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## HEROICALLY ORDINARY

### Matt's Story

In spite of their numerous and unprecedented challenges, most contemporary teenagers quietly muddle through this crazy world to become fine people. Many days, I'm unsure of how that's possible, but the research assures me that it's true. I suppose that, like everyone else, my eye is always drawn to those kids grabbing the TV spotlights, the ones doing the self-destructive things that the adult world seems to push upon them, such as sex, drugs, and violence.

Whenever I think of all those good kids who quietly fly below our radar, Matthew always pops into my head. He could have been the poster boy for ordinary teenagers. Not tall, but not short; not fat, but not skinny; not particularly athletic, but not especially clumsy; not Track 1 in school, but not Track 4. He was not lots of things—he was just ordinary. That's what he most disliked about himself—the fact that he was just a face in the crowd, and not the popular, heroic figure he dreamed of being. He was about to learn that “popular” and “heroic” are often words that don't always belong together.



*“Fourteen,”* he corrected with a sigh. *“I’m fourteen, not thirteen. I don’t know why my dad put that on my form there. He keeps thinking that I’m younger than I am. I guess I act younger or something—but I’m*

*fourteen*. Maybe if I played football or did drugs, he'd remember how old I am."

That comment made me look up from Matt's paperwork, which was extensive. The three months of reports from a host of doctors and hospitals all spoke of a yet-undiagnosed stomach problem that caused Matt substantial pain, mostly in the mornings. The final report speculated that his illness might be emotionally based, which is how he came to reluctantly sit before me. "The doctors, I know what they're all thinking. They're thinking that I make this up to get out of school. They're wrong. I'm not in love with school, but I don't hate it either, not that much. And if I wanted to ditch school, I'd make up a better symptom than gut pain. Do you know what kinds of things doctors do to you when you have gut pain? Those tests would convince any kid faking it to go back to school—trust me."

Matt looked uncomfortable, as if anticipating another lousy doctor experience. I tried to reassure him. "Well, trust *me*," I smiled, "I've had both kinds of tests, and the tests I give are a *whole* lot better." Matt's eyes got big. "You mean . . . you . . . *do* tests like that?" "No, no," I explained, "I'm sorry. That was a bad joke. Any tests I give are just done with words or pictures or puzzles. I never stick anything in anybody, OK?"

As Matt nodded, I took in his picture. A pleasant, open, but worried face; average 14-year-old height and weight, although a little on the chunky side; rumped, sandy hair; one ripped, untied sneaker; and a death-themed, heavy-metal-band shirt and a huge spiked bracelet, both of which looked comically out of place on this boy. As if he were reading my mind, Matt shifted uneasily and took off the massive bracelet. He held it and rubbed his wrist like the band was something he had been forced to wear, and was glad to finally have off.

"So, you were saying," I continued, "that your dad can't remember how old you are, because . . . you don't do, well, *unusual* things?" "It's not my dad's fault," Matt explained, "My dad's great. He's a really nice guy. He works two jobs for us and he never complains or gets mad or anything. He's yelled at me, like, twice in my life that I can remember, and once was when I let the refrigerator fall down the basement steps, so that hardly counts." Without pausing to explain

the refrigerator catastrophe, he went on. "It's me, not my dad. I'm, like, so . . . boring, and . . . I don't know, so . . . *ordinary*, that no one really remembers me." He thought for a minute. "It's like I'm not there a lot even when I am," he summarized matter-of-factly.

Those words set off a rush of reactions in me: My stomach suddenly recalled that same empty feeling of being a nobody teen. My head couldn't remember ever hearing a kid describe that so well, and my heart worried that he might feel badly about himself. But he claimed that he didn't. "It's like at school. I don't get teased or bullied—much—you know, just the usual stuff. And I do OK with grades, so, no, I'm not *down* on myself. It's just that I'm not *up* on myself either. I mean, like, lots of kids, they're somebody. They're, like, football players or student council types or real smart or real popular—you know, the cool kids. I don't mind that I'm not like any of that. Only sometimes, it feels . . . funny."

