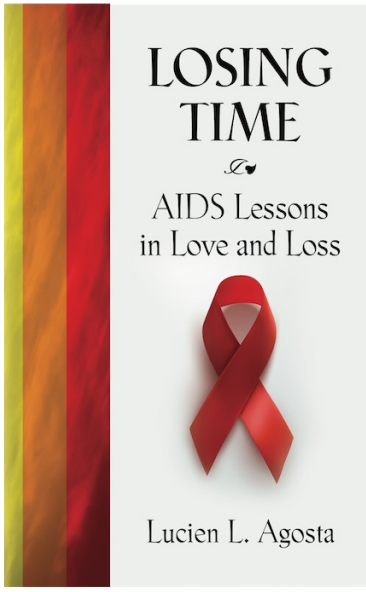

LOSING TIME, a memoir, offers a frank account of gay life as I lived it in Sacramento, CA during the AIDS crisis--the Losing Time of the title. The book's focus on personal experience particularizes an AIDS history fast becoming generalized, its human details being lost to memory.

LOSING TIME:
AIDS LESSONS IN LOVE AND LOSS
by LUCIEN L. AGOSTA

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LOSING TIME

& AIDS Lessons in Love and Loss

Lucien L. Agosta

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Author's Note: All people in this memoir are actual persons, though names have been changed for those who can no longer grant permission for their identities to be revealed.

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INTRODUCTION

I

Many gay men who survived the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 90s still thumb a blister of grief and rage and guilt:

Grief over the senseless squander of hundreds of thousands of amiable, talented young men, our friends, our lovers.

Rage at Ronald Reagan, Senator Jesse Helms, and other politicians of their ilk in unholy alliance with Jerry Falwell and the indifferent religious hypocrites who averted their eyes and turned their backs on our suffering, avowing that our holocaust was an appropriate Biblical punishment meted out for gay sexual abominations. Reagan did not even mention the word AIDS until his friend Rock Hudson was stricken and then only after 53,000 Americans had already died of the disease, Americans he had pledged to serve and protect. And Falwell and his bunch so compassionately referred to people battling AIDS as WOGS (or Wrath of Gods).

Guilt that somehow we survived the plague by sheer dumb luck. “Survivor’s guilt” they’ve termed it.

Why us, we ask? Why not Gordon, whose violin could scour the grime away from our lives while helming an orchestra as its first chair? Why not Carl, who earned an MFA from the Corcoran Gallery in printmaking a year before going blind from CMV (cytomegalovirus) retinitis

and whose final gallery exhibition was held posthumously, as if to rub it in how much we had lost when he gave up the world he had so richly depicted? Why not Roger, whose idea of exalted living was a boozy night out at a South of Market gay grunge dive in San Francisco where he could be the piss-pig-cum-dump slut he prided himself on being? Or Declan, who soared a single season as lead in a ballet company before a fatal dose of PCP (pneumocystis carinii pneumonia) brought him low? Why not Connor, a broker at Charles Schwab who persuaded so many gay men into giving up their monthly paycheck sprees to establish long-term retirement investment plans, when, as it turned out, nothing long-term awaited them? Why not you, Dore?

So many fell out of history before they could make it. So many of us who have survived cannot get over it.

For a long time I avoided writing of my experiences during the AIDS crisis, still numbed by the repeated blows inflicted by the virus and needing a stay from a more intense engagement with it that writing of it would involve. Unprocessed grief always seeks a way out, though. The history of the AIDS era, which began nearly 40 years ago, has been largely outlined in works by Randy Shilts *(And the Band Played On)* and more recently by David France *(How to Survive a Plague)*. But dozens of my friends and acquaintances vanished unrecorded. For many survivors, still traumatized, closure escapes us: we live in a wide fracture. The thrust of memory of the Losing Time, its unimaginable magnitude, has gradually distilled for me with a gathering intensity that urges me to remember and record before memory blurs. Catastrophes like AIDS become meaningful or understandable only when humanized, when records of experience show how those

catastrophes impacted specific human lives. Thus, though the general parameters of the AIDS crisis have been mapped, the particular human significances of that crisis still need to be told.

