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## If only for a while, two men with AIDS reclaim lives

By Douglas Heuck

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(Last of a series)  
On Sunday night, Jan. 15, shortly after 10 p.m., Jim Merriman's lover John did what Merriman had hoped. He closed his eyes and died.

Kathy Coyne, a nurse, was with John earlier in the evening and said he was peaceful at the end. He thought his mother was in the room, though she had passed away years ago. He said hello to her.

In his room at Brewer's Hotel, Fred Campbell was making preparations for a new life. He gathered up all his plastic prescription bottles that held the medicines he needs to stave off the effects of

AIDS. He carried them down the hall and into the bathroom. One by one he emptied them into the toilet. He flushed it.

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On Monday evening Merriman waited for me to arrive so he could take a shower while someone was in the apartment. He was afraid he might have a seizure.

In the living room I waited for the water to stop and the shower to end. If he fell, would it be audible? Would he be able to call out? And if it were necessary to call 911, what address would I tell them? I hurried into his bedroom and was relieved to find a letter with his address.

The shower ended. He got out. He turned on the water in the bathroom sink. Then he vomited. He got dressed and we went out to

## A ROSE WILTING IS STILL A ROSE

dinner. Mentally, Jim was back to his old self for the first time since his Christmas seizure.

Physically, though, he was a different man than I'd met in November. His face was a colorless mass of wrinkles. His eyes were pools of pain.

He rubbed his face as he remembered meeting John 12 years ago. He recalled when they became close last spring, after they both knew they had AIDS. And tears came to his eyes when he

said, "I told John to close his eyes, but I forgot that when the bitch finally did it, he wouldn't be taking me with him."

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Campbell explained why he destroyed his medicines.

It had all become too much for him. The hospital on Christmas. The death of his father. Richard. The bright spot for him had been the hope of moving into an

apartment in Highland Park. But the dream of a place of his own ended when it became clear that the apartment would not be ready to be moved into that day.

All his belongings that had been packed and moved to the new apartment had to be moved back to his old room at Brewer's Hotel.

When the move fell through, Campbell made what could have been his final decision regarding AIDS.

"It's real strange. It seems every time I turn around, there's a little bit more adding to the hassles. I can't really see anything that's come along that's really helped any. It's all added to the problems."

"Right now, it might sound strange, but I'm going to ignore my illness for a while. I need dis-

tance from it. And I know I can't take much more. It's too hard. There has to be a point where I say enough is enough. And I reached that point today."

"Right now, I'm sure that if I had an accident, I would not want to go to the hospital. Because by moral obligation I would have to tell them that I'm HIV-positive, and I don't want to do that. I'd limp home to my own room. I'm tired of saying it. I'm tired of being it."

"The Swedish have a thing called the sleep cure, and when something real traumatic happens they'll use very heavy sedatives and the person will be out, anywhere from a few days on. If I had the time, I'd do that."

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## AIDS

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"I grew up on a farm, and in the country they'd always say, 'Put it on the back burner.' And go on about the other things that need to be done."

"With me, it needs to be further than that. It needs to be taken off the stove and put in the ice house for a while. Leave it out in the storage cellar. Pack it away. Box it up and forget that it's there, and go on about the other things that have to be done. AIDS isn't something I can forget about. I know it's going to be back. I know for a fact that eventually I'm going to have to go back to that cellar and pick that box up. But for now, I don't want it."

"And I know it's going to harm me. Not having the medications, I leave myself totally open. And it may seem like a rash decision to say, 'No, No, No, No, No,' which is what I've done. But it's something that's been in my mind. In all of our minds."

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On Wednesday Merriman arrived at the funeral home in Bloomfield shortly before 9:30 a.m., when John's memorial service was to begin.

He wore a suit with a purple tie in honor of John. "It was his favorite color," Merriman said. His fingers were cracked and bleeding from dryness, and he wiped them with a handkerchief.

Inside, friends and relatives had gathered. Flowers adorned the room. A baby cried.

