

Letters for Matt Shepard

Thursday, October 15, 1998



- **Editors note:** Due to the number of letters coming in from all around the world we cannot post all the letters we receive. The **BI** apologizes for this and will try to post as many as possible.
- View letters from [Tuesday, Oct. 13](#)
- View letters from [Wednesday, Oct. 14](#)

I simply don't know what to say, except to say that I care. I will be with you, as will so many others. I don't think I've ever felt so at a loss for words. I'm horrified and angry. I'm saddened and exhausted. I'm not ignorant, yet I'm stunned. I feel like we all live in a small, little neighborhood - your town has just grown to include so many concerned neighbors fighting the same injustices. I, for once, find myself searching for the appropriate phrase, although I have much to say. Mostly, I will hang on to hope, passion and conviction, the important ingredients in the fight for our community.

Love to you all. Carpe Diem.

Ash Curtis
New York City

Observe the irony that the victimization of Mr. Shepard coincided with National Coming Out Day. Mr. Shepard was singled out for this brutal, savage attack and execution because of his gay identity--because he had the courage to come out and live his life openly as a gay man.

We are all victimized by this incident. Hate crimes against us are intended to keep us down and powerless, to keep us quiet and invisible, to tell us that we will be attacked if we try to assert our right to live our lives openly and truthfully. Fear is the weapon being brandished against us. We are made to fear the process of coming out. We are made to fear the notion of living our lives as openly gay people. How sad that on National Coming Out Day, a day when we reach out to our fearful gay brothers and sisters and encourage them to face down their fears, we should be reminded so shockingly of the justification for those fears.

I am simply dumbfounded by this crime. Gay and lesbian issues have never been so much in the forefront of public discourse as they are now. We appear to be making headstrong progress day by day. Gay characters appear in films and on national television programs; gay celebrities come out of the closet and share their sexual identities openly; employers increasingly offer spousal benefits to same-sex domestic partners; the support base for anti-gay legislation appears to be eroding; legal marriage for gay people may become a reality in the United States. So much progress, yet one incident such as this makes it all too clear how much more remains to be done.

I hope we as a community will not take this affront quietly. I hope that we will have the courage to declare loudly that this treatment is intolerable. That we will not be pushed into the closet. That we will not be intimidated into giving up our civil rights. That we will not capitulate to violence and fear.

I hope that we will inspire our closeted and fearful brethren to have the courage that Matthew Shepard had, to stand up to the fear and live openly as gay people. I hope that we will unite to assert our rightful place in

society, to claim the benefits and privileges that heterosexual society takes for granted but resists according to us.

I hope that college campuses and gay communities across the country will memorialize Matthew Shepard by holding vigils, by rallying for the right for all of us to live openly as gay people, free of harassment. I hope that gay and lesbian people across the nation will come together to denounce fear and oppression, to refuse to be pushed back into the closet, and to insist upon federal hate crime protection that makes it a crime to hurt people because of their sexual identities.

I, for one, have had enough. If others of you share that sentiment, let's make it known. Let's write to our representatives in Congress and demand passage of the Hate Crimes Prevention Act. Let's organize student rallies on our campuses. Let's teach our young people how such tragedies today are analogous to the lynchings of days past, and just as abominable.

But please, let's each do something. Let it be known that we have had enough. This loss will not go unremembered; it must not go unpunished. We cannot allow it to be swept under the rug. We cannot just suffer in silence any longer. Otherwise, a little piece of each of us died with Matthew Shepard today.

John H. Bickford, Jr.

Department of Psychology

University of Massachusetts - Amherst

As I begin this letter, I remember my first year at UW, 1968. Times were more tumultuous and many of us there for the first time from small towns in Wyoming were as concerned with politics as any other student in the US at that time. I remember the formation of GLOW and the comments published in the **BI** at that time. I also remember supporting an unpopular antiwar stance and the comments the **BI** published regarding this "travesty." I even remember sitting under the flag pole in front of the Student Union to protest the killing of fellow students at Kent State. Yes, I've been there off and on for 30 years! I was born and raised in Wyoming as were my children. My wife and my children have gone to UW and graduated, my family has a history there. We have graduated as both undergraduates and lawyers from this great school which has done so much to add to our welfare and education.

