

MAN OF DIGNITY AND GRACE ...

(and a little mischief)

The True Story of Matthew Hayes

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Matt with the World Series trophy, a Boston Red Sox representative, and his mother, Judy

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Prologue

Matt's full name is Matthew Howard Henry Hayes, the initials of which sound to him like someone taking their last breath: *M...H...H...H*. But Matt Hayes has always been about life, choosing life over death every minute of every day. Matt doesn't just survive, he lives.

He rarely lets the medical staff do anything for him that he can do for himself. He stays in touch with family, friends, the movie and music worlds, the news, the joys and sufferings of others. He edits books and articles from his hospital bed, and generally takes whatever comes his way on the chin.

And much has come his way. If only Matt had contracted his disease twenty years later, his narrative would have unfolded much differently. Still, long before he became ill, he completed his Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, a degree which only enhanced his sensitivity to people.

"There are three reasons," he told me, "people go into psychology:

1. It's easy
2. To get married
3. To understand their own craziness ...

"and I studied it for reasons #1 and #3 ☺."

It is his hope and mine that the following sample of anecdotes from his life will startle you with chuckles, tears, rage, faith, and admiration for a man I have come to respect.

Matt Hayes is a person whose story must not be lost. He truly is a man of dignity and grace, touched by God and a gift to us all. In fact, his surname, he pointed out, is defined as "shrubby along the roadside intended to guide travelers." How fitting.

Lorraine C. Anderson, Interviewer and Scribe

Psalm 23

Traditional Rendition

King James Version, Public Domain

1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the
paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:
for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Chapter One

Beginnings of ...

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” —Psalm 23:1

Kitten Love

Matt and I share the same birthday, though I'm nearly a decade and a half older. Matt began reminiscing:

"I was born on August 30, 1962, in Redding, California (Shasta County), but I was *created* in Sparta, Wisconsin ☺. My Dad was in the Air Force, so we moved around a lot.

"I remember one time when I was quite little, as usual, I fell asleep with my favorite blanket. Later on, I woke up to find our cat nestled into my blanket. Only something was different this time . . . she was giving birth to a litter of kittens, right on top of me! I was soon to discover the only thing I am allergic to are newborn kittens. Something in their chemistry makes my fingers break out and itch. Still, what a wonder to be, literally, their birthing station."

Activism

"When I was five, we moved to Alaska. A number of years later, I was ready to enroll in junior and senior high school in Wasilla, which, yes, is the same school Sarah Palin went to . . . in fact, her older brother and I were in the same class.

"I was not a fan of gym in high school, so I'd jog around the track reading a book. My creativity caught on, and it wasn't long 'till I had started a trend among the other kids. Gym would never be the same.

"In my junior year of high school, I won a 'Know Your State' government contest, after studying for just two hours. Part of my prize was a trip to our state capital Juneau. I walked all over the city, observing not only the sites, but what makes the capital tick. I asked a couple people in the Department of Transportation how they decided where to install traffic lights. Did it depend, perchance, on how many people had died at a particular intersection? One person told me 'No' and the other told me 'Yes.' Hmmmmmm. So before leaving the capital, I made a plea for a traffic light in Wasilla. You see, a family friend was driving with her kids in the car when they were struck by another vehicle. Our friend, their mother, was killed. Soon after I returned home, the Department of Transportation installed our town's first traffic light ever, right in the middle of the highway at the intersection leading into Wasilla.

"We will never know how many lives have been spared because of that light, but I pray they are innumerable."

Journeys Galore

“It was to be a long summer of crisscrossing the country. In June, my dad, one sister, and I struck out in our RV from Wasilla, trekking through Fairbanks, Tok Junction, along the ALCAN (Alaska-Canadian) Highway, through Winnipeg, Ontario, then down the Kluane National Highway to Seattle. We continued through Los Angeles in the direction of Grand Canyon National Park. After taking in the North Rim, we headed north to LaCrosse, Wisconsin, for a family reunion before hightailing it to South Carolina, where we hunkered down for the remaining hot weeks of July and August. Near summer’s end, it was time for the three of us to RV back to LaCrosse, where I said goodbye to my Dad. My sister and I caught a bus from Wisconsin to Silt, Colorado, to visit our mother and, again, the Grand Canyon. Then Mom, my sister, and I took a bus to Redding, California, where we visited the Redwoods. We changed buses in Sacramento to obtain a copy of my birth certificate before backtracking to Seattle, where I said goodbye to them. Phew! While they were flying home, I was about to embark on the longest and penultimate part of my journey: Seattle to Boston, a seven-day bus trip.

