

Meeting the AIDS Challenge

We are a community besieged, from both within and without. Hatred, isolation, and discrimination have keynoted the history of lesbians and gays, but now gay males, especially, are being forced to contend with what is being called "the gay plague," an odious epidemic called AIDS, in a disease-stricken subculture where the community appears to be its own nurturant.

A.I.D.S. I find myself so weary of this abbreviation which has come to haunt and further taint the gay community over the past two years. Yet I want to say it and write it over and over and over in hopes that the reality, the excruciatingly sad and horrendous reality of AIDS might permeate and jolt what continues to prove to be a guilt-ridden, lethargic, and often resistant gay consciousness.

In these increasingly hedonistic times, gay men are now being forced to ask and answer increasingly serious questions about their life choices. The number of AIDS-related deaths among gay men in the last few months has been staggering, and it is apparent that the backroom/bookstore/bathhouse/meatrack/sexual multiplicity will prove suicidal if continued. I am not commenting on morality, merely the reality of our lives and deaths. But gay men of this generation, even those who came out after the appearance of AIDS, have been conditioned to defend their right to "express their sexuality," and those not yet touched by the harshness or severity of the disease act as though they possess a natural immunity. Not only is this attitude stupid, it is dangerous in the existence of untold numbers who are carriers and who have not yet been diagnosed. This disease is by its very nature self-perpetuating, and unless gay men learn to surrender the use of sex as affirmation and to relinquish this lingering, laissez-faire, sex-by-the-numbers attitude, there might not be anyone left to play with in a few years.

I am certainly not condemning anyone to celibacy or the ascetic life. I am selfish and, at age 22, am not prepared to lock my libido away in some paranoid hope chest. But neither can I enter the disco anymore, much less a liaison, without concern for the consequences. No amount of abstinence at this point can make me completely safe, only safer.

More than just endangering our lives, though, AIDS also endangers our existence as a community by increasing our susceptibility to attack by our adversaries on--you guessed it--the right. I'm sure to Jerry Falwell et al., AIDS proves to be some sort of cruel poetic justice, a peculiarly appropriate fate for a bunch of supposed sinners and sodomites. Let us not forget that prior to 1973, homosexuality was officially considered by psychiatrists to be a sickness in and of itself. To this day, in the minds (or absence thereof) of homophobes, being a "fag" is worse than having cancer, and many fundamentalist Christians have suggested AIDS is God's punishment of homosexuals. Well, don't go crawling back into your closets. After all, who blamed the American Legion for Legionnaires Disease?

Easy for me to say, but the catch here is that the American Legion was not a despised minority group, uncertain of its right to exist, much less public sympathy. The slow response to the AIDS crisis by the mainstream media is admission of our expendability.

But the really frightening thing is not that the public might be apathetic or that our enemies should find satisfaction in our suffering but that this imposed guilt should strike a responsive chord in many gays as well. Though AIDS threatens our very lives, it need not damage our identity as gay people. Like nothing else in our history, AIDS should facilitate a mobilization and the creation of single identity within the pluralism of American society. Where conflict over issues such as pornography, pederasty, and S&M have divided the gay and lesbian community for years, AIDS can and is uniting us in a struggle to keep our health and our natural rights.

We will not stand by idly while political homophobes utilize health infractions as an excuse to continue their assault on gays and lesbians. We will not allow wholesale firing in restaurants or hospitals. We are now, more than ever, confronting both our adversaries and our own mortality, and there is strength and wisdom in the fight and the introspection.

We must introspect, though, both personally and communally. There are hundreds of people, our brothers and sisters, who are sick, fighting for their lives, and they need our help. It's not just a matter of doing what's politically correct or waiting around for the doctors to discover some miracle cure, it's a matter of concern, genuine concern for human suffering, and a concern which begins, but does not end, with your personal choices of conduct. These need not be choices borne of some inapplicable, antiquated, or vague Old Testament morality; they need to be liberated choices borne of love and concern for the preservation of yourself and of others.

Make the choices. Meet the challenge.

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