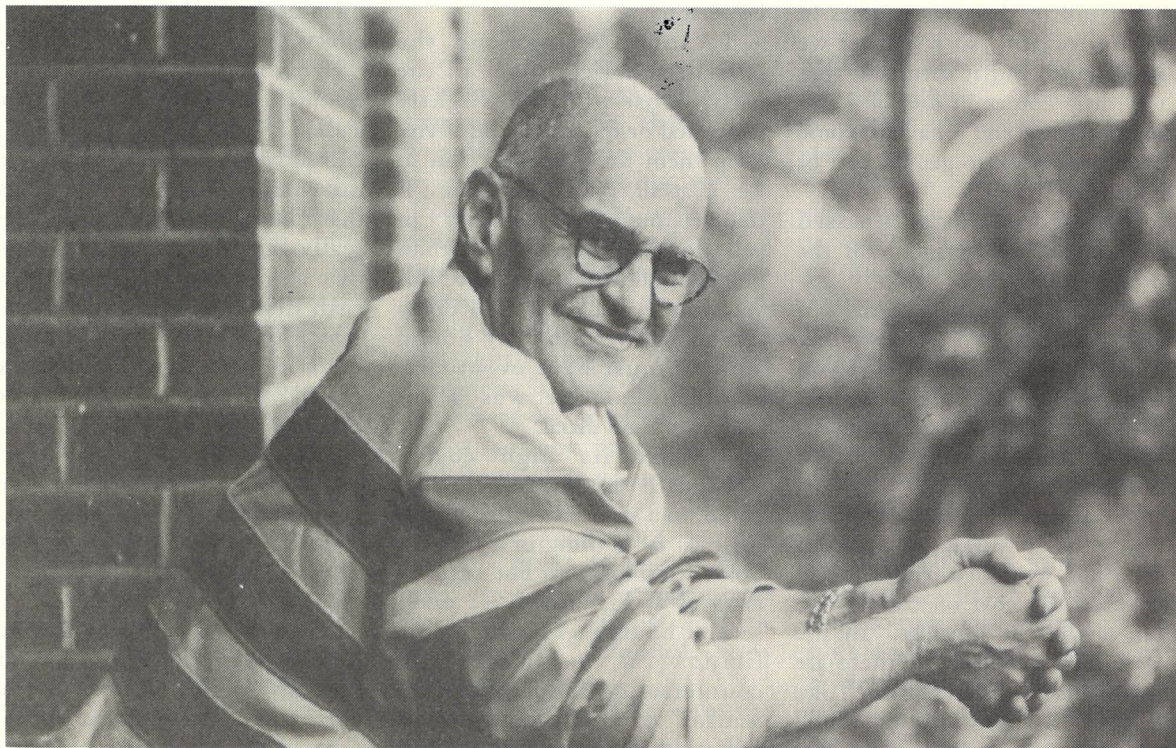


Larry Kramer



Larry Kramer needs no introduction. But for those of you who are just tuning in, Larry is the co-founder of Gay Men's Health Crisis, the founder of ACT UP, an author, playwright, screenwriter, and quite simply the most tireless activist we know. His views may be controversial, but his honesty and dedication are beyond dispute. We are all in his debt.

Without further ado—Larry's thoughts, as expressed in a conversation with your humpy editor on October 11, 1994.

What is the state of AIDS activism in America today, and also in particular here in New York? Out in California it's sometimes hard to keep up with what's been going on in New York, and whereas ACT UP was very much in the public eye five years or so ago we don't see so much activism nowadays.

■ If you don't see it, it isn't happening. And I think we're out of touch with what's going on on the west coast. Most of the contact we have here is limited to dealing with Marty Delaney, who as far as we can see is the only one doing anything effective anywhere. I don't know what AIDS activism is going on. I think we're at the lowest point possible. ACT UP here is for all intent and purposes useless if not dead; even though a few straggly souls meet every week, they're very ineffective.

