

DEAR UNCLE RONNIE by Randy Roberts Potts

Ronald David Roberts, was born in 1945, the oldest son of the late televangelist, Oral Roberts, my grandfather. My Uncle Ronnie, like me, was gay. He wrote in letters, published after his death, that he “came out” in high school, but only to close friends and family, including his father. His father, Oral Roberts, was the first televangelist, and likely the most famous faith-healer since Jesus Christ, with a worldwide audience in the hundreds of millions. He did not want a gay son. Oral’s anti-homosexual rants were so vehement that they can still be found on YouTube, forty years later. In his thirties, six months after getting divorced and coming out, my Uncle Ronnie died, on June 10th, 1982, by a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the heart.

I’m gay too. And my mother, like her father, does not want a gay son. My mother made a point to tell me, only a year ago, at my grandfather’s funeral, in front of 4,000 people, that Hell does exist and I’m going there. My uncle and I were raised in a world dominated by Evangelicals who taught, and still teach, that the fires of Hell await all gay men and women. This is the Evangelical “Christian” legacy for gays like my uncle and me: Threats. Bullying. Damnation. Death.

But for me, and many others, the story doesn’t end here. Five years ago, when I was divorced and came out, I found myself, like my Uncle Ronnie, in Oklahoma, in my thirties, and terrified of losing my children because I was gay. I was regularly called a faggot, both by strangers and by my ex-wife, and, like my uncle before me, reached a point of despair. Suicide among gay men and women in Evangelical communities is still prevalent. Evangelicals may not be killing gays outright—the police report suggests my uncle killed himself. However, while the Evangelical community might not pull the trigger when one of their gay members commits suicide, they provide the ammunition.

When I came out, I started writing a letter to my Uncle Ronnie, a letter meant for me, for my uncle, and for friends I have who are still closeted—terrified their family will reject them. Five years later, I’m still writing this letter—it’s become a way for me to record this experience.

It all started for me one summer afternoon when I was twenty-seven years old, and I stood in my kitchen and said to myself, out loud, that I was gay. It was the most liberating feeling I’ve ever had, and for the next three days I was on top of

the world. But then reality came crashing down on me—I was married, with children, and I didn’t know what being gay would mean in terms of my family, my wife, my children. It was a horrible place to be. It took a few more years of being scared to death and going to two different therapists before I finally decided that the best thing for everyone involved was for me to get divorced and come out. I had been suicidal for years, and I eventually realized that my children needed a father who wanted to live, who looked forward to tomorrow, and the only way I could be that man was to get divorced and come out.

That’s when I started writing my letter to my uncle, because I felt like he was the only one who would understand. My parents didn’t understand, most of my friends didn’t understand—it was something I didn’t know how to explain, so I started writing.

Coming out was TERRIFYING. I remember going to gay bars and standing against the wall like a thirteen-year-old kid at a middle school dance. I was awkward and shy and didn’t have a clue how to talk to people. I drank a lot; it would take two or three drinks just to get the courage to step away from the wall and actually talk to people. And the feeling of talking to a guy who seemed to like me was great, and scary, and nerve-wracking, and amazing, all at the same time. I’d spent my whole life aching to find a nice guy who wanted to hold my hand so the first time I went on a date and held a guy’s hand was AMAZING. I’d never felt happier.

But I was living in Oklahoma at the time, and someone driving by yelled “faggots!” at us. A couple weeks later I was in line at a bar with my boyfriend and two tough guys in front of us said they hoped “no fucking fags” came into their bar tonight. My boyfriend and I were both over six feet tall so I tapped one of the guys on the shoulder and said, “Hey, you’re looking at two fags right now. What do you want to do about it?”

I had never been in a fight in my whole life, but I was ready. I wanted a black eye. I wanted everybody to know I was out, that I was a fag, that I was ready to fight for the right to be who I was. The owner, Edna, leaned over the bar and said “Nobody’s gonna fight about something that stupid in my bar! Free round for the four of you as soon as you hug each other. Do it! Now!” And so we all awkwardly hugged each other and drank Tequila together.

Even a year after coming out, I can’t say things had really gotten better. My ex-wife was still calling me a fag in front of my children and screaming all the time. So, I eventually took her to court for that and other custody violations, spending \$50,000 I didn’t have. But it was worth it—she hasn’t called me a faggot since, and my children haven’t heard their mother or new step-father talk disparagingly of gays in their presence either. My ex-wife and I share our children equally, and the kids are doing great. We get along just fine now.

And me, I’m doing great. Finally. I’ve had a lot of different boyfriends. I’ve fallen in love a couple times. I’ve felt that wonderful, giddy feeling you get when someone you like likes you back, and the gut-crushing feeling you get

when that same someone lets you go. I’m finally not desperate anymore. I’m just me, happy, and gay, but not defined by my sexuality. The best thing about coming out has been to watch myself go from someone terrified of being gay, to someone willing to fight for my right to be openly gay, to, finally, just another guy living his life who happens to be gay. That’s the best thing of all. I had to fight hard for it, but it finally happened—the freedom to just be myself, no apologies, no fighting, no drama. The day I thought would never come finally snuck up on me and surprised me. My grandfather was famous for telling people, “Something good is going to happen to you!” And, it’s strange to admit it, but he was right.

That’s what I’d like to tell my Uncle Ronnie today: It really does get better.

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