

## A Kid From North Dakota

By Tom Matchie

I was born in 1933 in Fargo, North Dakota, during the heart of the Depression. A birth announcement appeared in the *Jamestown Sun* stating "the wee one is not expected to live." However, my father gave me a blood transfusion that ultimately saved my life.

My parents, Tim and Agatha, were farmers near Spiritwood, North Dakota. Dad had returned after three years studying engineering at Marquette University to run a very successful farm in the 1920s, only to experience seven crop failures in the 30s. My mother taught high school in Jamestown, but during this desperate time was told she could not return after revealing that she was pregnant. But neither gave up, and their optimism and energy has had a lasting influence on my life.

After the failure of the farm, my mother hocked her diamond ring to start her own business school in Jamestown, Central Dakota Commercial College. To keep it going she traveled the countryside seeking students, and as it happened was able to educate countless individuals and eventually many veterans returning from World War II. Dad consequently scored high on a federal exam to earn a job in the Post Office, which he held until retirement.

I was the third of four children. Jim was the oldest, then Mary Pat. Both followed in our mother's footsteps, finding jobs in the new technical schools teaching business methods and machines. Mike was born a year and a half after me. I refused to go to the first grade without my brother, so Mike and I went through grade school, high school and college together. All of us attended St. John's Academy, but Mike and I traveled to St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota, where we both majored in English.

In high school we did everything together. We played football and basketball under coach Deb Boss, and in 1952 went undefeated in football, beating the Class A champions, St. Mary's of Bismarck. We also played baseball, often facing the American Legion team from Fargo where Roger Maris was a star. We wrote for the school paper, *the Eagle*, a first class piece under the guidance of Sr. Mary Micheas. That paper received several national honors in numerous categories.

As a senior I won the first TV in North Dakota for an essay entitled, "Peace With Honor For America." In that year (1953) I performed a graduate piano recital that I had prepared for all through grade and high school. Patty Gallagher accompanied me on the second piano featuring a Beethoven Sonata and Mike sang Danny Boy as a part of the program.

Many of our teachers were Sisters of St. Joseph from St. Paul. Most had PhDs, making us heirs of their knowledge and expertise. Two teachers most memorable for me were Sr. Micheas in the language arts and Sr. Clare in social issues. Also two young priests, Fr. Mueller who introduced us to the dynamic aspects of the new liturgy, and Fr. Nilles, a musical genius, coached us in the boys' choir and often demonstrated the art of playing the piano and organ. He always admired and encouraged me.

In 1957 I graduated from St. John's University summa cum laude. Majoring in Biology and Chemistry I had planned to go to med school and was accepted at Marquette, but decided to remain at St John's Seminary to study for the priesthood. It is interesting that the Bishop of Fargo, whom I would later serve, gave the commencement address at the graduation.

Upon hearing I wanted to be a priest, Fr. Adelard, the Benedictine monk who taught me biology, suggested I remain in the monastery and teach that subject. But I told him I was a kid from North Dakota, and wanted to return there to serve those I considered my people.

It's interesting that during the summer while I was in high school and college, I worked at Foremost Dairies in Jamestown. Ralph Koenig, the foreman, put great trust in me, and I did many kinds of things, from washing cream cans, to pulling butter, to even driving a truck loaded with milk and ice cream to various small towns in the area. Though the job didn't pay a lot, it helped pay for my high school and college education.

In the spring of 1962 I was ordained for the Diocese of Fargo at St. James Church in Jamestown. Needless to say my Polish dad and Irish mom were very proud to have a priest in the family. I was stationed at St. Mary's Cathedral in Fargo, but also taught at Shanley High School. Having picked up majors in English and Philosophy in an interim year, I taught four sections of senior English.

Sometimes teaching in high school involves conflict. Once some parents objected to my teaching controversial literature, such as e. e. cummings' *I Sing of Olaf*, or Graham Green's *The Power and the Glory*. The bishop suggested I hold several classes for the parents. The classes not only resolved the conflict but also turned out to be enlightening, energizing, and fun for us all.

I had the privilege of hosting two CFM (Christian Family Movement) groups of parishioners, and here the adult exchanges on the place and power of the laity in the Church were simply awesome.

One extremely important factor motivating my life is contained in a poem I would teach by e.e. cummings entitled *A Man Fallen Among Thieves*. It ends with this verse:

Brushing from whom the stiffened puke,  
I put him all into my arms,  
And staggered, banged with terror,  
Through a million, billion, trillion stars.

These lines capture, I think, the limitless and unending responsibility we have for others.

At any rate, that special trait, which my wife says defines my personality, is in reality related to my affection and care for what she calls "broken wings." Looking back, among them were a mentally challenged woman trying to make it on her own, two older men struggling with their sexuality, a gifted misunderstood political colleague, several with crippling emotional conflicts, and the list goes on.



During the 60s I served in several other parishes in and around Fargo, including St. Benedict's of Wild Rice, Holy Family of West Fargo, the Newman Center at NDSU, and Cardinal Muench Seminary. In addition I was asked by Dr. Corwin Roach to teach God and the Modern Novel at the SU School of Religion. I especially came to love the little French community of St. Ben's fifteen miles south of town.

The 1960s were a very active time in history. Pope John XXIII started a new era in Catholic thinking and the documents of Vatican II served to highlight the people rather than the hierarchy as the essence of the church. In effect these documents brought together various religions to relate as equals, something that had not been true for centuries.

