

Between Suicide and Celibacy

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Review of Fred and Marilyn Matis and Ty Mansfield, In Quiet Desperation: Understanding the Challenge of Same-Gender Attraction (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004), 270 pp.

It is difficult to know how to review this book, which is really two books loosely connected, although both deal with homosexuality and both share a similar point of view. The first and shorter part is written by Marilyn Matis, the mother of Stuart Matis, a Latter-day Saint man who committed suicide in 1992 on the doorstep of the LDS stake center in Los Altos, California. The second part of the book was written by a young, gay Latter-day Saint man who has chosen to remain celibate for the duration of his life. Suicide and celibacy represent two dramatically divergent responses to the challenge of being homosexual in a religious culture that does not permit homosexual bonding or expression.

The title and cover of the book suggest something about the ambiguous nature of these two treatments of homosexuality: “In Quiet Desperation” seems an inapt title for responses to homosexuality that call for attitudes and behaviors that are the opposite of desperation—honest, open acknowledgment of same-gender attraction, including courageous acceptance of the restrictions placed on expressions of homosexuality within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The title, which comes from Thoreau’s Walden (“The mass of men live lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation”), actually relates to a section of Ty Mansfield’s narrative in which he associates desperation with those who live openly homosexual lives, and yet I believe it relates ironically to both parts of this book as well, for Stuart Matis’s decision to take his own life was clearly a desperate act (his mother calls it his “last desperate act” [40]), and Ty Mansfield’s commitment, as he expresses it in these pages, although countered by what he terms “quiet inspiration,” ultimately could also be seen as desperate, an attempt to suppress all desires for romantic and erotic expression. The ambiguity of the title is also seen in the cover illustration in which the title is placed across the eyes of a decidedly handsome young man in a way that suggests a blindfold. A more apt title would have been “In Quiet Acceptance,” with the person in the photo looking confidently at the reader.

There is a disconnect on these pages that ought not to be ignored—the conflict between a spiritual ideal, expressed in the words from a prefatory statement entitled “The Refiner’s Fire,” by an anonymous writer that “Our trials do not come at random, and he [God] will not let us be tested beyond what we can endure,” and the story of Stuart Matis who apparently was tested beyond what he could endure. It is also expressed in the statement that Ty Mansfield quotes from Elder Neal Maxwell that “Saints reach breaking

points without breaking” (129). When I met Stuart Matis some months before his death I was impressed that, as I stated in a memorial piece dedicated to him,¹ he was an example of the finest that Mormonism produces, a true Latter-day Saint (a friend described him as “a Christlike leader” [37]). It was also evident that he was nearing the breaking point in his attempt to reconcile his homosexuality with his religion when, during our meeting, he spoke of his self-destructive impulses. He reached that breaking point just a few months later when he took his life. The sometimes intense homophobia one encounters in the LDS Church and in American society in general, coupled with a quest to live a saintly life, can prove fatal, as it did for Stuart Matis and far too many other Latter-day Saint homosexuals.

Since Marilyn Matis’s and Ty Mansfield’s treatments of homosexuality are distinct, I will treat each separately and then comment on them together in my conclusion.

Part I, “A Parent’s Spiritual Journey toward Understanding,” was written by Marilyn Matis, Stuart Matis’s mother, even though both she and her husband are listed as authors. Their story is a familiar one to those who know something of the history of homosexuality in the Church over the past three or four decades when it became increasingly acceptable to acknowledge at least the reality of “the love that dare not speak its name,” if not the name itself.²

Like the parents of many Latter-day Saint homosexuals, the Matises went through an arc of confusion, denial, embarrassment, and finally acceptance of their son’s homosexuality, which included their courage to face the challenges of having a gay son in a church and culture basically hostile to homosexuals. The story they tell about their son is also a familiar account of the arc that is unfortunately characteristic of too many Latter-day Saint homosexuals: denial, repression, acknowledgement, sustained and desperate attempts to change one’s orientation, vacillation between the impulse to express homosexual feelings and the desire to conform to Church standards, feeling unaccepted by the Church or loved of God, and finally abandoning all hope of finding a peaceful resolution in mortality.

