

MATTHEW'S STORY

A simple act of acceptance from a kind pastor helped prevent Matthew from finding release in suicide after a lifetime of intense self-denial and secrecy.

Sixty Years in the Closet

I am New England Yankee. My parents divorced before I was born, and I lived with several different families in my early years. One of my earliest memories is of Brad Braley playing the pipe organ at the Tremont Street Temple. As a boy soprano, I sang for evangelistic meetings and on the radio. One family, I stayed with had a piano where I taught myself to play "Chopsticks" and hymns from *Christ in Song*. When I was in the eighth grade I paid for my first piano lessons from money I earned feeding my grandpa's chickens. Having no piano at home, I walked a mile to a neighbor's house to practice.

I was always interested in artistic and domestic pursuits, although these interests were often squelched by ridicule. I was seldom chosen for team sports, so I spent recess talking with a boyfriend. Boyfriends were important to me from the time I was eleven. Once a year, because of social pressure, I took a girl to the school social event. Even in childhood, I began to realize I was different in the way I reacted to gender and sex. Unfortunately, I had no information, no confidant, and no role model to help me understand myself. As a teenager, my feelings were as real as those of heterosexual teens. Living in a conservative, rural community were not likely to know a homosexual person. Returning from service in the US Army, I did the expected thing and married a woman who shared my love of music. We began our college teaching career together, but Margo put hers on hold when we started our family. We both planned for and welcomed each of our children as a gift from God. We shared responsibility for their care and agreed on important matters such as education, discipline, recreation, and schedules. Although our budget was tight, we had fun as a family, camping and making music together. I encouraged Margo to continue performing and we toured together to give concerts at various colleges, churches and professional groups, always taking the children with us.

During those years homosexuality was never defined or discussed; it was simply not an option. Having grown up in a strict Adventist culture, I had learned that sex was reserved for marriage, and I was completely faithful to Margo. We seldom talked with each other about our sexual feelings; to her, it was a sort of duty to satisfy her husband, and to me, it was an occasional sign of loyalty. I knew that Margo hated homosexuality and distrusted those who practiced this behavior; today I am deeply thankful that she never knew it existed in her family.

Just as the older children were in their teens, Margo's life ended tragically in a plane crash. I tried to pull the family together and assume the role of both parents. Before a year had passed, close family friends were talking to me about marrying again. They introduced me to a lovely woman named Nora. I realized marriage would be best for the children and me. I was anxious for my children to have proper role models as they went through their impressionable teen years. I already suspected that two of them were like me in orientation, but I intensely desired that they might be "normal" and spared the

inner conflict through which I was going. So Nora and I were married and she took over our grieving family, bringing joy and security back to the home. The children and Nora quickly developed a close and loving relationship.

The Silent Years

For the entire forty years of my professional career, I lived and taught on Adventist college campuses. I lived so deep in my homosexual “closet” that I dared not open the door, even for a peek. It is difficult to describe the fear and terror of this secrecy. For me, the only security lay in a path of total denial and self-abnegation. Although I now feel cowardly for having chosen this safe haven of silence and secrecy for the first sixty years of my life, these are my reasons: 1) Adventists’ literal and unbending interpretation of the Bible leaves little room for independent thought, 2) discipline for heresy comes swift and severe; 3) honest inquiry and self-revelation are rarely honored; 4) confidentiality is virtually non-existent, even in some counseling venues; 5) spouse, children and extended family are perceived to be guilty or casual so, for love of all that is precious, you repress everything; 6) denial is so severe that the church even uses legal action to be sure that the terms “Seventh-day Adventist” and “homosexuality” cannot coexist.

Meanwhile, during these years I saw students, colleagues, and friends being fired, committing suicide, becoming mentally ill, running away and suffering silently. Increasingly, I realized that I was in a unique position to be helpful to young people struggling with their sexual orientation, but I never discovered a way to do so without jeopardizing their professional futures and blowing my own cover. So essentially I did nothing.

I do have a vivid memory of one young man who came from a distance specifically to study with me. Although he was my graduate assistant for two years, I never discussed sexuality with him. The day he left I prayed with him in the hallway, then whispered in his ear, “I advise you to keep your social life and your professional life as far apart as possible.”

In my forty professional years I never once spoke to another Adventist in a situation where we both admitted to being gay. Unfortunately, persons struggling with their sexual identity are among the most rabid in their denunciation of others. And heterosexual persons are suspected of being gay if they speak any kind word or show compassion for the unfortunate persons who happen to be homosexual. So the barbaric dance perpetuates itself.

My Son Michael

It was awesome to witness the birth of my first son. Thirty-some years later, it was devastating to recognize his corpse in a distant morgue. For over a decade his family had hoped for healing. Now he slept, silent and still.

