Farm Boys

Fellows, Will

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Norm Reed

Norm was born in 1945 in northeastern Ohio. Until he was seventeen, he lived on a small family farm in a Mennonite farming community between Massillon and Wooster, in Wayne County. Norm grew up with two older sisters, an older brother, and a younger brother. He was married for five years and is the father of one child. He lives in the Cleveland, Ohio, area.

GOING TO CHURCH was my own choice. For a while, my father was basically a drunk, and my mother was a run-around whore. It was us kids who felt the need to get involved with church. It was kind of a haven, a nice place to be on Sunday mornings, away from the fighting that Mom and Dad were doing at the house. My parents were very anti-church and would have nothing to do with the little Mennonite community. We weren't Mennonites, but every summer I would go to Bible school for two or three weeks at a Mennonite church. Sundays I would go to a United Brethren in Christ church, sort of a branch of the Mennonite church.

When I was seven years old, I got very involved in praying and reading the Bible and learning as much as I could by listening to every word the evangelist or minister would say. I decided when I was in third or fourth grade that I had to be a minister. When I was ten or eleven, Mom and Dad got interested in going to the United Brethren church. I never had any intention of getting them involved or trying to help them get their lives straightened out, but eventually they kind of got it together as a result of being more visible in the church community. Groups of people would come to our house to have prayer meetings in the backyard. All through high school, I was involved with groups like Youth for Christ. We would hand out tracts at school, inviting kids to come to church. In college I studied Christian education, preparing to become a missionary. After college, my wife and I became heavily involved with church work. We taught in a Christian school for three or four years, and were married for five.

Dad worked in a factory full-time, but had grown up on a truck farm where they sold vegetables for a living. We had only about six acres. We always had four or five cows, barnyards full of chickens, and rabbits. By the time
I was seven or eight, it was my job to get up around 6:00 and milk our cows. Then we would have breakfast and go off to school. I milked in the evening as well. Our neighbors about a half mile to the west were Mennonite, and every night when the woman would go out to feed their chickens, she would sing church songs. During the winter her voice would echo across the fields, and sometimes we'd go outside just to hear her sing.

We butchered chickens and rabbits every Saturday during the summer. We would clean and pluck five or six chickens and Mom would use them during the week, mainly for Sunday dinners. She would invite people in—neighbors, other farmers, but the majority were people from the church. After church, there were at least twenty, twenty-five people there for dinner. And during the week there were always lots of people there, a lot of commotion. It seemed like our house had become the center of neighborhood activities.

We had maybe three acres of strawberries and raised our own vegetables, so we all did a lot of work in the gardens. We had a tractor but we didn't have a lot of the equipment that the larger farmers had, so we would go out with scythes and sickles to cut hay. On occasion, Dad would loan his tractor out, or I would drive the tractor to help cut the farmers' fields for them. Our farm sat in the middle of larger dairy farms, and during the summer we would work for the neighbors, give them a hand with baling hay, taking care of their cows, cleaning out stalls, and anything else that they might have to do. It wasn't because we wanted the money, it was because that was the way things were done. If a neighbor was sick or in the hospital or couldn't tend his farm, I would volunteer to take care of his cattle, do the milking. And my dad had a way of volunteering me to do things when I didn't want to.

Grandma and my younger brother and I slept in the same bed for a number of years, and my older brother was in the same room. Everybody wore everybody else's clothes, and I always got my older brother's rags. We did not have running water; we had a pump in the cellar. I always wanted to get away from the farm. My grandmother on my mom's side lived in town and I often asked her if I could come live with her. Sometimes I'd go in on Friday night after school and spend the weekend with her, go to church with her on Sunday and then back home. I'm not sure I liked being with her as much as I liked not being on the farm. Dad was such a mean bastard, nobody ever wanted to be around him. He was always very demanding, rather brutal, and things had to get done his way. He and Mom fought all the time, and he would often take it out on us kids. By the time I was born, my parents had gone through the Depression and the war, and Dad was supporting a family, trying to keep up a
small farm and his own job. I think he felt a lot of pressure and was very frustrated.

Mom, on the other hand, was always supportive, pretty much no matter what we wanted to do. And anything that we were a part of, Mom was there—church youth group, Cub Scouts, school band. She was a volunteer cook and room mother, so she was at school every day with me and my little brother. She wasn’t overly protective, but she just had to have that grip on us. She didn’t want us taken away from the farm or the house too much. I think getting involved with our involvements was her way of showing how much she loved us without communicating much verbally. As far as sitting down and talking and sharing feelings, we never did that.