■ The only group that's going on is TAG, Treatment Action Group, which as far as I'm concerned is a bunch of idiot kids who have turned themselves into fascists, and who have wrought a great amount of damage. It's an indication of the huge void in AIDS activism that they were able to march right in and do their damage and get away with it without any kind of opposition from anybody really except Marty and myself, and mostly Marty because I've been away.

■ I don't know what ACT UPs elsewhere are like; the one in Paris I am told is probably the only healthy chapter with a large membership that exists anywhere in the world. I get calls from cities around the country, from the odd member in Kansas City or Maine or wherever, but one gets the sense that there are not many people doing any of this.

■ I think as far as the government is concerned, the people in AIDS research and AIDS policy pretty much deal exclusively with TAG, which is why TAG has been able to get away with literally knifing us all in the back. It's a very sorry state. The AIDS organizations that I know of, APLA and GMHC have been as cowardly as ever in forcing policy decisions anywhere, either on the [federal] government or local government. Sometimes I get in such despair that I don't know what use any of these organizations are, either AIDS activist organizations or AIDS service organizations. I think we'd be better off without any of them. The services that they perform, taking care of sick people, should and would've been done if they didn't exist by the state anyway. What have they given us? We're in terrible terrible straits.

[Former Surgeon General C. Everett] Koop is going around now making speeches, saying there's never going to be a cure for AIDS—it's in the Advocate this week. There's never going to be a cure so all we can do is education. Well, education's a crock of shit. There's plenty of studies that show that education simply doesn't work.

Could you be a little more specific about what mistakes you feel TAG made, if for no other reason so others could avoid making similar mistakes in the future?

I'll be happy to. It started out when the new administration came into office. They were able to get Senator Kennedy's office and your California senators and representatives who deal with AIDS to pass what's called the NIH reauthorization bill, which in effect took all the research power away from the people who were in fact doing it, like [Dr. Anthony] Fauci, and established a new office, called the Office of AIDS research, OAR. All that it did was create yet another bureaucracy when they had plenty of bureaucracy already. If anything like that was going to work, Marty and I both felt that it had to be set up outside of the NIH and given emergency powers.

What in fact has happened is that they've appointed a man, Dr. William Paul, to head the OAR, and Dr. Paul who's a very nice man is also a great wimp, he's had fifty million dollars for over a year, he hasn't spent a dime of it. TAG helped choose him, TAG helped put him in office, TAG supports him, and we have AIDS research at a standstill.

Similarly, this has brought Dr. Harold Varmis to be the new head of the NIH, and Dr. Harold Varmis couldn't care less about AIDS. As far as AIDS research is concerned we were better off under George Bush. Another thing TAG has done is they've decided that the whole thing we fought for for so long which was getting drugs quickly and speedily is now suspect, and that and we should now have trials that last five, six, seven years like they had before we came in, and that drugs should be tested endlessly in what are called large simple trials, and everything we fought for should be thrown out the window. Even Dr. Krim has said they're out of their fucking minds, and so TAG has backed down off all that.

TAG represents the height of ludicrousness where you have literally seventeen and eighteen year old kids who are acting like doctors and telling us what we

should do in terms of treatment, and I'm sorry, AIDS activism is about self-empowerment, but it's not about idiots running the store, and that's what TAG is as far as I can see.

What you have is government officials thinking that TAG represents the gay community or represents the AIDS community. So people in Donna Shalala's office like Patsy Fleming, who is the acting AIDS czar think that TAG speaks for everybody, so they do what TAG tells them, and none of the AIDS organizations have been there saying no, these people don't speak for us. Marty's been the only one out there with the guts to do it.

I don't know what you all think of Marty in California, but he's a gigantic hero to me, he's indefatigable, he's the only one who's there every minute on every issue, and he's got better connections in Washington than anybody else. And he's the only one who's reasonably sane.

Every activist has his or her own personal ethics regarding what kind of actions are appropriate. For example some people in the anti-abortion movement would feel it's okay to shoot abortion doctors whereas others might not. I wanted to know what your own personal sense is of where to draw the line.

Well, that's a loaded question. What I wouldn't mind seeing being done and what I'm capable of doing myself aren't necessarily the same thing. It comes down to the fact that we are being murdered, and we are being murdered intentionally, and in my book that equals genocide. So one man's line is not another man's line in terms of how you respond to all of that.

