

On Learning of Matthew Green's Death

In 2012 we received news of James Matthew Green's death, and in response to that news ten of his friends put together a little book of biographical essays remembering our friend. I edited that project and contributed an essay. I am proud of that collective work, and I am glad we were able to share our memories of Matt with his children.

I proposed and edited that project for many reasons, notably my grief that Matt was dead; but also because I had unintentionally become the point-of-contact for Matt's friends from high school and college surrounding his death. I wrote about my relationship with Matt in the memorial project. This is the story of my relationship with Matt's death.

I have a good relationship with death in general. I have known many people that died—mainly because I am a gay man who came of age during the plague years of AIDS. I have taken care of the dying. I have held lovers as they died. And I have had several friends who committed suicide. So I am rather cavalier about death: I jokingly always turn first to the obituaries in the newspaper—and in the Austin College house organ.

In the summer of 2012 I was “deep in the weeds” of writing my doctoral dissertation. My partner had built me a studio in our back yard so I could give the research full concentration. I was researching and writing almost every night, all weekends, and taking at least one day a week off work to spend in the studio. It was a fulltime job, in addition to the fulltime job I had, plus launching a non-profit corporation with some friends, plus trying not to get divorced.

One day I took a break and went to the sidewalk to retrieve our mail. The quarterly Austin College magazine had arrived, and I sat on the steps of our front porch—and turned to the death notices. They are arranged by year of Austin College graduation. It is very rare that anyone from the class of 1987 is listed; but there was Matthew.

I posted a quick message to Facebook— “Matt Green has died, does anyone know the details?” And then I went to work as an information professional (librarian). No information in the Fort Worth *Star Telegram*. No obituary in Legacy.com. No contact information for Delane, his mother. But the obituary for Matt's grandmother listed Delane with an unfamiliar last name. . . . No tax records for that new last name. Probate notices for the grandmother. And finally, a probate notice for Matt—in Tarrant County. Was he in Fort Worth when he died?

The last I had heard from Matt was approximately three years prior, via Facebook. We had established a friendly Facebook relationship after decades of silence. He was living in Qatar, but his four children were living Vienna with their (two) mothers. One set of children were teenagers, the other were elementary-aged. Matt invited me and my partner to visit him in Qatar.

And then that was it.

And there had been two decades of no communication prior to that brief Facebook interchange. And then nothing for past two or three years.

In my memorial project essay, I wrote about my intense friendship (and unrequited love) with Matt my senior year of high school, and how I transferred to Austin College as a sophomore to

be near him, and that our friendship ended halfway through that sophomore year. I wrote about my regret that I could never fix that friendship, and that I did not really even understand why it ended. And I wrote about how my memories of that friendship continue to influence me, and make me a better person—how Matt made me a better person.

When I posted the message on Facebook about Matt's death, my friends who saw the message probably only remembered our great friendship, which extended back to our hometown, in Fort Worth. They probably remembered that I was on very good terms with Matt's mother and his grandmother. They probably remembered that we had traveled together. They probably remembered we shared a dorm room—a beautiful corner room in an old dorm with wood floors, a high ceiling, and two windows.

But they probably did not remember that something happened to end the friendship. And that he moved out of the beautiful corner room with two windows, and into an interior single room—with no windows. And I kept the beautiful room for myself. (My parents paying for the double room.)

I really do not know what happened. But Matt's feelings toward me changed abruptly—and it left me hurt and heartsick. (For more than two decades.) I do have some ideas, though.

The summer before I transferred to Austin College something happened in Matt's family. His mother and his step-father (who had been in some sort of leadership position of the Fort Worth Hell's Angels) moved to a small community on Lake Whitney. I visited that new home several times and I could not figure out what was different about them—except they were totally different people than when Matt and I had been in high school. They had experienced some deep psychic change, and they had moved to a spiritually-centered community of like-minded people. I just did not understand what the like-mindedness was about.

Then Matt and I went off to our sophomore year at Austin College—and I discovered crystal methamphetamine. For various medical reasons, I could not drink alcohol that first semester at Austin College; but I was an alcoholic, so I switched substances and became a speed freak. Matt was neither drinking nor using drugs, but I did not know why.

Looking back, I now realize that his mother and step-father had joined AA and had completely turned their lives around. They had moved out to Lake Whitney with a bunch of other ex-bikers in AA. So at the same time that Matt's family was finding God and healing itself, he was living with someone destroying himself with meth.

I do not really know if this is what caused our relationship to end, because we never talked about it. I did not realize what his family had done until well after I was sober. And he never criticized my drug use (that I remember)—and he was not part of the intervention of friends later that year that ended my meth abuse.

I really do not know. I do know that that my other friends and professors were very concerned I was spiraling into self-destruction. They did confront me.

