An Ongoing Process

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 **R310 Rhetoric, Society & Culture**

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Final Portfolio – Entries 5-7

*Portfolio Entry #5 (final draft)*

***A Father’s Love, A Son’s Gift***

 On October 6, 1998, I celebrated my 19th birthday. I felt the warmth of my family’s love that cool October evening. We told stories and laughed and ended the evening by watching a movie; my then six-year-old nephew Anthony nuzzled under my chin and fell asleep in my arms. I felt at peace.

 That very same night, almost 2,000 miles away from my home in Central Massachusetts, a young man named Matthew Shepard begged for his life as he was savagely beaten, tortured and left for dead by two men under the stars of Laramie, Wyoming. Tied to a fence, the only warmth he felt was that of his own tears trickling down his blood-stained face. He was left alone in that Wyoming wilderness with no one to hold him as he slipped into a coma from which he would never regain consciousness.

 Nearly thirteen months later during the sentencing phase of one of Matthew’s killers, twenty-one-year-old Aaron McKinney, the nation expected that he would be given the death penalty as punishment for killing Matthew in cold blood. However, after both trials had concluded with a plea bargain, after all of the facts had surfaced and both McKinney and Russell Henderson admitted their roles in this heinous crime, Matthew’s father, Dennis Shepard approached the podium in that Laramie courthouse to read a statement he’d wrote to the members of the jury and Mr. McKinney.

 It is this statement that I would like to look at in Portfolio Entry #5. (1, attached) Dennis Shepard cuts to the heart of his son’s murderer. His words cannot be denied by a nation that passed hate-crime legislation because of this senseless tragedy. Dennis Shepard uses rhetoric and imagery to cause his audience to sit with hushed breath as a father makes a difficult, yet absolutely merciful decision, all in the name of his first-born son, Matthew.

 According to our study of Wilber Samuel Howell, and his theory on the way that rhetoric has evolved in five observable ways since the beginnings of the study and implementation of rhetoric, simplicity is the word of the day. (2) Mr. Shepard is formal in his introduction, thanking the judge, jury and prosecuting attorney one at a time, and at length, with sincerest gratitude, while commenting on the political implications of the trial.

 This introduction sets up the rest of the statement logically. After thanking each member, he discusses what the outcome of Matthew’s tragic death could possibly do in the future to avoidthis type of hate-crime. It is also at this time that Dennis Shepard discusses why he and his wife Judy decided that a trial of that magnitude was necessary, to shed light on the persecution of homosexuals and also to “provide some closure to the citizens of Laramie, Albany County and the state.” (1) All eyes of the United States, and the world, were on Laramie, Wyoming during those thirteen months between the murder and conviction. Her citizens were type-casted as bigots that allowed the murder of Matthew Shepard to happen, since McKinney and Henderson were raised in that town since birth. The ever-watchful eye of the media had Laramie in its sites and some could say that the town was exploited for tabloid gain. The strength and perseverance of the Shepards are undeniable at this moment in the statement where Dennis is able to look beyond his personal tragedy and towards what good may come out of his first-born son’s murder.

However, from this point forward, the statement is a tribute to Matthew as only a father can deliver. It is simple, yet deliberate, and he chooses his words carefully. He keeps his vocabulary accessible to all that can hear his words; but do not mistake this simplicity of words for lack of passion or emotion. Mr. Shepard does not have to use extravagant language or highly formal words to transcend the audience and persuade them into his way of thinking; the uncomplicated stories he tells of Matthew as a child growing into a man tug on the heartstrings of everyone in that courtroom. Although this statement is simple and heartfelt, Mr. Shepard’s words are ever eloquent and beautiful. You can hear the pain and suffering that he and his wife Judy must still feel to this day.

As someone who watched this trial from 2,000 miles away and weeps every time I watch actor Terry Kinney’s portrayal of Dennis Shepard in the 2002 film, “The Laramie Project” (5), I believe this statement did exactly what it intended. Just as Judy Shepard’s statement to the American public delivered by the hospital spokesperson says, *“please tell everybody who's listening to go home and give your kids a hug and don't let a day go by without telling them you love them”* (1), Dennis Shepard’s courtroom statement assaults the emotions of everyone that cares to listen by personifying Matthew to each listener. Matthew has become the face of Hate-Crime Legislation. The Matthew Shepard Foundation and Matthew’s Place have become a resource for GLBTQQ and Allied Youth. As Dennis Shepard stated, “good is coming out of evil.” (1) According to Howell, “in modern and contemporary times, public language corresponds to the best elements of everyday language. It’s not overly formal or overly colloquial.” (2) Mr. Shepard gives a powerful speech that is completely accessible to the audience of townspeople and members of the jury, and can be experienced for years to come in the theatre.