“I stopped once more in LaCrosse to say farewell to my grandmother and other relatives, then boarded a bus heading east. LaCrosse is a mid-size city on the Mississippi River in western Wisconsin, about 275 miles south of Canada. Somewhere between Wisconsin and Albany, another seventeen-year-old plunked down beside me and, as people do on long bus rides, we chatted and got to know each other a bit. The bus was a little chilly, so I shared my blanket with him. When the bus pulled into Albany, New York, I was sleeping soundly, something not easy to come by that week. When I woke up he was gone.

“‘No chance to say goodbye. Oh well.’ He had been a pleasant enough fellow throughout the tedium and occasional wooziness of the endless highways. But our acquaintance would be forever cemented in my memory when I realized he had just pick-pocketed me. Of course, I didn’t notice anything was amiss until after we pulled away from his stop.

“So, I arrived at the old Greyhound Bus station in Boston’s Park Square, bummed out, temporarily impoverished, and very tired of sitting and bouncing around, with a few dollars randomly stuffed inside my shirt pocket. I found a cab driver willing to take me to Boston University for all the wealth on my person—five bucks. As he sped through the streets of Back Bay into Kenmore, my thoughts drifted back to a sign a few miles back: ‘Boston University, Home of the Terriers,’ and I felt an excitement wash over me. I was home.

“My ruminations were interrupted when we arrived at BU and the greeter, upon casing my battered luggage tied with numerous plastic bags, declared, ‘The grapes of wrath have arrived!’

“Yup, that would be me.”

“The ultimate leg of my journey was just beginning. It was my eighteenth birthday.”

Chapter Two

Your Heart Made It So

“He leadeth me beside the still waters.” —Psalm 23:2

Sealing the Deal

Matt had attended a guest speaker's event at his mother's Bible college and, although he had heard about Jesus' love countless times, on this particular evening, it clicked. He opened his heart to Christ, and God's grace was noncritical, compassionate, and real. The resurrected Jesus was surely with him 24/7/365.

A month or so later on a special Friday afternoon, about twenty people braved the cold to assemble in our church. Some had brought finger sandwiches and cookies. The every-week-cake-lady had baked one of her signature desserts and written Matt's name on it. We had planned the occasion together, with Matt choosing his favorite songs, Scriptures, assistant, special witness, and more. He had lots of people offering their love and support.

The piano music was beautiful as we all sang Matt's songs: *What a Friend We Have in Jesus* and *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*. The familiar and meaningful Psalm 23 was read, followed by a brief meditation. Then, before we moved off the platform, Matt told his personal story. He gave us a snapshot of his background and then told us this:

"I have been very sick again, as you know. I actually crossed over to the other side, and didn't like what I saw. I decided it was time for 'New Friends.'"

And the Friend who had always been there, just waiting to be noticed, had literally become Matt's truest new Friend. Matt had exerted gigantic effort just to be in this place today, to seal the deal.

Garbed in a borrowed wet suit, Matt removed his oxygen, just for a few minutes, while his mother, his hospice chaplain, and I helped him into the baptismal tank. As usual, the water was icy cold, but he was adamant about being baptized. His mother watched from the platform while the chaplain assisted me.

"Have you welcomed Jesus Christ into your life?"

"Yes, I have."

"And is it your intention, by God's grace and to the best of your ability, to live the rest of your life for Jesus, until He escorts you across the threshold forever?"

"Yes."

"Then Matthew Hayes, it is our honor to baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

I guided Matt backwards with Chaplain Jonathan behind him to help raise him up. We were able to dip Matt to his chin, but had difficulty submerging his entire face, so we splashed his head until he was thoroughly soaked. Cameras snapped, people applauded and cheered, tears spilled. We sang a closing song and gathered in the other room, where Matt received his Certificate of Baptism, gifts, and celebrated.