To lose a child to suicide is among the most devastating experiences of parenthood, especially when parents feel the futility of doing all they can to prevent the suicide and yet not be powerful enough to counter all of the forces that lead to it. Unlike

¹ “Requiem for a Gay Mormon: In Honor of Henry Stewart Matis,” (www.beliefnet.com and Family Fellowship, Provo, UT)

² Semantics and homosexuality is a subject apart. What seems strange is the reluctance (perhaps even fear) some Mormons have using the term “homosexual,” let alone “gay” and “lesbian.” Marilyn Matis reflects a common point of view when she states, “We have come to the conclusion that it is unwise for them [homosexuals] to refer to themselves as *being homosexual* or *being gay*. Fred and I feel that the terms *homosexual* and *gay* are negative labels that people use to *define them[selves]*” 43-44). If “heterosexual,” as opposed to “opposite-gender attraction” and “straight” are acceptable, then “homosexual” and “gay” and “lesbian” should also be.

many LDS homosexuals who take their own lives, Stuart was blessed with loving parents who were trying to help him find some way out of the labyrinth in which he felt trapped.

The Matises are clearly people of faith, and their commitment to the Church is unwavering. Marilyn Matis reveals that she “called twenty temples across the United States every two weeks to put [Stuart’s] name on the prayer rolls” (11). Her son also prayed often and fervently to be free of the burden he felt his homosexuality placed upon him. Marilyn Matis speaks of the “great feeling of peace” (14) both she and her husband felt when, a couple of years before Stuart committed suicide, he informed her that he had purchased a gun and she was unable to dissuade him from attempting to take his life.

Later, it was in the temple that Stuart’s father received a personal revelation, a “strong impression not to worry about Stuart, because he would be all right” (18). In light of Stuart’s continuing decline into deep depression and ultimate suicide, it is difficult to know how to interpret such impressions, especially in the face of what Stuart himself reveals about his emotional state during his last months. In the letter he wrote to his parents the night before he took his life, he said, “My life was actually killed long ago. . . . I simply could not live another day choking on my own feelings of inferiority. For the first time in over twenty years I am free from my pains” (19). It is a terrible indictment of our attitudes toward and treatment of homosexuals that for some suicide is seen as the only avenue to peace.

It was in this last letter that Stuart expressed the wish that somehow his parents could turn the tragedy of his life into something positive: “Perhaps your action to help others understand the true nature of homosexuality might help to save many young people’s lives” (19). The Matises have taken this wish as a mission and have (along with others) successfully petitioned the Church to change some of the language about homosexuality in at least one publication (“For the Strength of Youth”), have shared their experience openly with other families, and have counseled a number of young Latter-day Saints who are wrestling with this issue. Instead of despairing over their son’s death, they have worked arduously to prevent similar deaths.

Perhaps the most positive contributions Marilyn Matis makes are her acknowledgment of the complexity of same-gender attraction--“Until we have a definitive understanding of what causes same-gender attraction, all therapy becomes a guessing game” (10)³--and her modeling for other LDS families to be open in their discussion of homosexuality. It certainly took boldness on the Matises part to take the declarative position that homosexuality is not a choice and that, at least for the majority, is not changeable. The importance of this contribution cannot be overestimated in a culture that has continually argued that homosexuality is chosen and changeable.

I believe that Stuart took his life because, in spite of the unwavering love and support of his parents and his own sustained heroic efforts to prove to himself otherwise, he felt abandoned by both God and the Church. This is evidenced not only by statements

³ Although it must be acknowledged that some therapeutic approaches, especially those that do not focus on reparation and that honor individual choice, have proved more effective.

he made during his conversations with me (“If God loves me, why hasn’t he answered my prayers that he change me?”) but also by two symbolic statements he made at the end of his life. The first took place a few weeks before he took his life when he placed his scriptures outside his bedroom door. His mother writes, “Stuart’s scriptures in the hallway told me that he had completely given up fighting his anxiety and depression” (20). The second symbolic act was an ultimate one: with planning and deliberation he took his own life on the front steps of an LDS stake center. Stuart was a bright person and I am certain that, in spite of his troubled state of mind, he intended these dramatic, symbolic statements as an indictment of a church culture which he found destructive to himself and his fellow homosexuals.

The most heart-breaking part of Marilyn Matis’s account of her family’s coming to terms with their son’s homosexuality is her portrayal of his state of mind, especially during the period before he took his life. She quotes Stuart as saying, “The reason I have never told you I love you is that I haven’t allowed myself to express feelings for anyone” (12). This is an astonishing statement. It reveals a person who is striving so earnestly to control his emotions, so fearful of controlling his same-sex feelings, that he can’t allow even the most normal of affectionate expressions.

I couldn’t help wondering as I thought about Stuart how negatively he might now be viewed had, instead of taking his life in a desperate attempt to end his pain and suffering, he had instead chosen to live in a committed, monogamous same-sex relationship and was a productive, contributing member of society. Stuart truly was an outstanding man and there is little doubt that he would have done enormous good had he been capable of choosing life instead of death. In his more coherent moods, he did consider such a choice as he revealed during our meeting and which he said was encouraged by one of his ecclesiastical leaders. During our meeting he told me that he had met someone to whom he was seriously attracted and that he wished for a permanent, loving relationship. Although his mother said Stuart “never made such a statement” (26), my remembrance of our conversation is quite vivid.