The Sophists and the 19th century Elocutionary Movement focused their attention on an “over-emphasis on delivery” (2). Although I do not have audio or video where I can watch Dennis Shepard’s actual delivery of his statement due to the closed courtroom setting, I can only imagine that delivering something so personal, he did not have time or the inclination to want to focus on his elocution. The multiple versions that I have found online (as this statement is now a part of Moises Kaufman’s true account of his investigation into the murder of Matthew Shepard, a play called “The Laramie Project”) all depict Dennis Shepard as a father grieving his son, and nothing more. In this statement, it is obvious that he was not attempting to win over the crowd or sway the judge. This statement was for him, his wife, their family to start “the healing process” (1), to correct some misstatements portrayed in the media, to thank all those involved with the trial, and to look his son’s murderer in the face one last time, all while closing this chapter of his life. The end of his statement is one of the most heart-wrenching things I have ever read. I wonder if he looked across the courtroom into the eyes of Aaron when he says, “I would like nothing better than to see you die, Mr. McKinney.” What that would have been like, to look into the eyes of the man that killed your son, and for Aaron to look into the eyes of the father of someone he chose to kill? As genetics go, Aaron could have been looking into the same eyes that November afternoon in Dennis as the ones he looked at, blood-stained and tear-filled, on that cold October evening thirteen months prior.

This statement is a mix of empirical observations and subjective analysis, (2) as it is given at the time of sentencing, after the trial had ended, after all the witnesses had testified. The facts of the case were given and entered into public record, and they are now undisputed. The members of the jury, the judge, the prosecuting and defense attorneys were all well aware of the facts of the case (empirical observations) and were then being exposed to Dennis Shepard’s memories of his son (subjective analysis).

What would the men of the Second Sophistic movement think of Dennis Shepard’s statement? Would they commend him for bringing out stories of Matthew as a child to break the hearts of the jury members? Would they instruct him to inject tears and sobbing into the delivery of this statement? Or are his words sufficient? I think back to one of our first class meetings this semester (January 24) where Dr. Dobris gave us a hypothetical setting of 465 B.C.E. She assigned me the role of a wife/mother within this story, where she attempted to explain how rhetoric could be used against people simply trying to live a good life. In the story, a stranger showed up on “our” doorstep saying that our land was now his land. The stranger, well-educated and well-versed in rhetoric, used eloquent speech and effective words to take our land away from us. He used rhetoric to his advantage, but not for good. In my notes from that same class period, I wrote down “How would rhetoric and democracy affect communication in 465 B.C.E.? It would give a voice to the voiceless.” (3) As the semester ends, and I reflect on the positive and negative aspects of rhetoric, my optimistic heart must fall on the side of hope and continue to agree with this statement I wrote. In Dennis’ statement that cold November morning in Laramie, he gave a voice to the voiceless. That voice is still heard today with the passage of Hate-Crime legislation.

This statement remains grounded in fact; meaning, Mr. Shepard did not embellish the facts of the case – they were gruesome enough. He shared his personal truths as a grieving father, but did not use them for his personal gain. He did not have an ulterior motive of trying to sway the jury members or judge. He did not make up outlandish accounts of Matthew being anything more than the center of his world as his first-born son. In this way, Mr. Shepard spoke in the classical form of rhetoric; communicating truth to those that cared to listen. He spoke in the most common of languages – the language of love, and family, and of a broken heart. That is something to which we all can relate.

In conclusion, this statement is a beautiful of example of rhetoric that is personal and heartfelt, but available to anyone who chooses to put themselves in Mr. and Mrs. Shepard’s shoes. I cannot begin to imagine the pain that the Shepards felt and experienced during the trial and while writing this tribute to their son, but I commend Mr. Shepard for delivering such a genuine and frank narrative of a father saying goodbye to his son.

*Portfolio Entry #7(final draft)*

***Continuing Thoughts on Rhetoric, Society & Culture***

*An Ongoing Process in the Global Conversation*

 As another semester winds to a close (hard to believe) and I am one step closer to finishing up my undergraduate work, in light of R310, I feel like I’m leaving the semester with more questions than when I began. I’ve been reading over my portfolio entries as I prepare to submit my final drafts, and the constant, overarching theme is the search for truth in communication, and how I can apply that truth to my day-to-day life. I admit that when I started this semester, it was just a class that I had to take, a requirement for my major in English. I did not think that this class would affect me as profoundly as it has. I believe that this class is, unfortunately, one of only a few that I’ve taken thus far at IUPUI that I would say really challenged me to think, process and apply in a tangible way to my own experiences as a human in the 21st century.