Now, it is with great sadness that I discover the bigotry we have fought to conquer is still alive 30 years after I first encountered it there. Why? The University, through its teachers, has spent this 30 years trying to educate students, now adults, against bigotry. I have seen many examples of this and can easily name numbers of professors who taught me this and who attempted to teach it to all in their classes. Why didn't our peers and children learn these lessons?

History teaches us the results of bigotry. We can easily point to numerous failures of human society resulting from bigotry. Let us come together, end our divisiveness, and embrace all others, "Straight, Gay, Lesbian, Black, Hispanic, Asian, Anglo, etc., etc. Let's learn from this senseless killing: each of us has unique abilities, qualities, and orientations which should be embraced through acceptance of our wonderful diversity. Love one another, that is the most worthwhile endeavor one ever gets a chance to do, be kind and accepting.

To paraphrase Rod Steward, "Matthew was a friend of ours!"

Dennis Bachlet

Los Alamos, New Mexico

It is with profound regret and pain that we bury Matthew Shepard, the latest victim of brutal homophobia. As the media draws attention to inequality, institutionalized forms of bigotry and intolerance, let the gay and lesbian community put out a message to those windbags of disinformation and pseudoscience: Senators Trent Lott and Jesse Helms, Congressman Riggs, James Dobson of Focus on the Family, Pat Robertson of the Christian Coalition, and Janet Folger of the Center for Reclaiming America. As you stand irresponsibly and unaccountably from your pulpits denouncing gays and lesbians for one illogical reason or another, plaster newspapers with incredible stories of former gays and lesbians or compare us to pedophiles or kleptomaniacs, you empower others to physically commit violence against members of our communities. Recalling how some African Americans took on the Ku Klux Klan and won, your rhetoric implicates you as accessories of the worst hate crimes of this decade. The blood of Matthew Shepard is on your hands.

Damiano Iocovozzi
Martinez, California

I do not blame any city for the death of Matthew Shepard, but the whole world. Don't tell me the bible says being gay is a sin, so is living together, babies without fathers, drugs and drinking. Let us look at what we have allowed ourselves to become, we stare at others who look different and shy away from others due to their sex, race and religion.

I am no better than anyone, I am like everyone, I have my own beliefs and dreams, that is what makes me different than you, but neither of us is better or worse.

I pray in this case that we don't have to listen to excuses, they know what they did, the past should not make any difference. We as Americans and parents need to stop making excuses and teach our children morals and values, then maybe we can love everyone, no matter what. Our children are our future, someday they will make decisions that affect us, let us leave them a world of love, unconditional love for all.

I hold we as people at fault, we made this mess, instilled these ideas, and only we can change them. It's time that the punishment fits the crime, let's clean up ourselves and then accept everyone for who they are. No person should be afraid to be themselves, we are all God's children, let's act like it, give unconditional love to all.

Donna Sherlock
Nebraska

I am gay. I am Jewish. My people -- in both senses -- were the object of a plot of global extermination more than 50 years ago.

Yet, I reject the call for special legislation -- at any level of government -- to handle so-called "hate crimes" any differently than any other crime which affects the victim similarly.

The purposeful act of taking another person's life through beating and abandonment is no more heinous

whether the person is gay or straight, white or black, male or female, young or old, rich or poor.

Our world will never come to peace as long as we value each other's lives differently or treat a crime against one person any differently than an identical crime against another person.

If we believe that we are all equal in the eyes of the law, if we believe that we all deserve equal treatment under the law, then we must not pass laws which treat us -- or acts perpetrated against us -- any differently because of who we are. If we succumb to the temptation to treat the willful murder of one person any differently than the willful murder of another, then we succumb to formalizing the notion that some people are more worthy of protection (or retribution) than others.

