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Wait just a minute

Are public sex and high-risk behaviors essential elements of gay male sexual expression?

by Paul Harris

In the past couple of years it seems that every gay writer who could even loosely describe himself as an "academic" has felt compelled to get into print to tell the rest of us how we should be leading our lives. Recently we have had a group called Sex Panic! come into existence. They have described Michelangelo Signorile, Gabriel Rotello and Larry Kramer as "neo-cons" and "turdz" with a venom reminiscent of the treatment of The Gang of Four in China back in the 1970s.

With all the smoke, charges, countercharges and bluster I think we have lost sight of an important issue: Today another 40 gay men will die of AIDS in the United States.

For those with better things to do than to sit down to read all the books and articles that have been published on this matter, let me bring you up to date. Some people such as Kramer, Signorile, Rotello and Andrew Sullivan have argued that gay men need to radically change their lifestyles.

Larry Kramer, blunt as always, said, "The whole culture has to change. We have created a culture that in fact murdered us, killed us. Why—you can't help but think if you've got any brains—don't people ever learn anything?"

Someone with brains, Kendall Thomas, a law professor at Columbia University, and cofounder of Sex Panic! responded by noting that "a culture doesn't kill people. The virus kills people."

I think Thomas is wrong. I believe, for example, that our society's homophobic culture has killed thousands of queer teenagers over the years who were filled with such self-hate that they committed suicide. The culture in which we are brought up and live clearly plays a large part in determining our actions and lifestyles.

The debate is not a simple one about how to contain a deadly virus. It is about how we as gay people choose to live our lives. For some in Sex Panic! a promiscuous sexual lifestyle is seen as a cornerstone of gay liberation, with its rejection of heterosexual society's supposed values. Tony Valenzuela, an activist/writer and sex worker who co-organized a one-day conference in San Diego for Sex Panic! says he wants to put sexual liberation back in our movement. (Read about the conference in stories on pages 10 and 11.) Sex Panic! has represented the so-called neo-cons as wanting to all but lead the gay population into the Rotary Club.

Sex Panic! argues that there has been an attack upon gay-male sex culture with the threats to bathhouses, back rooms in bars, and arrests in public bathrooms and parks.

Michael Warner, an English professor at Rutgers University, writes, "Among the most effective ways of oppressing people is through the colonization of their bodies, the stigmatizing of their desires, and the repression of their erotic energies. We believe continuing work on sexual liberation is crucial to social justice efforts."

Hang on a moment. Let's examine that. It would appear Warner is claiming that it is "crucial to social justice efforts" that gay men (or others)

be allowed to have sex in parks or fumble with each other in dark public restrooms. If that is his vision of liberation, I for one want no part of it.

Having said this, I believe that those who argue for the closure of private sex clubs and bathhouses do the cause of stopping the transmission of HIV a disservice. Sometime in the mid-1980s I interviewed Father Fred Tondalo, a priest in Fort Lauderdale who was involved in the founding of CenterOne, the local AIDS service organization. He argued pragmatically that the bathhouses should be left open, as it was a way of reaching gay men (who plainly intended to have sex no matter what) with condoms, lubricants and safer-sex literature.

The argument made sense to me then, and still does. I believe it is wrong to close bathhouses so long as they are properly regulated. Clearly condoms, lubricants and safer-sex education should be made available. If the means for safer sex are not available, I do not think the business

should get a license to operate. Frankly, any business owner irresponsible and stupid enough not to comply with such a simple stipulation deserves to be closed down. Whether people choose to avail themselves of the means to safer sex is, of course, their decision.

By the way, I want to remind you that about 40 gay men are going to die of AIDS today in the United States.

Some people believe that gay men and lesbians should seek to emulate the heterosexual ideal and settle with one person, live in a house with a white picket fence and have (or adopt 2.5) children. It may be news to some people, but only 20 percent of U.S. households conform to the supposed norm of the heterosexual nuclear family. While the instability of gay relationships is almost legendary, heterosexuals aren't doing too much better. Over 50 percent of straight marriages now end in divorce. Marriage and monogamy plainly do not suit everybody. For some it isn't even an ideal: They enjoy the freedom of being single and having multiple sexual partners. Although it may seem strange to some, not every gay man or lesbian wants a gay marriage, a joint mortgage and a cat.

I am fed up with people moralizing about other people's lives. It is none of my business whether someone has sex with 200 people next year or makes love with the same person 200 times. All I ask is that you practice safer sex.

Some people claim that after all these years it is too difficult to follow the safer-sex rules every time they make love. I ask you, does a diabetic stop taking his or her insulin or a hemophiliac his or her factor VIII because they are fed up with using them? Of course not. They realize that by doing certain simple things they can protect their lives. Is there any difference between that and safer sex?

By the way, today about 40 gay men died of AIDS in the United States.

Paul Harris is a nationally syndicated writer and a playwright.



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