The Rev. James Graham recited several prayers and then said, "It doesn't matter how long people live — John only lived 32 years. What is important is the legacy they leave. Somebody could live to be 99 and not leave the legacy John left. John's was a legacy of pain and suffering. And that is the most beautiful legacy, because that was Christ's legacy. Pain and suffering. That's God's wisdom, and we can't understand God's wisdom. Just as our wisdom in God's eyes is foolishness."

After the group recited the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary, Graham concluded the service.

"We now gather with love in our hearts. We commend to you, your son, our brother John. Now that he has passed, Father, we pray that he lives with you in the perfect life of heaven. Father we just pray that in your mercy and love, you forgive whatever sins John has committed during his life."

"John, may the angels lead you into paradise. May the martyrs come to welcome you and take you to the holy city, the new and eternal Jerusalem. John, may the choir of angels welcome you, and where Lazarus is poor no longer, may you have eternal rest. We pray this through Christ our Lord."

Outside, it was a beautiful sunny day that topped 50 degrees.

"We need to stop at Brewer's," Jim said. When we arrived, the bar was nearly empty. Fred was there, sipping coffee and talking to friends.

Jim ordered a Bloody Mary and spoke with Fred about the service.

The jukebox was playing Elton John's hit, "Candle in the Wind," and Fred said, "They've been playing that song too much. It's all about the death of Marilyn Monroe and how she burned out long before her time. I like it, but with all that's been going on, I just feel I've been hearing it too much."

Jim didn't seem particularly interested in his drink, the first time he hadn't been since before Christmas.

For Jim, the days since Christmas had been the most unusual in his life. He lost control of his body during the Christmas Day seizure. Soon after, he lost control of his mind. And with his mind went his faith.

As January had worn on, the irrational fears came less often and Merriman slowly regained his mind. His body was still shaky, but his faith was back.

At Ritter's Diner after the funeral, I asked him again what he thought about the joy of suffering.

"The neatest thing about the funeral service was that John's gift was his suffering. And the priest said how we can't understand that," Merriman said. "But I do understand it. I have it, too. And I do understand that there's a purpose in this. Maybe that's one of the neat gifts: I understood his suffering, and he understood mine. Sharing that, that's the joy."

Merriman acknowledged that for much of the past month his faith was threatened.

"But I knew I had bounced back when I was able to pray again. That happened yesterday."

Merriman again planned to move to Washington, D.C., to join the Damians, the new religious order that ministers to people with AIDS.

"I called them yesterday and I said I needed to come down and join the community. And they said 'We're waiting for you.' And that felt real good."

"I know that going down to D.C. is the right move. I need to be in community. I need people to share this with, and I need it to be spiritual. Now I just need God to do the timing on it."

We left the diner and drove toward the South Hills, and Merriman rolled down his window. It was uncommonly mild weather for January. The sun was bright and he said he felt very good, better than he had in a month. Merriman laughed as he looked out the window.

"He won. John won the race. There were times when I thought maybe I was going to go first. But he won. We used to talk about the