On Saturdays, Mom would root us out of bed around 5:30, 6:00 so she could rip the sheets and covers off and get her laundry started. My sisters helped her with the house chores. We had two great-uncles—old bachelors, just awful old biddies—who lived maybe eight miles from us. We often had to clean their house, and every year Mom would make me and my little brother clean their darned wallpaper. We always had to be busy doing something. We could never just sit and read a book, and we didn’t have a TV. I’d watch Grandma crochet and I wanted to learn how to do that, but Mom didn’t want me to learn. She didn’t know how to crochet, and maybe she thought that was something she could not be a part of. But Dad said, “Oh, it doesn’t matter,” so I learned how to crochet, and that was my hobby.

Every Saturday, the neighborhood would get together and have a ballgame. We had a very nice ball diamond in one of the neighbors’ fields, and the fathers got together to put up the poles and a net. Some weekends everybody played. There might have been as many as twenty-five, thirty people up there. We always met at our house, then up to the field with our bats and balls and gloves. On occasion, while the fathers were playing with their kids, the mothers would make ice cream. When we were through playing, we’d all get together and have ice cream and cake and pie at our house. My mom had grown up with a friend who was blind all her life. Mom would sometimes go pick her up and bring her over to the house. She loved my mom’s fudge, and on an occasional summer night Mom would make a big batch and we’d all sit out in the yard on blankets, eating fudge and talking.

We had so much commotion and no privacy whatsoever in the house, and Mom always had to know what we were doing. I just lived for the days when they would go to a church meeting or somewhere and leave me alone in the house by myself. Those times came infrequently. I used to take long walks, just to be alone, and I loved ice-skating and would often go skat-
ing at night by myself on a neighbor’s farm pond. On Saturday nights I would meet a friend at the railroad tracks, because his house was a mad-house too. We would flicker flashlights so we could see each other coming, then walk the tracks together for maybe twenty, twenty-five minutes and go our separate ways. One of my friends in grade school lived about two miles from us, so on occasion we’d meet at the pond or do something together in the evening. But his parents were very strict on him too, he had to be home, and they always questioned where he was going. All the parents in that community had such a grip on their kids. You could never leave the house without saying, “I’m taking a walk,” or, “I’ll be back in an hour.” You had to be always in the presence of your parents, for some reason. I think it was just that they had to control what they had.

When I started school, I was kind of a mama’s boy. But one thing I made sure I knew how to do was to tie my shoes. My sisters drilled me till I got it right. When we had gym in first grade we played in our stocking feet, and I knew how to tie my shoes, but a lot of the cute little boys didn’t know how. If it was a good-looking boy, I would make sure that I was the one who helped him put his shoes on. I’d put his foot in my crotch and tie his shoe for him.

We were never allowed to mention anything relating to sex or pregnancy at home. One morning when I was about ten years old, I was lying in bed rubbing myself, and it felt so good. I ejaculated and I was so scared about it. I thought I was real sick, that I had done something wrong to my body. The next day I said, “Mom, I don’t know what happened, but white stuff came out of me.” She just said, “Oh, really?”

A lot of times I would take walks so I could masturbate. It wasn’t like I could go in the bathroom and close the door, because we had no door on the bathroom, just a curtain. I couldn’t do it in bed, because my brother and my grandmother were lying right there. It was just such a hassle; I couldn’t be alone to do anything. We were always so afraid of getting caught at anything we did. Mom or Dad or somebody might be watching. And then, because it was such a hush-hush thing, I felt guilty for doing it.

Sometimes, when Mom and Dad would go away for a couple hours, I would go up in Mom’s closet and dress up in her high heels and dresses. I wasn’t five or six, trying to play mama. I was twelve or thirteen, and I thought dresses were so comfortable. I did that for a number of years and most of the time they didn’t know anything about it, until I began wearing her outfits to work in the fields sometimes. It was no big deal. “Oh, Norm’s got Mom’s dress on again.” Once we were out in the field spreading cow shit, and there I was in Mom’s high heels, her white gloves and a
dress, with my pitchfork. They just kind of accepted it, except one day when I was down by the barn in one of her better dresses. A damned goat started chewing on the dress, and I thought, oh no, Mom’s going to really be pissed, so I backed away and the goat ripped it right off of me. But other than that, no one ever said anything about it.

One day I was down at the barn fooling around and a calf started butt­
ing me. I thought, oh, this could be interesting. The inevitable happened, but I didn’t know what damage I might have done—if it was good for the calf or not, or if it could kill him—so I didn’t let him suck me off very often. There was one guy in high school—a drum major—and maybe three or four times we met in the bathroom between classes and jacked each other off. He was tall, thin, and very attractive. I think that was just a sexual outlet for him, but for me it went a little deeper.