Most of us look for fulfillment in another person. Mansfield suggests that for him, such fulfillment is found in Christ (“We should not look for someone who completes us as only Christ can” [212-13]), but for most of us these are not mutually exclusive desires or choices—we seek spiritual fulfillment in Christ and social, emotional, and physical fulfillment in a loving relationship with another human being.

Unfortunately, there are still some Mormon parents who believe that it is better for a child to commit suicide than to commit sin. What the Lord said regarding the saying, “The father’s have eaten grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge,” (Jeremiah 31:29), is appropriate for such belief: “As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. For every living soul belongs to me (Ezek 18:1-4). To idealize any suicide as acceptable not only sets a dangerous precedent, it manifests a fundamental misunderstanding of the gospel.

Part II, “A Young Person’s Search for Purpose and Peace,” by Ty Mansfield, is an articulate, confident, even passionate argument in favor of celibacy for Latter-day Saint homosexuals. Mansfield devotes nearly two hundred pages to laying out the rationale for

his position, marshalling scriptures (of which he demonstrates a deep understanding) and copious quotations from general authorities and others in support of his argument. In many ways, it is an impressive statement, not the least because Mansfield lays bare his own soul in making it. He does not flinch from the challenge this represents, while acknowledging that it will take a “miracle” for him to succeed. In the section in which he discusses such an outcome (Chapter 3, “A God of Miracles”), he says, “I am a living miracle. . . . I am a miracle of God” (89).

Obviously such a choice requires an ultimate commitment. It isn’t that it is impossible for one to make oneself a “eunuch for the kingdom of heaven’s sake” (Matt. 19:12), but the demands of doing so require a heroic sacrifice of so much that we tend to associate with being fully human that realistically few are able to achieve it. I don’t by any means disparage the wish to try to live such a life, but to do so in the absence of a religious philosophy that elevates celibacy to a high order of spiritual living (which the Mormon Church has never done) or a social and spiritual community that supports and rewards it (as Catholics and a few other religious orders do), is, to say the least, extremely challenging. If one could withdraw from the world with its “cauldron of unholy loves” to a cloistered world where, to use Gerard Manley Hopkins’ lines, “no storms come,” where “springs not fail,/ [and there] flies no sharp and sided hail,” and find deep fellowship with other celibates, it would be a more realistic achievement, although the serious problem the Catholic Church is currently facing over many priests’ inability to sustain celibacy reveals that even with a strong support system this seems not a realistic life choice for the majority of homosexuals—or heterosexuals. It is one thing to live a life of pure holiness in a cloistered world (such as that exemplified by the fourteenth-century German monk Thomas a Kempis in his The Imitation of Christ), but it is far more difficult to do so in a culture in which one tries to maintain one’s erotic poise while confronted daily with a thousand images of desire.

Mansfield acknowledges the tension in his own life between the real and the ideal: “I approach it [same-gender attraction] as one who has felt the feelings of being torn between an ideal belief system and the reality of experiencing longings that make the thought of conforming to that system almost unbearable at times” (72). In another place he states, “It has been difficult for me . . . a challenge that often seems impossible to bear and remain faithful” (107).

Mansfield’s text reveals a clear Calvinistic rhetoric. He speaks of our being “less than the dust of the earth” (188). He emphasizes our fallen natures: “We live in fallen, mortal bodies in a fallen society in a fallen world” (73). He goes so far as to suggest that homosexuality itself is “simply the fruit of living in a fallen world” (98). Extending this idea, he quotes the theologian, Richard Hays, as arguing that “Paul’s choice of homosexuality as an illustration of human depravity is not merely random: it serves his rhetorical purposes by providing a vivid image of humanity’s primal rejection of the sovereignty of God the creator” (168). Mansfield adds, “Paul uses homosexual sin as a type for all sexual sin because it clearly contrasts the creative power of God with the noncreative sin of homosexual actions” (170). But the creative-noncreative argument is weakened by the fact that ninety-nine percent of heterosexual intercourse is also noncreative, i.e., is not intended to produce children. Such rhetoric and appeal of biblical

sources tends to reinforce the images of depravity that society traditionally has associated with homosexuality.