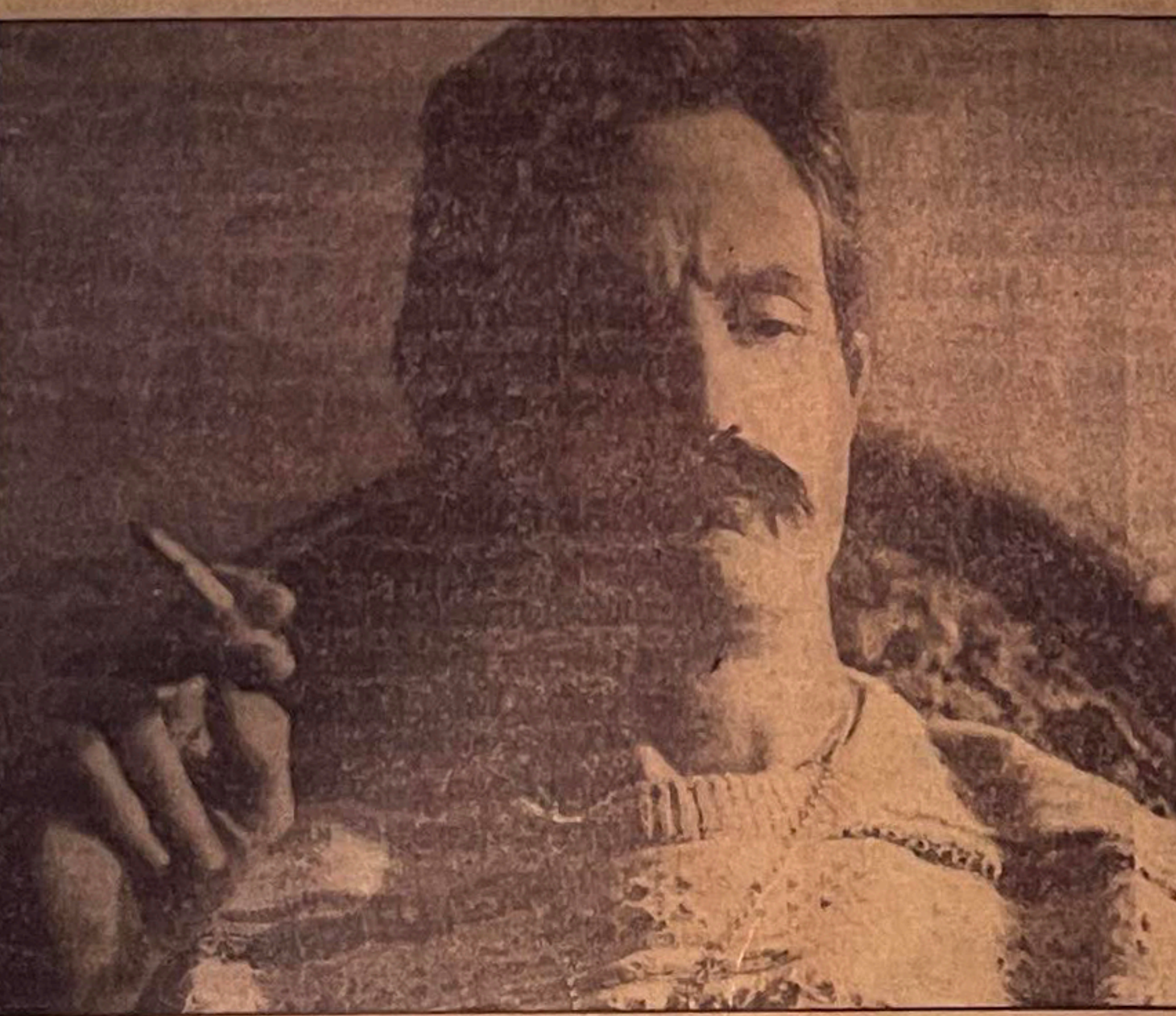


Susan Post/The Pittsburgh Press

Fred Campbell enjoys a birthday dance with a friend in the back of Brewer's Hotel



A friend holds table while Campbell shows a balancing trick on 41st birthday



Merriman: "I need people to share this with, and I need it to be spiritual."

race, and it wasn't a morbid thing. But we talked about his friends and mine who'd already died — people who had won."

When we arrived at his mother's apartment, Jim sat in the car for a moment before getting out. "I felt strong when I woke up this morning. I had no night sweats for the first time in weeks. I just slept last night. I woke up and I felt good. I was OK."

As he got out and said goodbye, he mentioned that he and his mother were getting along better. "We're going to go see a movie today," he said. "Something light."

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Campbell was ambivalent about being back in Brewer's Hotel. He had hoped to move, but he had friends at Brewer's and he knew what to expect. And, like many others who live there, Fred had nowhere else to go.

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Andy Usner owns Brewer's, and he keeps it open for people like Campbell.

He's a former city policeman and he has owned the hotel for five years. He is a big man, about 6 feet tall and 200 pounds.

"When people want to buy the place, they guarantee me they'll start new and throw everyone out. And at the time of the last offer, I had three people with AIDS here. A guy upstairs had been in an accident. I had an old-timer who was retired. I had two people from the VA, both in the service, both retired. They were going to throw them all out."

"Every time I get offers on the place, that's what they say — 'Get rid of everyone.' Well I lost the one guy, Walter. He died three months ago. He was here about 30 years. You don't throw people like this out. You know, I tried to tell 'em that. You just don't do stuff like that."

