

AIDS IS NOT GOD'S REVENGE

BY JANET WILLENER

A hundred year plague, the Black Death, spread unchecked through Europe between 1350-1450 CE. The bacterial infection vectored by the fleas of rats was not identified until the 1880s. Ignorance of the source of the infection caused the needless suffering and death of one-third to one-half of Europe's population. Medical science, unable to find a suitable cause, treatment or cure, attributed the plague to God, turning the matter over to the clergy who dutifully declared that the disease was in fact due to divine retribution. Having these "reasons" planted firmly in mind no one felt any responsibility to find the true cause and to eradicate the disease.

Several social phenomena ensued. Upon discovery of symptoms, previously devoted parents fled in panic, abandoning their children. Relatives and friends isolated themselves, some banding together in remote spa areas taking extraordinary care of their health. They wrote stories and pretty poetry to amuse themselves while their city dwelling cousins died by the millions. Others took the attitude of "eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we will die." Undertakers made a killing, so to speak, in the burial market. It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.

What would happen if a plague like Black Death occurred here?

Someone might start looking for a cause and a cure just as soon as the disease began to affect one or two famous celebrity people in their racial/ethnic/social group. The Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, would be consulted.

The issue of a vector (animal or insect carrier) would be considered. A "Typhoid Mary" prototype, originator of all diseases, would be identified and her case history studied and documented. (Mary, we will learn, entered this country illegally, has dark skin, speaks an unintelligible language and does not worship as we do.)

Infected persons would be placed in isolation wards. Their belongings would be burned. Misleading TV documentaries would be aired at prime time. Graphic skin lesions would be shown to the dinner-time audience.

Traditional, then alternative medicines would be tried. Some would be denied medical care because they either had no money, no insurance coverage or their HMO would disallow treatment.

Scientists in competing labs would begin working on a new treatment and/or a preventive vaccine.

Newly established experts on the subject would come out of the woodwork and into the limelight. They would do the talk show circuit. They would make book signing appearances on Oprah, Larry King Live and CNN.

Class distinctions would be made based on color, national origin or wealth.

Rules of the Disease would be established: "This disease only attacks those who are most deserving of it."

Fatalists would eat, drink and be merry and infect as many people they could before they died.

Tom Hanks would win a prestigious acting award for his sensitive portrayal of an infected victim.

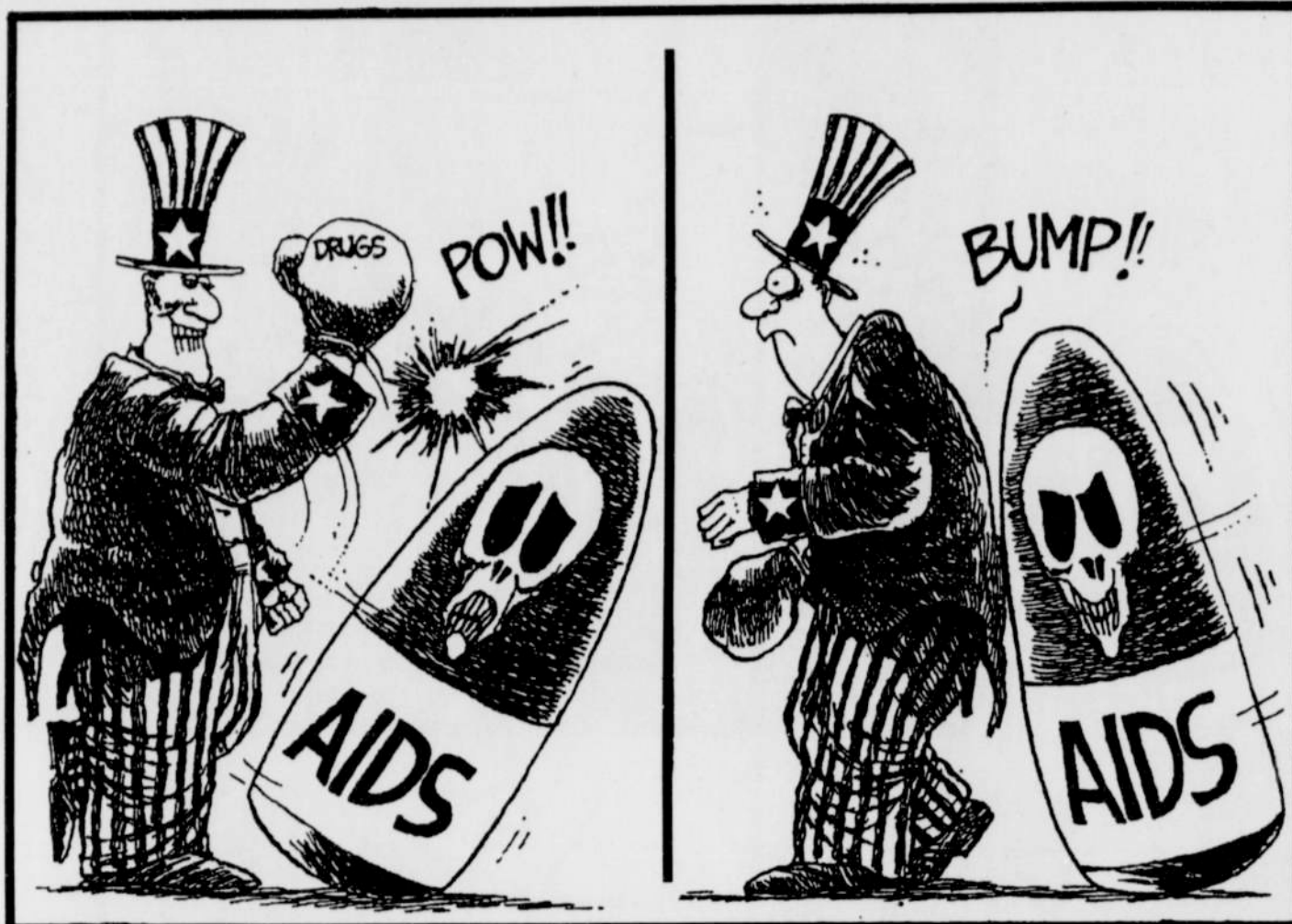
Infected or suspected children would be denied the right to attend public school. Parents would abandon their children in hospitals or drop them off at Grandma's indefinitely. Adult children would be disinherited. Relatives of victims would move away to more forgiving climes and take exotic tonics to protect themselves.