 In my final portfolio entry for R310, I will discuss the Central Concerns of Rhetoric (7) and how they are weaved in and out of the six time periods that we covered throughout the semester. I will touch on Foss’s challenges to rhetorical tradition and how they confront and connect to our ideas of rhetoric, society and culture. I hope to be able to offer insight into these subjects more cohesively than I would have been able to in January.

“Is rhetoric a way to discover or search for truth?” (7)

The first concern of rhetoric listed on Dr. Dobris’ powerpoint also happens to be personal central concern as I search for my own Truth. Rhetoric is not only a communications discipline; it also touches my major of English. A few semesters ago, I took a class in my major field called “Rhetorical Issues in Grammar and Usage” with Melvin Wininger. When I first signed up for the course, my first reaction was that we’d be editing each other’s papers for grammar mistakes and that it would be a pretty boring class. However, that outlook changed when we delved down deep into what rhetorical issues in grammar would look like. How word choice and placement could change the entire meaning of a phrase. In that course, I learned to choose my words carefully so that my message would be understood without question or pause. Rhetoric can have a negative connotation associated with it, but because of taking that class in the last couple of years, I have a different outlook on such a loaded word. R310 this semester has only cemented that stance as I have realized that the care I take with choosing my words should not only be reserved for academia, but the entirety of my life. When I write an e-mail to a colleague at work, my tone and word-choice are paramount to ensure clarity within my team. When I send a letter or have a conversation over the phone with my family back in New England, I must choose my words carefully, so that proper and accurate communication is achieved.

In the same way that I am personally searching for truth, rhetoric can be used within people groups and across the globe as we all try, as human beings, to figure out our own personal truths. As I was watching the news station’s “talking heads” before President Obama’s address to the nation on Sunday, May 1st, announcing the assassination of Osama bin Laden, I tweeted “Fascinating to watch the #rhetoric flying around.” Before the President had even entered the East Room at the White House, the news anchors were speculating on what he would announce. As the minutes wore on, they started focusing in on September 11th, 2001, with images of the airplanes hitting the Towers over and over again. Of course, in that moment, I was transported back ten years, and I’m sure I wasn’t alone on my time travelling journey. Before the President announced that bin Laden had in fact been killed, the news anchors were already taking it upon themselves to raise the Terror Threat level, all while warning American citizens to be vigilant for the “inevitable” attacks on foreign and domestic soil. Was it right for them to speculate like this? Were they selling truth to the American public as we all waited with hushed breath for the broadcast from the President?

Now, in the days after the Navy SEAL mission that cut the proverbial head off of Al-Qaeda, conspiracy theories abound about whether or not bin Laden was actually killed because Americans don’t have tangible proof. We are now living in a different truth when it comes to global terrorism because of the media; we will either choose to believe that bin Laden was killed or we won’t. Were these news anchors and producers behind the scenes practicing sophistic techniques in order to manipulate the American public? From my January 24th class discussion notes, I wrote that “sophistry came out of a place of pure greed by exploiting the less fortunate.” (8) Does this practice still exist today within the news media? Are the news anchors bestowing their knowledge upon the less fortunate, or better yet, less informed? Do they have the best interests of the country in mind, or are they looking for big ratings? Aristotle united the idea of truth and reality, but warned that humans can be corrupted. (8) It’s something that every individual will have to come to their own terms with, as they search for their personal truth. Unfortunately, many Americans will take what the media has to say verbatim, without questioning. Some members of the media, on both sides of the aisle, have taken their station in life a bit too far. This brings me to the next central concern of rhetoric that I would like to address.

Is rhetoric intrinsically moral, immoral or amoral? (7)

St. Augustine believed that sophistry was morally wrong. He came to believe that you can’t stop rhetoric and that rhetoric should be used for the greater good and turn people to God. He wanted to take rhetoric back for the Christian cause. (9) Plato and Aristotle were also champions for truth above all. It wasn’t until the Second Sophistic period that the idea of delivery over content really started to take a foothold in the study of rhetoric.

It isn’t by happenstance that rhetoric, persuasion and manipulation are familiar bedfellows. If rhetoric isn’t kept in check, the jump to immoral manipulation isn’t a difficult one. How do we get back, as a culture, to the classical period of rhetoric? Someone will have to take a stand. Could it be someone in the media; a professor; a writer; or will it be the students of R310, the new experts in rhetoric, society and culture? In a time of great technological change and scientific discovery, I believe that the arts will have to regain, once again, a foothold in rhetoric and logic.

