No Extra Cool Points

January 15, 2011 By Jay Vithalani

To begin with: an ancient TV moment. Jason Bateman, playing David Harper on the 1980s sitcom *Valerie*, has done something wrong. I forget what exactly; maybe it's the episode in which David decides to have sex, with a condom (first primetime mention of the word, Wikipedia informs me) but lies to his mother (Valerie Harper) about it. Valerie is very angry with him. He tries to wheedle his way out of a punishment -- he tells his mother, "At least I told you the truth!" Valerie is quite rightly indignant. She reacts by saying something like this (I'm paraphrasing of course): "You do something wrong and you think that simply by telling the truth that everything is A-OK?! I *expect* you to tell me the truth. Telling the truth is basic, not something so wonderful that it counts as a Get-Out-Of-Jail-Free card! *And* you seem to want a pat on the back!"

Back to the present and to real life. A couple of years ago I dated someone -- let's call him AB. (I'm deliberately keeping the timeline a little fuzzy. But, if you want a visual of the guy, think Steve Carell with salt-and-pepper hair.) We met by accident. The attraction, on my part certainly, was instant and strong, on several levels; and, though I have to fight my natural tendency towards skepticism in these matters, I do believe AB when he says he was instantly and strongly attracted to me as well. Strange but happily true.

AB was, and is, HIV-negative. I told him about my status at the end of our second date, before we'd kissed, let alone had sex. His reaction was, given the context and, for lack of a better word, exemplary. We paused for a bit on the street. (You want more specificity? OK then: at the corner of Church and Brattle.) Then AB said: "Well, it's not what I'd expected you to say and of course it's not something I'm happy to hear -- but do you still want to go back to my place and make out?" Yes, I said, I would like to go back to his place and make out.

We broke up, amicably though painfully enough, after a... while. The discord between us had nothing to do with the fact that we were a serodiscordant couple. AB and I moved on, after the necessary quantity of tears had been shed by each, and went our separate ways. Not-so-strange and unhappily true.

I narrate this slightly tedious tale, in outline, for two reasons. First, because of the way a few -- very few, thank goodness -- people perceived our breakup; and second, because of the way quite a *lot* of people perceived our getting together in the first place.

The first set assumed that the split *must* have had something to do my being poz and AB's not

being so: how could the stresses (inevitable, insurmountable?) of a “magnetic” relationship not be a factor, even the decisive factor, in the parting of ways? In this view, a statement like the one above (“The discord between us had nothing to do with the fact that we were a serodiscordant couple”) is myopically self-protective at best and stubbornly or willfully delusional at worst.

The second group, on the other hand, expressed some surprise that an HIV-negative person would date, and even consider a future with, an HIV-positive person at all. I’ve often heard, in conversation or in e-mails, something like this: "Well, he was of course lucky to have you, and it’s a shame you guys broke up. But what a *cool* guy he was, right? He was cool and *brave* enough to go out with a poz guy and you have to give him credit for that, right?"

I don’t really know to respond to the first (mis)perception besides saying that this is one of those weird notions that is hard to counter with reason. It is dogma -- in the sense that the “truth” is taken for granted. The more you object to this “truth” the more the implanted or implacable belief receives reinforcement. "Obama’s middle name is ’Hussein’ -- therefore he *must* be Muslim (and that’s a bad thing).“ ”You say that the dream is not about your mother? Then it *must* be about your mother." "How can you pretend that being HIV-positive was not a factor in your breaking up with AB -- since it *had* to be a factor?" Fine, then. Believe what you want to believe -- and if you want to believe that a serodiscordant relationship isn’t possible or sustainable, then well, bully for you. I’ll just shrug and walk away.

But what about the second set? The people who think (and sometimes say) that a neg guy dating a poz guy is something wonderful -- so wonderful that the neg guy in the relationship equation deserves to receive extra points for bravery and coolness? Does AB deserve -- do other negative men and women like him deserve -- extra cool points?

Nah. Nope. Not so much. But why not?

