

Light in Darkness: Matthew Shepard's Meaning

By **Robert Kyr**

I have created this essay as I might compose a piece of music, by weaving motives and themes into a polyphonic tapestry. Through these means, I have tried to explore the breadth and depth of Johnson's oratorio as the result of the personal and profound creative forces that brought it to life.

Laramie, southeastern Wyoming, between the Snowy Range and the Laramie Range. Tuesday, October 6, 1998 ... Matthew attended a meeting of the University of Wyoming's Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Association, then joined others for coffee at the College Inn. Around 10:30, he went to the Fireside Bar, where he met Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson. Near midnight, they drove him to a remote area, tied him to a split-rail fence, beat him and left him to die in the cold.

[Recitations I & II from *Considering Matthew Shepard (CMS)* by Craig Hella Johnson (CHJ)]

One of the questions for me in exploring and creating this work is a need to look into this suffering and not look away—to see it, to experience it. I need to experience what it stirs in me with the basic question of one wanting to understand it. A question that doesn't have an answer: "At the bottom of all of this suffering, the suffering in this story, the suffering in the world, the daily sufferings and deaths ... at the bottom of this, is the flame of love present?" It's a tricky thing to use that word—love... not "I love you because of your personality traits" or "because of that nice thing that you did," but really love as a burning flame, as a presence that's underneath all of life, as the river we live in, and that we swim in and move in

[Interview with CHJ by RK]

The next morning, Matthew was found by a cyclist, a fellow student, who at first thought it was a scarecrow. After several days in a coma on life support, Matthew Shepard died, on Monday, October 12, at 12:53 am. At the funeral, which took place on Friday, October 16, at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Caspar, Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church protested outside. [Recitation III from CMS]

I didn't set out to go on a poetic journey of asking questions. It was the precise event of Matthew Shepard being beaten and dying that cracked this question open for me, at some point, so that this event forced me to raise this question. It's absolutely about this question, and yet in another sense it's a strange mystery of life that this loss has generated love in people's hearts and generated poetry and

sculpture and musical pieces and essays [CHJ]

National media have begun to broadcast the story. As the news spread, many people across the country gathered in candlelight vigils, moved to (silently) speak for life over death, love over hate, light over darkness. [Recitation IV from CMS]

It is what his suffering embodied and enacted—that hostility and hatred—that so concisely brings decades of generations of people’s suffering to a head: it lances a boil And in this way, if this very terrible act lanced a boil, and in many pockets of the world began a healing process, then I find it to be a very beautiful thing, a very beautiful yield from something that’s very terrible. [CHJ]. *“In each moment the fire rages, it will burn away a hundred veils.” [Rumi] We all betray the ancient heart, / Every one of us... [From “Fire of the Ancient Heart,” CMS]*

I felt that there was a place in the work that needed drums—I don’t know why—but it was the very wordless aspect of staying very close to the fire that called for a drumming ritual, a fire ritual. Fire burns away all of our concepts, all of our words, so that we can get to the inner flame. I’m interested in what it means to be alive as a living presence together in our normal bodies with our everyday names and our everyday jobs; the drumming was really calling me out. It was asking, “Can we return? Can we burn away these millennia of betrayal?” All of the betrayal of our essence as one, “Could this be burned and burned and burned?” All of our attachments, all of our concepts of ourselves, burned to nothing, so we could return again to that place where we can understand both All and One, and the many manifestations of the One. [CHJ]

Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson were arrested shortly after the attack and charged with murder, kidnapping, and aggravated robbery. Their trial began on October 26, 1999; both were convicted of the murder and sentenced to two consecutive life sentences. [Recitation V from CMS]

One of his murderers—McKinney—expressed that this was a gay murder, so that’s obviously very much a part of the story. They had difficulty with it and there’s an issue of maleness in this. Right after we perform “I Am Like You,” we say, as singers (and as members of the audience), “Some things we love get lost along the way ... I’ve been reckless, restless, bored, unthinking, listless, intoxicated,/ I’ve come unhinged,/ And made mistakes / And hurt people very much ... I am like you (this troubles me)./ I am like you (just needed to say this).” This reminds me of a beautiful quotation from Tagore—it’s a momentary vision that makes me weep on the inside. My image in this moment of the piece is of Matt and Aaron and Russell standing together, representing all of us who are so separated from one another, singing “Once we dreamt that we were strangers / We wake up to find that we were dear to each other.” That possibility never ceases to amaze me when I think about it and feel it in this context. [CHJ]

“Sometimes no home for us here on the earth / No place to lay our heads.” [from “I Am Like You,” CMS]

I chose to finish “I Am Like You” with a noble male chorus, almost a men’s glee club-type of statement, a statement of unity, “We are all sons of fathers and mothers / we are all sons / we are all rivers / the roar of waters.” And all the men sing, “Sometimes no home for us here on the earth / no place to lay our heads.” And finally they sing out as an impassioned four-part chorus, “If you could know for one moment / how it is to live in our bodies / within the world.” I hope this is a place of recognition for the listener, too, because everyone could say, “If you could just know what it is to live in this body... the struggles I’ve had and the challenges...” This is a common ground. [CHJ]

In the days and weeks after Matthew’s death, many people came to the fence to pay homage and pray and grieve. [Recitation VI from CMS]

I just hope that it will be something that people can experience, reflect on, and allow to spark within their own lives and in their own meditation, to lead them forward and to call them forth. I hope that all of us will awaken more fully, to return home to the whole of this ancient heart. That we might actually return home to it and that this piece might serve as a meditation along the way. [CHJ]

And through it all he was breathing in for the last time the smell of Wyoming sagebrush and the scent of pine trees from the snowy range. He heard the wind—the ever-present Wyoming wind—for the last time. He had one more friend with him. One he grew to know through his time in Sunday school and as an acolyte at St. Mark’s in Casper as well as through his visits to St. Matthew’s in Laramie. He had God. I feel better knowing he wasn’t alone. [Statement to the court, November 4, 1999, by Dennis Shepard, Matthew’s father; quoted in “Stars,” CMS]

And if Matthew was here now with us, what would you say to him? [RK]

Thank you ... the deepest, most profound thank you. Thank you for being so ordinary, thank you for loving to be onstage, thank you for being ornery and stubborn, thank you for your opinions, thank you for struggling with things as you did, thank you for being a unique and generous child, filled with light, thank you for being. Thank you for experiencing everything you did. Thank you, thank you for being a friend in absentia. [CHJ]

And what surprises you the most about your own creative journey? [RK]

I grieve for all of us who have let the light flicker down and for some even get snuffed out. For those who were told by some outside person who was deeply invested in the separate self that they weren’t okay. For those who were told that

their own being was unworthy. Even when all of those other voices say, “Don’t sing your song; we don’t really need to hear it,” each of us gets to say, “I’ve got to sing the song that I was given; that’s why I’m here.” The only way to say thanks back to the Creator is to sing that song and that’s what Matt has compelled me to do ... to come out as a fuller human being. But the biggest surprise is the joy at the center of all of this. There’s actually a light underneath it all, because we’re facing the ultimate in this story, and it brings a very large space through difficult means, which actually brings joy as well.” [CHJ]

Always telling stories, wanting to remember where and whom we came from, who we are. Open, listen.

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