Wilber Samuel Howell, from the powerpoint “Changes in Rhetoric from the Renaissance through the Modern Age” stated that one of the five changes was that the “study of logic has disassociated itself from the field of communication and has allied with scientific investigation.” (10) I can attest to this statement. Taking this class, along with Introduction to Logic (P162) this semester was curious and difficult to synthesize. The P162 class was the complete antithesis of R310; an undeniable mathematics class disguised in the philosophy department. How have we deviated so far from the Renaissance, quite possibly one of the most beautiful periods of the world’s history, where men were inspired by something other-worldly to paint beautiful cathedrals and write books and passages that have stood the test of time. However, as the human race has become increasingly more intelligent in mathematics and sciences, we have largely thrown out the need for true inspiration and discovery of truth through the arts. As the splintering of academics continues, we will continue to find difficulties in communications. We are at a time in history (post-post-modern?) where the new experts of rhetoric will have to take a stand and point out the importance of right and proper communication, including logic and discovery, so that we can correctly traverse the searing gaps between the barriers of societies and cultures.

In this way, if we do not quickly and thoroughly “take back” rhetoric for the arts, I believe that rhetoric will continue down a path of immorality. If we do not relearn the communication techniques of the classical period, by partnering with the obvious new ways that Aristotle couldn’t have imagined – speaking to someone on the other side of the globe in a moment – then the class system and segregation with rear its ugly head all over again. Of course, I am casting a wide net over this topic, and I do believe that there are individuals that are practicing rhetoric in a moral and intrinsically good way. Margaret Mead, U.S. anthropologist once said we should *“never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”* We, as the new experts of rhetoric, must take up arms and restore communications to the most important of the arts. And what a beautiful time to start this communications revolution! Like I mentioned earlier, we can speak – in real time – to people on the other side of the world, all in a moment’s notice. Our world has become increasingly small, and accessible to those privileged enough to have the technology. No longer do we have to look at outdated, dusty books in a library (*though I still love the smell of an old, dusty book*…); we can access up-to-date information through a myriad of technologies.

So,“through rhetoric can we come to know ourselves and our worlds better?” (7)

Sometimes I feel as if I have information overload. Someone at work yells a question over the cubicle walls and with a few clicks of a mouse; someone has an answer for them. We have movies and television shows on demand. We can experience events half-way across the world in an instant. People in one country can meditate with other believers in an ashram in India through the internet. We no longer have to practice one religion because that’s the only one that’s “offered” in our town. We can begin to carve ourselves out of the large piece of rock that we may be when we are children to make the masterpiece that God intended us to be. Rhetoric can help mold us into the people we’ve always wanted to be. In that same vein, with the intervention of a powerful, charismatic rhetor, a person may morph into something so far from what they had wished-for as children.

As I had said before, Aristotle warned that humans could be corrupted. (8) With the development of sophistry, the door swung wide in order for evil intentions to enter. As the standards changed, and delivery took a front seat over content, rhetors could begin to manipulate their audience with smooth word-play and undeniable story-telling. As we moved through the Renaissance and the Modern eras, scholars continued to warn of these influences, and attempted to return to the classical period of rhetoric.

Rhetorician Hugh Blair would have answered the question “through rhetoric can we come to know ourselves and our worlds better?” with a resounding yes! Blair believed that through eloquence and education that a person could rise above their class/status. He used an eclectic teaching style, mixing classical and modern traditions of rhetoric. But above all, he believed and personified the high degree of effectiveness, saying that men could reach genius status with thorough knowledge of a given subject. (11)

The underlying message from scholars of the past, including classical, Renaissance, and Modern eras, is that education is vital to how we allow rhetoric to shape and define us. Without education, we can be manipulated by those, with evil intent, with charismatic teaching styles and sophistic techniques in their speeches. Without education in our arsenal, we cannot combat lies and deceit.

However, if a person has education and a strong sense of self, rhetoric can assist in a person finding out who they are in the grand scheme of the world. Rhetoric can exist as a refining fire where a person comes to truly embody what they believe, and walk out their identity with confidence. Rhetoric is all about balance; a balance from the messenger to walk that fine line of truthful content and beautiful delivery and a balance from the receiver to have the sense to not blindly believe everything they hear without their own investigation into the subject matter.

### Foss’ Challenges on Rhetorical Tradition

 I’ve never classified myself as a feminist and have never really identified with the difficulty that women have endured for centuries. Perhaps it’s because of my age and the fact that I have never personally felt held back because I am a woman. If anything, I identify with the plight of an overweight human being; I feel most identifiable by that marker. That being said, the April 25th lecture on Feminist Challenges (12) definitely piqued my curiosity in the subject matter.