My experience centers in Sacramento, a city on the periphery of AIDS-epicenter San Francisco, an easy 80-mile drive regularly taken by scores of Sacramento gay men on weekends. Thus Sacramento bore in its gay populace the concussive blows from the infected Mecca just down the freeway. I moved in a milieu of mostly white, middle-class gay men, knowing few women or people of color who fought the virus in my time, though some were clients of the Sacramento AIDS Foundation where I volunteered with many tireless men and women, mostly gay, but some compassionate straight people as well. So I pen a parochial piece of AIDS history, a microcosm in the world of harm wrought by the virus. The novelist Garth Greenwell wrote in a recent article in Out Magazine that "we're at this really interesting moment of negotiating the narrative of the AIDS crisis for queer people in the 80s and 90s, and yet that story is only told about San Francisco and New York." This book answers Greenwell's desire for a part of the broader AIDS story to be told as well.

Coined in 1987, the powerful catchphrase "Silence=Death" indicated that a passivity of speech and action guaranteed the deaths of those battling AIDS, thereby threatening an entire beleaguered community. Over 658,000 people have died of AIDS in the United States alone since 1981, most of them gay men. Potent life-extending drugs have been developed and released as a direct result of the confrontational demands and anarchist tactics of Larry Kramer and others involved in the founding

of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and other activist groups, unwilling to be silent and passive any longer.

Today, when many people with HIV are living longer, indeed indefinitely, "Silence=Death" takes on an added significance: when the stories and the names of those lost to AIDS are forgotten, when silence cancels their memory, then they die the final death. Silenced irrevocably are their lives and the particular history of our times. Silence=Death indeed.

This book thus has a double, interrelated focus: First, and more broadly, it presents life as lived in Sacramento, CA during the AIDS crisis—the Losing Time of the title. As such it chronicles the lives of some of those doomed to lose time entirely during that awful epoch of the 1980s and 90s. Second, the book deals in some detail with the later life and too early death from AIDS of one man among the many remembered here—Dore Tanner (1949-1998)—who taught me in that dark era that love was more than the heterosexual illusion I had always believed it to be. Losing Time offers an honest, sometimes humorous, depiction of two gay men who blundered haplessly into a love neither of them was looking for and, subsequently, the fat grief that comes from so soon losing a lover so lately found and the determination it takes to find one's way again when one's compass points only south. The book's interweaving of particular loss with the many other casualties of that time presents the texture of life as Dore and I and so many other gay men we knew lived it during the Losing Time, which began nearly 40 years ago. The book's focus on personal experience provides the germ of a history already being generalized, its particulars fast being lost to memory.

I was no leader during that time. I offered no new ideas or strategies or tactics, never committed any acts of civil disobedience, never put myself on the line. I was a foot soldier, a mere functionary, a follower. A witness, though not, I am proud to say, an inactive one. A servant, I hope. Certainly no hero, though I strove together with valiant individuals in a common cause.

HIV has no cure yet, though its ravages today are held in abeyance for many in the United States, an uneasy lull in a slower carnage now occurring largely off stage. This leads to AIDS being viewed with a dangerous complacency by younger gay men and by society at large. A sobering 15,807 people died in the United States in 2016 of AIDS-related complications. Still. Many of us who survived are now striving, like me, to remember with a long-withheld acceptance the shock of the Losing Time before time itself overwhelms us. This account—improbable love story, memory vault, regenerative narrative—is an attempt to let go of that time at last without losing forever those no longer with us.

Other survivors of the Losing Time are now also empowered to give up their stories in whatever ways they can. The internet, social media, archival oral histories, podcasts, and self-publishing provide powerful modern outlets for relating the transformative narratives that give voice to our loss and restore us to history. Such deeply personal accounts provide the foundation of a history that must not be forgotten.

II

Dore Tanner: I address you directly in these pages. To reference you only in third person brings with it a distancing from you, an impersonal objectification I still do not feel, though you have been dead for over twenty years.

During your last weeks, you talked, with such extraordinary grace and courage, the life you were leaving. Early life and late you told out, the jumble of memory, that uncouth recorder that minds no order. Ever an accountant, after you had opened your life's ledger, you scanned the columns, canceled entries, shifted the figures, worked towards the final balance. And you got there. Your last night was mostly silence.

I am attempting in these pages what you did: I am telling my life with and without someone who can no longer speak for himself, with and without others who are now also mute. I am telling of life during the Age of AIDS: you stand forefront among the many lost with you with claims to be remembered as well.

I did not know you all that long, a scant two years total, though in the Age of AIDS, that was often considered a lengthy connection. Relationships had to be expedited in that fatal time, as ours was. By rights, I should have gotten over you long ago, settled things between us, resolved us. But I have come to know that some relationships end without resolution, end in a forced closure with lingering resonances and echoes that will not be stilled. In such relationships, no one else can ever occupy that unresolved place after it has been emptied, though life can be lived fully and richly even over that vacancy, and others can enter one's life to enrich it.