Matt put his bracelet on and off a few times without speaking, like he was trying to figure out how to make it fit him. "Can I ask what you're thinking?" I asked. "Sure," he answered, and then he added, "Um, do you want me to just keep on talking, because . . . I'm not sure I know what you want to hear." "Matt," I explained, "in here, whatever you think and say is a lot more important than whatever I think or say. So it would be great if you just said whatever goes through your brain, OK?" "OK," he shrugged, "but it's kind of . . . embarrassing because I don't have anything, like, smart to say, and I don't think I've got any big problems, so what I think about is probably pretty boring. By the way," he diverted, "what the heck is that?"

He was pointing to a plaque on my wall that read: ORDER OF THE GOOD TIME, NOVA SCOTIA. I answered hurriedly, trying to get back to his thoughts. "Oh, that's a neat thing I was given by some wonderful folks in Canada. That was an idea started by the explorer Samuel de Champlain in 1606. In their second winter in the wilderness, when his team of explorers was sick and scared and sad, he somehow knew that keeping their spirits up would help them survive those terrible days. So he started a kind of club to boost their morale by having these special dinners and processions, where they would make a big deal out of nothing to try and feel better. It's weird

because now, 400 years later, scientists are just beginning to understand how important good morale is in fighting diseases. But, Matt, if it's OK, I'd like to get back to talking about your own morale, and your own thoughts."

Matt nodded approvingly at the plaque. "Cool," he said, "Very cool." He turned back to me. "OK, what I was thinking before was about how at school, there's these teachers that I like a whole lot, and I don't think they can remember my name. And sometimes . . . well, this just happened again today . . . when I was trying to talk with them, you know, trying to hang out with them a little bit, one of the cool kids walks up—he's a basketball star—and, well, the teachers just started to talk over me to the cool kid—like I wasn't there anymore, like I just vanished in the middle of my sentence. But I understand, you know, 'cause I wasn't saying anything important, and the cool kid, he's talking about the game on Friday and all. I couldn't compete with that. I never can compete because there's nothing special about me that would make anybody interested in me. That's what I mean about not being there. Even my parents, I think they're bored with me sometimes. That's why I joke with them about doing drugs—but I never would." He put his bracelet down, giving up on it, and rolling his eyes. "Maybe I should," he added.

In spite of his words, Matt was not feeling sorry for himself, nor was he fishing for sympathy. He was simply narrating his ordinary life as he saw it. "Do you want to know what I'm thinking again?" he asked. When I laughed and nodded, he seemed pleased. "I was thinking about how I need to be more than I am, but I don't know how. You know what I'm great at? I'm great at seeing both sides of an argument. I'm *too* good at it. When we debate things at school, or if my friends are having a fight, when I hear one side I think, 'Yeah, that's right.' And then when I hear the other side I think, 'Yeah, that's right, too.' Both sides can't be right but I have a hard time sticking to one side. I'm lousy at having an opinion. I'm *fantastic* at being neutral," he added sarcastically.

"Matt," I asked, "have you ever thought that maybe there are *too* many people in the world who have *too* many opinions that they are *too* sure of? Have you ever considered that perhaps it's wonderful

for you to be honest enough to say that there's much that you are unsure of, to say that you value both sides of things, that you don't believe that you have all of the answers?"

Matt was riveted for a moment. Then he asked, "Do you think this stuff is what makes my stomach hurt?" Without trying to be funny I answered, "I have no idea. . ." and before I could finish my sentence, we both burst out laughing.

For the next few sessions we continued pretty much like that. I warned him that his therapy would be a kind of search mission, getting him to talk his thoughts out to see if there was anything there that might explain his gut pain, but nothing seemed to come close. I became a little frustrated, concerned that I wasn't helping, and worried that his symptoms were worsening, not improving. But Matt seemed to enjoy talking more and more, as if he had years of ready-to-share thoughts stored up.