 Rhetoricians continue to hold onto the old ways of speaking to the middle-to-upper class, white, powerful males and at the same time continue to alienate and marginalize those people that lie outside of those boundaries. Sally Gearhart theorized that “any intent to persuade is an act of violence.” (12) The first time I read this statement, my reaction was one of confusion. However, after the 4/25 lecture, and subsequent readings I have done since then, I tend to agree with Ms. Gearhart. I agree with her that we should be “replacing traditional persuasion with dialogue.” (12) I believe that real dialogue is the only way to inspire an individual or a people group into action. Politicians are starting to agree with that sentiment with their “town-hall” type of gatherings during their campaigning, and the advent of talk-radio and message boards have encouraged all walks of life to get into the global conversation.

 Within my new position in my company, I have been “collecting” strong women mentors to look up to as I move up the corporate ladder. I’ve been looking for qualities that I appreciate and admire in the women “above” me to exemplify in my day-to-day work life. Women should no longer be “seen and not heard”; women can bring just as much knowledge and invention to the global conversation as a man.

 Foss’ challenges to rhetorical tradition from a feminist perspective has inspired me to identify in a deeper way with my womanhood, because, I do have something to say! I have many things to offer to the dialogue that should be taking place across generations, cultures and societies. In the last few days, I have made the decision to go on to graduate school so that I can become a professor and help mold the next generation of thinkers. I’m hoping to secure an internship for the fall semester so that I can help teach an online class in the English department to get me primed and ready.

### Synthesis and Application

How can rhetoricians continue to subjugate all people groups from entering their opinions into the global conversation, when it’s apparent that rhetoric must break out of its traditional conventions? With the advent of the 24/7 news cycle, protests from across the globe can be beamed into our television sets in a moment’s notice. Protestors can make their voices heard all over the world and attempt to change their station in life. There is a definite juxtaposition between our world becoming smaller and the new Cultural Revolution. No longer do patriots have to protest in media silence. They are broadcast around the globe for all to see. It’s the ultimate public relations campaign. At the same time, if a public figure makes a gaffe on national television, it will be played and replayed for an infinite amount of time. Speakers must choose their words more carefully than ever before. Speakers must believe in the rhetoric that they are delivering because they will always be associated with those words.

 Celebrities are held to the same standards, now that they are no longer untouchable “superstars” with the invention of Facebook and Twitter. They are as accessible as any of your electronic “friends” and they will be held captive to the words that they enter into the global conversation. As Elisia L. Cohen discussed in the chapter “The Interplay of Digital Technology, Rhetorical Practice and Research Strategy” in Golden (9), anyone that has been given an e-voice must take that responsibility seriously.

 Just as participation was an integral part of our grade in R310, so must participation be mandatory for people to feel a strong role in the global conversation. Those that are privileged enough to have an easy ticket to the discussion must share their rhetorical riches with those less fortunate. We must all traverse generational gaps, cultural differences and societal hindrances in order to make the global conversation accessible to anyone that chooses to enter the fray.

### Conclusion

 The single biggest issue in communication is the assumption of it. (8, 2/7/2011) As the semester winds to a close, I choose to draw a line in the sand and say that I will be intentional with my words and message I wish to convey. As a student of the English major, I will take the lessons I have learned in R310 this semester, and I will continue to refine my own writing style. I choose to listen to the advice of rhetorician Hugh Blair (8, 9, my emphasis added in parenthesis):

* Speak regularly and often for speakers require practice every bit as much as do athletes. (*For me, this also applies to the written word*.)
* Study the best models, not necessarily those you hear most frequently. (*Look for those diamonds in the rough*)
* Learn from the mistakes of others (*but do not dwell on them.)*
* Let your aim be verbal fluency; do not be governed by a state of mechanical rules as a grammarian is. (*Hey, what’s wrong with grammarians?)*
* Remember that repetition is both necessary and appropriate in oral discourse, for a listener cannot re-read (*and take care with the written words I choose for they will never be deleted*.)

As I continue on my search for truth, I realize that rhetoric will shape my reality, if choose to let it. I have been convicted by my own personal truth that the messages that I choose to deliver must, above all, be passionate. The passion that I portray will be received by the audience; that passion will become part of that audience, and consequently, they will share that passion with others. (8, 3/28/11) I choose to be passionate in my career (for now, at least!). I choose to be passionate in my schoolwork. I choose to be passionate in my interactions with others. That will be my message. That will be my rhetoric.

