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Epiphany Series

Host Hillary Larson

Episode 3

BROTHERS: A JOURNEY INTO THE HEART OF LOVE AND HATE

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[00:04] INTRODUCTION MUSIC

[00:18] HILLARY LARSON, HOST: In 1998, Craig Hella Johnson was a talented choral musician living in San Francisco. Like millions around the world, he was rocked to his core when he heard the news of the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard. Matthew Shepard was a young man beaten to death because he was gay. The horrific image of his bloody and broken body tied to a split rail fence was seared into America's consciousness. It was recognized as a hate crime, and it changed Craig's life forever. In the years that followed Matthew's death, although they had never met, he and Matthew Shepard would become brothers in the deepest sense.

[01:01] CRAIG JOHNSON, GUEST: I felt Matt's insistence in saying 'don't leave me at the fence, it doesn't end there. That's not the end of this story'.

[01:09] HILLARY: This is a journey into the heart of hate and violence, but also into the depths of love and forgiveness. This unexpected brotherhood between Matthew and Craig celebrates the mystery of how one life, in one moment, can change the life of another, in a most remarkable way.

[01:30] SINGING: *We tell each other stories so that we will remember. Try and find the meaning in living all our days.... (singing continues in the background)...*

[01:51] HILLARY: Craig Johnson is the Grammy Award Winning Founder and Director of the choral group, Conspirare. His most recent work is called *Considering Matthew Shepard*. The inspiration behind it was driven by his own experience as a gay man, as well as the impact of the violent end to Matthew Shepard's life.

[02:13] CRAIG: The big question for me that kept driving this was a personal question and this question of in the midst of all of this darkness, all of this tragedy, all of – one might say – the confounding reality of life, so much of difficult life, you know, is love anywhere to be found at the core of this? I mean, really. I needed to ask it for myself because I had had lots of beautiful teachers showing me evidence in their lives that it was. But I needed to take my journey to the core and this is I think, one way in my life that I've done that. The only way this love was gonna be real to me was if it included us all.

[02:54] HILLARY: Craig grew up in the midst of the forest and the lakes of northern Minnesota. His father a Lutheran preacher and his mother a nurse, a brother with two sisters. It was a life that was filled with music and the love of his family. Over the years, Craig became close to Matthew's parents as well. In fact, some of the lyrics he came up with for *Considering Matthew Shepard* actually came from Matt's own journal entries.
(music from *Considering Matthew Shepard*)

[3:15] SINGER: *I love theatre, I love good friends. I love succeeding. I love pasta. I love jogging. I love walking and feeling good...*

(music continues in the background)

[03:30] HILLARY: Eventually Craig came to know Matthew as Matt, like a brother. The parallels between the two are hard to miss.

[03:38] CRAIG: I love the fact that I felt like I got to identify with him. I mean, a teenager, a gay kid, a kid who loves to be on stage, was passionate. And you know he was also searching and struggling. And it was really normal stuff.

(music from *Considering Matthew Shepard*)

[3:55] SINGER: *Such an ordinary morning, in ordinary days, seem like ordinary life's all we lead. It's an ordinary journey and ordinary fears seem like ordinary hope for the...*

(music continues in the background)

[04:12] HILLARY: You can hear from that piece from *Considering Matthew Shepard*, that there's a certain joy and innocence that brings the story of Craig and Matt together, but there's also a sense of shared conflict and confusion.

[04:23] CRAIG: I was feeling so troubled about these feelings of attraction towards men, when I'd see a magazine picture or something, of an attractive man. These things were bothering me greatly. I knew somehow what this meant. You know, it meant I was wrong. I, I was not right. There was something terribly wrong. And so I talked to my parents about it, you know, probably fifth or sixth grade. It was interesting because it, it really all of the sudden, something shifted. And I remember when I shared this, wow, there was just a stillness in the room that was so...new. I'd never experienced anything like that with my parents. And I saw my Mom, just didn't have words. And tears started to stream...down her face. And, and she left the room, which was, I mean, just for a moment, but she left the room without saying anything, which was completely new, new to this kid. I, she took a moment out in the hallway, like, pulled herself together and said 'how do I come back and be with my son? This is brand new.' It was terrifying to her. But she came back in the room. You know, it was beautiful. You know, she said to me next: 'Craig, no matter what you could tell us, you could tell us anything and our love for you never changes.'

