

## ACT UP EXPLAINED

by Jon Greenberg

If part of my knowledge about life has come from AIDS and my view into death, another part of it has come from my involvement in an organization called ACT UP. Let's see if I can define it as I go along. The acronym ACT UP stands for the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. As history would force me to acknowledge, the acronym came first and then the words were found to fit the acronym. But, as truth would have it, both the acronym and its meaning, and the words which make the acronym and their meaning have a larger meaning and a significance which neither could have been aware of at their inception. The English, two-word verb 'act up' means to be naughty. It is a verb which parents use with their children to indicate being bad or naughty. As in, "Billy has been acting up so I sent him to bed without his supper." The type of misbehavior which 'act up' indicates is not so severe as to be morally wrong or even dangerous. It is simply the type of behavior which parents typically dislike because it is inconvenient and may make them look bad or feel uncomfortable. Usually it is the type of behavior which children engage in to test the limits of their parents authority.

ACT UP, the organization, does exactly what its name says. We do demonstrations, and act in such a way that the authorities (and in this case we mean government officials, researchers, politicians, the church and the law) feel is inappropriate but ultimately accomplishes our goal by bringing into focus the problems which they are unwilling or afraid to address. Once again, let me return to the official definition: ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) is a diverse, nonpartisan group united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis. We meet with government and health officials; we research and distribute the latest medical information; we protest and demonstrate. WE ARE NOT SILENT. Once again, when this statement was drafted in 1987, no one had any idea how true it would turn out to be. Only in retrospect are we beginning to understand what we are continuing to do.

It would take me too long or perhaps be too boring to explain every aspect of ACT UP (nor do I think I could, in fact, do it justice). Suffice it to say that because of ACT UP, AIDS and the public's perceptions of the disease and the institutions of our society have been radically transformed and changed. {I am in the process of writing a long piece on exactly how ACT UP, at least in New York, has accomplished and is continuing to accomplish its stated goal of "ending the AIDS crisis". The crux of that article, which I will surely send you when I have finished it, is that "crisis" is a state of mentality and ACT UP's process of identifying a problem, bringing it out into the open and creating or forcing institutions to take the necessary steps towards the implementation of the solution effectively serves to lessen the psychological state of crisis which AIDS causes in so many people.}

For the moment, however, the most important aspect of ACT UP's activities, that of demonstration and direct action, is the area that I would like to focus on. I believe that every action we do, has significance and meaning on as many levels and layers of the infinite experience as we are able to comprehend. Sometimes we are not able to see how completely meaning infuses our daily activities but that doesn't mean that the meaning is not there. It simply means that we have not yet been awakened to the meaning. In terms of ACT UP's demonstrations, I like to talk about internal and external goals. Naturally there is a great deal of overlap to these completely synthetic categories but nevertheless there is a grain of truth to what I am about to say.

An ACT UP demonstration has many aspects, all of which need to be explained at great length but which limitations of space and your reading patience (particularly in English) require me to limit to much less. There is the actual demonstration, with banners and signs and yelling and people marching around looking angry and getting angry. There is usually some sort of illegal activity which demonstrators do in order to get arrested. The act of breaking the law is a very important aspect of this process. This lawlessness gets the media coverage. The news reports call attention to the issue. This embarrasses those against whom we are demonstrating and gives them the excuse they need to implement the programs that very often they would have wanted to implement anyhow but which their fear of public reprisal prevented them from implementing. This is the external goal. This is what the public sees and this is how, externally, ACT UP actions work.

Internally, an ACT UP demonstration serves another function: that of empowerment. Empowerment is an interesting word in English—it is a word which doesn't exist properly in any other language. It means the process whereby one gains self-power. Not power over the self, but power of the self to function completely in the world. It doesn't mean taking power from anyone else. It is not based on the assumption that there is only a limited amount of power in the universe and that if someone else has it then it limits my ability to have it. No. Self-empowerment acknowledges that true power is limitless and within each individual—it just has to be uncovered. And an ACT UP action is one of the best ways to uncover it by giving people the structure and opportunity they need to work through their obstacles to empowerment.

