

Bears & Health

Bears, Gaining and Encouragement—Part 1



Lawrence D. Mass, M.D., is a co-founder of Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York City and the author/editor of four books, including, most recently, *We Must Love One Another Or Die: The Life and Legacies of Larry Kramer* (St. Martin's Press). You may address questions or comments to Dr. Mass via our mailing address or Email address.

John Outcalt is a past president of Metrobears of New York City who identifies as an encourager and gainer and who has been a thinker and voice of both subcultures (bears and encouragers/gainers). In the two-part exchange that follows, he has some surprising things to say about a community that is, well, encouraging interest and gaining adherhants.

Mass: Over time, a number of bears have asked me how I see the encourager/gainer phenomenon. One recurrent question is: don't I think it's immoral for someone to encourage somebody else to gain weight when that is likely to be injurious to their health? My answer is that I see it as being like S/M. There, too, people are doing things with each other that may seem questionable, but so long as the relationships are consensual, it's not for anyone else to judge. What do you think?

Outcalt: You have to remember that the act of being homosexual is considered immoral. As we all know, what two consenting adults do in privacy is their business. There are so many exciting and fun things that can be done in private. Feeding someone is one of many options.

Gaining weight is not an activity that has to be injurious to your health. I have always advocated healthy gaining. That means exercising and taking larger portions of a balanced diet, instead of pigging out on fats and sweets. You can be fat and fit.

There are two worlds of gaining: fantasy and reality. Some gainers and encouragers will promise you anything to get you off. You have to realize that you can only go so far as you are physically comfortable with. If it doesn't feel good, stop. But if it feels good, do it!

I think a man of size is the most beautiful thing that God has ever created. There are many gay men who look at a hot bodybuilder and say "WOW, I want to look like that!" Well there are also a lot of guys who look at a hot big guy and go "Wow, I want a shape like that!" Fortunately we live in a world where you have the ability to share and respond to what you like more and more.

The net has helped a lot with that. When I was doing my newsletter, it went out to about 400 people. Now, with the net, we know that there are thousands of people who revel in their size. This is great as it lets folks know they're not alone in their appreciation of gaining and encouraging. What's interesting is that there are a lot of Bears out there who like big guys but who would never think of themselves as chasers.

Mass: Food for thought, certainly. What do you see to be the relationship between the bear and e/g communities?

Outcalt: Over the years I have found that there are relational aspects between bears and gainers and encouragers. What I love about bears is that being big can be a part of our culture. Remember, the bear community started as an alternative to the mainstream gay community where you don't exist if you're not thin or muscular.

My two favorite adjectives are big and hairy, and that aptly describes a major portion of the bears that I'm attracted to. As we also know, the bear appetite is famous, and what's fun is that bears are not ashamed of their size or their appetites. For me it's part of what makes 'em sexy.

My friend Pete, who is definitely a

bear, tells me that as he's put on more weight, more bears are attracted to him. Why do you think that is? I have heard men say that they feel too small to be a bear with a touch of envy in their voice.

When I go to bear conventions and I see a lot of gainers and encouragers, however, I think many of them are still closeted in this area. Years ago I met someone who was working at *Bear Magazine* who was leaving sweets [around] to fatten up his lover; he wanted a bigger bear. He would never admit to being an encourager or a chaser, and yet, at the same time, he found the size of a larger man very appealing. This year I ran the first ever Gainer and Encourager discussion group at Bear Pride in Chicago. I have to thank the organizers of the convention who were very open to this kind of meeting. With Girth & Mirth convergences, by contrast, I find there's usually a lot of discussion of should we or shouldn't we?

Next issue: Part II of *Bears, Gaining and Encouragement*

John Outcalt has directed a documentary entitled *Chubs & Bears*. He can be contacted at EncourageNews@aol.com. To find out more about Encouragers and Gainers, check out: www.bellybuilders.com, www.GainRweb.com, or biggercity.com on the internet.