[05:58] HILLARY: Craig spent much time in our conversation talking about the love and support he felt from his family for his whole life, such a beautiful relationship. And yet, they were venturing into unknown territory, places they had never been.

[06:13] CRAIG: We embarked over time on kind of a path of conversion therapy. Sort of looking to these counselors, these people who were sort of claiming to be counselors of homosexuals who could kind of help people turn straight. Eventually it led me also to aversion therapy – it was over a course – which included some electric shock and some other things that were a part of that journey as well. You know I was getting a lot of input, a whole lot of love and at the same time there was this message that fundamentally somehow you are not okay the way God wired you. You know, we gotta fix some of this wiring. Yeah. This of course is what, you know, lots of, many, I mean, many, many, many gay people go

through this. And, and then one could say many human beings go through this, in their own way of, sort of, some message that comes down that said 'you're not complete, you're not wired correctly, you're not, you're off'.

[07:22] HILLARY: I have parts within myself that I've resisted in my lifetime, tried to get rid of them. Mine may look a little different than yours, but still I've never received shock treatment to try to get rid of those things so as somebody who's listening to you, that's so stark.

[07:47] CRAIG: It is, yeah. It's, it's shocking, isn't it, that it actually happened, and that it still happens. There are still people attempting those therapies even in this day and age. It's incredible. It's awful. So I really understand that shock. It's shocking to me even to share it, to say it. You know, it's, my parents didn't know that piece. And when we were in family therapy years later, when I was beginning to become a grown-up, you know we were in a, a session together and this came out. And of course it was horrifying. I mean, my mother who's got such a heart of love, and is so kind and beautiful, and, and this was... just broke her heart.

(music from *Considering Matthew Shepard*)

[8:33] SINGER: *Don't wanna look on this. Never get me. Flames too rough for me. Grief too deep. Keep it away from me. Stay out of my heart. Keep it away from me. Stay out of my heart...*

(music continues in the background)

[09:06] HILLARY: As a teenager as part of his conversion therapy Craig was given tapes to listen to to cure him of his disorder. He listened to them over and over, every night as he was going to sleep. They were filled with biblical references explaining why it was God's will that he be changed. There was a twelve-step approach mixed in where he was asked to admit that he was powerless over his homosexuality and that his life had become unmanageable. The nine years of therapy trying to convert Craig were long and painful, and they left their mark.

[09:46] CRAIG: For me, there's something about the extreme nature of it that, it's relevant, I guess it feels important. It's part of my question, like, the question that I ask in this piece like, in the face of these kinds of confounding darknesses, is love to be found there?

[10:13] HILLARY: Through all of it, he found compassion for himself and his family. But could he find forgiveness for Matthew's murderers? As well as those who supported what they had done? For that he needed to revisit the crime that was done to Matthew Shepard.

(music from *Considering Matthew Shepard*)

[10:30] SINGER: *Ooooh, ooh ooh oooooh.....*

(music continues in the background)

[10:38] HILLARY: It was in the evening of October 7th, 1998, Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney took Matthew Shepard to the outskirts of Laramie, Wyoming. They beat him

savagely, hung him on a fence, and left him there to die, with the fence the only witness to this horrible crime.

(music from *Considering Matthew Shepard*)

[10:58] SINGER: *I held him all night long. He was heavy as a broken heart....*

(music continues in the background)

[11:23] HILLARY: The next day a cyclist passing by mistook Matthew's body for a scarecrow. He had been on the fence for almost eighteen hours. By the time the police arrived he was barely alive. In the early hours of October 12th, Matthew Shepard died, leaving behind a mother, a father, a brother and a world once again that was forced to face its own humanity.