***Sources for Portfolio #5:***

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***Dennis Shepard’s Statement to the Court - 11/4/99 (1)***

 *Your honor, members of the Jury, Mr. Rerucha:

I would like to begin my statement by addressing the jury. Ladies and gentlemen, a terrible crime was committed in Laramie thirteen months ago. Because of that crime, the reputation of the city of Laramie, the University of Wyoming, and the State of Wyoming became synonymous with gay bashing, hate crimes, and brutality. While some of this reputation may be deserved, it was blown out of proportion by our friends in the media. Yesterday you, the jury, showed the world that Wyoming and the city of Laramie will not tolerate hate crimes. Yes, this was a hate crime, pure and simple, with the added ingredient of robbery. My son Matthew paid a terrible price to open the eyes of all of us who live in Wyoming, the United States, and the world to the unjust and unnecessary fears, discrimination, and intolerance that members of the gay community face every day. Yesterday’s decision by you showed true courage and made a statement. That statement is that Wyoming is the Equality State; that Wyoming will not tolerate discrimination based on sexual orientation; that violence is not the solution. Ladies and gentlemen, you have the respect and admiration of Matthew’s family and friends and of countless strangers around the world. Be proud of what you have accomplished. You may have prevented another family from losing a son or daughter.

Your honor, I would also like to thank you for the dignity and grace with which this trial was conducted. Repeated attempts to distract the court from the true purpose of this trial failed because of your attentiveness, knowledge, and willingness to take a stand and make new law in the area of sexual orientation and the “Gay Panic” defense. By doing so you have emphasized that Matthew was a human being with all the rights and responsibilities and protections of any citizen of Wyoming.

Mr. Rerucha took the oath of office as prosecuting attorney to protect the rights of the citizens of Albany County as mandated by the laws of the state of Wyoming, regardless of his personal feelings and beliefs. At no time did Mr. Rerucha make any decision on the outcome of this case without the permission of Judy and me. It was our decision to take this case to trial, just as it was our decision to accept the plea bargain today and the earlier plea bargain of Mr. Henderson. A trial was necessary to show that this was a hate crime and not just a robbery gone bad. If we had sought a plea bargain earlier, the facts of this case would not have been known and the question would always be present that we had something to hide. In addition, this trial was necessary to help provide some closure to the citizens of Laramie, Albany County, and the state. I find it intolerable that the priests of the Catholic Church and the Newman Center would attempt to influence the jury, the prosecution, and the outcome of this trial by their castigation and persecution of Mr. Rerucha and his family in his private life, by their newspaper advertisements, and by their presence in the courtroom. I find it difficult to believe that they speak for all Catholics. If the leaders of churches want to comment as private citizens, that is one thing. If they say that they represent the beliefs of their church, that is another. This country was founded on separation of church and state. The Catholic Church has stepped over the line and has become a political group with its own agenda. If that be the case, treat them as a political group and eliminate their privileges as a religious organization.

My son Matthew did not look like a winner. After all, he was small for his age—weighing, at the most, 110 pounds, and standing only 5’2” tall. He was rather uncoordinated and wore braces from the age of 13 until the day he died. However, in his all too brief life, he proved that he was a winner. My son—a gentle, caring soul—proved that he was as tough as, if not tougher than, anyone I have ever heard of or known. On October 6, 1998, my son tried to show the world that he could win again. On October 12, 1998, my first-born son—and my hero—lost. On October 12, my first-born son—and my hero— died 50 days before his 22nd birthday. He died quietly, surrounded by family and friends, with his mother and brother holding his hand. All that I have left now are the memories.

It’s hard to put into words how much Matt meant to family and friends and how much they meant to him. Everyone wanted him to succeed because he tried so hard. The spark that he provided to people had to be experienced. He simply made everyone feel better about themselves. Family and friends were his focus. He knew that he always had their support for anything that he wanted to try.

Matt’s gift was people. He loved being with people, helping people, and making others feel good. The hope of a better world free of harassment and discrimination because a person was different kept him motivated. All his life he felt the stabs of discrimination. Because of that he was sensitive to other people’s feelings. He was naive to the extent that, regardless of the wrongs people did to him, he still had faith that they would change and become “nice.” Matt trusted people, perhaps too much. Violence was not a part of his life until his senior year in high school. He would walk into a fight and try to break it up. He was the perfect negotiator. He could get two people talking to each other again as no one else could.

Matt loved people and he trusted them. He could never understand how one person could hurt another, physically or verbally. They would hurt him, and he would give them another chance. This quality of seeing only good gave him friends around the world. He didn’t see size, race, intelligence, sex, religion, or the hundred other things that people use to make choices about people. All he saw was the person. All he wanted was to make another person his friend. All he wanted was to make another person feel good. All he wanted was to be accepted as an equal.

What did Matt’s friends think of him? Fifteen of his friends from high school in Switzerland, as well as his high school adviser, joined hundreds of others at his memorial services. They left college, fought a blizzard, and came together one more time to say good-bye to Matt. Men and women coming from different countries, cultures, and religions thought enough of my son to drop everything and come to Wyoming—most of them for the first time. That’s why this Wyoming country boy wanted to major in foreign relations and languages. He wanted to continue making friends and at the same time help others. He wanted to make a difference. Did he? You tell me.