If we do that, then all hope of living together peacefully as equals is lost. My heart goes out to the friends and family of Matthew Shepard. I have three wonderful children. I cannot fathom the anger that I would feel if this happened to any of my children.

I pray that Matthew is at peace, and that those who participated in his murder will face a form of suffering no less extreme and no less painful than they chose to inflict on this young man.

Steven Givot
Barrington Hills, Illinois

This is my fourth year of college and the whole time I have been studying crimes, victims, the affects on communities, and the atrocities of crimes. I signed up for a class on hate crimes this semester and have studied these types of crimes over and over. Although I have been absolutely sickened by these crimes, when it happened in our own backyard it put everything into a different and very difficult context. My heart absolutely breaks for Matthew Shepard, his family, and this community as a whole. I like to think that I am not a naive person in believing that these crimes do happen and they can happen everywhere, but nothing can prepare you for the amount of emotion that hits you when it happens so close to home. Throughout this week I have gone through all the emotions; pity, anger, hate, shock, sorrow, and so fourth.

It is devastating that these things happen. But they do and we as a society, must do something to stop them. I truly believe that the first step is with our children, we must teach them that being different is alright and that violent behavior will not be tolerated. We must also make punishments for these crimes, and others, severe-, sending out a message that people will not get away with this and justice will be served.

I attended the candle lighting ceremony for Matthew and heard person after person stand up and say that we must find it in our hearts to forgive the perpetrators of this crime. I know that these people are right but one thing must happen first, justice must be done and the criminals must be punished. However, I only heard one person stand up and say this. Right now I have anger and contempt in my heart for these criminals and hope that one day God will grant me the serenity to forgive.

I also know that there are people out there who would like to hurt the perpetrators of this crimes and I must warn that this is not the way either. Violence will not solve violence and as much as some may want to hurt these people they must refrain. Not only would they get themselves into trouble but they would be a terrible model for our children and would become just like Mattews attackers.

As a community I feel that Laramie is doing a good job of coming together to fight this type of action. We must not let this act rip us apart and must continue to work together. I feel the community has done a good job of letting the world know that both Laramie and Wyoming, are not this way. But at the same time we

have admitted that this is a world wide problem; one that we are not immune to. This is an important part of the healing process for the community.

I pray everyday for the Shepard family. God, please give them the courage to make it through this difficult time. Also, please help this community, this state, this world.

Carrie Lyons

I'm writing in response to Matthew Ashment's column "Good-ol'-boy mentality doesn't equate hate". To begin I would first like to tell you Mr. Ashment that I do agree with you that the state of Wyoming should not be perceived as a singular, bigoted group of people within the union. My concern lies within your reaction to this issue. I'm sure that the world doesn't really think we are "groups of people winking in conspiracy".

It's true that hatred is spread throughout the nation. Wyoming does however have an extremely low minority representation. With this being the case it can be frightening or at least uncomfortable for someone outside of the white, male majority to be here. The events this past week probably enhance that, and it's important to empathize with that.

This leads to my point. Attitudes of intolerance are all around us. On a week to week basis I hear derogatory remarks about African Americans, Asians, Chicanos, Middle Easterners, women, and especially those of the gay community.

A quote hanging on the wall of my bedroom reads "It is above all necessary to make changes in attitudes and in the image each has of the other, to transform the way in which we manage inter-personal conflicts as much as group conflicts..... (Pierre Calame, Mission -Impossible)

The reason that your reaction concerns me Mr. Ashment is that to become defensive is contradictory to the goal of our campus. Instead of being defensive we need to work on solving the problem. We need to change the attitudes and behaviors that exist, beginning at the lowest possible level, that is ourselves and those we associate with.

Lance Young
Communication

This letter is to the column written by Eric Rohr in the Oct. 13 issue. I am Shaundra Arcuby and I dated Russell Henderson in High School and recently became friends with him again. I was asked to talk about the Russell that his friends and family know, and that is what I tried to do. I want to clarify that Russell and I are friends, and that we talked about leaving town to see the world, just as any friends might do. In no way was he taking "time to break off his relationship with Chastity Pasley". Also, Russell never gave the impression that it was not a content relationship. I got that impression from rumors around town, and we know how rumors around Laramie go. This may not seem important, in light of the seriousness of the crime and the heartache for Matt Shepard's friends and family, but I do want to clarify these facts.

