

## Remembering Keith

“Honey, I’ve got bad news. Keith has AIDS.” The tenderness in the voice was, in a way, more alarming than the actual words. It was 1986. Keith was my favorite cousin and AIDS was a deadly disease with no known successful treatment. I knew that I had just been informed of his death sentence and my brain was scrambling to find an alternative explanation for what my ears had just heard; the tenderness ruled out any other explanation.

Keith had moved to New York City to follow his dreams and had come back in Texas to visit the family.

The voice continued. “He was so sick when he got off the airplane, Caroline [his sister] took him straight to the hospital. He has pneumonia; he’s not going back to New York. Your Uncle Marshall is taking him back to Big Spring.”

*Keith has AIDS.... not going back to New York....taking him back to Big Spring.* I was reading a lot of classical poetry at the time and those words called forth lines from a poem by John Donne:

*No man is an island,  
Entire of itself.  
Each is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main.  
If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less.  
As well as if a promontory were.  
As well as if a manner of thine own  
Or of thine friend's were.  
Each man's death diminishes me,  
For I am involved in mankind.  
Therefore, send not to know  
For whom the bell tolls,  
It tolls for thee.*

I had known that Keith was gay since before I even understood what it meant to be gay. And I was just in the process of coming to grips with the fact that I wasn’t straight either. We were kindred spirits. We’d grown up in the same crazy extended family. We’d survived years of leaving my grandmother’s table hoping that we wouldn’t explode from eating that last piece of fried chicken or coconut pie and the terror of driving lessons with my grandfather before either of us could actually see over the steering wheel and reach the brake at the same time. And we’d survived the joy of many family get-togethers that revolved around family feuds. This connection was strengthened by the fact that we were the unacceptable queer sheep of the family, both lived in the buckle of the Bible belt, and were both surrounded by people who felt justified in beating us senseless because they thought that the bible told them that that’s what we deserved.

So he’d escaped. He’d gotten out. He lived in a brownstone in New York City. New York City! You can’t even imagine the freedom that implied. He was *free*! And then because of a stupid disease, he’d had to come back home, had had to come back to a place where he had been persecuted and rejected. I sobbed for both of us when I got off the phone. I wasn’t just losing my cousin; I was losing my hope in the possibility of hope for something better. I felt the bell toll for me.

To my Aunt and Uncle's credit, they did everything they could to support him. They got him into an experimental drug program in Galveston (these were the years before the live saving cocktails). It was his only chance of surviving. They'd even moved to Galveston so that they could visit him every day. I still remember hearing my uncle, a manly man who loved football, hunting and fishing, break down into tears because he was the only father who went to the hospital to visit. None of the other fathers bothered to show up. Few of the mothers went either. This rejection was part of the brutal reality of being gay in Texas in the mid-eighties. My aunt and uncle became surrogate parents to a number of men on the AIDS ward. And even though my Aunt and Uncle showed up and did their best, they never really understood. They loved him *even though* he was gay. Keith and I both knew that it wasn't the same as just being loved.

The treatments failed. Keith never got better. He just wasted away, physically and mentally. It was heartbreaking to watch. After battling the disease for at least 2 or 3 years, he died 1988..

You'd think that the grueling process of death by AIDS would be enough, but the pain and humiliation didn't stop there. Dead, his body was even more tainted than it had been when he was alive. The local funeral homes refused to touch his body. The funeral itself (with an empty casket because my aunt and uncle had to have his body cremated) was an exercise in denial. My brother was the only person at the funeral who even acknowledged that Keith had died of AIDS. His words, "Fucking faggot -- he should have killed himself instead of putting everyone through all this embarrassment." weren't particularly comforting.

Because of his dementia and his impaired immune system, I never really got a chance to say goodbye. So here's to you Keith. And here's to all the other people who have died of HIV. And here's to all the people who are living with AIDS. And most importantly, here's to the hope that science will put an end to this epidemic once and for all.

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