Matt moved out of our beautiful dorm room with two windows, and into a single room with no windows. The next semester my parents paid double so I could stay in the beautiful room, alone. The next year I moved into a house just a block off-campus, and I do not know where Matt lived. We were not speaking. Then he graduated early. Then I went to rehab over Jan-term my senior year—and I experienced a psychic change, and began using a spiritual program to live without drugs and alcohol that includes making amends for harm done. I remember I ran into Matt once shortly after rehab, and I attempted to apologize for whatever had happened. He seemed grateful for my effort, but made it clear that he did not care to be friends.

I would return to Fort Worth over the years after college to visit my parents and grandparents. Matt's grandmother, Jewel, lived a block from my grandmother, so I would visit Matt's grandmother about once a year. Sometimes Matt's mother, Delane, would also be there. Those visits were always very cordial, and they would tell me about Matt's life—in Paris and Vienna and China. I would leave my contact information with them, saying I would love to drive up and see Matt next time he came to visit. But I never got a call. I never saw Matt again.

Now let's return to 2012: I am writing my dissertation, I am working fulltime at a public library as a cataloguer, I am launching a recovery-related non-profit with some friends, and I am now obsessed with Matt's death—or, more specifically, the lack of information about Matt's death. And due to the magic of Facebook, I am the contact point for other people who are learning of Matt's death.

From Matt's grandmother's obituary that appeared five months prior to his own death, I see that Delane, his mother, is listed with a last name that I am unfamiliar with; however, I can find no one listed with that name in the tax records or phone directories in Fort Worth. I do finally find an estate probate notice for Matt in the Fort Worth newspaper, and I send a letter to the attorney listed, asking him to forward a condolence letter to Delane. I send a copy of the condolence letter to the Grandmother's old address, as well. And then I hear nothing back for several months.

At Christmastime a mutual friend that now lives in Fort Worth attended a Christmas Eve service at an Episcopal church, and notices that the flowers were given in memory of Matthew, but no donor is listed.

And then in January I receive a cryptic note from Delane, Matt's mother, thanking me for the condolence letter—and implying that Matt had died in China in a tragic accident. She also stated that his children were still living in Vienna. I shared this information with the Facebook community of people that had responded to the first post seven months earlier.

The dissertation I was finishing at that time relied heavily on “memory studies,” which is a fairly new discipline that incorporates the social sciences of how we remember to examine history and culture. I was writing about how librarians remember their professional lives; but I felt compelled to write about how I remembered Matt, as well. I solicited the other Facebook friends to also write about their memories of Matt, to document what we loved about Matt for his young children.

But almost immediately after I “posted” to Facebook that Matt had died in China due to a tragic accident, Delane sent another letter with a different version of his death: He had committed suicide in Fort Worth.

As I stated, *supra*, I have a great deal of experience with death and suicide. I am not morally opposed to suicide. Some of my best memories of Matt were reading Camus together and talking about suicide—as the only decision we modern men truly make each day. I have helped the terminally ill end their lives with dignity. I believe suicide is a tool that should be used wisely, with great caution, and with careful attention to the details so the living bear no undue trauma.

So I amended my Facebook post about Matt’s death to correct the geographic location and left the cause of death ambiguous. And I made plans to drive up to Fort Worth to have lunch with Delane.

She began by apologizing for not responding quickly to my letters. She had received the one sent to her mother’s old address because that is where she was living; and the attorney had forwarded the one I had sent to him, as well. She explained that shortly after Matt’s suicide (which was just months after her mother’s death), her most recent husband (who was also her first husband and Matt’s father) had become ill with cancer and died just before Christmas. Her mother, her son, and her husband had all died in 2012.

But she desperately wanted to tell me the story of Matt’s last years and his death. She said she had not been able to tell any of his friends—because he had none. Delane seemed lucid and rational at this luncheon, but many of the things she said simply do not make any sense. And, frankly, many of the things she said were so disturbing that I question my own memory of the meal with Delane in Fort Worth.

I have been questioning my own memory of the meal with Delane in Fort Worth for the past four years. I am writing about it now to (I hope) quell the disturbance.

First, Delane said she had visited Matt over the years in Vienna and was on good terms with her grandchildren’s mothers. She had enjoyed attending AA meetings in Vienna with Matt. (Matt was in AA?! Why didn’t he ever want to talk about this with me!?) Matt had always been very secretive about how he made money, but she understood that he worked in international finance and brokered “deals” with his charming diplomacy and stunning linguistic abilities. However, toward the end of his time in Vienna he had converted to Islam.

He had worked on a big project in China the year before his death, and she had visited him there and met his current “love interest” who was an Asian woman. She believes something very bad happened in China—and this woman is at fault. She visited at least twice while Matt was in China, and she felt that this Asian woman was manipulating him in an evil way. And Matt was prefacing almost all his conversations with his mother with proscriptive language and ideas from the Quran—which she felt was completely out of character.