Well, think again of David and the reason why Valerie scolds him. David does the right thing by his mother, at least in one way -- he fesses up. But he’s thinking like a clever celebrity or politician: commit your misdeed, deny it as long as possible, but when you no longer can, tearfully or piously tell the truth, and expect the press and the public to applaud your “wrenching” honesty in being (momentarily) truthful. The previous lies, the initial wrongdoing, David expects, are to be forgotten: it’s a canny use of candor. Except. Except that, as Valerie reminds him, his candor is only superficially exceptional -- it used to be taken for granted, and it *should* be taken for granted, that truth-telling was/is simply the base and not some extraordinary, sky-high, moral edifice.

Valerie is a mostly-forgotten TV show, and I’m sure there are dozens of more recent, and no doubt better, pop-culture references I could have used for my purposes. Be that as it way; given the vagaries of memory, this exchange between mother and son, *circa* 1987, has stayed with me. And I’d like to apply the idea of what is “basic” to my relationship with AB and to other poz-neg relationships.

My point, you will have guessed, is itself pretty basic: doing the right thing does not get you what I'm calling "extra cool points." And AB was simply doing the right thing: responding favorably to an attraction, without letting (irrational) fear and (socially sanctioned) prejudice get in the way.

The end? Yes and No -- "Yes," because what else is there to say, in a sense, beyond this; and "No," because, on the other hand, there is, there so much is, so much more to say.

Try prefixing an "OMG!" or "How cool is that?" to each of the three, brief, scenarios below:

"A Baptist preacher permitted those under his pastoral care to attend yoga classes if they wished -- and this despite the fact that yoga clearly has historical and spiritual roots in a non-Christian tradition. The breadth of his tolerance and magnanimity is admirable."

"A conservative Southern country club just admitted three African-American families. How progressive of them! It's really brave -- considering that the committee's Confederate ancestors are turning over in their graves."

"The Board of Directors didn't pass over the female candidate for the position of Chief Operating Officer. And she's only in her early 40s, she could yet have another child you know. I'm really impressed at how forward-thinking this Board is. Kudos!"

I'm pretty sure that most people (though certainly not all) would agree that the prefixes are ludicrous when attached to every one of these "cases" -- and that's because moral congratulations were being conferred when not a single one was warranted.

I'll be the first to admit -- in this compressed but sprawling disquisition, on *one* aspect of acting rightly or morally -- that I'm ignoring several major complicating "issues." Five of these come to mind right away. First, that race, religion, and gender are not quite the same thing as a disease (or virus if you prefer). Second, that individual temperaments differ, and some people have preferences and aversions that they can't help holding on to, despite wanting to shed them. And then third and fourth: that individual acceptance or rejection is not the same as the institutional kind, and that legally disallowed discrimination is obviously different from the personal variety. Fifth, and most importantly for me in this context, that doing the right thing -- or doing something that can be counted as brave or extraordinary in some way -- does not, in most cases, remain static through time and space.

On that fifth point: it's pretty clear from the context, I think, that AB is a well-educated man living in 21st-century urban America. But what if he were a figure from Abraham Verghese's *My Own*

Country (small-town Tennessee, mid-80s) or Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (New York, same time period) or Lizzy Attree's *Blood on the Page* (contemporary South Africa and Zimbabwe)? A question, or set of questions, to address elsewhere, elsewhen.

I've been unusually exasperated with myself (and that's saying something) while writing this essay: there has been a nagging sense, at times, that a boy-meets-boy narrative has been taxed too hard, that an old romance shouldn't be sermonized over, and that succinctness and amplitude have both been sacrificed. On balance, however, these concerns were defeated by the need to "interrogate" a much larger, and truly dismaying, exasperation -- the angry and sad and incredulous and not-yet-resigned exasperation that wants to yell, "Hell, no!" when repeatedly confronted with this: "But what a *cool* guy he was, right? He was cool and *brave* enough to go out with a poz guy and you have to give him credit for that, right?"

AB himself would (and does) disclaim any special credit; he would (metaphorically) yell "Hell, no!" along with me when faced with (necessarily) different versions of the well-meaning but wrong-headed statement-questions repeated above. He would (sadly, smilingly) agree with me that the real bravery he and I both showed was in embarking upon the crazy adventure known as a "relationship." And, if Mr. AB doesn't get or deserve any extra cool points on one score, he certainly deserves at least a few for agreeing that he doesn't.

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