

Divided or United: Can We Move Beyond Poz/Neg?

By Emil B. Friend

Communities have always been divided, factionalized, continually negotiating their interior as well as exterior boundaries. Humanity is organized formally by nation-state, by territory, and then by city, town, village, even by personal property. We are then divided subjectively by religion, by age, by gender, by lifestyle, and (politically correct or not) by pigmentation of our skin. As societies and as individuals we create these categories as a means of controlling and ordering our own environments. Breaking down any of these boundaries in the creation of a common cause requires a serious investment of effort into understanding and withholding judgments. The return on that investment, though, can be the power to define an era.

The last thing that any community needs is another reason to be divided, but such a reason showed up around 1980 in San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York. The 70s had been a great success for urban gays, who were finishing rubbing their wrists after breaking the shackles of heteronormativity and were moving on to other parts of their bodies, both metaphorically and literally. Now a new threat came not from an external force of institutionalized discrimination (unless we start talking about institutionalized sexualities), but from within. HIV and AIDS began to spread from and through the very rank and file of the gay rights movement. And its vectors of transmission were

based on—and were often fatal for—the same relationships that had previously held the gay community together.

HIV isn't the only banana peel we slip on. Perhaps ironically, the acceptance fought so hard for by the gay community now allows many Gen X queers to be comfortable exploring their social and even sexual paths independently. They may see gay culture as stereotypical, hormone-driven, or unnecessary. Some, even, will have nothing to do with it: their sexual preference is one aspect of life, but not a defining one. It turns out that the downside of our culture becoming an institution is that it becomes, at the same time, an establishment of conformity that rebellious adolescents can lash out against.

There may be much for the gay community to be sentimental about; it achieved great things in a few short decades. Now it should recognize that the freedom to rebel is a sign of its successes, rather than bemoan the perceived loss of camaraderie amongst a new generation of men and women who again find themselves outside sexual, cultural, and even biological norms.

This is not to say we youngsters are loners; in fact the opposite is true. We may be found queering everyday places: music shows, dive bars, and our friends' apartments, as well as maintaining a presence at more traditional gay-friendly institutions of good taste like

galleries, theaters, and boy bars. Even the very definition of community has changed, as the virtual worlds of Myspace, Gay.com, blogs, and so on become de facto social networks.

Nor is it to say, in the wake of a slew of state constitutional amendments, that the road ahead is smooth. The point is, instead, that if sexual minorities are to muster and maintain the unity required to eliminate HIV as something to worry about, not to mention cementing their places in society legally, the paradigm shift to a new age must be embraced.

For unity will be needed. HIV may be under control in the United States, but it will take a better level of communication that exists now to eradicate it, and even more to understand how it has affected us. Today, in what could be called the urban, gay, Post-AIDS-Scare era, asking someone about his or her HIV status can still send a twinge down one's spine. Even for those accustomed to discussing it, HIV can be a touchy subject. The result is that many negative people have little idea how HIV affects those who live with it. They haven't set out to ignore the issue, but they don't have a convincing reason to invest emotionally trying to understand it.

Some even intend not to go there. As anyone who has perused M4M ads on craigslist can attest, UB2 ("I'm this way, you be too") is a commonly posted requirement meant to

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exclude potential partners of opposite serostatus (HIV-infection status). Some negative men wouldn't pursue an intimate relationship with someone they knew to be positive, and vice versa.

HIV poses a threat—physically—only to those who might come in intimate contact with it, which rules out most social situations. And then, safer sex practices (that are a good idea for many reasons) greatly reduce the chance of passing it on. Finally, a successful viral therapy regimen can make HIV undetectable and probably less readily transmitted. Obviously, testing positive is still a life-changing event, but wasting, skin cancers, and other syndromes that served as physical markers for a generation of men can be all but invisible today. So what's the big deal? Why does HIV make us so nervous?

There may be a certain peace of mind lost when knowingly performing a sexual act with someone of opposite serostatus. As a negative man, I know that sucking someone who is positive is supposed to be safe. I've done it, but in the back of my mind, consciously or not, I may feel that I'm on a slippery slope and HIV is waiting at the bottom. Using a condom to fuck is standard practice anyway, but when the rubber represents a degree of physical separation between me and someone I care about, that separation can seem almost hostile. I can only imagine switching places and knowing that there is a harmful virus

in my body that my partner is susceptible to. These worries represent the power of HIV that all our advances in scientific and social understanding cannot yet tame.

HIV is something that many communities—drug users, women minorities, and the continents of Africa and Asia, to name a few—have to contend with. It happened to spread quickly due to certain sexual practices common among gay men in the 1970s, but it would have made its way around eventually without that help. So how will the gay community, and those who have evolved from it, deal with HIV in the coming years? What obstacles will they—we—face? What can be learned from others in the same situation?

Whether or not HIV lives in your body, or in the bodies of your friends and family, your individual awareness of its impact will add to the sense of community awareness that is the virus' biggest enemy. A place to start might be the open forum called Get It Off Your Chest at 8 p.m. on March 29 at the LGBT Community Center. It is designed to evoke frank discussion in a charged atmosphere that still maintains respect and safety. It won't be a pity party; rather it's intended to be the beginning of a process to identify real shortcomings in how we communicate, and to form goals for creating some positive (pardon the pun) energy around HIV and AIDS.

What will the LGBTQQA community of the future look like?

It will depend on a climate that helps people feel safe to talk about their problems, failures and successes, remembering and celebrating that we're all human and so is to err.

Emil B. Friend graduated in 2005 with a journalism degree from the Pennsylvania State University. He now lives in San Francisco, where his interests range from the wonderful mysteries of queer theory to the potential ecologies of community gardening. He may be contacted at cerebralepicture@gmail.com.