Combating Projections onto HIV/AIDS

A psychologist on the denial of death and vulnerability around the virus.

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“Do you know what it’s like to have AIDS?“ my friend asked. ”Everyone looks at you as if you have a skull and crossbones over your head. They treat you like you’re already dead." Another man I knew who also had AIDS told me after coming out of a coma, “It’s hard to keep living when people insist on seeing me as dead or dying. I’m not dead yet; I wish people would stop burying me and start relating to me.” He said he dropped into a coma because he didn’t have the strength to fight against people’s constant projections.

The denial of death is ever-present. People get sick but resist their own sense of frailty; people witness another’s death but deny their mortality; people age but fight against every visible and invisible reminder. Death is the enemy; sickness is a sign of weakness and failure. As a result, people are compelled to project death and dying onto someone else; those with HIV/AIDS have been prime targets. Whether people are caring and care-taking, cold and dismissive, or contemptuous and blaming, the projector escapes the disquieting experience of seeing their own death in the mirror while forfeiting its gifts—the way it can highlight the profundity of the moment, reorganize priorities, and bring people closer to their loved ones and spirit.

Being looked at as diseased or dying is a most awful projection sapping the energy out of those with HIV/AIDS, devaluing the life they are living, hypnotizing them to stop living before their time. However, because this particular projection is so prevalent and seems true it is hard for many to fight back, to defend their humanity, to remember that they are full of ‘living experiences’—feelings, conversations, touches, spiritual states, not to mention loving and being loved.

But this projection not only injures those with HIV/AIDS, it costs everyone. When sickness and death, failure and weakness are projected onto another the capacity for genuine compassion turns into pity and we become blind to how we can learn from the psychology of AIDS.

AIDS is a condition of weakened immunity, of intense vulnerability. While physiologically this poses great difficulty, psychologically it represents a kind of openness that many others compulsively avoid. As a dream analyst I sometimes imagine a community of people coming to my therapy practice with the following dream: There are two groups of people. Some have a weakened immunity and are open to feeling, but defenseless against even the mildest breeze, while others

are more insensitive and try to stay away from people in the first group seeing them as sick and not wanting to catch their illness. They ask for my interpretation and I say, “The first group needs more protection and care for their vulnerability; the second group needs more contact with life and receptivity to its pains and pleasures. In this way the community can become more whole and healed.”

Integrating the psychological lesson, the “dreaming” meaning of AIDS, requires those of us who are free from the medical malady to learn to lower our guards, to drop a notch in our sacred shields. This includes those who engage in dietary or exercise regimens in order to make themselves immune to all but kryptonite, those who live in the hoped-for security of gated communities, those who stockpile weapons so they can survive WW III, even those whose response to September 11th was to insist they can go on living as if America’s defense systems can keep them forever safe. Simply put, many of us who live as if being invulnerable is the key to living a long life need to learn that being vulnerable, touched, moved, and affected is what it means to experience being alive.

I still feel close to my friend who passed some 15 years ago. I can hear him speak to those who project death and sickness onto those with HIV/AIDS, "We are not dead. We are dying, but so are you. If you could be more open to your own frailty, if you were less consumed with overcoming your own insecurity, if your psychological immune system wasn’t so good at making you feel that it’s not you who’s dying, it would give many of us a bit of reprieve and you the chance to touch life more intimately and to know more of the beauty of giving and receiving love.” As for me, I must say: To those who I have burdened with my ignorance, biases and projections, forgive me. And to my gay brothers who have shared their wisdom with me and taught me how to live more intimately with life, thank you.

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