Viral Communion

There's life beyond condoms

November 1, 1997 By Scott O'Hara

Cazenovia, Wisconsin (pop. 238) is about as far from Castro Street as you can get. I moved there in 1990 to avoid contact with other gay men and clear my head of the morbid atmosphere of San Francisco. I'd had enough sex to last a lifetime—and a good thing, too, because as newly diagnosed PWA with KS lesions crawling up my legs, I saw precious little screwing in my future. Gardening would substitute.

I'd been a sex star; my life revolved around sex, and I was depressed about having to abandon it. In retrospect, giving up being "The Biggest Dick in San Francisco" may have been a blessing, but it's hard to see these silver linings when the lightning first hits. Sure, there are actors who kept making porn after testing positive; it wasn't possible for me, not being the type of person who can keep secrets. Oh, I gave it a try: I asked a couple of producers if they'd hire an openly positive star. No takers. PWAs were still viewed with dread; the phrase hot poz land had yet to be coined. So...I retired.

And my libido retired, too. Condoms, which I'd used enthusiastically for years (not always, but almost), had taken on a whole new aspect. There was a time in the mid-'80s when they meant "I am a responsible gay man." Then, as people began prophesying that would never be able to stop using them, condoms lost their nobility and came to seem like something designed by the Religious Right to keep us from ever touching each other again. A visible reminder if the fear and mistrust that had erased all the revolutionary gains of the '70s, they made us into careful actuaries, weighing risks instead of savoring pleasures. Fucking was no longer fun, but a demonstration of finesse, timing and coordination. I gave up on it.

Even without fucking, of course, there's always risk—enough to muddy every sexual encounter with the thought: "Did I just infect this guy?" Not that I was doing anything I hadn't done before—a lot less, actually—but it changes the equation when you know you're positive. Before, I'd wondered "Did I just get infected?" and I could handle the possibility, no sweat. Now it was a guilt thing. Guilt isn't good for sex. Between one thing and another, my sex life ground to a halt. Ironic, huh? Me, Mr. Sex, who performs nightly on video in bedrooms worldwide—and all I wanted to do in bed was sleep. But with the hundreds of friends and fuck-buddies I'd cultivated, the 24-hour cruising, the endless culture and relentless obituaries, San Francisco was no place for it. I needed a change.

Cows on hillsides, wild turkeys in the woods, neighbors who “live and let live” and silence: Wisconsin. There, improbably, I met another positive guy. We fell in love, dated for most of a year, drifted apart—but I’d had my first lesson in the power of positivity. Sex was still possible. Over the next few years, I met positives who were uninhibited about sharing bodily fluids. Each one taught me something about trust, and it became the most important element in my sex life. I learned the necessity of opening myself up to my partners.

An advocate of casual sex, I’m sorry to say I don’t enjoy it anymore. Sex has taken on too many overtones—of life and death—ever to be casual again. Porn no longer interests me, and fucking is no longer play. I don’t do it with just anyone…and fucking with rubbers is shorthand for play. Feeling a man’s dick inside me, condomless—that’s when the sex becomes spiritual in its intensity. Communion, in the truest sense. Integral to that closeness is the knowledge that he intends to leave a piece of himself inside me; his cum, like, the sex itself, has a psychological value far beyond anything physical. Recognizing that power is one of the ways I defy this virus. I believe in exchanging bodily fluids, not wedding rings.

HIV may or may not kill you, buy it certainly forces a drastic re-evaluation of your life. The major casuality—and, ultimately, the biggest beneficiary—was my libido. Intimacy, I decided, is far more important than either safety or sex, and so are writing and eating and conversation…With that realization, I returned to the city, eager for more temptations and unafraid of dying. There are worse things than death. When I tell a man I want him to cum in my ass, I know the risks. To me, they’re worth it.

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