A couple weeks later Matt asked me,

“Are you sure my baptism was legitimate?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I didn’t go completely under the water. Was it bona fide? Will God say I wasn’t really baptized?”

“Yes, indeed, it was bona fide. Your heart made it so.”

Surely Matt touched God’s heart that day. He touched ours, too.

Chapter Three

Bravo!

“He restoreth my soul.” —Psalm 23:3

Mother

Matt's mother moved to Boston from Kentucky to help her son when he began facing health challenges.

She has been at his side throughout his illness, sometimes frustrated with him, more often agonizing for him. She has shopped, bought, fought, sought, but never stopped advocating and advising, sacrificing and supporting, positing and praying for her adult son. She has given food, rent, gas, money, clothes, blankets, technos, rubs, scrubs, encouragement, entreaties, celebrations, ruminations . . . words fail. You get the picture. There is absolutely nothing within reach that Matt's mother would not do for her son. Of all she has given and done for him, the most prolific has been the gift of herself, filled with the Holy Spirit of God.

Fun Storefront Church

In the '90s, Matt and his mom shared an apartment just a block from our fun little storefront church, and she became a regular, committed member. Through her we met Matt and many of his friends. Such an easy guy to be around.

Just after the New Year, a few of us wanted to plan something special for Holy Week and decided to put together an Easter Cantata Choir. Each person had a cassette tape of *The Promised Redeemer* and started learning their part on their own. Matt's mother sang alto with another friend, and we hog-tied a few men to sing tenor and bass. I sang soprano with some other women. We practiced together for weeks until we finally found someone proficient in complicated musical scores to accompany us on the church's living room-style organ. He was a true Godsend. We rehearsed with him twice and, when Holy Week arrived, we were as ready as we would ever be.

The big afternoon arrived, and we set up the worship space with Easter lilies, tulips, and neatly arranged white plastic chairs. Fancy pastries and drinks awaited the after-celebration as people began arriving. The choir had decided to wear black skirts or pants with white blouses or shirts, admittedly looking rather professional. Suddenly Matt walked in with several friends and they took their seats, smiling respectfully. After greeting them and others, we stood up front in a sliver-moon formation, breathed deeply, and tried to quiet our nerves. What would we have done without this patient, expert organist? His dynamic musical introduction set the tone and we were off. There were solos, duets, and whole choir numbers, all interspersed with Scripture passages read by people who had prepared with us. The cantata's lyrics and readings truly captured our hearts and propelled us toward resurrection morning. The music was written and played with majesty and complexity and sung with . . . well, we did our best. Some measures were beyond us in difficulty, but the organist soared along undaunted,

and we rode the wings of his flight. We chuckled here and there, and pressed through it with determination and joy. Then the applause struck with a startling standing ovation.

“Bravo! Bravo! Bravo, Mom!!”

These were friends and family who knew how much we had poured our hearts and amateur talents into this day, and genuinely seemed to appreciate it. No one laughed AT us, only with us.

Matt was one of the most enthusiastic attendees. I remember watching him congratulate his mother and being impressed by his authentic affirmation. His face belied no criticism, only sheer appreciation and wonder. Matt didn't even like churches back then, but he loved his mother and honored her faith. His respect for her and her church was nothing short of admirable.

I think the angels sang with us that afternoon. Now that I think about it, we weren't so bad after all.

We were blessed by Matt and his friends . . . pretty sure they were blessed, too.

Chapter Four

What If I Want to Live?

“Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.” —Psalm 23:4

Choosing Life Every Time

Among Matt's most inspiring gifts to us all is this one: his perseverant, courageous, faith-filled decision to choose life.

He had been in and out of hospitals for years and had been intubated several times. Once again his prognosis looked bleak, only this time it looked REALLY bleak. According to his doctor, Matt's lungs were functioning at just thirteen percent. With several of us around him to offer support, his doctor explained in medical detail the veritable seriousness of Matt's situation. In fact, the doctor told Matt to choose which day that very week he wanted them to pull the plug, disconnecting all life support. Imagine being faced with THAT decision! Matt took his 8 x 11 white board and dry marker, and in wriggly cursive wrote:

"What if I want to live?"

