

Death Into Life

By Fenton Johnson

BY MID-AFTERNOON the slanting sun is already fading from the windows. The light is dying, along with almost everything else at this time of year, although its death holds the promise of rebirth. The intertwining of death and life is something I have been given much cause to contemplate across a decade of helping friends greet their deaths.

A friend recently asked me, "How do you see H.I.V. as different from diseases like cancer?" His question spurred me to poke through my own cultural baggage, where I discovered a zippered pocket holding a deeply ingrained terror of sex and death.

By "terror" I don't mean ex-Catholic guilt — that's a whole different story. Rather I mean my culturally inherited fear of what cannot be quantified and recorded, comprehended and controlled.

Western culture, with its feet so firmly planted in Enlightenment rationalism, lives by the notion that everything can or will be explained. We are so practiced at ignoring the mystery in our lives that when we're brought face to face with it we can only try to control it through rational explanations, and then feel terror at their inadequacy.

Sex and death both make a mockery of our comfortable illusion of control. To engage them simultaneously, as confronting H.I.V. so

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often requires, is necessarily to forgo that illusion and to encounter naked the mystery that inhabits the heart of being.

Great art and profound spirituality grow from that mystery. Both seek to give it expression, not to control it but to acknowledge and honor its necessary place in our lives. This is a revelation that I would not have come to until much later in life — that I might not have come to at all — except for the lives and deaths of so many members of my adopted family of gay men.

All human beings are survivors, after all. We are all mourners on this mortal earth who daily choose the measure of our participation in the world's fate, which is to say its mortality, which is to say its grief. It's just that H.I.V. — with its extended incubation period, its prolonged illnesses, its often horrifying complications, its impact on close-knit neighborhoods and communities — is forcing gay men to acknowledge what our life- and youth-obsessed society prefers to deny.

"Write about the courage it takes to live in denial," a straight friend urged me. He meant, I suppose, the willpower required to live as if one had a long-term future when so many signs point to the contrary. His comment made me think about David Weissman's short film "Song from an Angel," in which Rodney Price, founder of the theater troupe Angels of Light, sings from his wheelchair, less than two weeks before his death, an original song entitled "I've Got Less Time Than You" ("If I look thinner/ Take me out to dinner/ 'Cause I've got less time than you, oh yeah/ I've got less time than you-oo-oo").

No denial there. How is it possible to deny an illness for which one takes medication every four hours? The wisest people I know, H.I.V.-positive or -negative, live not in denial but in acceptance — a state not of forgive and forget but of forgive and remember. The most difficult and necessary of the mourner's tasks are these contradictory imperatives: forgive and remember, accept and never shut up.

Memory and forgiveness lie at the heart of any community, for to live closely with others is to come to share their lives, including their virtues and their faults. I see the gay community groping toward this

The terror of AIDS connects the chain of being.

communal expression of forgiveness and remembrance.

This is what we all face, gay or straight, H.I.V.-positive or -negative: incorporating death into life, and replacing the myth of control with a reality that embraces love and grief, life and death.

In "My Own Country" the physician Abraham Verghese writes of his small-town AIDS practice: "My training had not prepared me to be this kind of doctor. We were trained in hospitals, not patients' homes; we were biased toward technological interventions . . . words like the 'soul,' the 'spirit,' were considered dirty words."

This is what I have been given by the ill and the dead: an appreciation of the soul, an understanding of the spirit. How pure these words are, how absent from our culture, how great is our responsibility to restore them — as writers, as artists, as vessels for the stories of our dead.

After more than a decade of encountering AIDS, I have come to believe passionately in the ways in which words — in this case, the names and stories of our dead — have the power to invoke among us the presence of those who, as Orthodox Jews would say, have traded the world of appearance for the world of truth.

Through invoking the names and stories of those we love, we engage a most essentially human quality. Human beings are the animals who remember and tell stories. We have been given awareness of the mystery of life and death, along with the widest range in which to express our praise and wonder and love and sorrow.

I'm afraid all this sounds too religious for an apostate gay liberal writer: Then I think how often we delegate to ministers and rabbis and priests our communal responsibility to think and speak about the mystery at the heart of all our lives. I think of the once-longstanding alliance, long broken, between the artist and the priest, and I think that it belongs to all of us — artists, priests, rememberers — to reclaim that alliance. Then I remember a story of someone gone from my life, and tell it to somebody else, and in the telling of that story take my proper and necessary place in the chain of being.

Russell Baker is on vacation.