

Matthew Ludlum: Memorial Service Eulogy by Lia Nigro

I'm glad we're having a chance here to share our memories of Matthew. Memories fade if you don't work to hold on to them, and Matthew is someone we all want to remember.

I knew Matthew for twenty years and there were a lot of things I wanted to tell you about him, to give you a good picture of him if you didn't know him as well.

I think everybody quickly picked up on Matthew's sense of humor, his unique sense of style, his understanding of fun in life. Matthew believed in experiencing life. He knew how to show his friends a good time.

Matthew also appreciated and savored the small elements of life that not everyone thinks about. He made an art and pleasure of "puttering," whether that meant baths or naps or organizing buckets of nails and fittings according to his own exact and mysterious systems. Sometimes I would get impatient with him for not getting on with the big project of the day, and he'd get impatient back at me. "Do you think these things just happen?" he'd say. "There's a lot of preparation involved." Sometimes I'd get what he was talking about—gathering up those perfect Creole tomatoes, the buffalo mozzarella, the sourdough bread, the beer, and the cheese curls for our fishing expeditions, for instance. Other times I'd remain somewhat puzzled but I accepted, and still accept, that his wisdom in this area was greater than mine.

Matthew was a person without malice. That's not to say he couldn't be cranky or get angry; he was in fact very good at exploding effectively when he wasn't getting good customer service or otherwise needed to stand up for his rights. Sometimes the gruff way he'd express himself made people think he was angry even when he wasn't. However, he didn't hold on to anger. He never harbored a grudge about anything done to himself. There are a couple of people I can think of that he didn't like because of the way they had treated a friend of his or their general bad attitudes but he didn't make a big deal of it, and whenever he had a relationship with someone he would put the effort in to work problems out and maintain good will.

Matthew was extremely smart, not just someone who knew about certain things like music and the Venturi principle as applied to boating and plumbing but an actual intellectual, one without pretention, who knew he didn't know everything and who was curious about the rest.

When he read it was typically serious stuff; I remember he particularly liked “Sister Carrie” by Theodore Dreiser and of course books relating to New Orleans such as “The Neon Bible” by John Kennedy Toole. He gave me a subscription to the New Yorker and was always coming back wanting to know had I read this or that article in it, typically something obscure and serious-minded that I’d skipped. He liked classic movies and the rather highbrow, creative and physically amazing Synetic Theater group.

Even though he didn’t play or follow sports, Matthew really admired athleticism. He spoke of the Synetic actors, of skilled, highly trained dancers and Olympic athletes as his ideal, people who experience the peak of life.

Matthew also loved kids and was very good with them. He’d listen intently to what they had to say and he knew how to talk with them. I remember going to a rummage sale with him where he took a lot of time attaching a tricycle to the top of his van so he could give it to the kids next door. Part of this was of course just the typical Matthew thing of having something funny riding on the top of his van but the other part was that he liked to make kids happy. One of the very last conversations I had with Matthew was about a big electric train set he’d talked me into buying my nephew and whether my husband had been able to get it to work right, and he was really pleased that Carl had in fact done so. Even though Matthew had absolutely no desire to have children himself I always sort of wished he had one just because he would have been so good at being a father. They would have absolutely had great times together--at least up until the kid got to be say around twelve or fourteen at which time Matthew would have become a source of great embarrassment for a few years....

Something I’ve realized just lately was that Matthew was a remarkably private person. You would think that someone who designed a light-up sports coat for himself must have some desire to be in the public eye but Matthew wasn’t like that. He said more than once that his goal in life was never to appear on television. I think he succeeded in that, though there was an article once in the City Paper about his speculation in high-flow toilets which as I remember he was pretty pleased about.

But, more seriously, I think it was hard to get to know Matthew fully because he didn’t tell you much he couldn’t make a joke out of. This is someone who for a long time was very

religious, who lived in a religious commune in Mississippi for seven years, but it was hard to get anything out of him about why he had gone there, why he had left, what his beliefs were then or now. He'd talk about the commune readily enough but it was a joke, it was all about barbershop quartets and raising rabbits and getting in trouble for Elvis imitations. I do remember him telling me, "it's hard to live off the land"; that there often wasn't much to eat and a sort of funny story that made me feel like crying about the time they went into town to some chain steakhouse and how it was such a big occasion for him and then the steak was really bad and he didn't know how to say anything about it. This is all interesting and tells a lot about Matthew in its ways but I still don't know how his spiritual shifts took place, from the strict Catholicism of his childhood to the speaking in tongues stuff and then to the more individual and perhaps deeper and certainly more private Matthew philosophies of recent times.

