

How Ought One to Lead a Life?

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- **Thank you for inviting me**
 - **Ashley Johnson**
- **While I have lived in California for almost 20 years, my story today—and certainly my AIDS narrative—begins right here in Massachusetts**
 - **I hope to share my AIDS story with you through this talk with two primary objectives in mind:**
 1. **To make an impression on you about HIV, health, and risk**
 2. **To do this within a broader project→ To encourage you to consciously think deeply about how ought one to lead a life**

This is a personal narrative, how I make sense of the last 25 years, and involves core moral questions about our connectedness to one another, sex and health, and the ways in which we find meaning in life.

- **I was not aware during my college years in the mid 1970s that one of the main things college was all about for me was figuring out**

for myself the answer to this question → *How ought one to lead a life?*

- I came up to Boston from a middle class town on eastern Long Island with a great deal of excitement, fear, and confusion
- What college was like →
- Academic success was important to me
- Coming to terms with who I was in the world turned out to be just as central to my time in college → not only coming out as a gay man in an era before *Will & Grace*, but grappling with questions of justice and injustice in the world, facing not only oppression but also privilege, and determining what I valued and what would give my life meaning.
 - Big brother program in Boston
 - Men's consciousness-raising groups on campus
 - Cesar Chavez and farmworkers support

The social expectations on me—on all of us—remained very traditional: money, career, family, children, community service.

How did young Eric grapple with these traditional expectations—nothing wrong with them except if they are embraced mindlessly and without deliberation—yet find a different, independent answer to the question, *How ought one to lead a life?*

- **Hence, I graduated from college in 1976, with an overall sense of what was to be important to me in life, but no clear game plan on how to make that real.**
 - **This is very risky.**
 - **Fortunately for me → found a job as a sixth-grade teacher in Belmont, found the motivation to walk into the offices of a gay activist newspaper in Boston, and moved after college into a six-person collective household in Somerville filled with fun people who lived and breathed politics, activism, and social justice.**
 - **Over the next couple years, I laid the basic groundwork of what would become my life and my career:**
 - **Working with young children as a teacher →**
 - **Activism → made a commitment to a lifetime of activism**
 - **Writing →**
 - **Relationships →**
 - **At age 25, I pictured my life would be some combination of traditional and alternative**
 - **And then an unexpected visitor arrived, dropping down on me and my community, in a quiet and powerful way.**
 - **I raise this for you because I've come to believe that most people's lives are visited by powerful and unexpected disruptions. Earthquakes that challenge our values and shake the foundations of our everyday lives**
 - **Some of these are personal or individual → a painful divorce, the discovery of chronic illness, a career disaster, a horrible accident**

- **Some of these disruptions are communal→ the Depression, the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, the arrival of AIDS**

We can experience these terrible visitors in several ways. We can do our best to avoid them, bury our heads in the sand, move into a place of denial. We can become traumatized and see ourselves as victims. We can experience them as challenges and find ways to make them into opportunities for growth and transformation.

Many of us bounce between all of these reactions, then ultimately decide how we will integrate the unexpected disruption into our lives.

- **AIDS has been the horrible unexpected disruption in my life. Just five years out of college, with a life plan in front of me, it dropped down on me and my community**
- **First awareness→ July 4th weekend on Cape Cod**
- **The early years (1981-1985)→ what it was like for gay men
What it was like for the mainstream world
What it was like for me**
- **Decision in 1985 to work full-time on AIDS and gay liberation**
- **Arrival in Los Angeles→ Rock Hudson**
- **Shanti Project→ Height of death and loss in San Francisco**
- **What I learned from the first decade of AIDS work:**
 - **Effective organizing makes a HUGE difference**

- **You will always find allies in surprising places**
 - **Fear is a catalyst to organizing but is not the basis for building sustainable community**
 - **Being part of social movements that change the world can be extremely gratifying**
- **Throughout all of these very difficult years→ How ought one to live a life?**
 - **Career and life interrupted**
 - **What was my responsibility to myself? To my community?**
 - **How did I want to situate myself in relation to health, safety, and sexual risk?**
- **Finally, after about a decade of intense full-time work on HIV/AIDS and gay liberation, I crashed**
 - **Viewed this from various perspectives but ultimately I think I hit the wall in terms of AIDS impact on my life, was facing the realization that I did not have HIV and was not going to get it, and that I needed to take a deep breath and decide what the next phase of my life was going to look like.**
 - **I had to find a way to engage in work aimed at promoting health and wellness in my community, but from a place of greater balance. And this has coincided with major changes in HIV/AIDS—and major changes in gay community life—over the past decade. We faced the fact that HIV/AIDS was not going to be a short-term visitor to our world, but was going to be here throughout our lifetimes.**
 - **So I took action→ took time to breathe, to heal, rethink my values and my life. I was hitting 40 and was able to look**

back at what I'd been able to check off and not check off from my "To Do" list of life.

- Went back to school
 - Became a professor
 - Began working in elementary schools again
 - Still working to contribute to the health and wellness of the world
- Here I stand, after 20 years of work on HIV/AIDS and gay liberation...and here we stand facing AIDS in the 21st century...
 - What I often am expected to tell people in a talk about HIV/AIDS
 - HIV/AIDS does not discriminate; it is an equal opportunity infection→ But what I really believe is that while everyone in this room is capable of becoming infected with HIV, specific communities and populations are at greater risk, simply because the people they might have sex with or share needles with have higher levels of infection.
 - Limit your number of sex partners or practice safe sex 100% of the time→ But what I really believe is that sex is such a deeply personal matter, that it's hard to give blanket advice or put down strict rules and expect them to be helpful. Instead, each of us has to think—and think seriously—about the ways we organize sex and relationships in our lives, and consider profoundly our own relationship to health, sex, and risk taking.
 - You have an obligation to assist others who have HIV and AIDS and do your part to stem this global epidemic→ But what I really believe is that we all should feel an obligation to assist others facing any kind of health challenge, and that we need to do our part to assist people with HIV in Africa,

Asia and other parts of the developing world, as well as on the streets of Boston and in the classrooms and offices of this campus. Perhaps what is more, we need to do our parts to change the conditions that are barriers to health and wellness throughout most of this world and look deeply at the role of our nation in creating conditions of poverty, disempowerment, and ill health in other parts of the world.

- **Finally, I want to urge you—when you think about How One Ought to Lead a Life—to consider:**
 - **How do you want YOUR life to interface with HIV/AIDS today? How do you want YOUR life to interface with broader issues of social justice→ war in Iraq, the funding of urban schools, homelessness in Massachusetts?**
 - **How will you organize your own life in college and beyond? What will be meaningful to you? What is your life going to be about? When you sit back at age 30 or 48 or 60 or 80, what will give you real satisfaction and happiness?**
 - **When AIDS or other surprising and horrible disruptions fall on you, your generation, and our world, in what ways will you become involved? What will be your contribution to the broader world around you?**