

2006 Eugene England Memorial Personal Essay Contest Second Place Winner

# THE GOLDEN BOY OF ROSARIO

By Brett Alan Sanders

THE WALK TO EDUARDO'S SHANTYTOWN REMAINS vivid to me even after almost a quarter century. I couldn't locate it now, either on a map or on the ground—even in the unlikely chance that it or its immediate surroundings might have survived intact. It was out in the countryside a way, past the last structures (concrete block or adobe) of the lower-middle class, in an undeveloped no-man's land between surrounding cityscape. For the truth is that asphalt and concrete would end and begin repeatedly, the city's interior fragmented by pockets of dirt and poverty whose geography I never completely deduced.

This was Rosario, second- or third-largest city in the Argentine Republic, situated roughly to the north of Buenos Aires in the province of Santa Fe, where it hugs the west shore of the mighty Paraná. From consulting the return address on my letters home, I know that I lived in a *pensión* or boarding house at Arijón 832, but I don't know the exact corner of the city it inhabited. I have also forgotten the names of the other nearby streets and avenues, or by exactly which route I found my way to that borderland between semi-respectability and social non-personhood. But I can still visualize the place. And that encounter with Eduardo, as real as any other, continues to haunt me.

The picture is clear. I am accompanied by my missionary companion, Grant Phelps, a curly-haired nineteen-year-old from Virginia—a blond and blue-eyed descendant of Mormon pioneer and songster William W. Phelps, author of the hymn "Come, Come Ye Saints." I am a convert to the faith—a brown-haired midwesterner from Indiana.

There we are, Elders Sanders and Phelps, decked out in standard-clean faces, short haircuts, dark pants, white shirts and ties, armed with scriptures and flip charts. The stretch of road we are walking is bordered by open field to our right and closely adjoining houses to our left. Unlike the houses in

richer neighborhoods which have protective exterior walls with shards of glass jutting out on top to discourage access, these houses are totally open to the street. As we reach the farthest extreme of this neighborhood, we can see the shantytown as the merest shadow on our horizon.

Where pavement ends, wilderness begins. What road continues from there is no more than a vague thinness worn in the surrounding grass. A straight line of trees like an arboreal arrow points the way. We walk to its right, open field extending in either direction. At trees' end, as if they had been planted with such development in mind, our path intersects with another that goes on briefly in both directions. That path, on its far side, is lined with makeshift homes, constructed willy-nilly from whatever could be scrounged up: mud, straw, scrap metal, plywood, cardboard, any combination of those basic materials and any others.

On the day in question, in February of 1980, Phelps and I encountered Eduardo at the converging of those paths as we were coming and he was going. We had already baptized four people from that neighborhood: a young married couple (parents of an infant girl) and the mother's own parents, a hard-laboring, sinewy man and an immense woman whose swollen ankles and arthritic knees would not permit her to kneel with us in prayer.

Eduardo, like those young parents, was youthful and slender. He was also exuberant, his attitude cheerful and breezy. He responded warmly to our invitation to hear a message from Jesus Christ. He seemed eager to arrange a visit for another day. While my photographs from that period are lost, I remember him well enough to give a vague description. His skin was the color of caramel, his hair black and wavy, partially covering his ears. More precisely, his eyebrows were trimmed (though I didn't take note of that upon this first meeting); his pants were tight and low, hugging his hips; the top, which did strike me as rather girlish, left a bare midriff; his voice and mannerisms were also notably effeminate. But those externals I quickly put out of mind, noting instead his "golden" personality and spirit.

