

H E L P O U T

Healthy of mind and body

by Patrick Caplis, M.D.

Some lesbians and gay men appear to be quite healthy, others appear to be not so healthy. With other minorities one can attribute this somewhat to economic factors, and this is also probably the case for some gay individuals. But I tend to assume that as a group, our health problems are more related to our self-image. We as a minority have been taught to think of ourselves as second-class, and the prejudice is so all-pervasive that soon many of us learn to believe in our second-class status. Consciously or unconsciously, we tell ourselves that we are bad and don't deserve much of love or success or health. We learn to be self-destructive.

As a concept, health is subtle and complex. Physical and mental fitness are certainly aspects of health, but true health cannot be measured solely by your resting pulse rate nor by the degree of your inner sensitivity and spirituality. Health, whole, and holy all stem from the same root word in Sanskrit. When a person is healthy, the impossible becomes easy. We say that such people are able to perform miracles, and we worship them as artists and saints.

When I was a kid, I wasn't especially sick, but neither was I especially healthy. Like most of us, I experienced my health as something that happened to me rather than as a choice. I couldn't have known then that health is by no means an accident; and, I blindly assumed that health professionals were the people with the answers about health. These are bits and pieces of my story:

My mother was a nurse. She was also the family cook and a pretty good one, actually. My father liked meat so there was always plenty. There were gobs of potatoes (he was Irish), some vegetables, some enriched white bread with margarine, and usually desert. Mother had learned in her nurses' training that sugar is an excellent source of energy, especially good for growing youngsters. Unfortunately, she had not learned that sugar is irritating to the digestive tract, increases the urinary excretion of calcium, upsets the body's acid/alkaline balance, puts stress on the pancreas and decreases the ability of our white blood cells to gobble up bacteria. In her heart Mother wanted the best for her children, but unknowingly she was probably damaging our health.

When I was four years old, I was sexually molested. No one seems to remember except me — and my body. When I was in the first grade, they found out that I couldn't see so they put lenses in front of my eyes. They didn't seem very concerned about *why* I couldn't see. Perhaps I didn't *want* to see that

person who loved me but had abused me. And they didn't know back then about the possible correlation between high sugar intake and myopia (near-sightedness) in children. Looking back I sometimes wonder: Is it possible that my eye condition could have been treated differently or perhaps even prevented?

When I was seven, I started having severe allergy attacks every autumn. For two months every year, I sneezed, lost weight, felt awful. We went to our doctor, of course, and he prescribed antihistamines and belladonna alkaloids, which did, in fact, stop my sneezing but also created terrible congestion in my sinuses and made me drowsy all day. Eventually these pills didn't work for me anymore so our doctor gave me stronger pills, and then eventually still stronger pills. Several years later, I started having asthma attacks, so they gave me asthma medication.

There is some evidence now that pollen and other environmental allergies may be

perment, just another philosophical question. But then I found myself marching in the first Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade and meeting gay friends and living in a long-haired gay collective. Now being gay became synonymous with being Patrick. I felt warmly alive and radiantly myself.

I shared my youthful joy with Mother: she was upset. Homosexuality *was* mentioned in her medical texts, and what they said about it was not good. The books called it a serious mental disorder, and what was worse, the books said that mothers sometimes unknowingly cause this disease in their children. No one told Mother that being gay is a deeply personal life choice that a Soul makes, a journey of discovery about Femaleness and Maleness, a beautiful and totally valid sexual preference.

Like most children, I somehow managed to survive my childhood. In retrospect, I can see some of the probable causes of my unhappiness and my lack of health. I didn't have

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connected with certain food allergies, and these food allergies can sometimes result from feeding infants concentrated high-protein foods at too early an age. We know that medications can effectively suppress the symptoms of many diseases, but what if we were to focus more on the underlying *causes* of a particular condition? Health and disease are often a reflection of the way we choose to live. Perhaps doctors could be trained to help people to recognize these choices and understand how their lifestyle affects their health.

By the time I was sixteen, I was, by outward appearances, a calm and dutiful son, a hard-working paperboy, an honor student, a pious Catholic. But I was also a myopic, allergy-prone, skinny, sensitive, brainful and inwardly troubled youth. I knew something was rotten in the State of Michigan, but I didn't know it was Lake Erie. What was wrong? The old answers seemed not to work anymore. The bumper sticker read: QUESTION AUTHORITY.

After graduation, I attended a university well-suited to sensitive bespectacled young men seeking refuge from a war they hadn't created. During my third year of college, I had my first sexual encounters, mostly with other men. I was not scared about possibly being gay, confused and bumbling perhaps, but not scared. After all, by this time I was only alive from the neck north anyway so exploring gayness was initially just another life ex-

a very supportive relationship with my parents. I didn't eat very well really. I was a confirmed bookworm and didn't exercise enough. I didn't realize how much I could trust my body's own ability to heal itself, so I ended up seeing a lot of doctors who only did, I'm sure, what they thought was best for me. I have great sadness and anger around some of my early life experiences, but I offer these recollections not out of bitterness, but as a model for how *not* to do it — stay healthy, that is.

I believe it is possible to be relatively healthy in America, and also possible to be gay and healthy, but it is a difficult challenge for many of us. We as gay people must often endure extreme prejudice, not to mention our own self-doubts about the validity of our lifestyles. For many of us, our coming out experience is difficult, in some cases resulting in a loss of closeness with family and friends. Many of us suffer from a poor self-image and feel ashamed or frustrated about our gayness. Many of us are alcoholics or abuse drugs. Too many of us have committed suicide.

To be gay and healthy is not easy because each of us has experienced in some measure a denial of our bodies, a denial of our true potential for health and happiness, a denial of our own personal unique vision. And because of this denial, each of us in some measure experiences pain and sometimes "dis-ease." But we struggle to believe in ourselves, and we can offer each other support in many

ways. We can reach out and be family for each other. And our level of health is one measure of how we feel about ourselves, how well we treat ourselves, how much we know how to love ourselves.

My mother was a nurse, and I am a doctor. I know the statistics about doctors — lots of marriage break-ups, lots of alcohol abuse, lots of outwardly successful inwardly unhappy people. To be openly gay and healthy *and* a doctor sometimes seem an impossible combination. But my hope is that some of us will be able over time to dig down and root out the causes of our self-destructiveness, and then by offering enough support for each other within the gay community, some of us will succeed in realizing our dreams and goals, hopefully making it easier for those who follow after.

Can an openly gay person in America be successful, healthy and inwardly content? Fifty years ago it seemed an impossibility, but now we know better. Good luck to you on your Path, sisters and brothers.

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