

A Revolutionary Act

This essay is a commemoration and appreciation that I can celebrate reaching the cusp of my 20th year of life with HIV. Feeling as healthy as I do and having AIDS is a mixed blessing, of course. I love being as healthy as I am. I have not yet lost the thrill of living that many of us lose long before we die. I feel fully immersed in the stream and flow of life. In particular, I love the physicality—the carnal aspect of living.

I love being in my body. I am learning to worship my body without shame or apology. It is not just a mere vessel for me. While it is not my essence, it is certainly an essential part of me. I have got to love it. Every day, the HIV that lives within me threatens to slowly and imperceptibly nest and divide to weaken and kill this body of mine. I will not let that happen.

And if viruses possess some form of intelligence, as some admiring virologists suggest, then I suspect that this virus, my virus, understands that. We have at least reached an agreement, if not an impasse. I cannot get rid of it, and it can't get rid of me. We have a very dysfunctional mutual respect for each other.

But because I have been spared many of the severe manifestations of this disease, I still have to remind myself to remain vigilant—to get my blood work done, to call and find out what my viral load and T-cell counts are, to continue to set up appointments with my case manager. My long-term wellness has made such precautions seem less urgent, but I know better. I know that the insurgent force that lives within my territories is clever, with inexhaustible patience and stealth as its greatest weapon. I must not fall asleep on my own watch. I do things to ensure my sur-

vival, informed by both intelligence and, far more frequently as of late, instinct.

For instance, I love my body quite tenaciously. Remember Baby Suggs's soul-stirring sermon on the mount from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, in which she admonished black people to never ignore their flesh? "Love it," she commanded. "Yonder," she warned, "they do not love your flesh."

Well, I have a new understanding for this these days. I indulge my body in certain disciplines and certain pleasures. To eat dessert, to sleep late, to run, to exercise, to stretch, to feel the weight that I push against or pull upon, to inhale, to drink, to lick, to suck, to sweat, to smell, to exhale, to touch, to feel ... this is to Live. This is life in the body. Each body is as divine and as unique as the color Purple, and I think it "pisses God off" for us to dwell in our body all the live-long day and not see this. I find myself sometimes smelling myself between my own legs. I taste the salt of my own tears. I touch the viscous tissue of my own pungent cum. I listen to the sound and hug the abrupt quake of my own laughter. This is what I will recall when those angels ask me about the beauty of it all. What was it like down here, below.

If my focus is highly erotic, it is because the erotic, like nothing else, reminds me of the animal that I am. I am still discovering the differences between the erotic and the sexual. During a recent men's retreat, I met a kind and honest brother who asked to spend the night with me without having sex. I agreed, but as there was a mutual attraction, I was afraid that I would not be able to resist the temptation of his body laid up next to mine. How fortunate then that I managed to refrain from any sexual touch and still hold and be held by him in a manner that left me more naked than many of my sexual encounters. I felt safe and loved in the warm blanket of his body. I felt no lack or regret, and even though I was excited by his touch, I felt no need to do anything other than be touched. I never felt more alive or fully open.

I once believed that the erotic and the sexual were one and the same, and that anything considered erotic must serve as a prelude, an invitation, to the inevitable sexual act. I believed that without

the all-important consummation, anything erotic was in and of itself a worthless tease, a ruse not worth getting hot and bothered about. In this line of thinking, erotic things, after all, are the appetizers that whet our appetites for the main course, sex. And sex, then, means intercourse; in the homosexual world, it specifically means anal penetration. Anything else would then be foreplay, and sex must culminate in ejaculation. Somebody has to come, or the deed will be left undone.

My first boyfriend and I often enjoyed hours of delicious sex, sometimes without penetration or climax; when I shared this with friends, several of them claimed that this was not “real sex.” Our culture, true to its Judeo-Christian roots, enforces a thick, dark line between sexuality and spirituality. It also reduces the erotic to serve the singular agenda of intercourse.

I believe that one of the reasons why homosexuals are so feared and reviled is because our sexuality is often not legitimized by procreation, marriage, or monogamy. The values that define sexual pleasure outside of such constructs as base and immoral are the same values that, in these United States, frame the bodies of women, black and brown people, and gays as terrains of unbridled desire and decadence. These bodies must be covered because they are profane; sanitized because they are hopelessly dirty; punished or imprisoned because they are criminal; and lynched, raped, mutilated, or otherwise destroyed because they are evil and threaten to subvert the dominance of white men or sully the purity of white women. When the voluptuous Janet Jackson flashed her breast before millions, it was a transgression for which she was swiftly punished. When a virile, dark-skinned 17-year-old named Marcus Dixon had sex with a 16-year-old white girl in Rome, Georgia, it was a transgression for which he was speedily imprisoned. When I perform fellatio on another man and then enjoy passionate sex with him way into the midnight hour, it is a transgression for which I could be consigned to eternal damnation, or at least be dispatched from this life like our young sister, Sakia Gunn, a 15-year-old murdered because she rejected the advances of a man by declaring that she was a lesbian.

Since I am revealed as an outlaw by my skin and my sexuality,

it is crucial that I celebrate my day-to-day survival in a land that rejects me as if I were an infection it has discovered and hopes to wipe out. But I know that I belong here, triple offender though I may be; despite the odds, I have managed to survive here. It is my birthright “bought and paid for” by my African ancestors and their American progeny, as well as my homosexual forebears. I am compelled to celebrate those who endured and those who perished so it would be considerably more difficult (though not impossible) for me to be killed or jailed for eyeballing a white woman or balling a man of any color.

Black men who love men tend to carry heavy loads of shame that are often masked by addictions and distorted self-images. We are usually served by well-intentioned organizations that don't have a clue about how we see ourselves and where our power and resiliency lies—that we are not merely walking pathologies to be saved by catchy messages with hip-hop soundtracks or mudcloth graphics. How do we reach the sensual salvation we seek when we are forced to love on the “minefield” described by the brilliant Charles Stephens in his contribution to the seminal anthology *Think Again*? It is, I think, an unanswerable question, and yet we must ask it.

One of the most powerful ways for me to exalt the improbable triumph of drawing breath is to fully embrace my own body, and to kiss and trace every warrior mark, whether or not it was earned or deserved. As a teenager, I often felt embarrassed by my desires and what or who—either innocently or deliberately—aroused them. I did not wait to relinquish that shame before I started having sex with men. But no paramour, however skilled or compassionate, could hope to love away the stains ingrained beneath my skin. This is my work, and I am so commissioned for life.

Shortly after I discovered that I had been infected, there came a time when sex was no longer sexy to me. After all, it was the very thing that got me into this mess. I was afraid to pee, much less have sex. I was so preoccupied with the fear of infecting someone, or someone finding out, or not being able to get hard, that the first time I tried, I found I could not perform. Well, I met this one

brother who told me that he was HIV positive as well. And we did it. And it was good. It was so good that the morning after, I prepared for him an exquisite breakfast. And after he left, I took the day off so I could take time to reflect on the experience. I didn't want to let go just yet of what had just happened and act as if nothing had changed. I wanted to savor it. I was not in love. I do not even remember his name. But I do remember that he gave me something precious. He reminded me of my right to life, to a corporeal, sexual life.

My flesh. I have got to love it. "Do not forget to love your flesh. Just love it."

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