What are some of those obstacles to empowerment? Well, in a nutshell, they all stem from fear. Sometimes that fear takes the form of anger, sometimes it takes the form of depression, sometimes it takes the form of confusion. Essentially, however, fear is the only obstacle to the realization of one's own power.

Now People with AIDS have a lot of things to be afraid of. They may be afraid of rejection, of legal reprisal, of losing their health care, of not being able to work, of losing their jobs, of social rejection. Often, after working through these various fears one uncovers a fear of one's own anger and a fear of one's own power. (anger is not power, however. Repressed anger is usually what keeps people from realizing their own power. Fear of one's anger, therefore is a way of manifesting our fear of our own power (which is really a quality of love))

People without AIDS who are involved in the AIDS movement often also have their own fears to work through: fear of abandonment, fear of separation from a loved one, fear of loss, of being alone of grief of pain. Fundamentally, many of these fears are also manifestations of that same old fear of ones own power, fear of oneself.

Ultimately, both people with AIDS and those without have to face their fear of death. This is a big one and the fear that we all have to confront sooner or later. It's just that PWAs have to confront it sooner than they thought they would have to. This big fear can only be reached and uncovered to begin the process of confrontation after we have successfully confronted and worked through our fears of more earthly things.

Naturally, one doesn't eliminate fear by ridding the world of that which one is afraid of. Many children have perfectly mundane fears of things like dogs and the dark. They don't eliminate these fears by ridding the world of the objects of their fears. Rather, as children mature, they learn to face and confront their fears and thus befriend them. By becoming familiar with those things which we are afraid of, we lose our fear of them.

ACT UP is an extraordinarily effective tool for people to use to help them confront and get to the other side of their fears. In meetings with government officials, we use the ACT UP name not so much to threaten others as much as to support ourselves in making demands. In other words, as a representative of ACT UP at a meeting, I can, in one sense, distance myself from my own power by attributing my power to the larger organization of ACT UP. This gives it just enough distance to allow me to handle it without making it so distant that I don't recognize my place in that power equation. Thus, I am able to see my core power manifest in the real world without needing to be afraid of it. As I become familiar and comfortable with seeing my power manifest in the world, I am more and more able to utilize that power outside of the confines of ACT UP. This is the essence of empowerment.

An ACT UP demonstration with arrest gives people the opportunity to confront and work through their fear of authority, i.e., police. Through the arrest process, people are given a chance to see that law and the enforcers of the law which we have all been taught to fear are really nothing to be afraid of. ACT UP, through its tight organizational structure and support mechanisms, gives people the knowledge that they need to get arrested without a lot of unnecessary fears so that they can concentrate on the main fear of the police which they are being asked to confront at that moment. In other words, knowing that someone will pay their fines, that people on the outside of jail are following them through the arrest and jail process, that they will not be mistreated without public exposure, etc., gives people the strength that they need in order to confront their fear of the police which in turn can be used to confront their fear of death and, perhaps, their fear of life (as in my case).

Additionally, and equally important to the process of empowerment, an ACT UP demonstration gives people the opportunity to work out their anger in a public forum so that the anger doesn't continue to hold them back, make them ill, confuse their thinking. Anger is not empowerment. Knowledge is empowerment. But the anger has to be released (sometimes lots of it, for a long time) before we can allow the knowledge to flow as freely as it should. ACT UP demonstrations are primal scream therapy for people who would never voluntarily engage in primal scream therapy. Get the anger out so we can open up to love, knowledge and power.

Obviously, this process works for other people, too. But for people with AIDS it could mean the difference between dying now and dying much later. (We all die, eventually. Death is not an enemy. Hopefully we are ready for death when it happens. Getting over our fear of death makes us ready to die but it can also serve as the key to life.) In this way, ACT UP, and its direct action, is a direct treatment option for people with AIDS.