The doctor hemmed and hawed, trying hard to persuade this very sick man to end his suffering, but the doc had just received his answer. Matthew Hayes once again would choose life in the face of all odds, and, by cracky, his internal determination machine was cranked up full throttle. His support team would continue praying with and for him, and his medical team would honor his choice.

Most of us would have taken the doctor up on his offer, and prepared to cross the threshold within the week. But Matt is not "most of us." He is stellar in his zest and gratitude to God for life, even though the months and years ahead would prove to be challenging and discouraging at times. He was moved from hospital to hospital, on the respirator for months, then, through his own sheer hard work and chutzpah he would come off the respirator. He would exert every effort to try and stand up, take a few steps, then weaken again. His digestive system was usually in a state of upset, but still, he would experiment with eating and drinking until it all became impossible.

And still Matt presses on.* He lives on a respiratory floor in a local hospital which specializes in long-term, difficult cases. But again, Matt Hayes is not a "case"; he is a unique man from whom we have much to learn. He is university educated, well read, a lover of music, and a gentle soul smitten by cats-extraordinaire. He is sensitive to others' thoughts and feelings, eager to learn, computer savvy, and unwilling for anyone to do for him what he can do for himself.

* At this writing, late 2015.

A New Lover

Matt has a faith that is uncomplicated, nonsectarian, and pure. It's not always easy to feel God's presence, especially when struggling for breath . . . but, then, trusting resides deeper than feeling.

"There is a song called *Jesus, Lover of My Soul*. What if you were to think of Jesus as the Lover of YOUR soul, who lies beside you in this hospital bed, sits in the power chair with you, and watches over you day and night? Would that help? He promised to be with you always and never leave or forsake you anyway.* Pretty cool!"

Matt never lets me leave before we pray together. Thank you, Matt, for assigning a whole new depth to the term *pro-life*, and to the verse:

"The righteous will live by faith."**

*Matthew 28:20

**Habakkuk 2:4

Don't Look Down

Choosing life is something Matthew began doing long before he became sick. Not much stops him from forging ahead, regardless. For example, he always had a fear of heights, but determined at a young age to confront it head-on. And confront it he did.

"Even standing on the top step of a small step ladder gives me butterflies. But I'm not about to let a little acrophobia hold me back."

Classic Matt.

"I remember forcing myself to go to amusement parks just to ride the highest, scariest roller coasters and ferris wheels. I would buy my ticket, wait in line, and climb into my seat, shaking and dry mouthed. It felt like my heart might stop and surely, I would never live to tell about it, but once my feet were on solid ground again, I felt great – every time. One more giant felled.

"On one of our family trips to the Grand Canyon, I got down on my belly and dragged myself – slowly – to the edge just barely peeping over for a micro-second. Yes, the sight was breath-taking and almost literally stole my life-breath, but I beat down one more giant nevertheless."

The Wheels on the Bus Go

"And then there was the unforgettable, rather hilarious time we left our wheels sixty miles back. I was about fourteen or fifteen riding with my family through Canada on our way back to Alaska. My mother wanted to make good time and was driving sixty to

eighty miles per hour, with our trailer in tow. She said the car felt a little jerky, but pressed on.

“We were indeed making good time until we stopped for a break on the side of a hill. That’s when we noticed the road behind us was pretty torn up . . . because, about an hour earlier, our trailer had lost its axle and wheels! During all the hubbub, I scampered up a path to take in the view. I ran right up to the edge of a ledge overlooking the expanse below and suddenly froze. I couldn’t move.

“Finally, I managed to extricate myself and very slowly descend to my family. Later on, I realized that what scared me so much was how tempted I felt to jump—not to hurt myself, but just because I could.

“We ended up staying in that town for a couple of days to replace the wheels and collect our nerves. It’s a slice of history riveted in my memory as a grand hoot.

“I’m not sure if my mother has laughed about it yet.”

