

liferelationships

'None of us knew that Bob was depressed'

He wrote a book on gay middle-age happiness, then he killed himself.

Tim Teeman on the tragic life of Bob Bergeron

Four months after his death, Bob Bergeron's suicide note remains stubbornly haunting. Bergeron, a handsome 49-year-old New York psychotherapist, killed himself some time around New Year: on Saturday a gathering in his honour was held at an East Village hotel.

His friends and clients remain baffled by his death. Bergeron was living some people's idea of a dream gay life: sexy, outwardly optimistic, an apartment in the gay-popular neighbourhood of Chelsea and about to publish a book, *The Right Side of Forty: The Complete Guide to Happiness for Gay Men at Midlife and Beyond*.

If ever there was a poster boy for the book, it appeared to be its author. However, a *New York Times* article in March revealed that Bergeron felt he had "peaked" at 35, and described his worries over ageing, loneliness and whether his book would bring fame. Scott Boute, a former partner, found Bergeron dead in his apartment on January 5, a plastic bag over his head.

On Bergeron's counter was a piece of paper with an arrow pointing to the title page of his book. On the paper was a note beginning: "This is what my strategy for a great future was based on and it was built on false information." His death was ruled as suicide due to asphyxiation.

A 57-year-old friend told me: "If he couldn't get it right, what hope is there for the rest of us?" Bergeron's death has led many gay men to ask how they can age healthily and sanely, especially when a strand of gay culture loudly valorises youth, and maintaining one's sexiness, above all else.

James Sackheim, a former partner, chatted with Bergeron by phone on January 1 for two hours; Bergeron didn't seem unhappy. They talked about Sackheim, 50, being in a gay club. Sackheim recalls that they discussed "how hard it was. In my twenties I was a shirtless bartender. I've aged well, I'm told, but it's hard. These kinds of conversations formed the catalyst for Bob's book." Sackheim doesn't relish ageing and talks of once planning to kill

himself at 65 ("I thought I didn't need to be 85"), although Bergeron's death has made him think that suicide "is a selfish act. It's devastating. I'm not sure I could now."

Sackheim has Bergeron's journals and his computer: "Maybe there are more answers there, but I can't face looking yet." The alarm around Bergeron's death, Sackheim says, is misplaced. "Everyone has taken Bob's issues with ageing as symbolic of all gay men," he says. "But maybe it's just symbolic of a person like Bob, whose looks are so important it's devastating to think you're losing them. Bob's suicide should inspire people to age as well as they can."

Stanley Siegel, an author, therapist and Bergeron's mentor, says: "None of us knew Bob was depressed. He seemed to be ageing extremely gracefully." With his clients, Bergeron "was practical, directive. He didn't go deep. Bob lived in a positive space. He seems to have been floating out there cheerfully, but with no anchor when the darkness came." The speeches by friends on Saturday focused on Bergeron's (nickname "Fluffy") reputation as a party boy.

Bergeron's blog is relentlessly upbeat, especially around feeling sexually attractive when older. The last entry, dated December 15, reads: "In 2012 I want to: take better care of myself; spend more time out of the house interacting and having fun; find happiness with getting older and stop lying about my age." Another entry majors on how to remain a "sex object". Siegel recalls that when they met a decade ago Bergeron "had a pretty face and long bleached hair. One day the hair was gone. He still wanted to be sexually attractive but in the leather community as a 'dominant top'. I admire sexual exploration, but for Bob sex was a way to experience power."

Siegel believes that Bergeron committed suicide after a drugs binge, "going to a dark place and not able to find his way out of it". Dr Frank Spinelli, a Chelsea physician who referred patients to Bergeron, says: "This has made many people ask: 'At what age do you accept the ageing process?' A lot of gay men fall prey to the stay-young, look-good thing with fat diets, Botox, the latest haircuts, steroids. But I would never have imagined Bob was wrestling with those demons as hard as he was."