In order to accomplish both its external goal (media, public attention, forcing government officials, etc) and its internal goal (self-empowerment of people with AIDS and their communities), ACT UP provides some of the best planning and pre-production work found in the world. It is often said of ACT UP that its actions are the best theatre available. This is definitely true and it is not without design. The inspiration of ACT UP, Larry Kramer, is a playwright by profession. ACT UP demonstrations are theatre outside the bounds of the physical theatrical space. They are theatre in the world, and accomplishing the types of reactions, actions and catharsis that all people in the "conventional theatre" only dream about. We use the same tools, however. Research, intensive pre-production planning, bringing together the actors (demonstrators), rehearsing them and getting to their motivating emotions (anger, fear, loss, love for each other), sets, props, fundraising, publicity—all this for the single goal of creating a spectacle that will change people's lives and change the world. For the most part, we have been successful.

[~1992]

## DIVA TV Netcast



**DAY OF DESPERATION** January 23, 1991.

Early morning protests took place downtown Manhattan with AIDS activists protesting the Government's involvement in the Gulf War to the exclusion of vital interests at home. That afternoon--5:00 RUSH HOUR--Grand Central Station was filled with demonstrators protesting under the banners "Money For AIDS, Not For War" and (on the train and track time-schedule: ) "One AIDS Death Every 8 Minutes".

The night before the Day of Desperation protests, AIDS activists disrupted the **CBS News Evening News** with Dan Rather (by jumping on-camera as the news began: "Fight AIDS, not Arabs; AIDS is news!") and the **MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour**. (Robin MacNeil: "There's been a demonstration in our studio; it was a group of non-violent demonstrators from ACT UP who complained that we and the media are spending too much time and attention on the war in the Middle East which they say will never kill as many people as are dying of AIDS and I told them that this program has spent a lot of time on the AIDS matter and will be covering it more in the future." \_ Asked by a reporter: "Don't you think this is an immature and silly way to get your point across to the country?" We responded: "No, we think spending hundreds of billions of dollars bombing people in another continent is a immoral way to get a point across." \_

## Evening News Zaps

**DAY OF DESPERATION**

January 22, 1991



AIDS activists zap the CBS Evening News with Dan Rather and the MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour protesting the Gulf War and lack of main-stream media News coverage on AIDS.



Jon Greenberg's speech for Mark Lowe Fisher's political funeral, read by Barbara Hughes at Jon Greenberg's Political Funeral, Tompkins Square Park, Lower East Side, NYC.

## Jon Greenberg

### Speech for Mark Lowe Fisher's Funeral

On Jan 22, 1991: Mark, Barbara, Anna, Steven, Laurie, Neil and I sat in the cafeteria of Channel 13, waiting for a signal which would tell us when to take those final steps, walk those final 100 yards which would propel us down the passage and into the studio where Robin MacNeil was reporting on the Iraq War once again.

We were nervous, frightened, fidgety. We were about to push through a social barrier, do what many had only imagined and fly in the face of convention and what was once considered acceptable social behavior: to declare our presence and force the world to take notice. Our country, this world, had lost all perspective. And we were determined, if only for a moment, to reaffirm some truth, some reality into a media event where truth and reality had ceased to have meaning.

We were prepared for everything we could possibly be prepared for, Mark had made sure of much of that. As many variables as we could control we did control, largely because of Mark's extraordinarily anal organizational abilities. But for all that, as we approached that studio door with the red light flashing outside; we, none of us, knew what to expect on the other side. The red light was meant to scare us into staying on our proper side, control our actions with fear. But Mark and the rest of us, in spite of our fear, knew that it was only fear and rather than let that stop us, we used it to propel us into further action, to confront and push through the barrier of our fear and be liberated even as our bodies were being arrested and jailed. there was an otherness about those moments. We all felt it. We all knew that we had, if only for a moment, an hour, a day, become larger than we had been the day before. We each became part of the other and as a unit our collective spirit crossed an illusory boundary which we only knew was an illusion after we had crossed it. We were each a part of Mark on that day, and he was a part of each of us. Through collective empowerment we declared who we were and how we felt and made a place for ourselves in the universe.

Mark has once again crossed a boundary that each of us will sooner or later have to cross, whether we have AIDS or not, whether we are angry or not, whether we are afraid or not, and whether we have a Republican President or not. The truth is that each of us will one day follow Mark to that ultimate otherness and the final liberation. Mark took that road consciously, let us hope that we can do it as consciously, actively and as well prepared as Mark has. To the end Mark was unafraid of the consequences of his actions, or if afraid, he used that fear to propel him onward rather than to paralyze him and stop him from fully living.



