

AIDS & Hunger

In the course of the AIDS crisis, I have seen and heard many things that now no longer shock me. I can calmly sit through graphic descriptions of chronic diarrhea, brain biopsies and infected Hickman catheters. I can hold a dish while someone vomits into it, and I can watch people scream in pain as they try to stand, all without batting an eye. Yet I will never understand nor tolerate the acceptance of hunger and malnutrition as a way of life for people living with AIDS.

The essence of my acceptance of the tribulations of AIDS is due to its incorporation into my everyday life; it only became bearable when I began to confront it and when I began to socialize with people who did the same. I have gone into the streets with my friends and demanded acceptance, housing, and better medical care. I have attended hundreds of meetings, talked endlessly on the phone and in my home about the issues. Yet I cannot understand how activists seem to be able to forget that people with AIDS are often hungry.

Recently, pondering a friend's weight loss with his lover, I asked if it wasn't time to see a doctor about the problem.

"Well," he deferred, "I don't think..."

"You know," I insisted, "I think that it

is really time that you see the doctor about this."

"That's not it...it's..."

"It's what?"

"Well...we don't always...have enough to eat."

That's when the blood rushed to my face.

"What do you mean 'You don't always have enough to eat?'"

Then I heard the long, sordid tale about not being eligible for food stamps. How they are often too sick to travel all over Boston to the various once-a-week-see-we-are-doing-something-about-this-dinners at various social service agencies and churches. How the Catholics really don't want to give you food unless you have a herd of children. How the Protestant churches are more generous with food handouts, but what with all the people being denied public assistance, the existing food banks are already overtaxed.

That's when my ears started pounding.

Another example is from a recent talk I was having with the care provider for a friend who died this Spring. During the conversation, he told me that one point Doug had been too sick to feed himself.

"You mean he didn't have enough money to buy food?" I asked.

"No, he had plenty of money and

food, he just didn't have the strength to cook it."

"Why didn't he tell anyone about this?"

"I don't know."

That is when the blood rushes to my face.

"And what about his brother? Wasn't he living there?"

"Well, yes, but you know he's always been a little bit of a flake."

"What do you mean, 'a flake'?"

Pounding ears time.

"Well, he thought that Doug's weight loss was just because of AIDS. He didn't realize that he hadn't been eating."

In my mind, that is right up there with people who take naps on railroad tracks.

Why do we demand housing and treatment, but speak in hushed tones about not having enough to eat? Why don't we realize the futility of putting drugs into malnourished bodies? Unlike housing and health care, maybe hunger is not a popular issue and won't catch the public imagination. Maybe folks need to learn that, just as the elderly couple carefully reading labels in the pet food aisle may not be concerned about Fido's nutrition, the thin young man standing next to them may not be concerned about Fido either. ▲



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