My family and I struggled to cope with four frightening aspects of Michael’s life; namely, mental illness, drug use, homosexuality and, eventually, suicide. Though knowledge of

mental illness and homosexuality in the family tree is suppressed, I was reasonably sure I had inherited and passed on such genes. (Science, of course, has never demonstrated a relationship between mental illness and homosexuality.) With alternating optimism and despair, I encouraged and financed various opportunities for his healing. Two months at Hazeldon were very helpful in promoting his total wellness while, by contrast, two months spent with the church-sponsored ministry of Colin Cook were detrimental in every respect. He made a major suicide attempt while there.

To this day I struggle with regret that I did not directly admit my homosexuality to Michael. I did support him and his friends, and I specifically remember the day I told him, "I am more like you than you will ever know." Coming out to my son might not have prevented his suicide, but it would have made his life easier. I was less than candid with him in order to protect the rest of my family from shame and retribution.

Even in academy, Michael seemed to sense his need of help. He subscribed to *Psychology Today* and read avidly about mental health in the university library. His first brush with the law occurred when he tried to pass an illegal prescription for a drug to self-medicate. In his confusion, Michael ricocheted between harmful addiction and self-righteous abstinence. His death was due in part to not taking the prescription he desperately needed.

From my present perspective, I believe that Seventh-day Adventists, along with many other conservative Christians, create an environment where it is difficult to deal appropriately with the issues confronting Michael and our family. Mental illness carries a stigma and mental health care professionals are suspect. Homosexuals and their families are shunned and any person who is sympathetic becomes suspect. Drug use and abuse have finally been acknowledged and there are some persons willing to help. Suicide brings terror to families and few Adventists give support to the bereaved or seem willing even to discuss the topic. Fundamentalist theology and praxis, as I perceive them, are inadequate to address these issues.

Coming Out

"We all have a story." Gays and lesbians often use this statement to refer to the arduous and painful process of coming out to themselves and others regarding their sexual orientation. Rather than narrating the details of my experience, I want to focus on a few defining episodes.

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One Sabbath my family and a few friends were eating dinner on our patio. The conversation drifted to Hillary Rodham Clinton's recent proposal for the overhaul of health insurance. A seminary professor asserted, "I don't see why my tax dollars should go to benefit unwed mothers and people with AIDS." My thoughts went to the funeral I had recently attended for one of my young friends who had died of this dread disease. At his memorial service, I had the opportunity to greet Matthew's mother personally. I assured her that Matthew spoke lovingly of her, despite the fact that his family had virtually disowned him. Apparently, she was not able to acknowledge this,

for she replied that she needed something to drink. Matthew's father, a Baptist minister, chose not to attend the radiant and comforting service celebrating a victorious life. My sadness was mixed with anger.

Soon after Michael's death, Nora and I made an effort to be open to other young people who might be struggling with issues of sexuality. We invited a group to our home several Friday evenings for food and fellowship while being careful to safeguard their identity. I shall always admire my wife for making this bold and unselfish move.

However, we found no support from the university. The president offered consolation for the death of our son but had no interest in helping others like him. The dean was consumed with disciplining a gay student accused of inappropriate behavior. A full-time counselor for the university was only willing to helping those students committed to change therapy and absolute conformity. One kindly faculty person was sympathetic to our support network but full of concern and caution.

The futility of this attempt to be helpful to gay and lesbian students became a major factor in my decision to leave everything and build a new life.

The gay bars in the large city nearby seemed to be the only place where I could meet persons like myself without fear of being outed, although I did not drink alcohol and felt uncomfortable there. One evening in the semi-darkness I noticed a man with a clerical collar, so I sat down two seats from him, hoping to talk with a serious-minded person. I ordered a cranberry juice and offered to buy him a drink. Above the raucous music, we chatted about my situation. Violating my own defense system, I told him my correct first name and my church affiliation. He responded with insight and compassion, for he came to this bar purposely dressed as a cleric to minister to gay persons. He shared the story of his brutal dismissal from an administrative position in a prominent church-related university. When his name appeared in the local newspaper for a minor infraction deliberately provoked by undercover operatives, he was given twenty-four hours to vacate his office and apartment. My fear of being apprehended and fired increased, and I reinforced the doors to my closet.

On another occasion, I struck up a conversation with a good-looking guy at a beach. After a pleasant swim, he invited me to his Victorian house. As we were talking seriously in the hot tub of his secluded garden, he asked, "What church do you attend? My lover and I are looking for a place to worship." Ordinarily, I would have been instant in witnessing to my faith, but I realized that a gay couple would not be welcomed where I worshipped. So I did not answer right away. When I did finally mention my church, I could tell he was disturbed. He said he had been a top executive with Ford Motor Company. His neighbor was a Seventh-day Adventist minister. They had become friends, fixing each other's lawnmowers, playing golf together, etc., until the preacher discovered that his neighbor was gay. Never again would the pastor speak

to him. Over the years I have been a successful evangelist, even spearheading the raising of a church, but after hearing his story, pride in my denomination turned to shame. Still, I painfully buried my true feelings and continued to teach my adult Sabbath School class.