A couple years back Matthew was started collecting rubber ducks, and I've been thinking about that, and the saying: "Be like a duck—calm and unruffled on the surface, and paddling like hell underwater." I keep wondering how much Matthew was paddling beneath that bright smooth surface he kept up. I remember how Matthew insisted on taking charge of his Dad's care when his Dad had Alzheimer's. My family has been through a milder version of a similar situation since and I understand that these things are a tremendous strain. Most people end up saying "I can't take this anymore" at some point. To my knowledge Matthew never did. He worked hard to find the right place for his dad as it became clear his Dad could no longer live alone or with Matthew—he would raise hell when the places didn't do things just right and he moved his dad a couple times until he found a place he was sufficiently satisfied with. He went to visit his "dear old Dad" all the time; I went with him a couple times and saw how he had these beautiful old photos of the family enlarged and set up where his dad could see them, as he'd read that would help in holding on to the memories. But Matthew never talked about the stress that must have been involved in taking care of his dad, or how difficult it must have been to watch the person who had been his dancing and good times buddy for perhaps the previous ten years or so (after I think a more strained relationship in younger years, not that Matthew told me about that)—to watch this person decline and become a shell of his former self. With Matthew, like that duck, you didn't see the paddling—he just floated through, doing what he felt was important to do.

Similarly, I don't think many of us realized at first the seriousness of Matthew's illness. I wouldn't have myself if I wasn't somebody who immediately does an Internet search on any medical condition she hasn't heard of before. Matthew kept it all as light as he could; he didn't want anyone to make a fuss over him or treat him differently. And he wanted to live just the same as he always had. He kept taking trips right up to the end, only on a faster pace than he used to, to fit as much as possible in. He kept planning trips and parties and quietly paddling against the current, without making a fuss over it.

A surprise that slowly emerged from Matthew's very private life, for those of us who were around for his last few months, was how much he loved Alicia. While I knew his relationship with her had deepened and blossomed, like everyone else I think I was surprised to hear he was getting married. Matthew was someone I always referred to as a "confirmed bachelor"—his privacy and freedom and image of himself as a singular and independent individual were so important to him that it was hard to imagine him getting married even if it had been primarily for practical reasons, which is what I at first thought might be the case. But while of course it was a practical thing to do at that time, at the wedding and afterwards, I saw it was also something that was a pure delight to him. He was solemn, he was serious, but you could see he was all quietly lit up inside about what was happening. He said "wasn't it beautiful?" about the ceremony; a week or two later talking about Alicia and himself, he said "it's a beautiful thing." And this is not someone who used the word "beautiful" much or casually.

He started asking me questions about the marriage Carl and I have—since we'd been married all of four months, he said, we would be role models to them. You could see him stretching out and exploring the concept of being married, the dynamic of the couple they were becoming, how to balance it and make it even stronger and more beautiful.

Obviously Matthew didn't have time to work out his ideas fully, to do everything he would have liked, even to say goodbye in the grand style he was planning. But this is how life and death work. What is good is that the life Matthew had was fully lived. He lived with unique style and strength that leaves us much to remember and to celebrate.

I'd like to close with a poem I wrote about Matthew a number of years ago that I never read to him. It was a time when there was some distance between us—not a big distance but it felt at the

time as though things wouldn't be the same and so it's a sort of an elegy—more appropriate now than it was then.

A couple of people have heard it before and they asked me if it was about Katrina. It's not; it was written before that happened. It's about Matthew though so of course it's about New Orleans, which had become the home of his soul. The poem is called "When We Traveled Together."

When We Traveled Together

Like another country.
Like stepping into the past.
Hot sun on the shotgun houses,
Dilapidated shops, bright signs
Offering turtle meat and crawfish.
Trains bumping down the old steel bridge
We'd drive over to the bayous.
The weather forecasts made me laugh.
Each day of the seven-day matched
Down to the degree. And every day
The sky darkened, the trees shook
As sudden but expected rain broke
Each afternoon's humidity.

We had our own traditions too.
Coffee, scotch, no chicory,
One slow drink, one for the go cup
Your long baths, radio on all day,
Recording old tunes off the college station,
Which every other hour recited
What's at the Funky Butt,
What's at the Treasure Chest,
Spellcaster's Lounge and Tipitina.
Me begging you to hurry, wanting
That pickled green bean, oysters,
Sauce, beads, trumpets, beignets even,
To catch it all before the parade went by.