Halfway along the trail from Scout Lookout to Angels Landing in Zion National Park, Utah, the path narrows along an exposed sandstone rib so that hikers must walk single file. On the right side, the rock underfoot tumbles hundreds of feet into Refrigerator Canyon. On the left, it drops a thousand feet to another canyon floor, where the North Fork of the Virgin River meanders.

I hiked this trail with my younger brother a few years ago, and when we came to this place he went first. He moved effortlessly across, using a step carved into the rock like the stairs of a Roman amphitheater. As I followed him, I found myself crouching and moving slower and slower, until my knee joints began to creak. A single misstep, I realized, could send me plummeting to my death. I froze.

"Just don't look down," my brother called out as he turned and saw me immobilized with one foot on the stone step.

Poised at this juncture on the trail to Angels Landing, I saw the ground hundreds of feet below me on both sides. It barely seemed to move as I walked, much as the moon hardly appears to move as you cross a field at night. Heeding my brother’s advice, I glanced up toward him. Even so, my peripheral vision continued to register the canyon floor far below.

Along the trail to Angels Landing, chains are embedded in the
stone as handrails to assist hikers. My brother, nimble and sure-footed, hardly touched the chains. I clasped the chains and pulled myself along one step at a time. I envied my brother’s poise.

“Don’t worry so much,” he said to me. “Just stand up and you’ll balance fine.”

“I’m not afraid of heights,” I yelled back as the wind whipped across the space between us. “I’m afraid of falling.”

THE GRAVITY OF HIV INFECTION

Gay men who test HIV-negative often find themselves fearful and immobilized much as I was on the trail to Angels Landing. When we learn of our HIV-negative status, we feel relieved, redeemed, saved. And yet often this relief is short-lived. The possibility of becoming HIV-positive lingers in the periphery of our minds just as the canyon floor lingered in the periphery of my vision as I walked along the trail in Zion National Park.

Some gay men have little difficulty adjusting to the knowledge of their HIV-negative status. Like my brother, they walk nimbly along the trail with assurance. Others of us, however, are not so fortunate. Our position seems precarious. One misstep, one moment of carelessness during our lovemaking, we fear, might send us hurtling to an unwelcome fate. Some of us are convinced that we cannot escape becoming HIV-infected, just as we cannot escape the inexorable force of gravity. Often these feelings lead to a kind of sexual and emotional immobility akin to the immobility I experienced on the trail to Angels Landing.

I suggest the metaphor of falling because it expresses the one-way nature of HIV infection. According to our current understanding of HIV, the uninfected can become infected but the infected cannot become uninfected. Being HIV-negative—unlike being HIV-positive—is not necessarily a permanent position. It is unstable, and this instability makes it difficult for many HIV-negative gay men to feel secure.

I sympathize with my HIV-positive friends who object to equating HIV infection with falling. The metaphor of a fall is sometimes used to imply that those who have fallen are inferior