I loved my son and, as can be seen throughout this statement, was proud of him. He was not my gay son. He was my son who happened to be gay. He was a good-looking, intelligent, caring person. There were the usual arguments, and at times he was a real pain in the butt. I felt the regrets of a father when he realizes that his son is not a star athlete. But it was replaced with a greater pride when I saw him on the stage. The hours that he spent learning his parts, working behind the scenes, and helping others made me realize that he was actually an excellent athlete—in a more dynamic way—because of the different types of physical and mental conditioning required by actors. To this day I have never figured out how he was able to spend all those hours at the theater, during the school year, and still have good grades.

Because my job involved lots of travel, I never had the same give-and-take with Matt that Judy had. Our relationship at times was strained. But, whenever he had problems we talked. For example, he was unsure about revealing to me that he was gay. He was afraid that I would reject him immediately, so it took him a while to tell me. By that time, his mother and brother had already been told. One day he said that he had something to say. I could see that he was nervous, so I asked him if everything was all right. Matt took a deep breath and told me that he was gay. Then he waited for my reaction. I still remember his surprise when I said, “Yeah? OK, but what’s the point of this conversation?” Then everything was OK. We went back to a father and son who loved each other and respected the beliefs of the other. We were father and son, but we were also friends.

How do I talk about the loss that I feel every time I think about Matt? How can I describe the empty pit in my heart and mind when I think about all the problems that were put in Matt’s way that he overcame? No one can understand the sense of pride and accomplishment that I felt every time he reached the mountain top of another obstacle. No one, including myself, will ever know the frustration and agony that others put him through because he was different. How many people could be given the problems that Matt was presented with and still succeed as he did? How many would continue to smile—at least on the outside—while crying on the inside to keep other people from feeling bad?

I now feel very fortunate that I was able to spend some private time with Matt last summer during my vacation from Saudi Arabia. We sat and talked. I told Matt that he was my hero and that he was the toughest man that I had ever known. When I said that, I bowed down to him out of respect for his ability to continue to smile and keep a positive attitude during all the trials and tribulations that he had gone through. He just laughed. I also told him how proud I was because of what he had accomplished and what he was trying to accomplish. The last thing I said to Matt was that I loved him, and he said he loved me. That was the last private conversation that I ever had with him.

Impact on my life? My life will never be the same. I miss Matt terribly. I think about him all the time—at odd moments when some little thing reminds me of him; when I walk by the refrigerator and see the pictures of him and his brother that we’ve always kept on the door; at special times of the year, like the first day of classes at UW or opening day of sage chicken hunting. I keep wondering almost the same thing that I did when I first saw him in the hospital. What would we have become? How would he have changed his piece of the world to make it better?

Impact on my life? I feel a tremendous sense of guilt. Why wasn’t I there when he needed me most? Why didn’t I spend more time with him? Why didn’t I try to find another type of profession so that I could have been available to spend more time with him as he grew up? What could I have done to be a better father and friend? How do I get an answer to those questions now? The only one who can answer them is Matt. These questions will be with me for the rest of my life. What makes it worse for me is knowing that his mother and brother will have similar unanswered questions.

Impact on my life? In addition to losing my son, I lost my father on November 4, 1998. The stress of the entire affair was too much for him. Dad watched Matt grow up. He taught him how to hunt, fish, camp, ride horses, and love the state of Wyoming. Matt, Logan, dad, and I would spend two to three weeks camping in the mountains at different times of the year—to hunt, to fish, and to goof off. Matt learned to cook over an open fire, tell fishing stories about the one that got away, and to drive a truck from my father.

Three weeks before Matt went to the Fireside Bar for the last time, my parents saw Matt in Laramie. In addition, my father tried calling Matt the night that he was beaten but received no answer. He never got over the guilt of not trying earlier. The additional strain of the hospital vigil, being in the hospital room with Matt when he died, the funeral services with all the media attention and the protesters, [and] helping Judy and me clean out Matt’s apartment in Laramie a few days later was too much. Three weeks after Matt’s death, dad died. Dad told me after the funeral that he never expected to outlive Matt. The stress and the grief were just too much for him.

Impact on my life? How can my life ever be the same again?

When Matt was little, I used to take showers with him, just to teach him not to be scared of the water. Later, Matt helped me do the same thing with Logan. Anyway, Matt and I would be in the shower spitting mouthfuls of water at each other or at his mother, if he could convince her to come into the bathroom. Then he would laugh and laugh. We would also sing in the showers. I taught him the songs “Row, Row, Row Your Boat”; both “Brother John” and its French version, “Frère Jacques”; and “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” Matt would sing loud and clear. Now, that voice is silent, the boat has sunk, Jacques is no longer frère, and the little star no longer twinkles.