(music from *Considering Matthew Shepard*)

[11:54] SINGER: *I cradled him just like a mother....*

(music continues in the background)

[12:09] HILLARY: There's such violence that happened at that fence. It's so symbolic. And when I look at the violence of that act, what comes up for me frankly is the violence that was imposed upon you, of trying to make you different, of trying to kill that part in you.

[12:34] CRAIG: Yes. I, I'm certain that's one of the reasons I'm so drawn to this story and to Matt Shepard, is because of those parallels. And I have a feeling that every single person who was, at the very least deeply offended by this incident and to a greater extent, feeling a huge emotional reaction to this horrific crime, that what they are responding with is their own experience also. It's really hard to face some of the darkest places in our lives that have happened. And there are abuses that happen of course, across the globe every single day. Things that people carry for their lives, they are never able to speak about them, they feel. That Matthew has sort of called us forth in a way.

(music from *Considering Matthew Shepard*)

[13:29] SINGER: *Crime seeker, crime seeker. Crime seeker crime seeker crime seeker. A boy who takes a boy to bed. Where I come from that's not all right. He asked for it you got that right. The fires in hell burn hot and red....*

(music continues in the background)

[13:54] HILLARY: When word got out of Matthew's death, people came from so many different places, so many expressions of love and sorrow, confusion – that two people could do something like this – but there were also people that came forth that hated gays. And maybe saw that that murder was justified in some way. And I really, I think we really have to dig into that, and acknowledge that as part of this conversation.

[14:29] CRAIG: Yeah, it's true, there were, especially around the time of the funeral when it was a very vivid picture for many because there were protesters. On the day of the funeral, if, if you can even fathom, you know, just, you know a grieving mother and father and

brother, and so many others were going into the church for this funeral service. And there are these haters expressing such hateful violence.

(music from *Considering Matthew Shepard*)

[14:53] SINGER: *Ah ah ah, ah ah ah, ah ah ah ah ah....*

(music continues in the background)

[14:58] CRAIG: It did feel important and critical to the story that we acknowledge that this is in our world, that this exists, and it certainly came to the surface as a result of Matt's death, and you know, incredible homophobic hostility.

(music from *Considering Matthew Shepard*)

[15:15] SINGER: *A boy keeps his time for bed. Say your prayers instead goodnight. A boy who takes a boy to bed. The fires of hell burn hot and red. I am like you. Aaron. and Russell...*

(music continues in the background)

[15:57] HILLARY: What I wanted to ask you about *I Am Like You*, is the piece that we would rather not look at. 'Cause it's easy to talk about what a horrific thing Matt's murder was, but you invite us to look at the places within us that seem unbearable.

[16:20] CRAIG: Yeah, you know, how do we hold that? That's really difficult, and yet I, I, I wanted to, to try. Are there aspects of, of me, are there places inside of me, instincts in ways that I'm wired that are similar to Aaron and Russell? Do I have those instincts for hate and violence?

(music from *Considering Matthew Shepard*)

[16:41] SINGER: *I don't even like to say this out loud. It isn't even all that true. But I wonder for a moment. Am I like you. Even when, I'm pretty and service you ...*

(music continues in the background)

[17:08] HILLARY: What was the answer to that question, for you?

[17:11] CRAIG: A pretty clear yes. Yeah I'm afraid to say, I mean today I can report it, 'cause I've lived with it for awhile, but in, for much of my life, if I'm honest, you know, to be aware that, yeah, I have things to look at there. I have things to own in the department of inner violence and hate. I might not wanna call it that a lot of days – who does? And yet there is just that glimpse that says that if I'm willing to, willing to ask the question maybe I could get another piece of this answer, like, is love to be found somewhere in the midst of this?