Mansfield is ambiguous and perhaps even contradictory when it comes to the matter of marriage. While acknowledging that “marriage should most certainly not be viewed as a ‘cure’ for same-gender attraction” (207), he also believes “that the idea of marriage should [not] be entirely abandoned” (207).⁴ In spite of his own complete lack of bonding to women, he still holds out the possibility that he might be able to marry in the future. Particularly problematic is his statement, “I have come to feel that to love another person completely has little to do with our sexual orientation but rather entirely to do with our hearts and our commitment to our spouse and to Christ—regardless of the nature of our attraction” (209). He bolsters his argument by quoting from a letter from a woman married to a gay man, “As long as my husband is committed to the Lord and me, I don’t care if he has feelings of attraction to other men” (209). Unfortunately, there is a long string of broken hearts and broken families as the result of such a belief.

Mansfield shows a certain naivety when it comes to sex in marriage (which is understandable since he has never been married). He states, “Though the physical expression of intimate love between married couples is not solely [or largely?] for the purpose of creation, those sacred powers—and all expressions of them—must be viewed with reverence” (170; emphasis added). He further argues that “when we use those powers in any form that is self-serving—whether married or unmarried or with another person or singly—we are abusing that sacred gift and must repent” (170). Most married couples recognize that sometimes sexual desire is self-serving and that sexual expression is often viewed more as pleasurable than sacred. Sexual expression in marriage tends to run the gamut from the spiritual to the comic. Eventually, it simply takes its place along with a variety of other experiences that make for a healthy marriage.

One of the most significant conclusions from both authors is that as a Church and culture we all bear a responsibility for the deaths and disaffection that characterize the lives of many of our homosexual brothers and sisters. Marilyn Matis asks, “When will the suicides stop? When will we, as members of Christ’s church, begin to realize the pain that so many young men and women experience because of the challenge of same-gender attraction?” (45). It is important to note that the anguish and despair homosexuals experience is less related to their orientation than to the way our culture responds to them because of their orientation. The homophobia that exists in Mormon culture is real and it is deep. In a letter to the BYU Daily Universe written not long before his death, Stuart

⁴ The issue is complicated by the fact that the risk of marriage is different for homosexuals than it is for bisexuals. The latter tend to have greater success in bonding with partners of the opposite sex, although the risks of marriage are still great since their same-gender attraction persists. What is especially tragic is that many young women, especially, marry homosexuals believing (because they have been told so) that marriage will change their spouse, only to find that it does not. They then are faced with the choice of trying to stay in the marriage at the cost of their own needs for intimate nurturing or terminating the marriage, an extremely difficult choice in a religious culture that tends to see divorce as a significant failure.

Matis wrote that his own “internalized homophobia, immense self-hatred, depression and suicidal thoughts” were directly related to the kind of sentiments expressed in an earlier letter to the editor that “equated my gay friends and me to murderers, Satanists, prostitutes, pedophiles, and partakers of bestiality.” He adds, “Imagine having to live with this hateful rhetoric constantly being spewed at you” (37).

The responsibility for the negative attitudes toward and treatment of homosexuals is shared by all of us—general authorities, local and regional ecclesiastical leaders, family and lay members alike. It is also shared by the LDS therapeutic community which, to some degree, has not served Mormon homosexuals well by doggedly persisting in emphasizing reparative or change therapy, by encouraging homosexuals to marry, by marginalizing therapists who have taken a broader view of homosexuality, by simplifying the issue in not recognizing the range of sexual attraction, and by attempting to control the dialogue about treatment. Many homosexuals report finding standard treatment by LDS therapists not only not helpful, but counterproductive, and in some instances even destructive. The Association of Mormon Counselors and Psychotherapists (AMCAP) has seemed particularly resistant to any challenge to the standard position. There are, of course, examples of courageous therapists who have been willing to consider different points of view and employ alternate therapeutic treatment.

Church leaders also bear a special responsibility for the climate in which homosexuals are regarded in the Church. While it is an extreme example of the failure of such leadership, I recount the following experience of a friend who, many years ago, prior to his mission, felt it important to tell a general authority about his same-sex attraction. After he was invited into the office to which he had been sent, the general authority, without stopping the work he was doing at his desk and without even looking up at my friend, said, “Elder, I wish you were coming in here to tell me you were dying of cancer than that you are homosexual.” I was recently informed that this same general authority has a homosexual son from whom he has been disaffected and estranged for many years.

Fortunately, such attitudes are changing. President Hinckley was honest and forthright during a recent interview on the Larry King Show when he admitted that he did not know the causes of homosexuality. President Hinckley and Elder Oaks have both counseled homosexuals against considering marriage as a solution to their same-sex attraction. Such attitudes suggest that all of us need to be humble in the face of what we do not know about homosexuality or what we do not understand about how to deal with it. It also suggests that we should not be so dogmatic in our proclamations or so unquestioning in our attitudes that we surrender our responsibility as individuals to be as intellectually and spiritually informed as we can be.

