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Another Family's Loss

Edward Marks

There was probably no one on earth whom I disliked more than the Reverend Jerry Falwell. He was one of the top leaders of the American Christian right, a man who stood against everything I believed in. Every night, my father and I would watch Jerry Falwell rant about international and national politics on MSNBC, from abortion to the Middle East. As I lay on the living room floor sitting beside my father in his chair, we looked at each other, smiling and rolling our eyes. It was because of Falwell that I had become so interested in politics in the first place, angered over the growing power of the Christian right in this nation, and the division between my American brothers and sisters, a culture war that I blamed him for.

In my early teenage years during art classes, one of my favorite pastimes was drawing devil horns and Hitler mustaches on photos of Falwell and his supporters I cut out from magazines, writing in bubbles from Falwell's mouth, "War is Peace. Freedom is Slavery. Ignorance is Strength," after reading 1984 in tutoring. It wasn't just Falwell I hated, though. I hated all the evangelicals. The way I saw it, they were all just a bunch of white-trash Nazis who couldn't read, and I complained constantly about them in history class, even if it meant interrupting the lesson, and my teacher yelling at me and kicking me out of class. I didn't care. I just couldn't get it out of my head that Falwell won Reagan the evangelical vote in 1980, as the President turned away when the AIDS epidemic spread across the world, cutting short the lives of thousands of gay men, prostitutes, heroin users, and Haitian immigrants, and let it go on silently for years. Ever since the Supreme Court verdict of *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion thirty years ago, Falwell had crusaded to overturn the decision and keep same-sex marriages illegal, concerned that children wouldn't function as well in a home without both a father and a mother. I was raised in Chicago in a reform Jewish household, where my art-collecting Democrat parents sent dozens of checks to the Obama campaign for presidency, and my mother once joked she would have to consider disowning me if I ever became pro-life, although she wasn't entirely kidding, either. Both my parents knew of the comments Falwell made, admitting that he believed if 666 ever came down to earth, he would appear in the form of a "middle-aged Jewish man." After all, this was my father he was talking about. He had no right.

Being a strong supporter of Israel, however, a stance which gained him the following of my mother's militantly pro-Zionist brother-in-law, Falwell eventually apologized, but I still wanted to send him back to hell. He claimed that Tinky-Winky, an alien baby from the PBS children's televi-

sion show, Teletubbies, was a homosexual who somehow promoted “the gay agenda.” And after the attacks on 9/11, Falwell said that the tragedy happened to punish America’s permissiveness on abortion, homosexuality, feminism, and paganism. But then when Fred Phelps of the Westboro Baptist Church led a demonstration at the funeral of the murdered gay college student, Matthew Shepard, and held up signs proclaiming violently anti-gay epithets, even Falwell said he went too far.

One May morning, though, I woke up in my dorm at boarding school, ready to go to my first class. As I was waiting in the empty school building for my class, I noticed a copy of USA Today sitting on the desk in the staff office. There was a drawing of Jerry Falwell on the front page, announcing that he had died. It read “Jerry Falwell: 1933-2007.” I picked up the paper, smirking.

“Oh, man, this I gotta see...,” I said to myself.

I went into my classroom, began reading the long obituary, and I don’t know what came over me, but for some reason, when I saw that picture of him, tears filled my eyes. I realized his family lost someone that day. I saw my own grandparents in that picture, and thought of the day when I’m going to lose them. This was no longer an issue of Democrats and Republicans, or how we vote, or where we live. This was about fathers and sons, and the love that we feel for each other. And for one brief moment, I no longer looked at Jerry Falwell as some religious zealot, but for once as a man, as a grandfather playing with his grandchildren, the way my grandfather did with me, and as a generation about to die.