(music from *Considering Matthew Shepard*)

[17:56] SINGER: *Say the song of summer. Come to my window to see me fly away....*

(music continues in the background)

[18:15] CRAIG: It's God's work to forgive, and mine to let go, or to keep my heart open, but one thing I will say is, enough time around this story which I had and I started to feel a whole heartache of pain, of course, deeply so – always for Matthew Shepard, for the Shepard Family, for all of us close to the story who experience anything like this – but I still felt a chest full of pain for Russell and Aaron. You know, I mean, they just felt lost, I mean just completely lost in life.

(music from *Considering Matthew Shepard*)

[18:49] SINGER: *We wake up to find that we would give to other. Give to each other...*

(music continues in the background)

[19:09] CRAIG: I'm not telling a fairy tale that, that doesn't exist here. I mean, Aaron and Russell brutally murdered Matthew Shepard and it was horrendous. And terrible, rooted in evil and darkness I'm sure, but I just wanted to have a vision, you know, if we all hadn't forgotten the ancient heart, sort of the love that binds us all, could we have ever lived our way into a vision like this, where we, we see these three young men, these three boys acknowledging that they were dear to each other. You know this was, to me a, as a man, a very moving vision.

[19:50] HILLARY: The last part of our conversation, while we sat at Craig's piano, he sang another piece from *Considering Matthew Shepard* that really brought home this longing for understanding and forgiveness.

[20:03] CRAIG (singing live with Hillary): *We are all sons of fathers and mothers. We are all sons. We are all rivers, the roar of waters. We are all sons.* Almost as a claiming of this and then they sing from the sense of what it is to be a man in this world. *Sometimes no home for us here on the earth. No place to lay our heads. We are all sons of fathers and mothers. We are all sons.* And then the guys cry out together. *If you could know for one moment. What it is to live in our bodies. Within the world. If you could know. You ask too much of us. You ask too little.* If you could know for one moment how it is to live in our bodies within the world. So it's, it's this, kind of prayer, this request for empathy, you know what would it be for us in this world to really feel an, a true empathy for one another?

(music from *Considering Matthew Shepard*)

[21:44] SINGER: *We are all sons of fathers and mothers. We are all sons. We are all rivers, the roar of waters. We are all sons. Sometimes no home...*

(music continues in the background)

[22:15] HILLARY: It was in the retelling, the reliving of Matthew Shepard's story where Craig found the answer to his question, is love in the midst of the most horrific things in life? But it wasn't an answer that was discovered on his own. It evolved into a collective discovery between Craig, the poets who helped him create the lyrics for his piece, and the singers of *Conspirare*. You can hear it in their voices. It was found in the concert halls as audience members became part of his journey too. By having the courage to venture into the

unbearable, it was there where not only love, but joy was found. Yes, love is in the midst of everything. Craig's inquiry is a testament that love is who we are.

(music from *Considering Matthew Shepard*)

[23:05] SINGER: *If you could know. You ask too much of us. You ask too little...*

(music continues in the background)

[23:22] HILLARY: Craig has been a student of Gangaji since 2008. Hard to put into words our gratitude for his courage to share his story here for Gangaji Radio. With hate crimes on the rise once again the timing seems particularly important. His beautiful piece of work, which you heard pieces of here in this story, *Considering Matthew Shepard* received a Grammy nomination recently. To find out how to hear the entire piece you can go to conspirare.org. We would love your support in making more stories like Craig's possible. You can write us at gangajiradio@gangaji.org. And the website is gangaji.org. I'm Hillary Larson. This is Epiphany on Gangaji Radio.

(music from *Considering Matthew Shepard*)

[24:07] SINGER: *What could be the soul. We'll begin again. Who can lead us there. Where my queen is. From the shadows climb. Rise to see again. Where can be the joy. How do we begin. Never our despair. Never the least of us. Never turn away. Never hide your face. Ordinary boy. Only all of us. Free us from our fear. Only all of us. What could be the soul. We'll begin again. Who can lead us there. Where my queen is. From the shadows climb. Rise to see again. Where can be the joy. How do we begin. Never our despair. Never the least of us. Never turn away. Never hide your face. Ordinary boy. Only all of us. Free us from our fear. Only all of us...*