Chapter Five

All Creatures Great and Small

“My cup runneth over.” —Psalm 23:5

What a Dad

Matt has always loved and respected animals.

“This is not a happy memory at all, but one that shows the tenacity of my dad. When I was seven years old, I had goats, and I really loved them. They were so funny to watch—jumping, playing, snarling—so beautifully colored, too. I arrived home from school one day to witness some of the neighborhood dogs eating my little buck alive. Whoa . . . I was seriously traumatized. I ran screaming into the house and my Dad reacted instantly. He grabbed his big .22 shotgun and put my goat out of his misery as the dogs took off. I stood crying and in shock. I was a wreck for days, hovering over the goats day and night, ready to fight off those dogs if they so much as sniffed in their direction. Not sure I’ve gotten over that trauma yet, but major kudos to my dad for acting quickly and protecting both the buck and me.

“Hey dogs, don’t mess with my dad!”

Bee-ware

“Another time I was walking in the woods with my uncle, and, sure enough, we had to pee. We quickly chose a pretty benign-looking spot, but, unbeknownst to us, we ended up peeing on an underground yellow jacket nest. THEY had no sense of humor at all! My uncle grabbed me up and ran like the dickens!

“Yup, we were covered in bee stings, but came away with quite the story to tell. We also managed to find a more hospitable loo the next time nature called.”

Sophie

“In 1985 after I graduated from Boston University, I was living on nearby Bay State Road. Across the alley from me, they were renovating a big building to turn into the BU Bookstore Mall. Lots of noise, lots of dust, lots of commotion. I came into our building one night and scaled the stairs to my apartment. When I turned on my kitchen light, there were at least six mice, or rats, throwing a Rodent Moving In Party. (Excavating and digging tends to temporarily evict these darling critters from their homes, so they sweetly visit their neighbors to couch-surf and catch up on the local gossip during construction.) I set out on a mission to share their charm with others on our block. To reduce the population a bit, I bought snap-traps and caught only three. How sad. Then I bought poison, and they devoured over a hundred dollars worth with no signs of stopping. Next, I got sticky glue traps and managed to take out forty-three mice. At first, I felt terrible and even thought of releasing them—until several of their posse ran over me in my bed. That did it. I went straight to my landlord and said I

needed a cat—immediately. That’s when I got Sophie. Turned out she was no mouse catcher, but I figured her smell would be enough of a deterrent, and gradually the mouse visits became less frequent.

“She was a sweet little cat who liked to sit perfectly still and blend in with her surroundings. Sometimes she would just suddenly appear out of nowhere, so I never knew when she’d show up . . . kind of like an unexpected touchdown pass in the final seconds of the Superbowl.”

Topper

“Shortly thereafter, I met someone special who declared unequivocally he didn’t like cats. (Who doesn’t like cats, for crying out loud?!%\$#?!) He complained vociferously when I added cat food to our grocery list. So, sleuth that I was, I went and found the cutest possible kitten ever. She was, if I don’t say so myself, a knockout . . . a small, fluffy, calico beauty! He fell in love with her, somewhat begrudgingly. Her name was Topper, and she ended the arguments over groceries.

“After a few years, he left to pursue his career, and, wouldn’t you know it, took Topper with him.”

Razz

“Before he left, he took me to Angell Memorial Animal Hospital where I spied a gorgeous kitten, a couple years younger than Sophie had been. A mom and daughter were looking at her too. Mom said, ‘What an ugly kitten,’ so I made my move and got her! I named her Razz, as in Razzle-Dazzle. She was a little standoffish and didn’t like being held. However, little by little, I got her to trust and love me. After that she only bit people whom I didn’t mind her biting.

“Razz got out once and was gone for a week. I doubted I’d ever see her again. But it rained the whole week and, come to find out, she had been hiding under the porch of a fraternity house close by. Pretty smart.

“When I first got really sick, my doctor told me not to change the cat’s litter box. How was I going to take care of my Razz? I remember sinking into despair, and that’s when I was introduced to Phinney’s Friends through Fenway Community Health Center. They helped me with her and thereafter became part of my feline life.”