I wish to hell there were some people out there courageous and crazy enough to go out there and throw bombs or burn buildings, or put a mark on Jesse Helms, or whatever. But for whatever reason we don't represent a population that's in any way capable of doing that.

My favorite story about all this is: the biggest demonstration ACT UP ever had in New York was outside City Hall when Koch was mayor, and we had maybe five to seven thousand people in a city with a gay population approaching a million people. That's all we could get. It was a lively demonstration, but a reporter from Brazil came over to me, a woman, and she said, "This is the best you got? In my country

when they raise the bus fare, the people burn the buses." And that's always stayed in my mind.

We can't even burn anybody in effigy. We are such good little boys and girls when it comes to how we are allowing the world to treat us, and I—you're talking to somebody who is well educated, who went to Yale—you're not talking to a crazy. I have been involved in AIDS activism, in AIDS something-or-other since 1981 and I am telling you, one government after another is murdering us. This is intentional. I've written books about it, there's a new edition of *Reports From The Holocaust* coming out that's 150 pages longer than the other edition that goes into this endlessly, and yet they are able to get away with it because we allow it.

So how do you draw a line? I don't know. I am not capable myself of taking a gun and shooting somebody, not even as an undercover vigilante—but I wish to fuck I was capable of it. And I keep saying I hope there's somebody out there who is.

Your criticism—and DPN's as well for that matter—can be very scathing and personal. We've had to make tough decisions from time to time, everyone we criticize has good points and bad points, as we all do. On some occasions I've personally regretted being too harsh, and I wonder if you've ever had that feeling as well.

I guess the shortest answer is no. I'm sure at some point I may have said things about somebody that I was too harsh about, but I think by and large I've called the shots correctly and as honestly as I knew how. And when somebody who I've called names has in fact redeemed himself or herself in my eyes, anyway—which are the only eyes I care about—I have reversed myself. I called Fauci a murderer; Fauci, as far as I'm concerned did a major, major turnaround and became one of my heroes, and I said so.

You've probably had more experience saying those sorts of things to someone's face than I have, or in some way having it get back to you, and I was wondering how that works when you're so thoroughly negative or scathing in a criticism of someone. How do people take that?

It's harder to do that when you know them. I think one of the biggest mistakes AIDS activists made was going inside and becoming a part of the system so to speak, joining committees and all, because it's harder to be harsh on people when you actually sit there and

work with them all the time on a personal level. On the other hand, I've always had high standards even before AIDS, and I've suffered fools badly, so it's not difficult for me to say to somebody you're simply not doing a good enough job.

But how do people take it? DPN never gets enough feedback.

How do they take it? I don't know how they take it. I think bureaucrats in some funny way have such a masochistic streak as part of their being, that they take it and sort of laugh about it and shrug it off. In the meantime it makes them burrow more into the ground. It doesn't make them angry, I'll tell you that. One would like them to get angry, because I think when people get angry they're apt to get off their asses more.

They can also punish you. There's no question that Louis Sullivan, when he was Secretary of Health and Human Services, simply turned his back on AIDS because of the treatment he received at the San Francisco AIDS conference from the activists, when he was booed for his entire speech.

The New York Times can punish you, and indeed Max Frankel who was the editor said that's exactly what would happen if I and others kept on their backs with such vitriol and constant pressure, that in the end the paper would either not write about it or would ignore writing about it. He wasn't talking about any corporate policy, he was talking about individual reporters, writers—why should they write about it if they're going to get kiboshed? And as horrible as it is, he was right. So that's the danger of calling the truth as you see it. The truth is very dangerous, it's real dynamite. But that doesn't mean you should stop.

In your play The Destiny Of Me, Dr. Anthony Della Vida is remarkably tolerant of Ned, he's treating him and is cordial despite all the nasty things Ned said about him. Was this consistent with your experience?

It's no secret he's Fauci, and he came to opening night. What I was trying to dramatize in that relationship in the play is the confusing uncertainties of what to do and how to proceed, all the things you're asking me questions about.

