John Boswell’s faith lit up a generation

My brother’s work paved the way for many LGBTQ Christians.

by Patricia Boswell in the April 20, 2022 issue

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My brother John Boswell was one of the most controversial figures in modern religious studies. The recent pilot for a proposed docuseries called *Sorry We Missed You* addresses the impact of his two most important books: *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* and *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*. The first won the 1981 National Book Award for history; the second was featured in Doonesbury, leading many newspapers to stop running the comic strip. “In gay religious studies,” writes journalist Brian Bromberger, “there is before John Boswell and there is after John Boswell.” In the *Sorry We Missed You* pilot, pastor and professor R. C. Wilkinson says that “everything that’s happened in the whole movement of having open and affirming churches is built on Boswell’s foundation.”

When Jeb’s story is told, the personal faith that drove his scholarship and paved the way for LGBTQ ordination is often overlooked.

Christmas Eve marked 27 years since Jeb, as John was known to family and friends, died of complications from AIDS. I helped him plan his funeral. He insisted that his eulogy be delivered by either our mother or me. I objected, pointing out that neither of us was qualified to discuss his scholarship. He felt that the more important subject was his faith. “You choose the music and the readings, Sweetie,” he said. “I ask only that the service should celebrate the glory of God and the desirability of the life to come.”

Raised in the Episcopal Church, at age 15 Jeb elected to join the Roman Catholic Church. He truly believed that this was the church founded by Jesus upon the “rock” of Peter, though I suspect his fascination with all things medieval also influenced him. I’m nine years younger than Jeb, and I remember accompanying him to confession, where he would give me a quarter to light a votive candle while he was with the priest. His loyalty to the church never faltered; he remained a daily mass Catholic until his death.

An exasperated friend once inquired why Jeb remained Catholic, given the church’s hostility toward homosexuality. I’ve never forgotten his response: “When the barque of Peter is in stormy seas, it is better to stay on board and be seasick than to jump overboard and drown.”

While my mother ensured that I went to church and Sunday school, it was Jeb who nurtured my faith and curiosity. On warm days, after he came home from school, we would sit at the backyard picnic table, the scent of the tomato plants in Dad’s garden tickling our noses, while he read C. S. Lewis’s Narnia books to me and our brother Wray. The God I learned about in church appeared to me to be a judgmental old man, but the God I learned about from my brother was more in the model of Aslan the lion: fierce, but also unconditionally loving. When the child protagonists go astray, he seeks to bring them back rather than to punish them. But, as the books emphasize over and over, Aslan is “not a tame lion,” and one can never predict his actions or responses.

As I grew older, Jeb encouraged me to read the Bible, yet we also reread the Narnia books every other year for most of our lives and reserved the language of Narnia as a private shorthand for our theology.

Jeb used the Bible to teach himself many of the languages he read. Early on, he gave me the Vulgate Bible to encourage my study of Latin, and he had me memorize

the beginning of John, his favorite book of the Bible. I can still recite it by heart: “In principio erat verbum, et verbum erat apud Deum, et Deus erat verbum.”

Jeb’s pioneering work in LGBTQ religious studies grew from his deep faith.

When I was 14, he recommended that I read the entire New Testament during Lent, while he read it in Greek, so that he could “help me philologically” if I got stuck. He wrote to me that the Gospels “are, or should be, the crux of a Christian’s faith . . . St. Paul is much less important. . . . The Acts are interesting: I don’t know why I said they weren’t, except that they’re not very theological, and theology is my chief interest.” Jeb asked me to decide whether “the kingdom of God is here yet or is to come. I’d be interested,” he wrote, “in your opinion.”

Wray and I were full of questions about the Bible, and Jeb spent hours while at Harvard writing painstaking answers—from what individual verses meant to the role of Paul to the question of inerrancy.

Jeb’s connection to his faith was both deeply intellectual and deeply emotional. He was moved by a production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* that he saw in London. The song “Could We Start Again Please?” spoke deeply to him. He wrote about its vivid portrayal of “the doubt about Jesus that overpowers everyone’s faith during his trial and execution.” He goes on:

> The audience, too, believes things have gotten out of his control and all is tragically lost. Throughout the trial one’s hope and faith sink lower and lower. Then at its lowest ebb, on a pitch-black stage, three soldiers nail him down to a cross, which then rises off the floor high above the stage. As Jesus delivers his last words and commends his spirit to God, the whole cast gathers under the cross to look up, horror struck at him dying (it’s extremely realistic and shattering) and then, as that last beautiful music plays, they, and you, suddenly understand that this is what he planned, that this is the final triumph, that the image of this poor man hung on that cross will rule the world and save it from then on through eternity. The cast turns and faces the audience. The looks on their faces are worth the whole play.

Jeb and I shared a passion for the Episcopal hymnal. Neither one of us could sing that well, and when he sang tenor and I sang alto, no one sang the melody. Still we

loved to sing together, and Jeb reminded me that God asked only that we “make a joyful noise.” In a letter describing his visit to Notre Dame Cathedral, he said that it looked the way “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence” sounded, and I knew exactly what he meant.