Not that it would have changed anything had I dwelled on those externals a bit longer—though I did still give credence to



BRETT ALAN SANDERS's stories, essays, and translations appear online in Mudlark, New Works Review, Tertulia Magazine, River Walk Journal, and The Quill and Ink. He may be reached at [brettalansanders@gmail.com](mailto:brettalansanders@gmail.com).

the biblical notion that homosexual activity of any sort is strictly forbidden. Given biblical injunctions against that and other “sins against nature,” I had not yet questioned the widespread assumption that homosexuality is not a biological given but a sociological perversion of the natural order. Had I immediately acknowledged, then, Eduardo’s rather obvious gayness, I could only have thought of it as something of a theological puzzle. Perhaps he had “caught” this misperception of his most divine nature by growing up in a home with only strong women in it, with no male figure to be seen. Or, if it were something that he truly couldn’t change (for whatever reason might exist within the context of this fallen creation), that God would certainly sort things out favorably in the end. Because there could be no doubt of Eduardo’s deeply spiritual nature. It didn’t occur to me that anyone else within Mormonism could possibly miss it.

**E**DUARDO’S BAPTISM WAS scheduled for the first Sunday in March, the second of the month. After the regular hours of worship and Sunday School, our moods remained buoyant, oblivious to any slights that might have been received. Had I noticed any, I might have attributed them to the typical reluctance of some Church members to embrace these down-and-outers from the slums, a reluctance that might be worn down with the passage of time and the new members’ continued demonstrations of true devotion. Anyway, there we were: seventeen-year-old Eduardo, eleven-year-old Moisés (the week’s other proselyte), and I in the rest room, adjacent to the baptismal font, changing into simple whites for that ceremony of immersion and re-birth. I might have been remembering my own baptism, as a boy of not quite fifteen; that conversion which had propelled me on this missionary journey to the southernmost margins of the American continents.

As I said, I imagined that Eduardo’s spiritual presence would be evident to anyone who looked—and, hard as it may be to believe, it had not fully registered with me that he was gay. Even had I been sure that he was, I don’t know that I could have foreseen the irruption of furious prejudice that was about to assault him. Nothing that had happened to me since arriving in this mission field fifteen months earlier had prepared me for it.

There the three of us were when the rest room door slammed open and closed again with a single violent shudder. The intruder’s shout was almost simultaneous. He left no time for us to collect our wits. What did Phelps and I think we were doing? he demanded, accusing us of inviting garbage into the



*What did Phelps  
and I think we  
were doing?  
He would not  
have the Church  
polluted by  
stray dogs  
and freaks  
and perverts!*

Church—*cualquier basura*, “any old trash”—the only phrase from his tirade that I remember exactly. He then confronted Eduardo directly, asking him if he was homosexual, to which Eduardo answered matter-of-factly that he was. The intruder then demanded that Eduardo be re-interviewed, that he would not have the Church “polluted by all the stray dogs and freaks and perverts”—a phrase I have his fictional counterpart exclaim in an unpublished novella.

In that version of the tale, written a full twenty years closer to the event than this remembrance, I have him grab Eduardo by the shirt, push him up against the wall, shout in his face. This far removed from the event, I can no longer tell whether the scene occurred that way or has been embellished, but my account in that telling captures the outrage I felt over the confrontation. In fact, that incident remains branded so vividly in my memory that I consider it the single point from which I began to disbelieve my faith’s insistent denial of a biological role in same-sex orientation.

At the moment, I was just stunned. I had no chance to soothe Eduardo’s offended dignity before he was hauled out of there in his baptismal whites and submitted to a second screening interview by a neutral elder: a zone leader. He was still found worthy, and I still baptized him, but the joy of the occasion was shattered. His expression was somber, and he did not want to talk. I left him that evening with a promise to visit the next day. It would be evidence of an almost gargantuan—even biblical—faith were he to ever return for another service.

**T**HE MAN WHO had presumed to disrupt Eduardo’s baptism was a member of the ward Eduardo would attend and also of the presidency of the local stake. Neither he nor his companions in that presidency approved of the missionaries’ tendency to recruit new members where they could, including, and in fact more numerous, from among less fortunate social elements, who did not come ready-made to assume leadership responsibilities. As I wrote in a journal entry shortly after the incident, “I think they want us to baptize, first, all the middle class or rich people who will make sure-fire leaders in twenty days, or money back.” In fairness, it should be admitted that this influx of the needy *can* strain the orderly operation of churches, just as widespread poverty strains the resources of Third World countries. Even so, it seemed to me then, as it still does now, that the primary mission of both religious and political leadership is to raise up and improve the lives of those people. That leaders shy away from that obligation does not relieve them of it. In any case, this dis-

ruption of a homosexual boy's baptism was only the most egregious, but by no means the first, confrontation between this stake and the *Misión Argentina Rosario* under the leadership of then-president, and later General Authority, Angel Abrea.

