Your Mother Liked It Bareback

January 28, 2013 By Mark S. King

Whenever a new study of gay men is released showing that we are having bareback sex, the arbiters of sexual conduct among us clutch their pearls and decry this shameful, shocking, murderous behavior. So you can just imagine runaway pearls showering the floor when a recent survey showed that nearly half the users of the gay phone app Grindr engage in unprotected sex.

I really wish that people would put down their smelling salts and try to understand the reasons why. Instead, every time some half-assed study demonstrates what we already know, they stand there in stunned outrage, frozen in their outdated indignation like they've been caught baking bread in Pompeii.

There's nothing new here, except our seemingly endless fascination with gay men behaving in exactly the same way as nearly every other man on this planet.

Maybe those who find bareback sex distasteful believe they are being politically correct, that their strident judgments about the sex lives of others are in the service of HIV prevention, that criticizing other gay men for acting like human beings will somehow alter instincts that evolution built over millions of years.

Perhaps this is part of our new gay agenda, to demonstrate to straight society that we're just as good at shaming gay men as they are, that we'll gladly be neutered for equal rights and be denied the same pleasures they take for granted, that if they only give us gay marriage we won't talk about the unprotected butt fucking that will happen on the wedding night.

Somehow, we have come to the homophobic conclusion that when gay men engage in the romantic, emotional, spiritual act of intercourse without a barrier we label it psychotic barebacking, but when straight people do it we call it sex.

This double standard is ludicrous. Your mother barebacked. It is a natural and precious act that has been going on, quite literally, since the beginning of mankind. Abraham (barebacked and) begat Isaac; and Isaac (barebacked and) begat Jacob; and Jacob (barebacked and) begat Judas and his brethren (Matthew 1:2).

Maybe you have the uncanny ability to enjoy sex while your penis is wrapped in latex. That is terrific, really. Please continue. You are using a classic prevention tool, a real golden oldie. Or maybe you and your boyfriend are HIV negative and have the good fortune to be in a committed, monogamous relationship in which you are having sex without condoms. Or perhaps, by whatever

Olympian discipline you possess, you are capable of using a condom each and every time you have sex, no matter what. You are to be commended, and you are, regrettably, in the minority.

All of these scenarios are valid and worth replicating whenever possible. They do not, however, represent a superior high ground from which to make pronouncements about someone else's choices.

There was an unspoken agreement that gay men made amongst ourselves during the AIDS crisis of the 1980's. We accepted that we would use condoms - at the time it was the only "safer sex" option that existed - until whatever time the crisis abated. Many of us believed this contract would be in effect for the rest of lives, if only because we thought we would be dead within a few short years. But none of us could have fathomed that, thirty years later, we would still be held to these strict and oppressive guidelines.

Even then, some of us didn't follow them. One might assume that the cascade of death we experienced would have led to long term behavioral change. In fact, many of us responded to the crisis in a profoundly human way: we found comfort by making love with one another, often without a condom. It was a life affirming gesture, and an enormous "fuck you" to AIDS.

In fact, a 1988 study of gay men showed that almost half of them never used condoms, and most did not use them all of the time. These figures are strikingly similar to the recent Grindr results. Everything old is new again. Or it never went out of style in the first place.

The 1988 study is particularly interesting when you consider how many gay men consider that period a time of great sexual austerity -- and some of them are wishing for a return to those times a bit too ardently. Gay men who witnessed the early AIDS carnage will sometimes say, "If only younger men knew what we went through. If they had seen it, they wouldn't be behaving this way."

That's sick. I do not wish young gay men could witness the soul crushing things that I did. I worked in the trenches very, very hard so that they might have the option of being apathetic. I prefer their blissful ignorance to burying them.

And make no mistake about it, the number of gay men in the United States dying from AIDS is a small fraction of what it once was. Cigarettes are now killing more people with HIV than the virus itself. HIV/AIDS has become a dangerous but largely manageable disease, and fear tactics that suggest otherwise are being ignored because they simply are not true. Sex is sex, it is affirming and natural, and anyone who wishes to equate unprotected sex to death and disease really needs to get some therapy.

Condom usage will almost certainly continue to decrease in the future because of new tools that have joined the growing list of HIV prevention options. Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) - taking medication in advance of sex with an infected person - has been shown to significantly reduce the risk of transmission (and some insurance plans in the United States are covering the cost). Many people living with HIV are limiting sex partners to those who share their HIV status, known as

serosorting. Positive gay men have largely dismissed scary fireside stories of the ultimate boogeyman, the reinfection SuperVirus, who has never materialized.

We also know that when those with HIV have an undetectable viral load the risk of transmission is negligible, so “treatment as prevention” efforts have increased (a new British study of straight couples showed that an undetectable viral load is more effective in preventing transmission than condoms, and those researchers believe the same will hold true for gay men).

Gleaming on the horizon are rectal microbicides. These products, currently in development, will come in the form of lubricants or douches that will prevent HIV infection, and they could make the endless debate and judgments about condoms moot, once and for all.

We don’t have to do this anymore. We don’t have to clobber each other with condom fascism, discredit the value of our sex lives, or promote a singular strategy that doesn’t work for everyone. We can accept that gay men are making educated choices to engage in a variety of risk reduction techniques. We can acknowledge that all of these techniques reduce the risk of HIV infection and all of them constitute “safer sex.”

And finally, we can stop pretending that those who remain fixated on condom usage have the moral upper hand.

The emperor has no clothes. And he isn’t wearing a rubber, either.

Mark

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