The leading character Ned Weeks is in the hospital at the NIH, and ACT UP is having a demonstration outside. Number one, Ned Weeks didn't know that

they were having a demonstration outside, and number two, he doesn't want to join them because he's not sure that they've been very effective. And I think that the parallel is made with this experimental treatment that Fauci's trying to whip up too, he's trying, and not proving effective either. What do you do? What's next?

I guess my relationship with Fauci is probably as complicated as any relationship I've ever had. Part of me still gets very angry at him, both publicly and privately, and part of me is genuinely fond of him, and part of me happens to think that he's the best there is right now. I know that—that's not an opinion, that's a fact. I suspect he's put up with more, and been more available to the interaction than anybody else we've had down there. He's been the lightning rod that everything's focused on. And that's good and bad.

It's interesting that we have for instance Broder, who's head of the National Cancer Institute, or Varmis, who's head of the whole fucking place—we're not after them at all. Sam Broder has been just grotesquely bad, he's the one who gave us AZT, and that was the last thing he's done, and he's got more money for research than NIAID has. Why aren't we going after Broder? A lot of it had to do with personality, Broder withdrew, he's hiding, Tony's out there, Tony goes to the meetings, Tony is willing to meet with the kids and the guys, so he's been more willing to serve as this conductor. Interesting.

And look at the politicians who got all the shit. Daniel Patrick Moynihan gets away scot free, and he's got as bad a record on AIDS as Jesse Helms does and yet he's the liberal's poster boy.

You learn a lot about the ways of the world, and none of it's very nice. That's the sad thing, I guess. That's what keeps you tough, in a way. In the end you realize that on a certain level, the world is just really a pile of shit—government, bureaucracy, elected officials, the system. Jonathan Swift said something like "Man is fine, it's Tom, Dick and Harry that I hate." I've not seen much to make me proud of being a human being in all this time. But strangely enough, I'm a happy person, I have a great boyfriend, and a nice life.

In writing about your own test results, you write "life has become exceptionally more precious, and ironically I'm quite happy." What were your thoughts about

discussing your own HIV status publicly—how important was it for you to set that example?

It's a complicated issue for a lot of people. I guess I've just been so outspoken and in your face about everything that it would've been hypocritical if I hadn't been forthright about this. I think everybody saying what they are defuses it a lot more for everyone. It's like not telling people you're gay; it indicates that you're ashamed. I'm not ashamed to be HIV-positive.

I have a problem with another issue which is complicated morally for me, which is I'm identified in lots of places for having AIDS, which I don't, and it's hard to write and correct them and say I don't have AIDS without sounding like I'm saying "God forbid that you should say that awful thing about me." That's not why I do it, I just don't think it's fair to the people who do have AIDS for people to think that I do. It's as if I'm trying to get sympathy in the world's eyes from something that isn't true.

You and others have taken gay people to task for the way we treat one another, for the lack of love. What is your vision of how gay people should treat each other?

I think everyone's capable of great and wonderful love, and I think everybody wants that. I didn't say we were incapable of love, I just think we went through many years of for want of a better description sexual experimentation that in the end turned out to backfire against us. I don't think if you look at it, it should be surprising that it did backfire.

Backfire in the sense of health issues, or socially as well?

Both. I have always found it very difficult to comprehend, that part of the gay movement, then or now, which insists on extolling the virtue of rampant—I hate the word promiscuity, because it's so loaded—rampant sex. That is not to say that persons can't have more than one partner, but we were really like kids in the candy store here.

I just think it's sad—and this is a moral thing, I'm not going to deny that I'm moral about it—I think it's sad that so much of the energy in this wonderful community had to go to sex, to the exclusion of everything else, to the exclusion of building a political movement, fighting for rights for gay men and lesbians, getting and maintaining power in the political process. Would that the gay political

movement had available to it the brains and the caliber of professional people fighting to establish this movement who would go off to the baths.