Now, as to this book: I am more interested in telling the truth than in reporting facts. Granted, facts are important, but one must always structure remembered events so as to locate the truth hidden within. What is importantly human can never be completely factual. As soon as the mind notices them, facts blur and transpose: events haze in interpretation, angle of vision, subjective filtering. All sleight of hand. These pages offer a necessary mix of memory and imagination and narrative sequencing. I have worded conversations to dramatize what I think you and I and others meant or intended to say. These pages are readings of moments re-visioned, told now in a language unavailable to me while those moments were occurring. I am telling the truth in the best way I know how to invent it.

III

Beside our bed you kept an old Chinese cabinet as a lamp stand. Its scuffed red-lacquer front bore bronze double-happiness pulls on four drawers, their interiors stained black. In them we piled a jumble of ticket stubs, love notes left on pillows, business cards, appointment reminders, airline flight itineraries, credit card slips, concert programs, receipts, party invitations, stock prospectuses, Valentines, paid bills, to-do lists, birthday cards, recipes, packets of photographic negatives, stray condom wrappers, too, too many obituaries and memorial programs—all the traces of our living together through the Losing Time.

You lived just long enough for us to fill the four drawers.

"There's a reason the drawers are lacquered black inside," you said. "They're black holes. Put something in that cabinet and it disappears. We'll never see it again. It's the cabinet of all lost things. It'll drag you in some day too!"

On the Sunday we sorted through your clothes, I asked your sister Bonnie for the cabinet. It has stood next to my writing desk for over twenty years. One day I took out the top drawer and overturned its contents onto the floor. Every item I pulled out of the pile prompted me to start. I have been writing you and the others echoed there ever since.

Now that I am concluding this memoir, I am starting to dream of you, of others now long dead. Freud's work on dreams was a crock. I think it is counter-productive to snatch dreams back from the morning dissolution they drift to. Dreams are the debris the mind is chucking out. The mind relaxes its stern daytime hold and goes wacko in the night. In dreaming, the mind tries to amuse itself when it has nothing else to do, having given up bossing the body around, its lumbering daytime playmate. Nevertheless, my recent dreams seem eerily apt.

Several nights ago, I dreamed we went to a fundraiser at some church. Pearlene, the maid who worked in my childhood home in Louisiana, was dicing red bell peppers for a jambalaya simmering in a sugar kettle over an open fire, a wooden stirring paddle laid over the black iron rim. You had something to do with all this. You held out to me a tray of small steaks, fat-veins raying across them like the fortune-lines in human hands. Around us, sitting expectantly on folding chairs, were many of the men I

knew who went away with you into the darkness. Your chair had a ruby glass rosary coiled on its empty seat.

Last night, I dreamed you were sitting on a black leather sofa in a gray room. You sat alone in the albedo light of before-dawn, or dusk, or just before a rainstorm, your eyes lowered, your hands holding a book that for some reason I did not want you to read. You sat beside the red lacquer cabinet from our bedroom, its drawers all open and empty. I watched you for a long time, both of us apart and perfectly still.

I am finishing this memoir now. I am giving it up. To my astonishment, I have become Love's apostle Paul, yours the bolt that knocked me off my high horse. Like Paul, I now know Love to be real, the most potent of the three necessary virtues. Hope anchors second after Love. Faith—in progress towards universal human advancement, world order, genuine and inclusive human tolerance, or environmental balance--is the rabbit virtue, ever tensed to dart away, its white scut a butt-star racing into a twilit thicket.

I hope this particular account of loss during the AIDS era of universal gay grief will echo for those who come after us, to those who laugh again after the mourners have left. That era must not be forgotten by those who follow us.

Even if this love story in the Losing Time must molder in some dusty gay archive somewhere, time's hostage, I hope someone will stumble upon it at some time and know the wonder it was to love you, the catastrophe it was to lose you and all those many lost with you, the living possible even after that.

PART I: GIVING UP

Love was a freakish venture in the plague years, an aberrant gambit as AIDS busied itself with aborting intimacy and parting lovers. The horror of AIDS was that love and death both used the same body portals to do their work. Fear and love make odd fuck buddies. But so it was: against all odds, untrue to type, and nearing fifty, I fell in love for the first time while AIDS raged unchecked around me. And to beat it all, I fell in love with a man whose defenses against the virus were all but depleted when I met him. That loving was costly. I grew from it. In spite of what I am about to tell, I would go through it all again, for to love, I learned, is recompense enough in itself even when love cannot ultimately win or solve or change anything much.

