The Great Sex Debate

Must gay men choose between monogamy and extinction?

June 1, 1997 By Gabriel Rotello and Introduction by Walter Armstrong

This is the question Gabriel Rotello asks in his bold new book, Sexual Ecology: AIDS and the Destiny of Gay Men (Dutton). His answer? An urgent, unconditional yes. Rotello, a columnist at the former New York Newsday, delivers a message that no one wants to hear. At a moment high on “end of AIDS” hope, he warns that the epidemic is more than ever an emergency: A second wave of infections is surging through the blood of gay men; without radically reforming our sexual desires, AIDS will drown bathhouse and bedroom alike. And turning ecological theory into explosive practice, Rotello cofounded Gay and Lesbian HIV Prevention Activists (GLHPA), which called on the cops to close sex clubs as a way to promote protected sex. POZ asked three activists at AIDS ground zero since 1981 to respond to Rotello’s challenge.

[Excerpt]

At any given moment a considerable portion of the gay male population is having a considerable amount of unprotected sex, and all the education in the world does not seem to be able to change that. This is where ecological thinking can make all the difference. Because in fact, HIV transmission between casual partners is not just a function of occassional unsafe sex, but of occassional unsafe sex multiplied by number of partners. And since gay men are unable to reduce their built-in level of occassional unsafe sex to zero, the other available option is to reduce the other aspects of sexual life that make those occassional lapses so dangerous. Primarily the overall number of partners.

This has been a major missing ingredient in the safer-sex equation so far. The condom code seeks to curtail transmission by lowering the level of infectivity per sexual contact, but it ignores the enormous role played by the contact rate itself. More than ignores it, denies it, since a core tenet of the condom code is the idea that so long as everyone uses condoms all the time there is no need to lower the contact rate. People have clung tenaciously to the supposition that the contact rate is irrelevant, but the irrationality of this position can no longer be denied. Lowering the contact rate alone is no substitute for condom use, but lowering it while maintaining a high level of condom use would be likely to lead to a significant reduction in transmission. Therefore, one of the most important additions to safer sex when it comes to casual partners is to reduce them. Preferably to one at a time.
The gay world may experience a general cleavage between those who adopt a lifestyle of sexual restraint and those who drift farther into an acceptance of homosexuality as inevitably disease and death-ridden. How this will affect AIDS organizations and...prevention, and which part of the community will be seen...as representing the “average” gay male, remains to be seen. But if such an “us versus them” cleavage takes place, the advocates of sexual freedom will probably be the more vocal faction. For one thing, those who choose to withdraw from the sexual fast lane and settle down tend, as a rule, to be less outspoken than self-proclaimed sex radicals. For another, the values espoused by those who choose a life of sexual moderation and monogamy expose them to charges of internalized homophobia and “sex negativity.” As a result, those who argue against ’70s values can easily be pegged as being anti-gay, and since this is a label no gay person relishes, such people would be more likely to keep their opinions to themselves. So a possible result of such an internal backlash is the withdrawal of the most ecologically responsible elements of the gay world from the main stage of gay life.

Given the overall progress of science and technology, a day may someday dawn when microbial illness will be an artifact of the past, and when that day arrives the behaviors that cause disaster today will no longer be harmful. In that sense, the “moralistic” idea that nature will always punish sexual promiscuity...does not seem likely to stand the test of time. When the last microbe is tamed...people will be free to decide how to behave based on ethical and social considerations, not epidemiological ones.

All this is almost irrelevant right now. Indeed, at the moment the microbes seem to be winning...Someday homosexual men will be able to behave as gay men did in the ’70s, and do so without promulgating epidemics. When that day dawns it will be up to that generation to decide how to behave, and they may just decide that such behaviors, being without biological harm, are justifiable, moral and rewarding. Someone may then pick up the yellowed pages of this book and wonder what the fuss was all about.