Monk magazine interviewed us a few months ago, and they asked us about our sense of spirituality. DPN's been pretty critical of crystals, karma, and other such stuff, and they wanted to know what we thought was spiritual. (I had a lot to say about that, but for some reason not a word of what we talked about in the interview ever made it into their magazine.)

I haven't read much from you on that score; your plays are so personal, but they don't deal much with spirituality or religion. Is that because it isn't important to you, because you think the issue is too divisive, or ... ?

Everybody's got their own definition about what spirituality is. I'm not a very religious or spiritual person, I don't believe in God, which may or may not have anything to do with spirituality. I often think that we do live after death, that seems to be something that I find personally comforting. I don't know that I think about it that much, but my lover David has broadened my views a little about this. My basic problem with spirituality which goes counter to what I'm trying to do politically is that I think that there's an element of spirituality which says, in effect, it was meant to be.

A kind of fatalism.

Yeah. And I just can't accept that, I mean I think things can be changed, and that's what has made me so angry about government, about AIDS research, whatever. I will not sit by and allow people to get away with murder, so to speak, whether it was meant to be or not. And I think that for a lot of people, that keeps them from being activists, keeps them from getting involved in the political system, it keeps them from challenging the status quo. It's a hard issue to get into because there's a lot of pain involved for a lot of people. If you take for instance the many twelve-step programs, and God knows this world would be a worse place if we did not have these programs, but the nature of a twelve-step program at some point is to accept what you can and can't do. And so one has to be careful about what one says. It's a complicated issue.

The short answer to your question is I don't think about it very much.

Your activism and your writing give the impression that you really value the life that we have on this earth.

It's the only one we've got.

Well, some would dispute that.

It's the only one I know about right now, and if I'm going to have another one, then the next me or whatever will deal with that. It's the one I deal with now.

I think spirituality can be very helpful, I think it can also be an excuse. And again it's hard, everybody draws their own line. One of the greatest persons I know is a straight woman who is exceedingly spiritual and religious, but she's also moved mountains in her work. And she gets the sustenance and energy from the part of her that can be contemplative and spiritual and I think in that sense that's spirituality at its best. At its worst it's where the religious right sits around and talks about God all day and then tries to destroy us.

I think that we are so capable of such incredible achievements and accomplishments, and by "we" I'm going to limit it there to gays and lesbians. I just think we are remarkable people, and I guess that's why I push us to do more, just like I push myself to do more. And when you look at what our artists have accomplished since the beginning of time, starting with the ancient Greeks, the great artists throughout all history have been gays. The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Proust, ... There's more in all of us if we can just reach for it and push and try.

What are you working on these days?

I'm trying to write a very long novel. I've already got a couple thousand pages. It's proved the hardest thing I've ever had to do, which has made me more determined to do it. I like to challenge myself, I don't like to do the same thing twice.

Is this novel as autobiographical as the plays?

Some of it is but most of it isn't. It's much more of an imaginative work, although it certainly started out to be about AIDS. The problems I'm having with it are more technical ones, about how to hold it together, how to link it together so it isn't episodic. And how do you make a reader read for

two or three thousand pages without being bored. I will do it so long as my health holds out.

A lot of us who've been at this for a while feel pretty burnt out. The endless frustrations with experimental drugs not living up to their promises, with friends dying, and so on. Where do you get your energy from? How do you keep going?

I think a lot of it is quite frankly just genetics, my mother is 95 and indefatigable. I don't feel very effective right now, and I am completely stymied about where we should go and how to get us there. I'm asked all the time, why don't I start another organization. I would if I knew what kind of organization to start. The two that I've started have in my eyes not worked out, or done what they're supposed to do. I don't know what to do, and that is more depressing to me than anything.

To be fair, the organizations you've started got results even if they're not doing what you'd like to see them doing today. It's rare for an organization of any size to last more than five years and not turn to shit.

All right, I'll accept that. How do you keep going?

I'll use the genetic explanation too. But somehow you just have to will things to happen—you make up your mind to do it, and you do it.

I think it probably comes easier to some people than others. Different people have different senses of responsibility.

Ain't that the truth. Larry, thank you for the interview. 🎱