Clergy would announce from their pulpits and on national TV that, "Gawd himself has willed this disgusting fatal disease to befall the unrepentant sinners."

A plague similar in magnitude to Black Death careened into this country during the early 1980s. The first case of AIDS had been documented in 1949, in the United States, when a visiting African man died of mysterious causes. He was no one significant, only one foreign black man.

Lack of concern and ignorance of the causes of transmission of the disease continued until the 1980s. Then, suddenly in large numbers, previously healthy white men who frequented bathhouses in New York and San Francisco began dying rather quickly from a number of mysterious symptoms. Suggestion was made by medical authorities that there might be a connection between the symptoms of AIDS and homosexual activity.

Unwilling to alter their behavior some homosexuals dismissed the thought and took an eat, drink and be merry attitude. Parents abandoned their adult children. Relatives



GARY MARKSTEIN

isolated themselves and turned to alternative medicine for treatment and prevention.

As traditional medical practices failed to save lives they declared the fault lay with God in this matter, and sure enough the clergy confirmed their suspicion. The clergy announced that AIDS was indeed divine retribution for those who sinned against nature.

Almost as an incidental afterthought, intravenous drug users and recipients of blood transfusions were added to the list of the usual suspects, as they became helpless hopeless casualties.

By the time a very few clear thinking individuals came up with a (virus) cause and a (antivirus) solution the modern day plague of AIDS was full blown.

After the first wave of victims died a laissez faire spirit set in: "It's just happening to *homos* and *druggies* and *black people*, so it doesn't concern me," a person may say. Or another might add, "I don't personally know anyone who has died of AIDS, so maybe it isn't as bad as they say."

The truth is that today 1 in 10 white, Anglo-Saxon, Christian, heterosexual men, women and children are affected by AIDS. Newborn infants in every ethnic group have AIDS. Celibate "holy" nuns have AIDS. Your own sweet silver-haired Grandmother who had a blood transfusion with her hip replacement surgery probably has AIDS.

Whole populations in Africa have been completely wiped out by the disease. AIDS has orphaned thousands of little children in Eurasia and infected children have been stockpiled in poorly equipped makeshift orphanages.

In this country thousands of once hoped-for and beloved sons and daughters have become socially isolated, disowned by parents and relatives and fired from their jobs.

A billions-of-dollars drug industry has developed with competing traditional versus alternative drug therapies being sold to victims and their caregivers. Many of these so-called cures kill.

