

# A Casual Reprieve

Commentary by Derek Livingston

"Oh no," the nurse said to me. "Your HIV test was negative." I was instantaneously happy. When I was asked back to retake blood tests for a drug study I was considering entering, I was convinced that it was a ruse to get me back so that I could be told what thousands ... hundreds of thousands of other gay men have been told. After sitting in the office for half an hour, I finally remarked, in an off-handed manner, so as not to reveal my true anxiety, "Oh, I thought maybe my HIV test was positive." That's when I got the nurse's casual reprieve. Internally I chuckled at her nonchalance. She had no idea how weighted that information was for me. As a gay man, hearing that news was more than another test result, it was a pronouncement of having escaped.

Of course, I felt anxious about my HIV test. 1994 was a year rife with loss of friends and heroes. Not only did we lose artistic luminaries such as Assato Saint and Marlon Riggs, we lost historians Randy Shilts, John Preston, and, right before Christmas, John Boswell. Little known ACT-UPtivist Aldyn McKain and Thomas Fabregas were lost to the very disease that they worked tirelessly to fight. Not only did news reports bring me the word of deaths of people I'd scarcely or never met, too many friends became the messengers of loss. When my friend, mentor

and hero Christopher Burke died, I traveled to Rhode Island for his funeral only to learn that my friends Jay Lodi and Joe Emma had died. When I spoke with my old roommate in New York, I found out his ex-boyfriend, Mark had died. When I spoke to my ex-boyfriend, Jake, I found out that another ex-boyfriend's best friend, Don Reid had died. At Christmas I found out about Ernie and Tony ... and it goes on. I sigh and yell to the universe, I'm only twenty-six and I've lost more friends than my mother. The nurse's dispensation made me angry at God that She could allow me to go unscathed when we've lost so many wonderful people.

But more than feeling angry, I felt relieved. Since my last test, I had slipped — more than once. In one of those cases, I contracted chlamydia. Of course, I knew better than to have sex without a condom. I had worked as an HIV prevention educator for three years. Personally, I had instructed hundreds of people on condom usage and safer-sex negotiation. I had even conned myself into believing that slipping could not happen to me. Sure, in my presentations I always warned others that each of us, no matter how much knowledge we have, is vulnerable to our own desires. I even told stories of other AIDS educators who confessed their own relapses in workshops. I listened and applauded their honesty,

but somewhere inside I didn't really believe it could happen to me. Under the conditions that I had always warned about — a sensual atmosphere, alcohol usage (my partner had been drinking), and a no-talk-just-action approach — I didn't put on a condom and, as we used to say in my neighborhood, I got burned.

My guilt was somewhat assuaged because when I was an educator, I did my best not to condemn the men and women I talked to who had had sex without a condom. From other gay men, particularly, I listened to self-berating cries of "How could I have been so stupid?" No matter how much I reminded them that they are human and, therefore, are programmed to make mistakes, I understood their feelings of stupidity. After all, gay men have been taught since the advent of AIDS to feel guilty and responsible for its spread. Moreover, we have been conditioned, more than any other group, to feel foolish for being unsafe.

Even in my "but-that-could-never-happen-to-me" educator mindset, I always pushed men to think of what they would do when next faced with an opportunity to be unsafe. I tried to liken it to dieting (as a former three hundred pounder, I felt I was on safe ground in this area). Sure there is guilt with cheating, or slipping, but the only way to achieve results is to work on it everyday. People in

continued on opposite page



"There is not one member of the gay community who hasn't benefited positively from the changes over the last thirty years. Yet we still hear, 'I don't like the gay community here very much.' To which we must respond, 'But my dear you are the gay community!'"

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# The Lesbian Under Construction

Commentary by Rene Upshaw

1. *Growth* — Stage or condition attained in growing. Progressive development. Increase and expand.
2. *Tolerance* — Sympathy or indulgence for beliefs or practices differing from one's own.
3. *Visualize* — To see or form a mental image.

These three words came to me while I stood on the third floor of the Old Court House in downtown St. Louis, Missouri. It is Monday January 16, 1995. I am celebrating Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday. I am listening to the first African-American to be elected mayor of the city that used to be a major port in the slave trade. I am a 32 year old African-American Lesbian standing in the same building that was used as a warehouse and point-of-sale to auction off human beings to be indentured servants. I am looking out into the mosaic. I see faces of all colors, shapes and ethnic features.

I am thinking about all the hard work, the tears and the energy that we have invested in the struggle for our civil rights and for the way over due equality in our lives. My mind wanders back just in time to hear our mayor say, "When all of us can come together, men, women, Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Asian, African-American, Mexican, republican, democrat, whites, gays and lesbians. Only then will Martin Luther King's dream become a reality."

I visualized a section from the wall of age old

hatred, intolerance and fear come tumbling down to land in the rubble below. I had been acknowledged by the leadership of this city. I now believe that all things are possible! This brave individual was telling us that it is okay to be different. That it is okay to bring our differences to the table and to share those personal perceptions that keep us apart and so divisive. Mayor Bosley, Jr. was telling us that it was time to heal and recover from those things that allow others to profit from our madness.

I have a theory. When you share the pie it only gets bigger. It is my hope that after you read this you will join with me in the next step that should follow acknowledgment. The healing process needs to start right now!

Times are changing. There will always be those who may feel that change is not happening fast enough. Let us try to remember that all the societal wrongs were not created overnight. Because we all are hurting and very angry we can not see that the opportunity is here to change the hair raising course that our society has embarked on.

When we ask others for tolerance, we must be willing to give the same. Labeling someone a racist or a homophobe does nothing more than incite a defensive posture from that person, thus cutting off the synaptic flow that enables a person to listen and to reason. In being tolerant you may have to take the time to educate someone by sharing your life and your experiences or your pain in a manner that does not create a negative

response. Stop screaming at the choir! Start communicating with those who are not like you. Just do it in a manner that makes it safe for the other person to let down their defenses so that you can actually feel that you have been understood. Do not pass up the chance to give someone a different view of how you live your life.

Why? Because it works! We need to learn to deal and cope with our anger in a more effective manner so that we can stop victimizing ourselves. In learning how to modify our behavior we can focus on the purpose of our lives.

I do not believe that our purpose in life is to constantly do battle for our human rights. During the Martin Luther King, Jr. celebration I witnessed and heard that there are others who shared the belief that one day, soon, we will begin the journey that is our true purpose of being.

I am a care taker, educator, friend, lover, sister and a daughter. And most important I AM SOMEBODY! I AM SOMEBODY! I AM SOMEBODY!

Join with me in knocking down more sections from those walls that keep us from fulfilling those dreams of justice and peace. Give up the love and the patience that is so desperately needed to stem the tide of hatred and fear. Let's grow together so that we may all ascend to a greater plain of existence. And, so that we can live with each other to heal old wounds that were placed upon us.

Can you hear me?  
 Be with me.

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