Shaundra Arcuby
Laramie

In the process of trying to rationalize the death of Matthew Shepard some people are trying to blame the church and Christianity for the hate mentality behind his death, this is false. I don't know of a single biblically founded church that preaches hate and condemnation. I am a Christian and I was taught to love my neighbor as myself. I was also taught not to judge; I don't have the right to judge others because I am ultimately no better than anyone else. There is only One true Judge; and if I were one of the individuals involved with this heinous crime I would be very fearful of His judgment upon me. Matthew Shepard was a beautiful individual who deserved to be loved and treated with respect, not brutally beaten and strung to a fence- for any reason. Today I heard about a certain preacher in Casper who claims to be a Baptist and a Christian. He is planning to protest with his followers at Matthew Shepard's funeral with the premise that "God hates gays This is absolutely corrupt, absurd and sickening. This man has manipulated God's word to produce his own sort of religion. He is not representative of Baptists or any Christian. My heart and prayers go out to the family and friends of Matthew Shepard, no one should have to go through what Matthew was put through or what his family is going through now.

April Jamison
fine arts/humanities

At this tragic time, let us remember the words of Pastor Martin Niemoller (a Nazi victim).

*They first came for the communists
and I didn't speak up --
because I wasn't a Communist.*

*Then they came for the Jews
and I didn't speak up --
because I wasn't a Jew.*

*Then they came for the trade unionists
and I didn't speak up --
because I wasn't a trade unionist.*

*Then they came for the Catholics
and I didn't speak up --
because I was a Protestant*

*Then they came for me
and by that time no one was
left to speak up.*

Let us all speak up for Matthew Shepard. Let us all speak up against violence. We must demand the protection of human dignity for all people. We must speak up against hate and violence if we, too, do not wish to fall victim to violence and hatred.

Mary Feeney
Political Science

Never in my life have I been so affected by the life of a stranger.

Matthew Shepard forfeited his life for having the guts to simply be the person he was.

I graduated high school from Butte, Montana. I know first hand how silence is forced on a person in a small western town. I had to learn to fight there, for no other reason than that I was 'the new kid'. God forbid someone should have discovered I was gay.

Why can't people understand that NO ONE CHOOSES TO BE GAY? Do they think for one minute, given a choice, we'd CHOOSE THIS KIND OF HUMILIATION, CHOOSE THIS KIND OF VIOLENCE, CHOOSE TO BE SINGLED OUT AND BEATEN TO DEATH?

The only choice we make as individuals is to listen to our own hearts; to believe in the idea that an individual is sacred, and free. We choose only to stand up and be counted for who we are. I can make no apologies for how I was born. I can only try to be as good a person as I can, and take from my own experience the knowledge that everyone deserves an even break.

Do I advocate the death penalty for these animals? No. I do not believe that that sets the example we are trying to set. I'm angry as hell, and fantasize about taking a few of their teeth out with a baseball bat, but another death will solve nothing. Another death will NEVER bring Matthew back, or any of the other countless people who have died at the hands of so many 'little hitlers'. Love is the only way to overcome hate. Hate is only fear disguised. I only hope that these smug bastards live long enough to realize who they have killed. I hope they live long, suffering lives in prison, and maybe learn to teach others how to avoid their own mistakes. Let them rot, alive, with their consciences.

I will never forget the name Matthew Shepard. I will never hide behind my masculinity, or try to slip in and out of the straight world unnoticed. We have been a part of humanity since time began. We are not going anywhere. GODSPEED, MATTHEW.