It is important in this as in other matters that we do not equate all criticism of the Church and its leaders with “evil speaking against the Lord’s anointed,” or all challenges to conventional thinking as “murmuring and fault-finding,” or respectful disagreement as unfaithful heresy. Mansfield seems to suggest that we accept official pronouncements and attitudes unquestioningly. While I agree with President George Q. Cannon (as quoted by Mansfield) that God alone will judge the general authorities—“He claims it as his prerogative to condemn them, if they need condemnation. He has not given it to us

individually to censure or condemn them,” (204)--I do believe that God will hold us as individuals accountable if we do not humbly and respectfully challenge thinking and even policy and practice when, in our opinion, they are destructive to his children.

Mansfield says, “Even though we have all covenanted to mourn for and comfort and be the saviors of men for each other, the kingdom of God is a kingdom of order, and those who have stewardship over us—primarily our parents and ecclesiastical leaders—should be our first line of resource for guidance and counsel” (236). Later, he quotes President Cannon as stating, “Your bishop will have all the wisdom needed to give you the counsel you require” (239). My experience over the past several decades in counseling with a number of LDS homosexuals is to be more cautious. While many families and church leaders are wise and compassionate in these matters, far too many homosexuals have experienced condemnation, rejection, and hostility from family members and from bishops and stake presidents. One Latter-day Saint couple whom I know has been forbidden from attending annual extended family gatherings by the family patriarch (who is a bishop) because they have a gay son.

In Quiet Desperation seems to offer little acceptable choice between Stuart Matis’s suicide and Ty Mansfield’s celibacy. In a way this seems strange in a church that historically has rejected both options. That is, suicide traditionally has been considered a major transgression, and celibacy (certainly as it has been practiced by Catholic priests) disparaged as a conscious life choice. The historic encouragement of Latter-day Saint homosexuals to marry is evidence of the rejection of celibacy. The fact remains that most Latter-day Saint homosexuals do not find either suicide or celibacy acceptable choices. Most choose a place somewhere in between, not, as is commonly believed, without great anguish of soul and personal sacrifice (of intimate involvement in the life of the Church and often of closeness to their families). From discussions I have had with many homosexuals over the years, I know that not a few are broken-hearted over the Church’s estrangement from them. And while some have found fellowship in more gay-friendly churches, many homosexuals remain so deeply connected to Mormonism that they can’t find satisfactory fellowship in any other faith tradition. This represents a loss for them, and to my mind a significant loss for the Church as well.

Both parts of In Quiet Desperation reveal a quest for perfection. What emerges from these pages is a portrait of a man (Stuart Matis) who was tortured by his desire to prove to God and others that his homosexuality did not disqualify him from their approval or their love. His fear that he somehow would not be acceptable to his family and church motivated him to try and live as perfect a life as possible. This quest for perfection may have coincided with his earliest awareness that he was attracted to other males (by his account, when he was seven years old), for his father reports one of Stuart’s Sunday School teachers telling him to tell his son that he didn’t have to be perfect. Marilyn Matis writes, “Stuart’s entire life was spent striving for perfection. He reasoned that if he were perfect, he would find God’s approval” (9). Such striving for perfection exacts a cost, for as his mother writes, “The harder Stuart strove for perfection, the more he hated himself” (9).

Stuart Matis’s life was so intensely focused on perfection that, ultimately, he could not sustain the stress of trying to live such a life. While Ty Mansfield does not

specifically address the idea of perfection, the life of sanctified devotion and sacrifice that he articulates as the ideal for Latter-day Saint homosexuals seems to require an almost perfect adherence to the highest standard of Christian behavior, a standard which, by the way, those who treat homosexuals as less than fully human fail to reach! The irony, of course, is that it was in striving to live the kind of strict, sanctified and celibate life that Mansfield recommends that drove Stuart Matis (and not a few other Mormon homosexuals) to commit suicide. One hopes for a different outcome for Mansfield, not only because he seems so dedicated to achieving it, but because the success of such a devoted, committed Latter-day Saint may give hope to those homosexuals who wish to stay within the fold of the Church.

What is clear to me is that as a church and as individuals, we must do everything we can to prevent the conditions that lead people like Stuart Matis to take their own lives. At the same time, we must give moral support to those who, like Ty Mansfield, are committed to a life of celibacy. And, we must continue to love and support those who find neither suicide nor celibacy the answer to their homosexuality.

