

# Children of a Lesser God

by Larry Phillips

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It's 10:20 Friday. I'm probably 35,000 feet up and I am flying west to see Ron. For the past hour or two I've been reading the *New Yorker*. I brought it because I wanted to read good writing in the hope that I might learn how to put into words thoughts and feelings within me about my brother Ron, who is dying of AIDS.

This time I'm flying a DC-10, which is far better than the 727 I flew in the last time I went to see Ron. The movie is *Children of a Lesser God*, one of my favorites. When the flight attendant came by and asked if I would like to pay \$4 to listen to the movie, I decided not to. Not because of the cost—the law practice is doing well enough—but because I thought there would be a certain poignancy in seeing this particular movie without sound. For now, I want to enjoy silence, to be left with my thoughts, to try to have this pen capture my love and feelings for Ron.

There are so many other things I should be doing at the moment. Life has been so hectic the past six months. I don't believe I have ever worked so hard at such a sustained pitch of intensity for so long. The worst is that my children are growing up and I hardly have time to notice, although I try to make time.

Lynette is already in academy. She says she wants to be a lawyer. We're going through that phase when she is determined to be treated and trusted as an adult but my wife and I are not convinced she's got quite enough maturity. We had a real blow-out about two weeks ago. We talked (sometimes I shouted—shouldn't have)

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from 10 to 12:30 one night by phone. Since then everything has been good between us. Next week I attend an awards ceremony put on by a foundation that sponsored an essay contest. Lynette is one of the three finalists. I'm so proud of her.

John is also having a great year at school. I have to give him more batting practice now that he is playing in the 13-year-old Little League where the pitching is much faster (I wonder why we don't teach our kids in our schools to play hardball. I can't remember reading anything in the little red books frowning on it.)

Last night was kind of special, although every Thursday night is special. After family worship (which we don't have often enough) we turn on the *Cosby Show*. Last night I held Dawn, my youngest, in my lap during the entire show. Right now she is so affectionate—she rested her head in the nook between my head and shoulder. We had a comforter over us. It was so cuddly, I couldn't stop kissing her head. For half an hour I reveled in being a parent. Time is going by so fast. Am I taking enough time to create memories with my family? What will my children remember about their father?

I know the love and concern a parent feels for their child. I know the love my mother has. "Your children can make you or break you," she had said, sitting by Ron's hospital bed about seven weeks ago. It was not said with bitterness or anger, but out of the pain of her great love for Ron—always her favorite. It was said spontaneously and without thought as to its effect on Ron. He had been talking about one of his friend's children and how well-behaved they were when out came her comment: "Your children can make you or break you."

The words cut deep into Ron. “Mom, I didn’t know anything about AIDS five years ago.” I thank God she restrained herself from saying something about the consequences of sin.

When it was time for Ron to take his afternoon nap, Mom and I went for a walk in the Golden Gate Bridge Park, up the street from Ron’s hospital. As Mom and I walked hand in hand, we talked about Ron. My heart wept for the tiny woman who was trying so hard to make sense of what was happening to her son who had been the subject of her daily prayers, especially since learning that he was a homosexual. The only way she could maintain some sense of order was to cling tenaciously to her religious beliefs and what those beliefs said about homosexuality. The awfulness of Ron’s sin was repulsive—offensive to the law of God, unnatural to man. Ron had chosen to live a life of sin and this was the consequence of that choice. There, in a few words, was God’s position, the church’s position, and man’s position. Simple, unambiguous, unequivocal. Cause and effect—black and white—God and Satan. Choose up this day whom you will serve—God or man (carnal man).

It’s amazing, as I watch the figures on the screen, to what lengths people go to communicate with one another. It’s fascinating to watch people who cannot hear or speak talk to each other with their hands. Children of a lesser God. Why is it so hard for us Christians to really communicate with one another?

Suppose homosexuality, I wonder, is biological—like being deaf or dumb or having sickle cell anemia. The needless, destructive hurt we inflict—how un-Christlike. Is it so unreasonable to think that just as God had to speak to the ancient Israelites within the context of their understanding of the cosmology of the universe (they believed the Earth was the center of the universe) that He might also have spoken to them in the context of the understanding of sexuality? Who was it that said God cannot change man’s perception of reality but must communicate to man within that context, however limited or mistaken it may be? Should science ever establish that homosexuality is genetic and not volitional, could the church change, or would we be locked

into our past and antiquated perceptions of reality as was the church in the days of Galilee?

But there has to be another level beyond the level of theological discourse. My brother is dying. DYING! Can’t the church understand that? One of God’s children—many of God’s children—are dying; dying a horrible, painful

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death made only more painful by the knowledge that the church of their childhood has rejected them—does not consider them worthy of understanding, acceptance, or ministry. If asking the church to welcome gays as part of its fellowship is asking the church to be more Christlike than it is capable of being, why can’t it at least try to love the sinner if not the sin? I am convinced that there is no bigger test of being Christlike confronting Christianity today than how it will relate to its children who are dying of AIDS.

The phone had rung around 9:30 in the evening. The man calling identified himself as Tom Harrison, a friend of my brother, Ron. He didn’t know how to break the news to me except directly. “Your brother has AIDS. He’s in the hospital and they don’t know if he’ll live.” I haven’t cried as I cried then since I was a child. Even then I didn’t cry as hard.

Tom had already called Peter, my youngest brother, in Europe. The next day Peter and I were in San Francisco at our brother’s side. In those first days we met so many of Ron’s friends. Gays, straights, black, white, men, women, rich, poor. People in the hospital said they had never seen so many visitors come to see one patient. As I learned to know Ron’s friends, I came to know my brother. I heard people speak of him as their dearest friend. Ron, they told me, had more friends around the Bay area than anyone else they knew. Friends who had worked with Ron in the California Department of Social Services 10

years ago when he left to go into business for himself. They told me my brother cared deeply about the people who were part of his case load; he refused to let shoddy work go through; he bucked the bureaucracy if it got in the way. Former tenants who had rented an apartment from Ron told me he was the best and fairest landlord they had ever had. Another told of how only a month ago Ron had stayed with a friend, day after day, until that friend finally died of AIDS. Ron loves life—he traveled widely, he learned the art of French cooking in Paris. He was generous, giving with his friends. I hate myself for not having known Ron.

His eyes were closed—sleeping, his breathing labored, aided by the oxygen being fed through his mask. By Monday, he had passed the immediate crisis. He was going to live, for the time being, and recover from the pneumocystic pneumonia that had put him in the hospital so suddenly and without warning. As I looked at him, I cried silently. I felt it was so unfair that he had to suffer in such a visible and painful way for past actions. If he had sinned, so also have I. Maybe not the

same sin, but sins nonetheless. Neither I nor anyone else has the right to sit in judgment on my brother—we all have “beams” in our eyes. Who has the right to say one sin is greater than another in the eyes of God?

As Ron slept, I closed my eyes. In my mind’s eye I saw him standing with a nondescript group of people. He didn’t have his oxygen mask on, and he looked remarkably fit. One characteristic marked his appearance and those around him—a puzzled, quizzical look on their faces. Ron was standing at the front of the group and was answering someone whose back was to me. I heard Ron saying:

“Lord, when did we see you naked and clothed you? When did we see you hungry and fed you? When did we see you in prison and visited you? When did we see you sick, and comforted you?”

And then the one, whose back was to me, said:

“Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these, my brothers, you have done it unto me. Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.”

I saw a banner flying over Ron and his friends. It read: Children of a Greater God.