George

“When both Sophie and Razz had died of old age, and Topper had moved away, Phinney’s Friends helped me get an older, scruffy, gentle man-cat. I named him George. He was the *best* . . . and I loved him dearly. George was a special case at Angell Memorial. He became the office Feline-in-Residence and ran freely among the desks, everyone’s pride and joy. He had lost his left eye to cancer before coming to me and was much better off for it. His original name was Puma, but that just didn’t fit him. I named him after the abominable snowman who caught Bugs Bunny and said, ‘I will hug him, hold him, love him, squeeze him, and name him George.’

“George would ride on my lap in my power chair, all around everywhere. He only needed a gentle nudge now and then to keep him steady. We went on tons of adventures together, and he was always terrific company for me. But he began to lose the use of his back legs, and the last thing I wanted was for him to suffer anymore. I had him put down. I stayed pretty upset after George died, and eventually decided I would have just one more cat.”

Lilly

“Phinney’s Friends brought Lilly to me: a refugee from a broken human marriage in a house with cat-eating dogs. Talk about traumatized! When she arrived at my place, she was scared and went into hiding until, suddenly, on the third day, she jumped on and off my bed. Soon my bed became her home.

“When I went into the hospital for what I assumed would be a temporary stay, my pastor offered to foster her with support from Phinney’s Friends.”

Love at First Sight

I first met Lilly a year or two before she came to live with my husband and me—and our housemates. The very first time I saw her at Matt’s home, she jumped into my heart. Really. Her face was delicate, her fur beautifully colored in variegated shades of black and golden brown, her demeanor dainty, and I loved her name. When Matt was hospitalized again, no one was at home to take care of Lilly, so a young man came by each day to feed her, but it wasn’t enough care and stimulation. When I asked about taking her in, Matt said he expected to be home within six weeks.

“We can handle that,” I said.

Sadly for Matt, happily for us, for nearly six years, petite Lilly adjusted just fine to us, and we to her.

The long-term care hospital where Matt resides allowed Lilly to visit him in his private room. What a pleasure to see them together, because Lilly definitely knew him. She would emerge from her carrier and walk right onto his lap. Then, after looking around and sniffing the air for a few seconds, she would snuggle down on or beside him and purr. Matt kept cat treats in his drawer and would feed her enough snacks for a tiger (not really). She loved the way he would scratch her under her chin and stroke her back. Lilly wasn't the only one purring either. Matt would sort of purr, and me too, just admiring their contentment together. At first I would call the nurses' station and make arrangements. They would contact security and give them a heads up that a cat was on the way. But then, one day, one of the nurses said to me:

"For crying out loud, if the cat makes him feel better, then just bring the ***** cat!"

"O . . . kaaaaayyyyyyy."

E.T.

When Matt was having a rough spell, Lilly seemed to do the same. When Matt was feeling chipper, she was too. Not all the time or every day, but in the general flow of ups and downs, there seemed to be an uncanny correlation. 'Spose we had the real Elliot and E.T. right under our noses? When I asked Matt about that, he was quick to reply,

"She's Elliot and I'm E.T."

Like Matthew's previous cats, Lilly became old and ill. He and I agreed the bottom line was not to let her suffer, while not ending her life prematurely. During the last two visits with Matt, we thought she was purring extra loudly, but, in fact, she was exerting her lungs and breathing heavily. The day before she crossed the threshold into heaven, I took her to see Matt once more. When it was time to leave, I coaxed her into her carrier, but before I could hook the door she barged out and bolted back to Matt. I had never seen her do this before. It would be their last visit together.

Animals know. Lilly knew. Who will the next cat be?

And I believe we will see her again on the other side. In fact, I believe Matthew will see all of his pets one day . . . his little buck, Sophie, Topper, Razz, George, and Lilly.

I'm not so sure about the bees and mice.

Grammie

Matt is an animal person and, for sure, a people person. He told me about three people along life's way whose deaths affected him particularly hard.

The first was that of his maternal grandmother whom he adored.