One day he brought a thought in the door with him. "You know, I never realized how much I hate being plain and ordinary." He paused, and then warned, "This next part is *real* embarrassing. Sometimes . . . well, *lots* of times I have this daydream at school where I'm this hero-warrior guy who . . . who . . . I can't even say it," he blushed, ". . . where I'm this, like, hero who rescues the school from these terrorists who try to blow up the building with everyone in it. Isn't that *insane*?" he asked, not able to look at me. "Yep," I nodded, "I'm afraid that's pretty bizarre. Now, if you had rescued your school from *communist commandos*, like I did when I was fantasizing at school, now *that* would be OK. But, *terrorists*? Yeah, that's pretty insane."

He looked up at me inquisitively without laughing. So I answered his unasked question. "And, no, I'm not making that up to help you feel better, Matt. That's *my* embarrassing truth. And I'll go you one better. Even today at age 54, I still sometimes daydream about being a hero. Not as often as in 8th grade, though. Of course, back then I had the cool kids that I needed to impress, and more importantly, I had the gorgeous Francine Leotta that I needed to rescue from the godless killers. And we both know how incredibly adoring she would have been then. Unfortunately, the commies

never showed, the cool kids never saw me as their hero, and Francine never got to show her adoration. So, tell me, how's *your* counterterrorist thing working out?"

This time he laughed loudly. "You're really not making that up?" he giggled. "I wish I was," I admitted, "but the truth is, I suspect that most kids have fantasies like that. I think lots of us want to be heroes, and I also think that's great. Because we all *can* be heroes—maybe not the terrorist/commando-fighter-type heroes, but *everyday* heroes. Like the hungry, exhausted cop on the news the other night who found the strength to chuckle-up the lost, crying 4-year-old, making him feel safe until his mom got there; or a teacher I knew who had the worst day of her year, who I watched patiently set her own pain aside to lend a comforting ear to an upset student; or that *plain, ordinary* 14-year-old young man who was nice to that kid who got bullied a few weeks back." Matt blushed again. "My mom told you? Well, I didn't go fight the jerks or anything. That was no big deal. That's not being a real hero."

"It is to me," I answered firmly. "Matt, I've met a couple of those war-type heroes. And they tell me that *their* heroes are ordinary folks like that cop, the teacher, and *you*—people who have a set of values and act on them, even though they're tired or angry or scared. One war hero told me that his heroism was a crazy, one-time thing that he thought didn't mean much. He wanted to be more of an everyday hero like those *plain, ordinary* people, like you." Matt shook his head, my words tumbling uselessly out of his ears.

"Look, Matt, I'm not telling you to *feel* a certain way—you have to feel what you feel. I am asking that you think, that you take another look at what being ordinary means." As he sat and thought, I had an idea. "If you and your mom say it's OK, the war hero guy I mentioned might be willing to chat with you about this stuff, if you want."

Two weeks later, Matt walked slowly into the room like he was thinking hard thoughts. He looked older to me. "I met Mr. Moore [the decorated war hero]," he said. "You knew that he's a teacher at my school, right? Well, guess what? Nobody there knows about

him being a hero. He made me promise that I wouldn't tell anyone—he doesn't want people to know. You know what he said? He said that what he did when he got his medal was *not* how he wants to be known. He said he used to be like some guy who's mean to his wife and kids, and runs into a burning building to save someone, and then goes back home and is mean to his wife and kids. He said everyone calls that guy a hero, and thinks that he's great, but he's not, really. Just because you do one special thing, he said, that doesn't make you a hero." Matt sat and thought about that before going on.

"He said that *his* hero was his sergeant who never got any big medals or anything, but who, every day, just took care of his men, trying to keep them safe, and joking with them to keep their spirits up and stuff, even when he was more tired and sick and scared than they were. The sergeant always worried about his guys, talking to them about going back to school, and not drinking, and stuff. Mr. Moore said that when he got his medal he wanted to rip it off and give it to his sergeant, that the sergeant deserved it a lot more, but that the sergeant will probably never get one because he's the kind of hero that people never know about. Then he said that the sergeant didn't care about getting medals, just about being a good person. And not just on one day, but on every day, especially on those days that were real bad."