When Phelps and I visited Eduardo on the morning after, he was in low spirits. We found him in the company of his neighbors, Moisés and the four who had been baptized earlier. The mean-spiritedness of the incident had also upset them. They couldn't fathom a spiritual leader treating another human being so spitefully for any reason at all, let alone for a condition of nature that he could do nothing about! I was struck by this instance of solidarity among a few of the earth's poor, and perhaps it was their shared conviction that first challenged me to consider that Eduardo's homosexuality was indeed a characteristic of his being that he could not change. In any case, while Phelps remained out front with the others, I retreated with Eduardo to a more private space for talking.

I don't remember our conversation exactly, but I do know that I apologized to him for the hateful episode, for the crude imperfections of those who presume to be holy. I must have assured him of his value as a child of God; perhaps I even recited some appropriate verses from our scriptures. I do know that I was comforted by his assertion that he had always been taught that his sexuality could never be acted upon, that he was already firm in his determination to live a life of celibacy. I was also comforted by his forgiving spirit that allowed him to consider coming back to church. An effect of the Holy Ghost, perhaps, the gift of which Phelps had bestowed on him, by a laying on of hands, after that baptism.

And he did come back. The blows of the first week were countered in particular by the kindness of a counselor in the local bishopric, who, before the next Sunday, had already sent us to Eduardo with a supply of shirts that would be more presentable for him to wear to church. Brother Rodríguez became Eduardo's champion and guide through the maze of personalities and observances that would confront him there. In my journal entry of 31 March—before then, I could not bring myself to write about the incident—I noted Brother Rodríguez's comment to me that “the one who really has potential is that Eduardo, if he keeps coming.” And Eduardo did keep coming, as long as I was there, so long, I wrote, as he could get together the bus fare.

Eduardo's other champion was President Abrea, who as far as I know never met Eduardo in person. While the local stake presidency seemed to resent our liberal reading of the biblical injunction to take the gospel “to every creature,” Abrea vigorously sustained our efforts to preach among any people who would hear us. Among my

clearest memories of him is an address he gave at a stake conference. There were no flourishes of speech or self-congratulatory posturings. But I thought I heard more than a hint of impatience in his voice as he answered the condescension of those who preferred a more restricted proclamation of the gospel. His series of barbed questions all centering along the basic theme of “Who are we to determine of whom the Lord might choose to make leaders?” was delivered, with appropriate scriptural allusions, in little more than the space of time that it took Lincoln to deliver his Gettysburg Address.

I have never known what President Abrea's thoughts were about the political crisis of his country at the time (homosexuals and other “deviants” were among those targeted by the military dictatorship), or about the largely acquiescent business community he came out of, but I had no question about where he stood with respect to the downtrodden. And in this case, I discovered, he made no distinction between a poor homosexual and a poor heterosexual. His response to the stake presidency after the baptismal incident was swift and firm. The counselor who had assaulted our proselyte was subsequently meek to Phelps and me, even admitting to us that he had misjudged Eduardo's character.

I DON'T RECALL exactly when I became convinced that, despite my church's many other virtues, its position on homosexuality is seriously flawed—that it is based on faulty science and on an overreading of certain passages of scripture. I cannot say when the realization was complete, but I am sure that the questions began to assert themselves on that evening of 2 March 1980, when an act of spiritual violence was perpetrated on the soul of one homosexual boy who had given no offense to anyone other than the unconscious ones of being poor and a homosexual.



“I’m sorry. . . . You’re going to be born a homosexual”