O'Hara have to tell us, in their different ways, about the effects of viral tyranny on sex and prevention. Read Aiden Shaw's essay and Pat Califia's interview with Edmund White to understand that there are many responses to acquiring HIV, including some that may seem, at first glance, incomprehensible.

The reality is that, either consciously or unconsciously, many people on occasion view sex without condoms as a value more worthy-at least at that particular moment-than complete assurance that they won't get HIV. *POZ* is committed to reporting and reflecting on this phenomenon, but we do

so with trepidation because others have been quick to misinterpret our intent as promoting unprotected sex. That is not the case. Our intent is to examine carefully the truth about sex and HIV and share it with our readers and the rest of the AIDS community. We've had too many prevention efforts based on lies; perhaps brutal honesty about what motivates unsafe sex *today* can help build effective prevention programs for tomorrow.

I am determined not to spend the rest of my life encaged in, and often immobilized by, fear of sex, death and disease. I am sick and tired of AIDS. That doesn't mean I'm going to throw out my condoms. I won't. But I will try damn hard to understand, and not pass judgment on, those who do. I learned long ago that when virtually the entire AIDS community is one one side of a particular issue, there is usually something misunderstood, unexamined and worth of attention on the other side.

We all need to care more about one another than we do about an orgasm's muscular spasm. We can start by respecting those whose strategies for preventing or living with HIV are reasoned, chosen but different from our own. Many of them know firsthand the uniquely grotesque pain AIDS can cause; to suggest that they are callous to those horrors-or their intent is to harm-is insulting.

As guest editor of this issue of *POZ*, Aiden Shaw's quiet yet forceful demeanor artfully guided our editorial staff and contributors to reflect deeply on our lives at this point in the epidemic. He challenged us, and I am grateful.

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