Matt mulled his own words for a while. "Mr. Moore, he said that his goal now was to try and be a hero like that sergeant, to be caring and patient and helping with his wife and kids, and to the kids at school, and to people he doesn't even know." Then Matt quizzically shook his head. "You know what else he said? He said that if someone ever gave him a medal for that stuff, he'd *hate* it. Because, he said, he needs to do this *quietly*, just for himself. That part I don't understand. I think I need to ask him about that. Why would you *not* want to get respected, you know, stand out in the crowd and be seen as cool?" Although he directed his question at me, I just shrugged. Some answers are best found on our own.

That night, Matt's mom called to cancel his next session. Tearfully, she told me that Matt's gut pain had finally been diagnosed.

He had a very rare and very vicious form of cancer that he might not survive. “The doctor,” she sniffled on the phone, “told us that Matt’s pain had to have been severe.” Then her guilt washed over her like a tidal wave. “*All this time. . .*” she sobbed, “. . . *all this time we wondered if he was making this up to try and miss school . . . and he just kept going, day after day, even though he hurt so bad . . . and no one was listening. . .*”

The word hero popped into my head.

I went to see Matt at the hospital. His mom had warned me that he would be terribly nauseous and weak from the treatments, and that he had lost his hair, and so maybe he would not want company. While I waited for him to come back from a treatment, the nurses asked if I was related to Matt. When I explained who I was, two of them looked at each other and then asked if I could keep a secret. They told me that from day one on the ward, as sick as he was, Matt seemed to make it his business to help the other kids on the pediatrics floor, especially the two who had no parents to visit them. He had created a club where all of the kids in that hospital were instant members, and they would all pool their treats—candy, popcorn, pudding—whatever. Every day, when most of the parents weren’t around, the kids who could walk or “wheelchair” would march around the ward, playing silly songs on homemade instruments like box drums and hair comb harmonicas, and they’d visit the rooms of the ones who couldn’t get out of bed. And there they’d sing more silly songs and eat their treats. This worked so well as a morale booster that the nurses had vowed to keep the idea going even after Matt left. They had never, ever seen a 14-year-old boy do anything like that.

My look of amazement caused one nurse to say, “Wait—here’s the weird part. Matt made us swear not to tell anyone, *including his parents*, about these great things that he’s done. He calls his club the ORDER OF THE COOL TIME.” Her eyes misted a bit. “He’s so sick and he’s doing this wonderful thing for everyone else. Why on earth does he not want anyone to know?” she asked me.

I knew that Matt would want me to just shrug like I had no idea, so I did. The mist in my own eyes wanted to tell them the truth or,

better yet, to give him a medal. But he would have hated that. That's just the way those ordinary heroes are.



As of this writing, Matthew is doing OK. He said that some time must pass before they'll really know that he's won his cancer battle. He told me that straight-up, still not looking for any sympathy. Just telling it like it is.

Most adolescents wrestle painfully with their dread of ordinariness, trying to find some way to break away, to be different, to be special—to be heroes. Some become provocative, acting out as a way of defining themselves as apart from others. Most just struggle quietly and bravely, doing the right things, being good people, and feeling lost and unimportant.

Not unlike de Champlain, the explorer, Matt blazed a trail that I asked his permission to share so that others might learn from his struggle. (He was uneasy with my telling his story, but he relented when he decided that it might help someone else.) He discovered a few things about heroism and ordinariness that all of us, teens and adults, might consider.

He found that true heroism is not one deed, but a view of the world that says, "This place is not about me." It is a quiet but steely belief that sees its best expression in the ordinary world, by ordinary people, and not on ball fields by great athletes, or on battlefields by great warriors. In its finest hour, heroism appears as compassion, not as competition—as creating, not as killing. It is a thing for silent, private pride, not raucous, public acclaim.

Matthew has already won his battle of the ordinary. He's found his path to heroism—in embracing that simple ordinariness of himself and others, and then seeing how each day presents heroic opportunities for each of us. And if you ever doubt that, I'd suggest a visit to that hospital to see the precious smiles of those small, scared, hurting members of the ORDER OF THE COOL TIME.