Bergeron's clients, Siegel says, initially felt "shocked, saddened, abandoned, betrayed and angry", and are bridging the disconnect between the man who counselled them and the man who couldn't seek help, or help himself. Bergeron had broken up with Boute in 2009, although it "was never like: 'I can't take it.'" Spinelli says. "But breaking with a boyfriend in your mid-forties is different to in your



twenties. Writing the book was tough. He struggled to find the right medium between the clinical and personal."

Don Weise, Bergeron's publisher, said Bergeron was "always upbeat". He had taken gruelling edits in his stride and was looking forward to publicising the book. "I wish he could have said how he was feeling," Weise says. "I've told all my writers if they ever feel like that to tell me or reach out to someone." Weise cancelled publication after Bergeron's suicide, although he has received e-mails from gay men asking him to publish the book and offers from writers to compose an introduction: "But I can't. It wouldn't be right."

What pain was Bergeron concealing, Spinelli wonders, "and who better, given our experiences of being closeted when young, at concealment than gay men?" Ageing is tough, "especially in big cities where there is such an emphasis on appearance," Spinelli says. "I have a patient in his early thirties who wants to get his eyes done. We're

“If he couldn't get it right, what hope is there for the rest of us?”

all, gay and straight, consumed by anti-ageing. We've been sold this idea that 60 is the new 40. It's a lie, and gay men are especially hard on each other. My friends and I have a phrase, TOFA: "Too Old For Abercrombie". There's a certain age when wearing tight T-shirts is not appropriate. We live in an ageist society, but need to accept the ageing process without going crazy."

Christopher Murray, a therapist who knew Bergeron and wrote an eloquent appreciation of him in the newspaper, *Gay City News*, says there can be a "chasm between a gay man's real persona and 'stage' persona which can cause a dislocation of the self". For Murray, the homophobia and bullying suffered by many young gays (and the self-hatred that comes with it) is often a dark ghost beneath the surface of the most apparently gilded life. He says: "I've had good-looking clients who say people don't believe they can have problems because of their looks."

Bergeron's death shouldn't obscure



Left: Handsome, vigorous and a budding author, Bergeron was a tireless spokesman for his community. Above, with James Sackheim

Older gay people may not be as physically beautiful as they once were but they have a lot to live for."

Sex can be an issue "when older gay men are attracted to younger if the latter doesn't reciprocate, which can be the case," he says. Gay older women and men may be more isolated than straight ones.

Weber knows that there is work to be done, including the promotion of lesbian and gay retirement homes, and in making existing institutions as gay-friendly as possible. SAGE offers meals, outings and talks, and a sizeable proportion of its volunteers who visit members at home are young, although Weber has seen young gays "veer around" SAGE's stall at events "as if they can catch ageing. I'd say to younger gay people that those who came before you know a lot and fought battles so you could have bars and gay marriage. Find out more about them. Help them if they need it."

Chatting together over their evening meals in SAGE's dining room are Michael Feuerstein, 70 (who recently lost his partner of 21 years), Gregory Terry, 65, and Guy Laurence — who whispers his age into my ear. Gay culture is not welcoming to older men, they say: bars are for the young and are too expensive. Laurence smiles that "in the past young people and old people mixed more: the interaction is less now".

Sex? "If it happens, wonderful," Terry says.

"But companionship and friendships are more important," Feuerstein says. Four years ago, Dom Tolipani, 64, lost his partner of 42 years: "It is a youth culture out there," he notes, but he would like to meet someone if he can "let" himself.

Patricia DeGaetani, 43, and her wife Louise Avanzato, 71, met 19 years ago and married in New York this year. The accumulation of shared experiences conquered their age difference, DeGaetani says. "We're still on our honeymoon," beams Avanzato.

In his final blog entry Bergeron wrote: "I've got a concise picture of what being over-40 is about and it's a great perspective filled with happiness, feeling sexy, possessing comfort relating to other men and taking good care of ourselves." Perhaps his best legacy is that gay men believe in those words more than Bergeron seemed to.

