How much worse does it need to get? Reflecting on US politics

August 1, 2018 By Andrew Spieldenner, PhD

Yes, "protest is the new brunch" was all too real (and funny) a year ago. But I'm exhausted.

The news does not help – it simply piles onto the aggravation with their cycles of BLAH BLAH BLAH and faux moralistic disgust (all while they make money on their ratings).

We all live in our bubbles, exacerbated by social media where you can listen to people who agree with you and "like" everything you do all day. And those bubbles are getting further and further apart. It saddens me when self-proclaimed allies dismiss my claims about the racism or HIV stigma or homophobia I'm experiencing today because it doesn't fit their bubble. To me, it's like telling a woman the sexism in the workplace is in her imagination, or to a person of trans experience that transphobia doesn't exist anymore because of the success of a few, or to someone living in poverty that the economy is getting better so their concerns aren't valid.

It's ironic because I believe that most people in the United States actually do feel vulnerable, that we feel our position in society is precarious. But we see the threats differently. Some are unused to feeling this way so they feel the need to lash out.

My friend Sean Zevran follows all kinds of people on social media, because he tries to stay abreast of the tone of the conversations and issues happening. I respect him for it but acknowledge I can't. Some of the diatribes will just piss me off and/or injure me.

I live in a bubble of HIV advocacy and academia. In both, I am besieged by news blasts about what this Administration is doing – against healthcare, reproductive and sexual justice, immigrant rights and people of color. Last spring, one of my students asked for an extension on an assignment because his mother was deported over the weekend. This is what our daily lives have turned into.

I first joined the US People living with HIV Caucus because the voices of people living with HIV were minimized in the HIV movement. Outside of a few highly visible CEOs living with HIV, there was very little visibility and definitely not a unified voice. Since we started in 2011, we have been part of a larger movement elevating the voices of people living with HIV nationally. The work of networks like Thrive SS, U=U, Sero Project and Positive Women's Network-USA (just to name a few) is AMAZING – and humbling to watch.

There are people in the HIV industry who do not acknowledge or value this work. Are the networks

of people living with HIV operating with 15-25 million dollar budgets?

No. But we have integrity and people trust us, especially other people living with HIV.

AIDS2018 in Amsterdam just ended. Amsterdam has a history of progressive policies concerning HIV, including legalized sex work and harm reduction programs for substance use. I look forward to hearing more about the amazing meetings and connections that happened (I couldn't afford to go).

AIDS2020 looms ahead. The announcement of San Francisco/Oakland as the host city caused a stir a couple months ago. The coalition that brought the proposal forward did not include any networks of people living with HIV. Since the announcement, in this country, the attacks against immigrants have actually ramped up, crackdowns on visas and at the border have increased, and hate crimes against individuals seem to be everywhere.

It's not getting better, no matter how much we protest (we still do because it feels good to see how many people agree that these policies are monstrous - and what else will we do? Stay quiet?). It's mindboggling to think to bring an international conference to the US right now when most "community" members – people who are poor, people of trans experience, people who engage in sex work, and people who have been incarcerated – will not be able to attend. Imagine trying to apply for a visa from a Muslim country, or Venezuela, Honduras or El Salvador.

Think of the evidence required to get that visa. Do you think all people living with HIV or affected communities can do that? Even if they were lucky enough to get a scholarship?

No matter how liberal or progressive the Bay Area is: visas are federal, the local jurisdiction has no say in how they are awarded.

I understand that AIDS2020 is a professional conference, meant for researchers, policy experts, government workers, HIV service executives, and representatives from the private sector. It's entirely possible that those voices are the ones that International AIDS Society means to center. That the few slots available to the community is enough.

I also understand that for many of us in the research world, this conference does do better than most of the conferences we go to with bringing community members together with other sectors. I know that seems odd to non-research people, but academic and public health conferences are almost entirely constituted of professionals and researchers. At the International AIDS Conference, we are able to mingle in several spaces, including the Global Village (my favorite part of the conference).

So I think about those bubbles we live in. I see how some HIV professionals in the Bay Area really want to believe in this conference in their city, how they live in a bubble where they insist this is "right" and a "good thing," and they will get to shine in the focus of the international HIV community.

But every week there’s something new. Immigration bans, increased police shootings, upticks in hate crimes, White Supremacists openly marching in American cities, separation of undocumented children from their parents, heightened barriers for travel visas, and deaths of people of color and people of trans experience while in the criminal justice system.

Reproductive rights are under attack.

Sex workers are under attack.

Healthcare is under attack.

This is not hyperbole: these are facts.

I guess the question remains, how much worse does it need to get before the International AIDS Society recognizes that the bubble this Bay Area coalition lives in is NOT the current state of the USA? For these reasons, I stand with others in opposing AIDS2020 in the USA.

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