So this is a love story in a dark time. I never imagined I would ever write one. In the first place, I did not believe in love. Also, I was lousy lover material. I did not want a partner or a lover. I elected early on to live alone all my life in a taut contentment. Oh, I wanted to have sex and all, but I wanted the men I had sex with to leave in the morning—at the latest. I even had a separate bedroom in my house reserved exclusively for sex: the "trick room," I called it. It was the first bedroom to the left, just past the foyer. Some late nights, my trick and I got no further into the house than this.

I came home from fourth grade one afternoon and announced to my mother that I never wanted to get married. She told me years later that she had been startled by this news, but she had tried not to make too much of it.

"You don't have to decide that right now when you're only nine years old," she laughed. "One day, when you're

older, you might just fall in love, like Daddy and me, and change your mind."

What happened next startled her even more: "No!" I screamed and threw myself onto the floor. "No! I won't ever fall down in love. I won't get married. No one can make me."

My mother had had to pick me up and hold me in her arms to stop my sobbing.

This is a love story. This is how it began:

I taught in the English department at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas for ten years (1977-1987), relatively safe from the viral holocaust then devastating large American cities and clear-cutting gay men like timber. I moved to Sacramento in my late thirties to take a job at California State University in 1987. When asked why I left Kansas, I would reply: "I slept with all the gay men in Manhattan, quarreled with their wives, and had to leave." Actually I dated only one married guy. Get this: he was a "manure diversion specialist" at a feedlot. No joke. "My job is bullshit," he used to say. He rode a horse all day: very D. H. Lawrence, an earthy cowboy fetish. His wife at first tolerated our little rodeo. She even insisted on going to the Horseshoe Grill for dinner with us on two occasions. Suddenly she turned: "Get that steer out of the corral," she told him, "or I'll get the hell out of Dodge. I'd rather you went back to riding the bush boys in the park." She failed to realize that I was no threat: I was job hunting and strategizing a move. Anyway, I did not believe in love, certainly not with a man so matrimonially encumbered. And so bow-legged.

When I arrived in Sacramento in fall 1987, the AIDS epidemic was at full calamity. I was HIV-negative, a

consolation of the Kansas sequester. The plague tempered my erotic exuberance a bit at first, but I soon shed my Midwestern reticence and hurled myself out there. I felt like one of the Hebrew children who, after roaming around deserts where they did not belong, crossed over into the land of milk and honey—or at least scented lube and semen. I wanted to be a sex object. I wanted to be used. A lot. I was not looking for love. That chimera ate people.

After a childhood, adolescence, even young adulthood of faggot shame and sexual-orientation denial, I elected promiscuous hedonism as a life goal. No more for me the creeping around, masturbating in the shower to the hot but tame bare-chested men snipped from Sears catalog underwear pages, the thin paper soon waterlogging in the steam to reveal bra-stuffed women on the other side of the page. Coming to the sexual revolution late, I now meant to have promiscuous hedonism guide my practice. I had lost time to make up, an interrupted puberty to rejoin—the adolescent sex I had denied myself on boy scout campouts and sleep overs and all that! I had to run to catch up to the parade, even if it was now resembling more and more a funeral procession. I reasoned that were I afraid to live fully now in my fading youth, I too would become, though in a less devastating way, also a casualty of AIDS.

I lived in a one-bedroom apartment in midtown Sacramento that first year: gay central. I could not open my door to arrive or leave at night without doors all around me opening. Every trick I brought home seemed to know someone in the building. “Hey, how’s it hanging?” my tricks would ask one or more of my gay neighbors peering out of a door at us. “Haven’t seen you around for a while.” Those

introductions often got me sleeping with the neighbors as well.

By November 1987, the Catholic impulse had surfaced in me again: I affirmed a devout faith in my wondrous new gay life—but as anyone with a lick of sense understands—faith alone cannot grant salvation. I lacked good works, enraptured as I was by the three D's: disco, drink, and dick. Here I was discoing at the Masque of the Red Death, screaming and carrying on, throwing back booze and bedding whomever while so many were falling all around me for those same earlier behaviors they had not known enough yet to protect themselves from. I had watched the AIDS epidemic devastate from the security of semi-rural Kansas, had learned about safer sex practices in the nick of time, had used condoms for so long now that merely uncrinkling one from its packet was itself a penis-pumping turn-on.