Mark knew he was going to die. We, each of us, will also die. Mark's life and death, if it is to mean anything, cannot be trivialized by wishing it away or by pretending that there could be any other end. Yes, we are in pain. We have lost a precious powerful friend and colleague. But to avoid that pain by blaming it on someone else, robs us of our opportunity to experience and learn from a greater consciousness, a larger self, a fearlessness. Acceptance of our mortality--as Mark accepted his--makes it possible to live life fully, in spite of our fear; makes it possible to live life in real freedom because we are not afraid of the consequences of our actions.

It is only after we see how trivial and illusory are the political, social, religious, and physical barriers of this world can we begin to liberate ourselves from our fears and find our true power, consciousness, action and fearlessness. Mark was honest with himself and with his life. He knew his death was unavoidable, he knew that to believe otherwise was to believe a lie and to give more power to the fear of the unknown than to the courage, strength and love we can choose to face that unknown.

And Mark chose this action today as his memorial, making even his death an act of empowerment for his community and giving each of us an opportunity to publicly declare our presence, our pain, our right to life and our right to be proud of our deaths. We can learn from Mark's death: learn about consciousness, empowerment, fearlessness and action; and follow his lead as I followed him almost two year ago through the barrier of our fears.

Goodbye Mark and thank you for this final act of empowerment and generosity. Mark's final entry into his medical journal was: "mind is clear, feel like a connected whole...."

We honor that connected wholeness in our actions today.

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**FLYER for Day of Desperation****The AIDS Crisis is Just Beginning.**

1,175 people died of AIDS last week and you murdered them.

**President Bush and Congress murdered them.** Within a matter of months the U.S. Government is able to house, feed and provide health care for half a million people in the middle of the desert. But here at home, the Federal Government continues to routinely deny these same basic necessities to people living with AIDS. We wonder--as we fight a war for oil in the Persian Gulf--whether President Bush and Congress are conscious of the desperate state of the AIDS crisis in this country. We are. Through 10 years of this plague and 10 years of Republican administrations, there remains no leadership. After over-whelmingly (and with much fanfare) passing the C.A.R.E. Act (aka the Ryan White Act), Congress and President Bush failed to appropriate the funds necessary to implement this disaster relief. Why is it that when a hurricane or earthquake hits--and causes mostly property damage and relatively few deaths--federal dollars pour in? When a disease devastates whole communities and kills more than 110,000 men, women and children--more than twice the number of Americans killed in the Vietnam War--our leaders remain silent. And you remain silent. **Silence = Death.**

**Governor Cuomo murdered them.** In order to cope with New York State's fiscal problems, Governor Cuomo is attempting to balance his budget with people's lives. What happened to his five-year AIDS plan? New York's AIDS budget received few cuts, but it is simply not keeping pace with the epidemic. Budgets must be balanced, but not at the cost of thousands of New Yorkers lives. Cuomo has never declared New York State a disaster area. He has never personally gone to Washington to lobby for federal AIDS-relief funding. Mario Cuomo is governor of the AIDS capital of the world. His "family of New York" is dying. Where is the leadership New York needs to weather this storm? **President Cuomo???**

**Mayor Dinkins murdered them.** During his successful campaign for mayor, David Dinkins made many promises concerning people living with AIDS. Dinkins has broken all of these promises, except one: Against the advice of every major authority on I.V. drug use and its connection to AIDS, Dinkins and his inept health commissioner, Woody Myers, scrapped the city's needle-exchange program. They ignore the evidence that needle exchange not only stops the spread of AIDS in the I.V. drug-using communities, but also acts as a bridge into treatment programs. I.V. drug users, their sexual partners and their children have the highest rate of new HIV infection. The cause is clear. The fix is cheap: Clean needles save lives. **Dinkins' policy is genocidal.**

**Did you murder them too?** As 1 in 25 New Yorkers is infected with HIV...As more than 10,000 people with AIDS are homeless...As our children become infected...As the Catholic Church continues to interfere in public-health policy...As promising new treatments remain unavailable...As we continue to die... Will you continue to do nothing?

**ACT UP**

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