Choosing HIV?

HIV uses our forces of desire as its means of transmission

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I try to remember how I felt before I became infected. It's difficult. Having sex with other men, I had already learned to celebrate being outside of society, to validate and strengthen my sense of self-worth. I'd heard about and understood safer sex, but disregarded it. I romanticized AIDS: It was tragic and saintlike, rebellious and dynamic. So nothing felt so deeply right as having sex I was told not to, doing it in a way that was dangerous and knowing I could suffer because of it.

I was told I was wrong to have unprotected sex, but despite the pressure, I didn't agree. Whenever someone said, "Play it safe," even if their concern was genuine, it felt like an invasion of privacy and an attack on my sexuality. Victimized, I was prepared to martyr myself.

And so I got HIV, just as I'd wanted. I laughed when I was told. It was such a relief. Everything fell into place. The future was clear; there was no need to worry about a career or old age. My marginalization and self-image were distilled, purified. An HIV community materialized where the mythical gay one never had. Gay men did have something in common, after all. My death would be painful, like my life. Somehow this seemed heroic. It was a ticket to spirituality. At a time when I felt little, a virus gave me so much to feel.

Now, HIV is just something I live with, like bad skin. And taking medication is like keeping athlete's foot at bay or my teeth from rotting—necessary physical maintenance between life and death. At times when I've been ill, apart from the fear and the pain, I'm reminded of how dull life can be. Frustration, bitterness, remorse—I've felt them. There are times, like now, when my health seems good, and instead of dealing with distractions, I can get on. Like before I was positive. But even though my life seems so different and I feel as if I've learned a great deal, I can't help wondering: If HIV were taken out of my body, would I end up getting it all over again? I think maybe I would, because the factors that drove me to HIV still exist. Nothing has really changed.

I have a fantasy. It goes like this: I would never have had to rebel against my family simply to justify my existence. I would be allowed the luxury of a God who didn't reject me. I wouldn't need solace in a culture created in response to hatred. My relationships would be complicated, but not because of oppression and damage. And the sexual-outlaw mentality I once had might seem manic, even neurotic.

The reality is that I'm at odds with a straight world. Also, I'm at odds with gay culture. I had looked

to it as a refuge from a sexual morality that excluded me. In a desperate attempt to feel a part of this culture, I made myself fit. But I ended up sacrificing too much of my individuality. The very culture I thought would liberate me, disabled me—bringing with it all the sexual baggage I wanted to leave behind. An insidious sexual morality crept in, so I hitched a ride with HIV. Now my confidence is underminded. Again I'm told I should have protected sex, but I don't.

Sometimes my partner and I know each other's status; other times, HIV is never mentioned. That's when the crippling guilt and fear jammed into me since the beginning of the epidemic fade away, if even for only a few moments. This is when I can almost touch how it was before—before my innocence and trust were replaced by involution. I miss how I was so much.

Trying to divert the depth of my passion exhausts me. I can do it for a while, but all this fabrication deforms me. I see this in my face and in others'. Sometimes my repression even leads me to fetishize HIV. I hate this.

I don't always have unprotected sex. But I'm not capable of always letting sex be ruled by the rational, or my passions by fear. It's a struggle to stop this virus. It uses our forces of desire as its route of transmission. The only thing I have to fight it with is my intellect. This pitches me against myself, and the relentless conflict continues. Many others know this story.

We've grown so much since the beginning of the epidemic. I would like us to be wary of ego, anger and simple mindedness. All I ask is that we remember to be kind not judgmental, gentle not aggressive, forgiving not impossible. Most of all, I hope we continue to find new depths of compassion toward one another.

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