Matt officially died at 12:53 a.m. on Monday, October 12, 1998, in a hospital in Fort Collins, Colorado. He actually died on the outskirts of Laramie tied to a fence that Wednesday before, when you beat him. You, Mr. McKinney, with your friend Mr. Henderson, killed my son.

By the end of the beating, his body was just trying to survive. You left him out there by himself, but he wasn’t alone. There were his lifelong friends with him—friends that he had grown up with. You’re probably wondering who these friends were. First, he had the beautiful night sky with the same stars and moon that we used to look at through a telescope. Then, he had the daylight and the sun to shine on him one more time—one more cool, wonderful autumn day in Wyoming. His last day alive in Wyoming. His last day alive in the state that he always proudly called home. And through it all he was breathing in for the last time the smell of Wyoming sagebrush and the scent of pine trees from the snowy range. He heard the wind—the ever-present Wyoming wind—for the last time. He had one more friend with him. One he grew to know through his time in Sunday school and as an acolyte at St. Mark’s in Casper as well as through his visits to St. Matthew’s in Laramie. He had God.

I feel better knowing he wasn’t alone.

Matt became a symbol—some say a martyr, putting a boy-next-door face on hate crimes. That’s fine with me. Matt would be thrilled if his death would help others. On the other hand, your agreement to life without parole has taken yourself out of the spotlight and out of the public eye. It means no drawn-out appeals process, [no] chance of walking away free due to a technicality, and no chance of lighter sentence due to a “merciful” jury. Best of all, you won’t be a symbol. No years of publicity, no chance of communication, no nothing—just a miserable future and a more miserable end. It works for me.

My son was taught to look at all sides of an issue before making a decision or taking a stand. He learned this early when he helped campaign for various political candidates while in grade school and junior high. When he did take a stand, it was based on his best judgment. Such a stand cost him his life when he quietly let it be known that he was gay. He didn’t advertise it, but he didn’t back away from the issue either. For that I’ll always be proud of him. He showed me that he was a lot more courageous than most people, including myself. Matt knew that there were dangers to being gay, but he accepted that and wanted to just get on with his life and his ambition of helping others.

Matt’s beating, hospitalization, and funeral focused worldwide attention on hate. Good is coming out of evil. People have said “Enough is enough.” You screwed up, Mr. McKinney. You made the world realize that a person’s lifestyle is not a reason for discrimination, intolerance, persecution, and violence. This is not the 1920s, 30s, and 40s of Nazi Germany. My son died because of your ignorance and intolerance. I can’t bring him back. But I can do my best to see that this never, ever happens to another person or another family again. As I mentioned earlier, my son has become a symbol—a symbol against hate and people like you; a symbol for encouraging respect for individuality; for appreciating that someone is different; for tolerance. I miss my son, but I’m proud to be able to say that he is my son.

Mr. McKinney, one final comment before I sit, and this is the reason that I stand before you now. At no time since Matt was found at the fence and taken to the hospital have Judy and I made any statements about our beliefs concerning the death penalty. We felt that that would be an undue influence on any prospective juror. Judy has been quoted by some right-wing groups as being against the death penalty. It has been stated that Matt was against the death penalty. Both of these statements are wrong. We have held family discussions and talked about the death penalty. Matt believed that there were incidents and crimes that justified the death penalty. For example, he and I discussed the horrible death of James Byrd, Jr. in Jasper, Texas. It was his opinion that the death penalty should be sought and that no expense should be spared to bring those responsible for this murder to justice. Little did we know that the same response would come about involving Matt. I, too, believe in the death penalty. I would like nothing better than to see you die, Mr. McKinney. However, this is the time to begin the healing process. To show mercy to someone who refused to show any mercy. To use this as the first step in my own closure about losing Matt. Mr. McKinney, I am not doing this because of your family. I am definitely not doing this because of the crass and unwarranted pressures put on by the religious community. If anything, that hardens my resolve to see you die. Mr. McKinney, I’m going to grant you life, as hard as that is for me to do, because of Matthew. Every time you celebrate Christmas, a birthday, or the Fourth of July, remember that Matt isn’t. Every time that you wake up in that prison cell, remember that you had the opportunity and the ability to stop your actions that night. Every time that you see your cell mate, remember that you had a choice, and now you are living that choice. You robbed me of something very precious, and I will never forgive you for that. Mr. McKinney, I give you life in the memory of one who no longer lives. May you have a long life, and may you thank Matthew every day for it.

Your honor, members of the jury, Mr. Rerucha, thank you.*