I think Mom always knew that I was gay, but it was never mentioned. If we ever sat down and talked, it was always about, oh, this person’s doing this, or the grandkids are doing that, or the neighbors, or her church ac­tivities. It was never heart-to-heart. In high school, I was going through this turmoil; I wondered why, if I’m a Christian and I believe in God, do I feel this way towards other guys? There were a number of times I would just stand at the kitchen window and stare out. Mom would come up behind me and put her arm around me and say, “Norm, what’s wrong? Talk to me.” But I could never talk to her. I would just say, “Oh, there’s nothing, nothing wrong.” I didn’t know anybody who was gay. In that community, they would as soon shoot somebody that was like that as they would a mad dog. To them, it’s just part of the Devil.

I met the woman that I married in high school, and we went to the same college. She fell in love with me, and I truly loved her. I was still going through the transition from adolescent to adult, not knowing that anybody else like me existed, but regardless of how I felt toward other guys, I wanted a family. The only right thing to do at that time was to get married and have kids and become the missionary that I wanted to be. In my college psychology courses, homosexuals were just briefly mentioned, with no definition. Most of what was in the library was written by very religious-type people, who damned it as very abnormal behavior that could be cured with counseling, and said that there was no excuse for being homosexual.

I got married when I was twenty-two. I had read in some book that the best thing for a person to do if he thinks he’s a homosexual is to get married, because the homosexual feelings will subside. Within a month or two, I knew I had made a mistake, because what I had felt toward my wife
subsided and my feelings toward men increased. I felt guilty whenever it happened, but every now and then, if there was an opportunity, it was very discreetly handled, and she never knew about it. One day we received a letter from a friend that we had both known in college. In the letter, he revealed that he was gay. I think she was kidding when she said, “Norm, since the two of you were such good friends, does this mean that you’re a queer too?” I looked at her and said, “I didn’t know he was a homosexual, but I know that I am.” I wasn’t going to hide anything from her at that point, and she just went nuts. Three years later, we got divorced.

I always tried to be so prim and proper in the eyes of other people. When the divorce came, she ruined my prestigious endeavors in the large church in Cleveland that she and I had belonged to. The minister came to me and said, “There’s a law on our books that if behavior like this takes place with any of our members, we have the power to ostracize them.” He was not at all willing to talk it through with me. He saw the Devil in me, and if you are a Devil they don’t want anything to do with you. He said, “The only way you can enter our building again is if you present yourself to the deacons and confess your sins before us. If we decide to forgive you and we feel that you have made an honest repentance to God for your sins, then you would need to confess your sins in front of the congregation and they would vote on whether they still want you in the church.”

It made me so angry, I never went back. I thought, holy shit, why put me through all of this just because I’m gay? To me, being gay didn’t mean that much. I had already gotten to the point where I felt it was wrong, but then I felt, hey, this is me. Whether it’s right or wrong doesn’t matter. It’s nobody else’s concern. The biggest turn-around for me was how angry I was at those hypocritical church-going people whose husbands were cheating on their wives, or whose wives were having their boyfriends in during the day, or whose little kids were screwing in the church parking lot. These were the church leaders, religious fanatics who have ruined the lives of very good people because they have ostracized them or made their lives guilt-ridden by cutting them off.

Eventually I met some other gay people, got involved with some of the activities downtown, and started going to bars. I’d never been inside a bar. The first gay march we had in Cleveland, I was right up in front, carrying a banner down Euclid Avenue screaming for gay rights, because it just made me so angry to think that I had given my whole life up to that point—I was twenty-seven—basically to God, to the church. Every time the church lights were on, I had been there, picking up kids for Sunday school, Bible school. My whole life had been wrapped around Christian addictive behavior. One night at the baths, a very prominent person in our
church walked up to me and said, "Well, Norm, don't be surprised. I'm not." He and I became very good friends. He was also a very religious Christian believer, and he was married and had children. We spent hours on the phone, sharing experiences and how we felt.

As I was finally coming to terms with being gay, my younger brother came home from college and lived with me for a while. I could see that he was definitely gay. "You can't be any different than I am," I said. "You're gay and you're not admitting it." He said he didn't think so, I said I'd prove it to him, and that night I took him to the baths. After that, he and I became even closer and were able to discuss things. He didn't have a hard time accepting being gay, because he never felt guilty, never liked church, never held much stock in any of that. I don't think he ever questioned whether it was right. He was so relieved to find out about himself, he was telling everybody. He told my parents and my older sister about himself, and he mentioned me in there too. He had a big influence on my being forced to better accept it within myself.

There is no explanation for my being gay. The Lord and I have an understanding, and He's just going to accept it the way it is. I have a lot of faith in the Lord and the Bible. I believe the Bible as literally as I can understand it. I've never felt punished by the Lord for being gay. I've been punished tremendously by religious fanatics who thought I was the perfect person, but ostracized me when they found out I was gay. I still believe the same way I did. I just don't practice it by going to some social club that they call church and Sunday school. The attitude that I have now towards fanatical religious-right-type people is probably the attitude my dad had when I was growing up.