His memorial on Saturday, appositely, was partly organised by SAGE.

“A strand of gay culture valorises youth and one's own sexiness above all



About a boy
Tom Bickerby's diary on his son Alex, who has Down's syndrome

"Is he very Down's? Or just a little bit?" This is a question that was first put to us by the grandmother of one of Alex's infant neighbours in the intensive care unit soon after his birth.

The phrasing may betray a slightly fuzzy understanding of the precise nature of his chromosomal condition — it's not as though you can have it in only one leg — but it is still a valid question. I ask myself the same thing every day, and I still don't know the answer. There's no way to test for the severity of Down's syndrome. You have to wait and see.

This means that as long as Alex is a baby, we are insulated from the full extent of his condition. Like every baby, any developmental progress that Alex makes seems miraculous and is a source of joy, regardless of how delayed it might be as a result of



The Plankton
One divorcée describes life at the bottom of the sexual food chain

I was walking back home from the café with my habitual cup of coffee in hand. The route is so familiar, every idiosyncrasy of pavement beneath my feet, the neighbourly faces I pass. The only variables are the position of the big bins outside the hairdresser's, the odd puddle after apocalyptic rain and the latest dog turds.

But two days ago there was a new variable — and it was a thought in my head. Not only do I no longer care about Surprise Twinkle, but that whole episode has made me realise that, from now on, I am no longer going to care, full stop. Not about family and friends and work nor the state of the world... I don't mean that. I shall always care about them. I am no longer going to care so much about being on my own and, more importantly, about men who

liferelationships

the Down's syndrome. The overriding impression is that all advances will be possible for him, given time.

His current state is all about exploration. As his burgeoning stability makes new postures possible, his hands are freer to roam and investigate. The sensation of his padded fingertips and satiny palms exploring my face is one of life's great pleasures. And as he gets more physically robust, he and I are both discovering how much he enjoys boisterous horseplay. He no longer feels as fragile as a hatchling, nor do his limbs flop and splay the way they used to, so I'm getting braver about bouncing him around and subjecting him to Daddish rough-and-tumble. His laugh is a deliciously flutey rasp, and I'm addicted to provoking it.

The day will come (some years from now, I hope) when my wife and I will have to face up to the inescapable limitations of Alex's abilities, and assess what difference they will make to his chances for independent, semi-independent or fully dependent adult life. When I'm troubled by fear or low spirits at that prospect, I cling to the idea that as long as Alex is happy, the particular circumstances of his life are of secondary importance.

It does leave our role as his parents rather open ended. He won't necessarily be moving out at school-leaving age, never to return. Will we find an arrangement that allows for his contentment in adulthood, and some semblance of retirement from practical parenthood for me and my wife? Is it wrong to hope so?

don't care about me. I thought, you know what? I don't even care if Telephone Number has a girlfriend.

A few years ago I met a wonderful man who asked for my telephone number. He did so in such a way that it never occurred to me that he might not use it. Uncharacteristic confidence. I should have known better. A week passed, then ten days, two months... and no call. I minded for quite a while. Why so sexily ask for a woman's number if there's no intention of ringing her? Don't mess with a plankton's head!

Unexpectedly, I am seeing him soon. We have been asked to the same small party. And, I admit, a little bit of old me thinks, wouldn't it be great if we got on as well as we did before? If the spark was still there? If he had recovered from his post-divorce rawness and the timing was now right? If he asked for my number and picked up the phone this time? And we went on a date, found we got on really well and my outstanding patience was rewarded?

But, negotiating the new puddles and current dog turds, gripping my latte, I also thought: he will have a gorgeous, pouting girlfriend, of course he will — remember the Ten-Minute Window and it's been two whole years so he probably has several — and yet will I really care?

And the answer is no. I have decided, after the ST fiasco, not to. To rise above everything. To gain strength from my autonomy and to maintain dignity whatever is thrown at me. How? By not giving a toss.

It is the New Me. Who knows how long it might last?