Many people growing up in the 1960s experienced a clash between their sexuality, their faith, and their families. Often it was faith and family on one side and sexuality on the other. For Jeb, faith was what helped him through conflict within our family. My mother was shattered when she learned that Jeb was gay. She had always anticipated that he would provide her with beautiful grandchildren—or become a priest. She could not bring herself to tell my father, a West Point graduate and an army colonel. But the weight of the secret was destroying her health, so her doctor, with her permission, called Dad in and explained the situation.

Jeb’s response to our parents’ fears and concerns demonstrates how passionate was his commitment to God. It was a loving attempt to reassure them that he would be careful, a gentle refutation of their beliefs about homosexuality, and a response to Dad’s concern about Jeb’s activism and its effects on his future. Jeb wrote, “If this endangers my future in one way, it ensures, in another way, that I shall *always* have what I value most—the knowledge that I have done what I believed was right and pleasing to God.”

Jeb eventually told Wray and our oldest brother, Henry. That left only me in the dark. Except that I wasn’t. While I had no word to describe Jeb’s sexuality, by the time I was a junior in high school, he had been bringing home a tall, handsome man from New Hampshire for holidays and casual visits. It seemed they were far too dissimilar to be mere friends. Jeb was lovely, slender, academic, passionate about classical music; Jerry watched football with our father, drove a muscle car, owned a share in a NASCAR team, and listened to the rock music that I loved. And yet, there was clearly an intimacy to their interactions that paralleled that of our married brother and his wife. The family took an informal vote, and I innocently wrote to Jeb, having determined that Jerry was “perfect for Jeb and a good fit for our family.”

So when he casually asked one day if I wondered why he wasn’t interested in my girlfriends, who clearly had crushes on him, I responded, “No, I just assumed it’s because of Jerry.”

The family adjusted, and eventually Jeb even persuaded my mother to go dancing with him and friends at a gay bar. He and Jerry remained together until Jeb's death more than 20 years later.

Jeb managed a wry smile. "Remember, Sweetie, God is not a tame lion."

When the AIDS epidemic struck, my family felt immune from it because of Jeb and Jerry's long-term relationship. I volunteered to work with AIDS patients and learned a great deal about the disease, which began to take Jeb's friends one by one. Then Jeb began to report unrelated illnesses and hospitalizations, and though his health had always been frail, I heard alarm bells. In 1991, we kids hosted a one-week reunion at the beach to celebrate my parents' 50th anniversary. Jeb called us the night before he was due to arrive to report that he was in the hospital with an infection, which the doctors thought might be Lyme disease. He would be fine, he said, but he would miss the festivities. All my worries and unease coalesced around that call, but I couldn't broach the topic by phone. AIDS at that time was a death sentence.

Jeb spent every Christmas with me, and 1991 was no exception. He arrived at the airport looking pale and drawn and was quieter than usual. He attributed both to being depressed over the loss of friends to AIDS. As we walked home together from the midnight service at my Episcopal church, singing hymns in off-key harmony and admiring the white Christmas lights strung throughout the neighborhood, I pulled Jeb to a stop beneath a streetlight. It was bitter cold, and our breath hung in the air. Then I asked him the question that had sat, heavy on my heart, since he missed the October reunion.

"Jeb, I hope I'm being alarmist, but I have to ask: Do you have AIDS?"

Jeb's face crumpled like a child's, and his fists went up to his eyes to stop the tears that nonetheless trickled down to his jacket collar. It was my answer. I wrapped my arms around him, feeling his warmth through the leather bomber jacket he wore, and my tears mingled with his. After a very long silence, when I could get myself in hand, I demanded, "Why? Why, Jeb, would God allow this? You have been so faithful."

Jeb managed a wry smile. "Remember, Sweetie, he is not a tame lion."

Jeb died three years later to the day, in the early morning hours of Christmas Eve. The immediate cause of death was a brain disease known as PML, a rare

complication of AIDS. A CD of the Choir of King's College, Cambridge, played carols in the background, and his partner, a dear friend, and I sat with him reading the Bible and the Narnia books until his breathing stopped. Although a nor'easter raged outside the clinic, he was now at peace.

I spent the next 20-plus years of my life pursuing a career in the public sector, before retiring and heading straight to divinity school. During that time, I have been deluged with stories of Jeb's impact on people throughout the country and the world. He influenced the conversion of many people to Christianity by the example of his unwavering devotion to God and to his savior. In my work as a chaplain, when I have found myself at a loss for words of comfort, I have often offered some variation of "He is not a tame lion," the words Jeb and I chose for the marker over his ashes in Grove Street Cemetery.

At a ceremony renaming William and Mary's humanities building for Jeb, four of us spoke. Katherine Rowe, the university's president, explained Jeb's lasting impact on the field of social history. Jerry Watkins, the professor who nominated Jeb for the honor, spoke of his impact on the field of LGBTQ studies. I spoke of Jeb's faith as the inspiration for his work in the inclusion of marginalized people. Perhaps the most poignant words came from a distant cousin named James Boswell, who attended William and Mary years after Jeb and confessed to always feeling like he was standing in his shadow. He said this:

> As I speak to you today with my husband, Chris, looking on, I am able to be my authentic self. Had it not been for the brilliance of John Boswell, I doubt that would be possible. So today, I don't feel that I'm in John Boswell's shadow. Today I feel that I'm in John Boswell's light.

That light illuminated a generation and a world.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "My brother's life of faith."