Sean Patrick Irvin
Hollywood, CA

It has been a long time since I have cried over a situation so far away from me, after the burial of my devoted father. I am a father myself and this vicious, rabid attack has shaken many Americans. I want to assure you that I shall not only be discussing Matthew in my classes but will duplicate collected materials on this savage attack to touch the hearts of my students in any way possible. I continue to mourn with Matt's parents and family, your community, your wonderful University and with the people of good will in Laramie.

Dr. Andy Nilsen
Professor of Psychology
William Paterson University

Oh dear. How my routine has been rocked again this week. My days now commence with a visit to the **BI**. Reading through every word in each article and each letter about Matt leaves me drained and crying. Being an organist, in order to face another day, I mount the bench of my organ each morning and envelop myself

in music to sooth my hurting soul. I just cannot comprehend the emotions storming my body and soul as I write. My god Matthew! How deeply you have affected so many others and me.

I am writing from my loft in downtown Los Angeles where I live surrounded by city hall, the courthouses, police and C.H.P. garages, the police heliport and numerous other crime fighting institutions made famous in film and television. Until recently, the roar of helicopters launching off the roof of their base and racing overhead to the next crime had gone unheard by my ears being that it is virtually a constant sound which fills the air. That all changed when a dear dear friend was attacked earlier this year. It was a pilot in one of two of these same copters sent skyward that night with his night light beaming down on the dark streets who found my friend's attacker literally red handed. He was arrested, charged with and was just recently found guilty of attempted murder. The justice system here worked this time. Sadly however, the age old questionof WHY? will NEVER be answered!

I am a 38 years old and very much a faggot. I design pipe organs and for many years worked for what was the world's largest organ builder until its demise in 1992. Through the years, I have been privileged to work on instruments for churches in the smallest of hick towns to noted cathedrals and universities, including the Crystal Cathedral. My career as an organbuilder and organist has afforded me the opportunity to meet many truly remarkable people both great and small. Sadly, however, these same years subjected me to having to deal with some of the vilest people in the world. Blame for so much of the hate that exists in the world may be laid at the feet of those leaders and flocks of the "church". This being something I have never been able to reconcile in my mind. I consciously choose, however, to hold close to my heart those memories which are of a more pleasant nature. To do otherwise would have long since destroyed me. Another cherished memory will be written this Friday as the organ, which will sing your praises Matt, is organ no. 10688 built by my former employer for Saint Mark's in Casper. It is truly a small world we live in.

I wish I was more capable of translating into words that which is overwhelming me right now, but I cannot. Instead, I will depend on the simple words found somewhere on the net of another not known to me.

Some people come into our lives and quickly go. Some people stay awhile and leave their footprints on our hearts ... and we are never the same.

Thank you Matt for stepping into my life ... however quick ... I will never be the same.

David-George Dauphinee
Los Angeles, California

Matthew Shepard gave his life in defense of liberty and protecting My freedom and the freedom of my children as much as the Minutemen on Lexington Green. It took a great deal of strength and courage to exercise the "freedom" to be himself. Freedoms not exercised are lost, and Matthew's vigilance cost him his life. I can hope that, because Matthew paid so dearly, that my children will be able to live their lives without fear of bigotry and violence because of their beliefs. It is time for the rest of us to stand up and be counted, as Matthew did, to demand the protection of the Constitution for all Americans and the action of the people to prevent hate crimes from happening and to thoroughly investigate when they do. It will take more than just voting, but we will be able to make America a place where being yourself doesn't cost your life, and where hate-based violence doesn't occur because it isn't acceptable to any level of society. My heart reaches out to Matthew's family that have to bear a loss that was totally preventable had we acted sooner. It is time for America to stand up and stop the hatred and intolerance that is spewed from so many pulpits.

Stephen Hopkins
St. Paul, Minnesota

As I tried to sleep last night, I felt some relief in knowing that Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney will receive legal penalty for what they have committed upon Matthew Shepard, his family, your communities, the state of Wyoming, the country I call home and the world we live in.