"Today is, I guess, a dollars and

cents world. I don't think people have too much empathy for another one's feelings, you know?"

"And people are always throwing this 'Aren't you afraid of catching AIDS?' Why would I be afraid of catching AIDS? For what reason?"

"You know I read these articles in the paper concerning the police handling an AIDS victim, and they're gonna have these suits on like Flash Gordon. Is this a joke or something? You don't need stuff like that. I don't know. Society is somehow or another misguided on this whole issue."

"But I could never sell this place because of that reason. I got one guy — he has AIDS. He ain't here too much 'cause he's in the hospital. And when he's not, he's trying to commit suicide. Nobody wants him. He's always crying. Jesus. It's pitiful to see. I'm not used to seeing a man cry to begin with."

"The biggest thing I noticed is they don't eat good. I even give a

free meal here every Sunday. I think I feed half of them. It's a joke. Half of 'em aren't even paying the rent. They're always running. I don't know."

"It's like Fred. I don't know how many times I've had to go break into his room up there because he was telling me he was going to commit suicide. One day he's not around and I get scared. I had to break in and make sure he wasn't dead."

"I mean I should just say, 'Who needs it?' Certainly I don't need it. But nobody cares, you know? I mean that's the whole damned thing. Nobody cares. Nobody. Their mothers and fathers don't care. Society doesn't care. They're just total outcasts, you know?"

"Even people in the gay business — they don't care. They tell you — they pretend. They hold functions, and all that, but it's only a greed function. I went to a bar the other day, and they're bitchin' and moanin' about this article you're working on. And then I understand one of those guys got hold of Fred and let him know every which way but loose that they didn't want the story, you know."

"They're afraid of adverse publicity, that it'll hurt the bar business. Piss on the bar business. I mean, the health of society is more important than one little bar, two little bars. Fred knows how I feel about it."

"No, I'm not in too good with all these bar owners right now. They all think I'm a jerk. Throw them all out! I says 'Hey, I ain't gonna throw nobody out.'"

"We got a guy who works here as a bartender. He's a, uh, what do you call it? They got a name for it. Anyhow, he's got silicone tits. His father would have no part of him. 'Get outta here, you son of a bitch.' He wouldn't even let him come home. And when his father died last year, they didn't even invite him to the funeral. You know, what the hell?"

"I mean I got four kids myself. Certainly, I don't want them being in the homosexual field at all. But if they do, what can you do about it? Life is life, I mean."

"And they end up here. I end up with whatever society doesn't really want. I mean you look at this stuff and you say, 'Holy Christ. When's it going to end? When am I going to get some different type of people?'"

"And to tell you the truth, it has hurt my business — having AIDS people here. Even among the gays, I get known as the funny place."

"But people don't understand this disease is something that could tear society apart. And these people are very mistreated. You know this thing in the City of Pittsburgh where the gays wanted equal rights. There was that 4-4 stalemate, and now the bill was dry-docked, and it never will surface again. They are very mistreated people, really."

"These people here are on pins and needles. They all think I'm going to sell it tomorrow. They know I'm under pressure — the city — I'm on every list that you could think of. But I talked to my attorney, and you know we don't do nothing wrong here. We do have problems. I'm not going to say there's no drugs in here because probably there is drugs. There's drugs everywhere. I don't care where you go. Anywhere at all in society today, there's drugs."

He pointed to an anti-drug notice on the wall. "If I catch 'em, and I see 'em, I'll report 'em in a minute. I reported a guy just recently. That's just how I feel about it."

Usner charges \$35 a week for rooms. He laughed when he said it.

"It's a joke almost, really. But whether anyone comes here or not is immaterial to me. I'll always have my couple standbys, and I own a place. All I gotta do is meet my few little taxes here. If I make anything, fine. If I don't, that's fine too. But I'm not going to lose this place, believe me. If I got to go out and get another job, I'll keep this place."

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On Jan. 14 Campbell went to his

go. He played with his usual bingo buddies, and afterward he decided to tell one of the women that he had AIDS.