I grew up believing that God was very vengeful, and at the same time I was taught that God is love and Jesus forgives. Maybe that's how I finally accepted that there's no problem with my being gay. Until the divorce and the horrendous thing at church, I felt guilty. This is not what the Lord wants; God would not condone this sort of thing. Then I thought, well, I'll just take Him for His word, that He does forgive and that He is a loving God. I believe so much in God's love and in the grace that's sufficient for all of us through Him. He's the one that created me and gave me these feelings. I've accepted this now for eighteen years or so, and I'm happy that I am where I am at this point in life. I'm not afraid of anybody finding out I'm gay, and I don't have to feel guilty or try to hide anything.

I've felt some resentment toward my mom for not telling me that she knew. I feel she should have said, "Norm, I know you prefer being with guys rather than women. There's nothing wrong with that—there's a lot
of people like you. Let’s talk.” It was up to her to acknowledge to me that she knew, not to just keep asking me, “What’s wrong?” Had I realized I was gay, I would never have gotten married. I have a son who’s twenty-two now. I would never undo what has been done, but it would have prevented a lot of heartache, as far as the divorce and child custody. About a year and a half ago I told my son that I’m gay. He said that he had suspected for a long time. Then he hugged me real tight and held me, and thanked me for feeling comfortable enough with him to let him know. Now we can talk about anything.

I’m so glad to be away from farming. I had my fill of all the animals and the commotion. I think that’s why I live alone today. It’s so peaceful. I kind of feel bad for people who are growing up in the country, but then in another way I don’t, because it’s a rich life. We ate well, had good neighbors, overall people were rather kind. In meeting really good, honest, genuine people, I would say I’ve met the best of them by growing up in that area. Some of those old-timers just cannot be beat. Even though they’re anti-homosexual because they don’t understand it, they’re still wonderful Christian people. If some of them found out I was gay, they would say, “I think I had a cow that was something like that once.” It’s no big deal to some of those old-timers, and they don’t even know what it means anyhow.

It was important that the cows got fed by six in the morning. It was important that they were milked by a certain time at night. It was important that church was attended every Sunday. Everything was important to everybody; you had to be where you were supposed to be at all times, and you had to be there on time. We grew up trusting everybody. Bums would come down the road, and Mom would invite them in and make a big meal for them, give them some extra bread, and send them on their way. I’m very trusting and giving, and I don’t expect anything in return. If you need it, fine, take it. If I can help somebody out, I’ll do it. That’s the way that community was.

My interests were always on things other than country things. When I was maybe fourteen, I had an opportunity to get involved in a local theater where I had gotten a part in a summer play. My dad thought that maybe it was too worldly, so he wouldn’t let me be in it. It really makes me mad when I think about the opportunities that I was not allowed to have because it just wasn’t right, or it was too far away, or it would cost too much, or it would take me away from the routine of everyday farm life. Other kids grew up in better homes than I did, where there was maybe a little bit more fun and laughter. It was never any fun at home, except those nights when Mom made fudge or when all of us kids would get to
throw buckets of water on each other, or just play games. Dad was always there telling us how to do it, or that we weren’t doing it quite well enough. And Mom was always there, not necessarily domineering, but just being there.

We never had TV and it was a sin to go to movies. Years later, when I visited a church where I had gone as a kid, I was wearing a tie. A woman came up to me with scissors and said, “You either take that tie off or I cut it off.” It was a sin to wear a tie to church—too worldly, putting too much emphasis on yourself. God doesn’t want that sort of thing. I just cannot stand organized religion, to have some minister up front befooling everybody from the pulpit.

My mom passed away about six years ago. In her memory, I thought the whole family should get together, and we’ve been doing it now for six years. When we get together, at least once a year, we have such a good time. Every April, towards May, we meet on my older brother’s place in southern Ohio and we have a mushroom fest because, growing up on the farm, we all went out with our bags to hunt mushrooms. There might be forty of us, all the grown kids and their spouses and their kids and their kids. My younger brother brings his lover with him. They’ve been together for about eighteen years.

I would love to have a lover like my brother has. Maybe ten years ago, I was down at their place and at 5:30 in the morning I heard all this laughing and giggling going on out in the kitchen. I was still in bed and I thought, jeez, they’re having a party out there. So I put on my bathrobe and went out and peeked around the corner, and there’s the two of them sitting at the table just laughing and telling jokes. They’ve been doing that kind of thing for the last eighteen years—just like two little magpies. That’s the kind of companion I’d like to have. But most people whom I’ve gotten involved with, there’s always something that I have to criticize. Either they’re not neat enough or they’re not clean enough, or they’re too—I don’t know. I like things a certain way, and if it’s not that way it’s just no way at all.