"She was the center of our family, the 'Queen Bee', and saw the good in everyone. She was also an avid sci-fi fan who adored Star Trek's Kirk and Spock. Grammie was ill all my life, in and out of the hospital. One time when she was hospitalized, I was at her house, alone, when suddenly out of nowhere a bat dive-bombed me. Of course, I sprang into emergency mode and began whacking it mercilessly until it flew outside. Not a good day for this little creature, but a solid triumph for me.

"I loved her house: a big, standalone, two floor home with a generous meshed-in front porch. I used to love watching thunderstorms from that porch, enjoying the drama and feeling perfectly safe, which was probably why I conquered the rogue flying critter with such bravado.

"I was devastated when she passed away, though when someone we have dearly loved dies, they remain a living part of us. Certainly, this is true of my grandmother."

Matthew Wayne Shepard

The second death especially crushing for Matt was that of Matthew Wayne Shepard, murdered October 12, 1998, in Wyoming. He had just turned twenty-two and was completing his studies at the University of Wyoming when two homophobes beat and tortured him, then left him for dead outside of town. He died six days later from severe cranial trauma. His death was the most notable spark in our country toward hate crime legislation and gay rights, accompanied by civil and not-so-civil civil dialogue.

If any group should be in the forefront of respecting and enfolding vulnerable, marginalized people, it should automatically be those who identify with Jesus. Yet, some of the most dangerous rhetoric and behavior against our LGBTQAI citizens comes from self-identified Christians, most notably the Phelps family from Westboro Baptist Church in Florida. Their ongoing vitriol despicably debases Jesus' injunction to "love your neighbor and love your enemies," which includes by definition those with whom we may not see eye to eye. That so-called church has established an obscene, sickening post, the description of which does not deserve a single speck of ink on this or any page.

Mercifully, Matthew Shepard's funeral was protected by the angels and he was honored and buried with dignity. This young adult's homicide hit way too close to Matt's soul, and surely to everyone with any heart at all.

Brett* and Caleb*

The third person Matt has deeply grieved was a young man named Brett, engaged to be married to Caleb, his lover of six years. Shortly before their wedding, Brett fell off a building and died. His family was embarrassed that he was gay and hatefully took out their angst on the surviving bridegroom, Caleb.

Immediately after her son's fatal accident, Brett's mother took control. She collected his belongings and oversaw his funeral arrangements. Initially, she told Caleb he was welcome to attend the funeral, then quickly recanted. In fact, she told Caleb if he even showed up at the funeral she would have him killed. She allowed no mention of Caleb's name during the service or any reference to the love of her son's life. She made sure Brett's body was buried between his grandparents and his name inscribed on their tombstone, with no additional space for Caleb or his name.

The unspeakable tragedy in these last two deaths is that Matthew Shepard, Brett, and Caleb were Christians, yet they were mistreated intolerably by other self-identified Christians both in life and, most appallingly, in death.

Avery*

Matt recounts that one of his boyfriends died many years ago. We'll call him Avery. He too had been sick from a disease which eventually won. Avery's family had already turned their backs on him and actually disowned him. But when it came time for his funeral, they apparently wanted to be involved . . . involved in his death, not his life. They refused to allow Matt to attend the funeral.

Avery's family lost out on a beautiful life; Matt, on the other hand, did not, because even death cannot destroy love.

Renowned author Philip Yancey asked, "Why do Christians hate so much?" Good question. The Jesus profited by ignorant churches and homophobic murderers and enraged families is not the Jesus who cherishes Matthew Shepard, Brett, Caleb, Avery, and Matt Hayes.

Why *DO* Christians hate so much? Lord, have mercy.

**Not their real names.*

Chapter Six

For What It's Worth

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever!” —Psalm 23:6

Passing Along Nearly Six Decades of Life Experience . . .

✚ Maintain Political Acumen

Matt stays abreast of political tides and storms and can readily discuss politicians, political ideologies, and paradoxes. For example, he said, "I'm very tired of 'Repedocans' [his term]. Remember, before the 2016 election, Albanians were quoted as saying, 'Better a Pedo than a Demo.'" He shakes his head in disgust.