Unlike the victims of the plague of Black Death, AIDS victims today have a known cause and can have an effective program of treatment with a positive lasting outcome. "Living with AIDS" is not just a trite slogan; it is a strong probability. We have conquered the once much feared smallpox, polio and pneumonia. It is only a matter of time (and money) before AIDS researchers will reward the world with a dependable lasting cure. However, it seems the human condition is rife with willful ignorance and religious superstitions that will continue for ageless times to come. Ignorance and indifference about AIDS continues "right here in River City!"

All of the above noted actions and reactions have already occurred with the AIDS epidemic of 1980 to 2001. If you try to tell me it has always been this way and it always will be, or that human nature with all its foibles will never change one iota from what it has been since the beginning of time, you will hear me scream loud and clear: "Stop the world! I want to get off!"

Must the ignorance and bigotry of the Dark Ages continue? Do you know about the facts about AIDS? Do you know the risks of contracting AIDS? Do you know about prevention and treatment? Has your indifference deeply hurt someone who is affected by the disease?

I have personally cared about and cared for a child who has lived with AIDS for more than 20 years. I thank my loving and forgiving God daily for the rich and rewarding time we have enjoyed together. But it has been a very long and lonely road.

Janet Willener lives in Seaside. She wrote this article to commemorate International AIDS Day on December 1.

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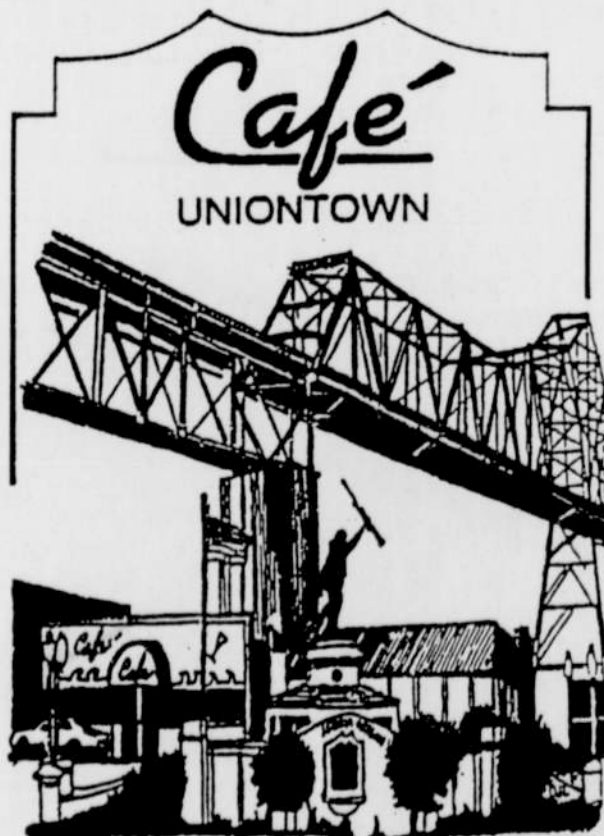
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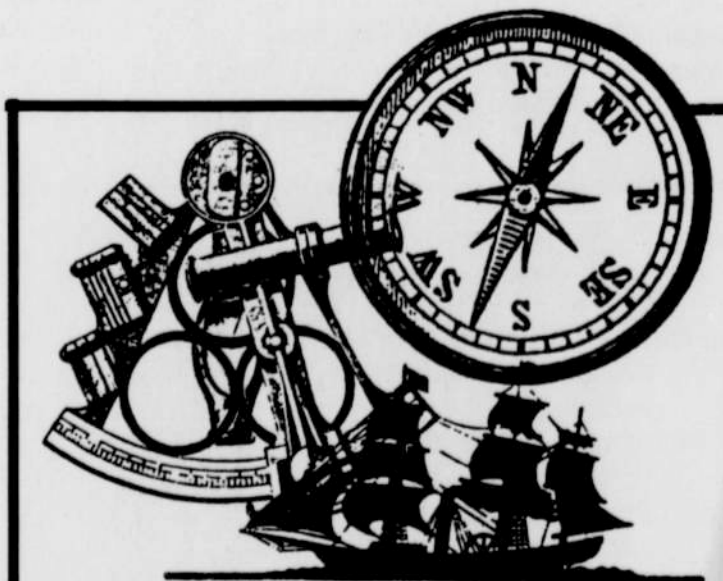
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