I noticed an ad in a local gay rag, The Patlar, soliciting volunteers for the Sacramento AIDS Foundation's "buddy" or "Hand to Hand" program: clients with advanced HIV disease were matched with volunteers offering them emotional or practical support. I signed up to offer practical support—driving clients to doctor appointments, mowing an occasional lawn, grocery shopping—naively thinking thereby to evade taxing emotional involvements. I passed an initial interview, the central question being "Why do you want to volunteer to work with men dying of a disease that must frighten you as a gay man?" The interview team concentrated on my answer like ants on a honey drop. "It's the central concern of my community," I answered. "I'm reaping the rewards of belonging to that community: if I can help those facing a disease I am lucky

to have avoided, I want to do that. I know that can be satisfying as well." Or words to that effect. I know how to use my tongue for a variety of functions, formal as well as louche. "Without those satisfactions, you won't go far in this work," said the chief interviewer. "The job you're volunteering for is tough. When can you train?"

The sessions during my training in early February 1988 were thorough and intense, occupying a Friday evening and all day Saturday and Sunday. I remember the first exercise from the Friday session: the "Giving Up Exercise," conducted by a man dying of AIDS, as he informed us before beginning. He did not need to announce this because he had what I called, strictly to myself, the "Dachau profile": sparse, straw-like hair of an indeterminate color; hollow, haunted eyes under a corrugated, feverish brow; a sallow complexion, sunken cheeks, and hunched shoulders; bones prominent everywhere. "I'm one of the people you've signed up to work with," he said. "You see what I've got and how I look. Get used to it quick. We need your help, not your pity. If you're just bringing here a bleeding heart, don't come back tomorrow. Go work with puppies at the SPCA."

He directed us to compile a list of the ten things most important to us, to write each of these items on a blank index card, and then to arrange the cards in ascending order, from least important to most. What was most important to me? I struggled with the list. I had just acquired a car, my first ever: that went down as number one, or least important. Next came the apartment I had rented with all the cheap furniture I had hurriedly bought for it. Third was the money I had stashed away in various retirement accounts. My job came next, followed by what I

noted on the fifth card as "a generally optimistic attitude/overall happiness and contentment." I remember the wording: this gift was hard to phrase. On the sixth card I wrote "friends," on the seventh, "family." The eighth, ninth, and tenth cards were difficult to order, but they fell out as follows: health, mobility, and independence (8); my eyesight (9); my mind (10).

Others were struggling as much as I to compose and then order their cards. After everyone in the room—all fifteen of us—had written, crossed out, shuffled our cards into order, carped and complained, the narrative portion of the exercise began:

"For a week, you've had difficulty climbing stairs. Even the half-flight from the underground parking garage to your office cubicle on the first floor of your building leaves you winded and wheezing. You have to rest on the landing for a full five minutes to get to your second-floor apartment, and that's when you're not schlepping up a sack of groceries. You're doctor noodles around but finally diagnoses you with PCP pneumonia and refers you to an AIDS specialist. After completing three days in intensive care on oxygen to stabilize you, you're flat on your back in a quarantined hospital room for a week. Nurses come and go in your room, staggering around you like astronauts in moon-suits or like workers cleaning up a radioactive nuclear meltdown site. You have only partial-coverage health insurance and a five-thousand-dollar deductible. Give up two cards."

I flipped my car card into a wooden box on the floor in the middle of the circle. The savings card followed it.

"After being discharged from the hospital, you cannot go back to work for at least three more weeks. Somehow

your born-again Republican boss finds out that not only are you gay, but you have AIDS. Your co-workers are afraid they'll catch it from you. Too weak to move from your sofa, the TV remote in your hand, you remember a joke your boss told you once: 'What do you call a faggot on skates?' 'Dunno,' you had said, grinning too hard. 'Rolaids.' You had laughed. Give up two more cards."

I threw my job card onto the pile. Reluctantly, I gave up the apartment card too.

