

## LITERATURE, THE ARTS, AND MEDICINE

### Addressing HIV

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On several occasions over the last few years, at the invitation of instructors in the Health Studies Program and in the Department of English and Cultural Studies, I have conducted seminars at McMaster on what it can mean to live with HIV. What is it that I hope to achieve when speaking to university students about my HIV history? Before I reply to this question I should note that although I am a teacher of philosophy and literature, in my classrooms my efforts are not directed toward offering any such account of myself and of my relationship with HIV. There, rather, I prepare students to think critically, using the rigor and capaciousness of literature and philosophy as a model. It is, at root, a form of training in how to sustain a questioning attitude towards everything that matters, whether inside or outside the university. Specifically, the goal is to help students tarry with difficulty, and thus to resist the temptation too quickly to resolve questions and problems that are much better left open-ended, not in spite but because of their demanding otherness. Sometimes the answer to a question lies in learning how to keep a question open as a question, even if that experience feels alienating, risky, and arduous.

This effort certainly continues in those classrooms in which I openly carry an identity card—that is, as an “HIV+ person”—although there it takes different forms. For in those classrooms, I arrive as an object of difficult knowledge and as something more than simply an object of knowledge. A part of who I am is what my students are studying, to be sure. But my goal is to be more than that, more than one more piece of the HIV curriculum. As I travel from one teaching situation to the other, I am turned upside down: in my own “regular” classrooms, where my role is “teacher,” I hope to teach students not only to know things, but, more important, to come to the realization that not everything can or should be treated as knowable—that is, quantifiable, calculable, and grasped as such. In those classrooms in which I speak as a person with HIV, however, I arrive as that unknown and unknowable other, hoping to be heard and engaged precisely because part of what is important about

me cannot be reduced to a question whose answer might simply appear on a final examination, no more than as a paragraph in a case history or a line of data in a lab report.

One of the things that I hope to bring to the classroom is the ways in which my own philosophical and literary education and my life with HIV came to speak to each other, and how that still unfolding conversation radically changed the ways that I understood and related to myself. Crucial to this transformation was the impact of the influential French cultural theorist and philosopher Michel Foucault. I began to study his work shortly before happening upon HIV, but it was with the diagnosis that I became a close and needful reader of his writings. After the diagnosis almost two decades ago, and after the loss of my friend to AIDS, I felt (as many of us diagnosed, though not all, in those days, did) that there could be no response to the disease, that it was a cruel caricature of what in us can respond. I mean psychically respond, not politically, because on that front I saw all around me the burgeoning activities of AIDS Action Now! and Act Up! As was ultimately to be recognized, Foucault played no small part in inspiring the practices of these new, politically creative collectives. Importantly for my self, though, it was Foucault who proved psychically crucial—not only as an intellectual I deeply admired and who had himself lived with HIV and died of AIDS, but also as someone who made it possible, within a deeply normative society, to imagine and to practice brand new ways of living with oneself...and thus with others, including the other who is always also oneself. The ambition of what Foucault wisely called “the care of the self” is not to make oneself “whole,” much less to return oneself to a former imagined coherence or even “health,” but rather the opposite: to reinvent oneself and to commit to living as if one really were a work in progress, never to be completed and in fact always turning away from the impulse to be complete. Such a practice amounts to a defiant challenge to the modern obligation to identify as one thing or another, and somehow to know oneself as such. Foucault saw the ongoing work of the care of the self as exciting, enabling, and above all as ethical, as evi-

dence of an abiding concern for and with others. That labour begins for him, as it does for me after having been taught by him, with learning to be productively at odds with one's self, and with the social forces that forcefully determine what and who we are. We are not or not only those things, and we can be many more things than we are told we can be. Somehow living with HIV and my philosophical education combined in subtle ways to teach me this lesson as never before, and it is a lesson I hope to introduce to others, my students especially.

So my reticence, in certain circumstances, to "come out" to my students as HIV+ is due neither to fear nor to self-loathing. My reticence in those classrooms is actually a chosen form of resistance: the point is precisely not to declare oneself as an easily known and knowable identity, a public announcement that gay men and HIV+ persons are strongly and repeatedly told they must do. What I hope to challenge – not only in my classrooms but in my life as well – are the forces that shape our identities, and that in fact mistakenly make "identity" the chief means of understanding each other. There are quite other ways of living with oneself and with others, ways that are more creative, supple, and responsive to the heat and dust of life; this is what Foucault helped me understand, this is what HIV made real to me.

If initially my diagnosis seemed to me a death-sentence, queerly enough it became that which compelled me to live and to live differently – not "to amend my ways" according to some morality but instead because I came to hear the diagnosis as a call from an Other, an invitation that was, and is, also an obligation to take my life as an object of care. Perhaps my students will also hear this summons, each in their own way, out of the open-ended project that is their

own life, each with its own challenges and difficulties, its own hopes, fears, and desires. I expect my need for a new form of understanding myself had from the start to do with the fact that when I was told I had HIV, I found the phrase a dispiritingly alienating one. I still do. I no more own HIV than it owns me. I no more possess HIV than it possesses me. I live with HIV. I mean "live" in its strongest sense—that is, quickened and troubled by the knowledge that nothing is set in stone, that there is always more to know, more work to do...and that all the things that I am – teacher and friend, citizen and student, lover and thinker, to name but a few – are part of that work.

When I speak to university students about my history of HIV, then, it is this history of relationality—with the self, with otherness, both inextricably interwoven—that I hope to convey. It is not as a confession that my history lesson unfolds, since that would assume a sovereign self, a moral code, and a stable, coherent knowledge, when, in fact, the ethical relationship of the self to the self, and of the self to HIV as other, is profoundly, happily, unstable and unpredictable, no less than is the knowledge by means of which one establishes the relationship. For my students, I hope to exemplify the possibility of just such an unfinished care of the self, not with the end of inspiring them, but rather to underline the importance of tarrying with that which is utterly unique about each person's relationship to this other that is HIV. As I speak with and listen to those others who are students, I like to hear them respond to questions that are there because of HIV, the illness with which I live, yet not explicitly posed by me: What is it to learn? What is it to live? †

#### **Author Biography**

**Dr. S.M. Barber** is Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Rhode Island. Before joining the faculty at U.R.I., he was a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Post-Doctoral Fellow in the Department of English at Duke University. Dr. Barber's research focuses on queer theory and critical practice, and on the relationships between contemporary French philosophy and British modernist literature. He is the co-editor of *Regarding Sedgwick: Queer Culture and Critical Theory*.