✚ Be Your Own Person

In every way possible, Matt is his own nurse, CNA, therapist . . . you name it. He chuckles, "Once I have shown the medical team I can do something for myself, they expect me to do it, even though I'm not on the payroll. They give me a hard time if I don't. LOL."

Furthermore, Matt is wonderfully complex: he is a man of mischief and faith, of humor and political astuteness. He is kind and thoughtful, dignified and gentle . . . not an angel, he will tell you, but then, thoroughly human.

✚ Read and Reflect

When Matt reads something poignant, he rereads it for awhile and lets it sink in. He told me he has read *Watership Down* by Richard Adams seventeen or eighteen times. You may remember it's a story about a warren of rabbits who set out in search of a safer home. Matt says, "I liked the loyalty between the brothers, the journey, and the way it was then. Something in it connected with me. I've had it in my head that it will be my last book to read, because the ending, when Hazel is taken to heaven, is very important to me."

This was the last time Matt and I worked on his stories and tidbits of wisdom. He simply wasn't up for it anymore. As he became weaker and sicker, he lost his ability to write, to see well, and long since, to talk. I knew intuitively the book would end here.

Matt crossed the threshold at 4:30 pm on Friday, October 25, 2019.

He loved animals. Isn't it uncanny how his connection with Lilly continued to the end, when he followed her almost exactly 22 months later . . . and experienced the journey of *Watership Down's* beloved Hazel rabbit?

Jesus said, *"I am going to prepare a place for you. When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am."* John 14:2, 3 (NLT)

It has been my honor and joy to be your pastor, Matt. You were the first person to explain the LGBTQAI world to me. Thank you . . . until I join you and Lilly.

Pastor Lorraine, 11/16/2019

EPILOGUE

by Judy Browning

October 25, 2019

Celebrating Matt's Entrance into Heaven

Joshua 1:9 (KJV)

⁹ Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God *is* with thee whithersoever thou goest.

Matt has been a good son. Sure, there have been some hangups and hallelujahs, but we have walked through everything. I've had to fight for him, as well as with him.

I've been up here 25 years come January 1, 2020, living with and caring for him. He's been brave and courageous, for the most part. Dreams have shaken him up at times.

He dreamt I hated him and was in a panic. I told him what my Mom told me: "I could never ever hate you; I always, always love you, but I can hate some of the things you say or actions you do." I suspect that goes with all parents and kids. He was at peace after that.

A funny guy—I'd tease about who gave you permission to get sick, and he'd reply, "It's always been easier to get forgiveness than permission for most things."

I'll have to admit how proud of him I was when he told me he was in the place he was, health-wise, by his own choices and didn't play the blame game anymore.

Rascal had a handbook, just in his head, and the first rule in the handbook was: Mothers can't see the handbook. Of course, how can kids change it then? 😊

The greatest thing he did was so touching. On the Friday before Mothers Day in 2011, he accepted the Lord at Charis Bible School / Gardner when Cecil Paxton from Colorado was there speaking to the students at a Healing Meeting. Matt felt the pain go from him when Cecil prayed for him, but didn't know how to keep it away. On the way home Saturday afternoon, He said, "Momma, I wanted to get you a nice Mothers' Day present. Is this nice weekend a good enough one?" I told him there was nothing greater that he could have given me.

I have peace in my heart, even through this tragedy, because I know now he is free from being a prisoner (under bondage) in his own body. He now is face to face with the

Truth (Jesus) that has set him free. No more pain, sorrow, or suffering for which I am grateful. Now he is happy, healthy, and content being in the arms of Jesus.

Philippians 1:21, 23 (NKJV)

²¹ For to me, to live *is* Christ, and to die *is* gain.

²³ For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, *which is* far better.

2 Corinthians 5:6-8 (NKJV)

⁶ So *we are* always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord.

⁷ For we walk by faith, not by sight.

⁸ We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.

I was with him the day he died from 11:00–3:00. Shortly after I left, he went into cardiac arrest and passed away. They did send him to UMass Medical Center in Worcester, Massachusetts, where he was pronounced dead, though they did try to revive him as well.

Matthew, I love you dearly.

Until we meet again, and we will.

Mom