"Your family in Utah sends you a pamphlet from the prophet informing you that AIDS is God's neat little extermination plan to tidy up gay abominations. Or, your family's evangelical pastor, told of your plight, takes it upon himself to tote up your celestial loss-assessment balance sheet for you in figures fire-and-brimstone Revival red. Or, the Vatican announces in the world's newspapers that you are 'intrinsically disordered.' Your family clips the account and sends it to you with a yellow sticky attached, advising you that you blew it in this world and you better as hell reckon with the one to come by making a complete confession to a pedophile priest as soon as possible. Oh yes, and they add that they cannot come to visit you because they are afraid they will catch your AIDS. Give up two more cards."

I threw away the family card. The one with ''generally optimistic attitude" followed it into the discard box.

"While running a bath, you notice a purple blotch just above your right ankle. It looks like this." The conductor of the exercise rolled back the sock over his right ankle to reveal an irregular raised blotch of bluish purple. "You dismiss it as a bruise: you stumbled over the vacuum cleaner or something. In the tub, however, you notice

another behind your left knee, another on the inside of your right thigh, just below the permanently enlarged lymph node big and hard as a walnut in your groin area. Within weeks you develop Kaposi's sarcoma lesions on your nose, forehead, and cheeks along with a white bloom of thrush at one corner of your mouth. You're embarrassed to go out in public. You call your best friend. You tell him you're thinking of killing yourself. 'Oh don't do that!' he cries: 'Let's go shopping at Macy's when you look better. I'll call you.' He never does. Give up two more cards."

"Jesus!" I said to myself. The "friends" card went. The "mobility and independence" card followed. The cards in the box splayed to the side under a gathering weight.

"You wake up in the middle of the night. At least you think it's the middle of the night. Your vision is blurred by CMV retinitis. You think you're in the lobby of the Hyatt. You see people coming and going, a glass elevator whizzing up a wall in the atrium. A lady with blue hair walks towards you, carrying a vinyl suitcase red as a Valentine. 'What are you doing here in sweats?' she demands. You suspect she is not real: she jitters in and out of focus like an image on a television with rabbit ears near an airport. You know somehow that you are in your bed, but all the same you cannot get out of the Hyatt. You manage to dial 911. The paramedics bust open your front door chain-lock to get in. You think they are firemen in the Hyatt lobby. You panic and try to run for the exits. They have to restrain you. Your neighbors peek through the cracked-open doors of their apartments to watch you being rolled to an ambulance strapped to a gurney and raving. Give up your last two cards."

I lifted my left haunch and tucked the last two cards under it, the eyesight and the mind cards.

"You have to give them up," gruffed a top-heavy lesbian assisting with the training. She reached for them, but I whipped them out and held them behind my back.

"You too," she ordered the guy sitting to my right. He was holding onto one last card. It said "Lover" on it. I thought to myself, "Oh give up the card, stupid. Your 'lover' skedaddled the moment he first heard your bigot boss fired you." The lesbian pulled the lover card from his resisting fingers and tossed it on the pile.

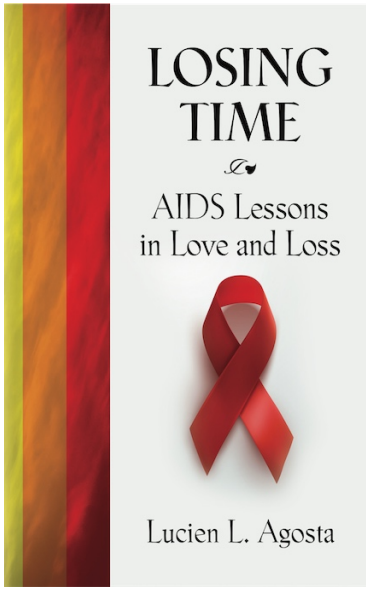
"And that," concluded the implacable voice, "is the fate, give or take a dozen other variant disasters, of the people you are volunteering to work with."

The next morning, assembled early for coffee and gluey Danish for day two of the training, only eleven of the original fifteen of us sat down in the circle.

This is the story of one man who never believed in love, who disdained it as a sentimental heterosexual fiction evolved to keep a man and a woman together just long enough to raise their kids. That man, without warning, slammed into the solid thing he long thought void. That man at last gave up enough of his dented egoism to learn to love, to know how brave lovers have to be, how arduous it is to love well, more exhilarating and painful than he had ever imagined.

This is the story of another man in the process of losing time altogether, of giving up everything on this earth, but who, in spite of all that, had the grace and courage to accept and extend love for the first time ever on his way out.

This is the story of two men, buffeted by AIDS, but each playing a fast, full hand, indeed a whole deck, gambling for everything with their cards fanned in a flush. They won. This is the story of two men giving up in a Losing Time.



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