My first opportunity to worship with homosexual people came unexpectedly. A thousand miles from my home seemed a safe place to attend a Metropolitan Community Church, a denomination largely made up of homosexual Christians. I was thrilled to be among hundreds of worshippers enthusiastically entering into praise. Midway in the service I was overcome with joyous emotion and began to cry. I was embarrassed and apologized softly to the gentleman seated next to me. Whereupon he grasped my hand firmly and spoke gently, "Don't worry. I cried for two years when I found this church." He had been an elementary school principal near my home. After being dismissed for his coming out, he moved to Florida where he and his partner are successful and happy. During that service, my heart rejoiced and sang, but of course, I reluctantly returned to my own church.

One spring day I was sitting with my car windows rolled down waiting for Nora to walk past so we could go to lunch. My pastor chanced by and asked if he could join me. I readily agreed. I had spent all morning phoning the six mental facilities on the university list to determine which might be gay-friendly. I had already come out to my pastor, so it was no surprise to him when I asked, "Do you feel comfortable with my teaching the Sabbath School class in the choir loft?" From his subsequent comments, it became obvious that he would rather I resigned. His rejection was so shattering that I pointed to the car seat he occupied and replied, "If Christ were sitting where you are, he would say, 'I love you'." My spirit grieved when I realized that it was inevitable I must give up my passion for spiritual witness within my church. The next morning I voluntarily admitted myself to the mental hospital.

An associate pastor and his wife invited Nora, and me to go out for dinner. As I suspected, he hoped that we could get better acquainted and talk about our marital situation. From his own experience, he was able to talk with us about the biblical ideal in a non-judgmental way. Over a period of months, we conversed and prayed together. Even when it became evident that Nora and I would live separately, he continued our friendship. During a university vacation period, this pastor was celebrating the Communion service. Nora had left with the other women for the foot washing, and I decided for the first time in my life that I would just sit in the pew without participating. This minister walked directly to me and invited me to participate in the service of humility with him. His spiritual nurture for me, an outcast, was evident, and of course, I accepted his invitation.

Coming out to Nora was the most difficult thing I have ever chosen to do. For a period of a year or so I had become increasingly aware that this step was necessary. I could no longer deal with the inner turmoil. I truly believed that if members of my church, school and social group knew who I was, they would hate me. I was also certain that my family would disown me. To save everyone from pain, I wrestled with the only two options apparent to me; namely, to run away so no one would ever know where I was or to follow my son in suicide. During the first fortnight in the mental hospital and during a year of professional counseling I was able to promise myself that running away and suicide were no longer options.

The agony was palpable. I had to go through with the disclosure of my sexual identity despite the pain it would cause Nora. I expected to leave home immediately. And I would have, leaving everything behind, but she wisely said, "When I want you to leave, I'll give you two weeks' notice." That gave us time to work through our feelings and to consider options for the future. For several years Nora and I respected each other and kept up appearances. I have the utmost empathy for Nora's emotional roller coaster ranging from, "I hope my Mother dies before she finds out", to "Didn't I let you go to Chicago whenever you wanted." She seemed to feel that the burden of my sexual orientation was too big to be carried alone. I loved her all the more and tried to keep our home happy.

The night I told Nora that I was a homosexual, I promised her that I would wait to tell our children until she was ready. That proved a hard bargain for me to keep. After about a year and a half, I begged her outright to allow me to tell them. To this day I do not know how much the family suspected before I came out in plain language. But I can tell you that it was an excruciating admission for me, and I am sure that my coming out caused my children and their spouse's great pain. Our family had been through so much grief that none of us wanted to take on this challenge. Each family member had personal adjustments to make. The children seemed to agree that a divorce would be better than living as we were. I decided that I would separate from Nora. This was a gut-wrenching experience for both of us, and I often grieve and feel lonely.

On June 1, 1998, I took my Steinway piano, the antique cherry desk, and a few other personal belongings and moved to San Francisco. I have offered to cooperate in obtaining a legal divorce, but Nora says that accepting the present circumstances are part of her commitment to our relationship "for better or for worse." Hardly a week goes by without a direct communication between us. Several times a year we visit each other.

My partner and I now attend Grace Episcopal Cathedral, where women and men, gay and straight persons are fully integrated into the life of the diocese. I genuinely wish that it were possible to dialog about homosexuality within the Adventist church. I would like to become part of a process of reconciliation and healing.