"I called Rose over. And I told her. She kind of gave me this look. Not a nasty look, but like she already knew. I said, 'You kind of already knew, didn't you?' And she kind of smiled. It was nice that she didn't jump back or scream or cry or anything."

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Shortly after Campbell got AIDS, he read a statistic saying that the average life expectancy of someone with the disease was 400 days.

He counted the days off, and 400 days from the date he got AIDS was Jan. 29, 1989 — his 41st birthday. There was a party at Brewer's that night, but Campbell also was celebrating beating the odds.

Drinks flowed. People danced. Fred's friends came and hugged and kissed him. A birthday cake appeared.

"We care," said one guy. "Do me a favor, write in your article that we care about him."

And, obviously, they did.

Fred was laughing and joking and performing gymnastic feats of balancing on his hands. He danced, and he talked. And for a moment, tears came to his eyes, and he said, "I've never had people care about me like this."

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By his birthday Campbell still had not gone back to his medicine.

He said he yearns for a more natural life, one that isn't regulated by AIDS.

"There's nothing natural in the life of a person with AIDS. Nothing."

"It's not natural when your 3-year-old great niece runs and gets you a glass of water because your beeper goes off. It's not natural to be sitting in a bar and my beeper goes off and the bartender automatically hands me a glass of water. If they hear a beeper go off anywhere along that bar, they get a glass of water. Automatically. It's a Pavlovian response."

"It sounds real strange. But I'm hoping that while I'm off the medicine something really hits — real hard. And kills me. I don't have the guts to kill myself, so I'm hoping by more or less leaving my body defenseless — which is what I'm doing — I'm really hoping that something hits and that's it."

And until that happens, Campbell said, he will have a kind of freedom that has been taken away from him. He'll have the freedom of his own time.

"The concept of time is so subjective. To a journalist, you've got deadlines. A dancer has his own timing. A lot of primitive people had as their shortest concept of time, a day."

"The normal period of time for me is 4 hours. That's the time between medications. Time for the last year has been measured in four-hour increments. The next measure time is 7 days, not because it's a week, but because there are 7 days between Friday and Friday, when I get my blood work done."

"Then there's the real strange time between the hospitalizations, and that's totally subjective to my body. It's time to be sick again. It could be one hour, one week, two weeks. It's never been long, it's never been short."

"And right now I'm breaking the imposed, subjective time frame. I want to go toward the ideal of time. Natural time. Where the day just occurs. It's not a Monday or a Tuesday because Monday and Tuesday denotes that I'm going to either go to group therapy or surgical clinic or hematology."

"I want to get away from, it's 12 o'clock when I take a pill. I'm not going to be able to do that for very long, but I want to get back to the notion that when the sun is overhead, it's noon."

"And just as I know that sun's not going to sit overhead very long. I know I'm not going to escape the disease very long. I have no idea how long it will be, but for a while I can be at the point where the sun is exactly overhead and there's no shadow."

"With the drugs, it's like putting your finger in the dike. But all you've got left is a six-foot section of the dike. The rest has already fallen down. It's wish in one hand and crap in the other — see which one gets full first. Well, we're wishing in one hand with AZT, but the other hand's getting fuller a lot quicker. That's why people get to the point where they get into macrobiotic cooking, yoga, acupuncture, massage therapy and medication. We're grasping at straws."

"And that's why some get into prayer. It turns me off about real heavily religious people. They go to God with a shopping list of favors. When they go to church, they may as well be going to Macy's to see Santa Claus."

"But sometimes I get my little religious bent. I'll call it. I don't pray, I write God letters. I wrote him one the other night."

"I was a little bit mad, a little upset, and I let God know it. I'm assuming that if there is a God, I don't think he can read every thought in every person's mind. So I put it down in black and white."

"I was just asking a question of God. The statement has been made that you never give anybody more than their plate can hold. And it's like, 'God, I've got a small appetite, why give me so damned much?'"

Campbell wrote the letter as he was sitting at the bar at Brewer's. And just as he was finishing it, a friend came up and sat down. The man had troubles, and, as one of the elders at Brewer's, Campbell listened to him.

As he listened, Fred took the letter and tore it up.