Then in late 2011 he showed up at Delane’s Fort Worth townhouse with the two youngest children from Vienna, unannounced. And he intended to live there and raise his children there.

Delane was alarmed—as this was completely out of character—but she was also focused on caring for her mother’s late-stage illness, and now she needed to also find schools (and clothes, and furniture, and toys, and pediatricians) for her youngest grandchildren. When I asked her if she was concerned about his mental health, she said yes; but she was more concerned about getting the kids situated and her mother’s terminal illness.

She reported that Matt spent all his time in a guest bedroom upstairs in the townhouse, or at a gun range. When they did talk, he claimed his kids were in danger in Vienna because of something that happened in China, and he was here to protect his family. When Delane would press for details or more information, Matt would only say “he had been forced to do something very bad in China.” He would often quote from the Quran. He was very afraid of something.

What I did *not* ask Delane while she was telling me this story, was why she never called me? I had visited many times over the years—and each time I had left my contact information with her and her mother imploring them to let me know the next time Matt came to visit. But she did not.

She was alarmed at Matt’s mental state, but did not reach out to anyone. She was busy taking care of her mother (who I know would have been a “handful”), and she was unexpectedly tasked with two young grandchildren.

In January of 2012 Jewel Holtz, Matt’s grandmother, died. Brian McCarthy saw the obituary and went to the service and saw Matt. He took the picture that is in *Espresso*. Brian asked him to stay in touch—hang out, be friends—but Matt never responded after Jewel’s funeral.

Delane believes that Matt truly believed he and the kids were in danger; but he could never tell her why. She remains unsure about whether this was a delusion. She is certain that “things were not right in China,” and the Asian woman was evil. She never understood why he became obsessed with Islam.

On the day of his suicide, Matt dressed the kids for school and took them to their campus. Then he spent several hours at the shooting range with his gun. Around lunchtime he returned to the townhouse. Delane was in the living room downstairs reading the newspaper. He walked past her without speaking, climbed the stairs to his bedroom and locked the door, and shot himself in the head. His firearm was of a caliber great enough to explode through the entire head, leaving the room a gory mess.

This is what I find most reprehensible: He blew his brains out in his mother’s house, where his two young children were living. Why didn’t he choose the shooting range? Or his car parked outside the shooting range. Or his car parked anywhere else? Why destroy your mother’s townhouse and your children’s home?

This detail also tells me just how sick he was. Dammit.

And, thank God Delane still had her mother’s house to move into with the kids.

I struggled with all of this additional information. I was not comfortable sharing it on Facebook, and I did not. Two friends, Dana Harris and Buford Craig visited me shortly after the lunch with Delane, and I processed the information with them. I met Adrienne Cox in Waco (halfway

between Austin and Fort Worth) to have lunch and discuss what I had learned. But mostly I have kept it a secret. It feels like it is Matt's secret. Delane certainly wanted to keep these details a secret; hence, the first letter claiming a "tragic accident in China." But ultimately she agreed to share (at least some) of the secret with me.

One more detail that has stuck with me: When Delane visited Vienna to check on the children after Matt's death (the children went back to their mother in Vienna), she went to an AA meeting and met with Matt's Vienna AA sponsor. He said that it did not shock him that Matt had committed suicide. His mental health had been so fragile for so many years, that he was surprised he had lived as long as he did.

I continued to work on *Espresso* and solicit the biographical essays from our friends, but I did not share my information outside of a small circle. We finished the memorial and distributed it electronically through the original Facebook postings to people who had inquired; I printed copies and snail-mailed them to all of the contributors; and I printed several copies for Delane to share with Matthew's four children.

Brian McCarthy and Adrienne Cox and I met with Delane for lunch in the Fort Worth Botanical Gardens to formally give the copies of the *Espresso* to the family. She was very gracious and grateful.

But even at that lunch—what I hoped would be the conclusion of my psychic trauma concerning Matt's death—I still felt angry. I was angry that he did not reach out. I was angry that Delane had not contacted me. I was angry that I never got to find out what ended our friendship in 1985, our sophomore year sharing a beautiful dorm room at Austin College.

Immediately after that luncheon at the Botanical Gardens, we all bid farewell to Delane, and then Brian and I said goodbye to Adrienne, and then Brian was getting in his car . . . and I asked Brian if we could take a short walk through the gardens because I really needed help letting go of my anger toward Matthew.

Brian reminded me that Matthew had left Fort Worth as soon as he could. He had made the most beautiful and exotic places in the world his home. He was raising two families in Vienna! Brian's response—much like his contribution to *Espresso*—was elegant and brief. "By the time Matt had made the decision to return to Fort Worth, it was already too late."