At first, legal penalty didn't make me feel any better. Then I imagined what must be going through the minds of the beasts that committed this act of horror. Surely, they had no idea they would be caught for this execution, embarrassing to the entire human race. I assume they feel terror; I assume that they fear being put to death for their deeds - for acting so thoughtlessly on their insecure masculine virility. And yes, that does feel good to me. At this point, vengeance is unavoidable. I mourned Monday morning; and I feel I have gone into combat since.

This is not a political cause or a social issue. This is a mechanism that suddenly I feel my survival depends upon. This battle is not an offensive strike, but one in defense of my being and of others like me.

I imagine my own life, now 25 years old, having ended at 21 in this situation. It is all too easy for me to imagine the possibility that this could have happened to me, and it still could. I lived a facade of a life until I moved from rural/small town environments to a diverse, and thus more tolerant city. I have learned to be strong - a threat, in fact, when necessary - and to be comfortable with my sexuality, solely because I know that I could and would defend myself, to any extent, if I had to.

I don't feel that I am free. I feel like I can be who I am and survive --not comfortably, but defensively.

I see Matthew Shepard as a symbol of magnitude because of the effect his death has had on my life. In the past seven days, having never met nor heard of Matthew Shepard, he has become the most prominent figure that my (OUR) generation has witnessed, living and dying in our own time, exemplifying our need to keep fighting this battle. Matthew Shepard will be regarded in the way that the generation before me regards Harvey Milk or Stonewall because his tragic death is the galvanizing rallying cry that our generation has never before heard first hand.

Finally, the vengeance gives way to a sense of goal. This ugly and too real event will, sadly, but nonetheless, unite my peers in a way that would not otherwise happen.

I have cried in private off and on for four days; but in public, I have stiffened my lip, I have worn the yellow band, and I have for once found a sense of reason for the anger I have always felt. I will direct it more positively. I will exhaust myself fighting in any and every way necessary, to be who I am without apology; and thus, one of these nights, I will be able to unclench my fists and sleep again.

Jef Hoskins
Seattle, WA

To the extent that Matt's death was caused by his being Gay and by the attitude his killers and others hold regarding Gays, I am in agreement with the heartfelt desire of many to see these attitudes change. If it leads to the passage of laws which actually improve the situation, I will be grateful.

But I am distressed to see so little evidence that anyone feels that our larger failure is in regards to his killers. Until we are willing to get close to those who are hurting and unhappy around us, we will continue to be shocked by the sudden irrational consequences of our indifference.

From what little I have seen about the character of those charged with this crime, it does not seem evident that their lives were focused on hurting Gays. This crime almost certainly required a great deal of self-hate on the part of the perpetrators. And self-hate does not grow in a vacuum. What were the failures of parenting, mentoring, befriending, etc. which contributed to this turn of events? What similar failures are we making now with regards to those in our families, our neighborhoods, our schools, etc.? Are we too focused on "the good life" or "the American Dream" to be bothered with such things? I don't believe we can hire enough professionals to do it for us no matter how wealthy we become. Getting involved in campaigns for reform may be an important response to this event for some of us. But I hope we will not use such activity as an excuse for not facing the deeper issues we have been ignoring too long. Why are our neighborhoods becoming less safe? Why are our marriages failing so frequently? Why are we such a violent nation? These things don't just happen. We are making choices individually and collectively which are bringing them about. If we don't change our priorities things can only get worse, laws or no laws.

Merle Baker
Oak Park, Illinois

As a twenty-three year old gay male I am horrified by the recent events concerning Matthew Shepard. It is sad enough that a young man had his life taken from him in such a brutal way, but now we must fight our own leaders to stop this kind of event from becoming commonplace in our society. Matthew will never again be able to enjoy the little things in life that we take for granted. He'll never see the sun set against the mountains, feel the first cool breeze of fall, or be able to hug his Mother and Father. Matthew deserves our support in passing a hate-crimes statute that will help to end this type of violence. If it does nothing more than to stop one more death, isn't it worth it? Nothing in the world can ever replace a lost life, but everything in the world should be done to stop the loss of even one more.

Jason Woodrum
Largo, Florida