I met often with different Lutheran and Catholic theologians and pastors. One year the German theologian Fr. Hans Kung came to Fargo to speak to our group. This decade also witnessed the Viet Nam War and its after effects. I spent much time protesting the war while evaluating its impact on people of all kinds, at home and abroad.

During this decade I continued my education. At night and during the summer I attended MSU in Moorhead where I received a Master's Degree in English. The bishop of Fargo then agreed to send me to work on a doctorate in English at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, after which I returned to teach at Cardinal Muench.

Here I wrote my thesis on Flannery O'Connor, a southern American author who shared my interest in both biblical theology and modern literature. I wrote the paper on ten short stories in the collection *A Good Man Is Hard To Find*. I took a mythological/psychological approach, showing how she reflects the thinking of many modern existential authors, but develops her own take in a unique, albeit grotesque, way. My advisor, Serena Pondrom, provide great insight and inspiration.

The rector of Shanley, Fr. Arth, was another of tremendous support to me, affirming my decision around 1970 to marry Michelle Christian, whom I met while teaching a course in philosophy at Concordia. He thought a married priesthood was in the works, though it never materialized. Michelle was Franciscan nun and a nurse who managed that order's nursing home in Breckinridge, Minnesota. She was also active in the anti-war effort. Truly, we seemed "to click" intellectually and personally in so many ways.

For our honeymoon we traveled North Dakota at the invitation of Barbara Erickson, Director of Continuing Education for the state. In the wake of Elizabeth Ross's research, we held twenty-two workshops in communities throughout the state on the subject of death and dying. I introduced various areas of literature and poetry on the subject while Michelle dealt with psychological aspects of care. Later Michelle became a VP for Lutheran Health Systems, and during the summer we traveled—really tented—throughout the southwest and Alaska while she evaluated nursing homes in order to discover what works best.



I got a job at NDSU in 1973, thanks to Jon Hove, Chair of the English Department, who had been a judge at a Fargo session to choose the high school teacher of the year in 1968. I was one of those selected to compete, and later when I applied for a teaching job at SU he responded with enthusiasm. Initially I taught the humanities (the history of art, music and literature), but soon was given a chair in American Literature.

In the thirty some years at SU, I covered classes in British Lit, Linguistics, World Novel, and Science Fiction, as well as working with students in beginning writing. But I specialized in Native and Midwestern literature. I was especially interested in North Dakota authors, like Lois Hudson (*Bones of Plenty*), Tom McGrath (*Letter to an Imaginary Friend*), Larry Woiwode (*Beyond the Bedroom Wall*), Larry Watson (*Montana 1948*), Lief Enger (*Peace Like a River*) and Louise Erdrich (*The Master Butchers Singing Club*).

I also taught regional Minnesota authors like Winona LaDuke (*Last Standing Woman*), Will Weaver (*Gravestone Made of Wheat*), John Hassler (*North of Hope*), and Frederick Manfred (*Conquering Horse*).

Teaching in college also involved special roles, like serving on various college and university committees. Some of the decisions I had to make on that committee were hard on me, especially those relating to which faculty members should be granted tenure. I learned that just because a decision is “right” does not make it easier. I also participated in a tri-college writing program with other teachers from Concordia, Moorhead State, and South High in Fargo. This combined effort was designed to improve the teaching of writing techniques on all levels.

One year I was invited to join professors from the three F-M colleges in a special tri-college program entitled *the Challenge of World Peace*, where I taught through the perspective of literature. Each February for twenty-five years I also taught in the F-M Communiversity, a program designed to address the intellectual needs of people in the area. Here I introduced many types of classes in theology and literature, including those on my favorite authors, Flannery O'Connor and Louise Erdrich, as well as Kathleen Norris' groundbreaking novel, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*.

During the 90s I traveled to small towns in North Dakota to discuss modern novels with people from those communities. We called the program Books of the Great Plains. In this decade I also received a Remley Scholarship to do research and present a program on the Native American author Thomas King and his classic novel *Green Grass Running Water*—around the state.

In 1984 Louise Erdrich released her first novel, *Love Medicine*. I wrote an article on that piece comparing it to *Moby Dick*. I argued that she captured at the center of the land-based North American continent what Melville did with the vastness of several oceans. In every year following I published an article on a Native or Midwestern novel, including all of Erdrich's subsequent adult endeavors. In the spring of 2004, the *NDSU Magazine* published some of my thoughts on most of Erdrich's novels, and how they fit into our visions of America.



I received two national awards for specific works. One was for the best article in the *Midwest Quarterly*, published at the University of Pittsburg, Pittsburg Kansas, entitled *Spirituality in Four Midwestern Novels*. The other award was from the University of Utah for my article on Tom McGrath's *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*. In it I compared McGrath's vision of the social politics of rural North Dakota with Walt Whitman's poem on the role of democracy in the United States as a whole.

At NDSU I received various awards. In 1998 the College of Arts, Humanity and Social Sciences recognized me for Outstanding Research and Creativity. In 2000 I was honored by AHS as the Outstanding Educator of the Year. And in 2004 I was nominated by NDSU for the Faculty Lectureship. The letter of recommendation read: "For his genuine and continuing concern for student learning and growth, for his engaging scholarship on Native American, Midwestern, and regional literature, for his service, with its unique blend of humanness and humanity.

In the mid seventies my life took another interesting turn. As a boy I had an uncle, uncle Walt, who had an avid interest in politics. He used to call President Kennedy personally. This man had a great influence on my involvement in political thought and action. Around 1975 North Dakota was re-districted, changing from one large to several small districts. Wanting to serve my people, I ran and was elected to the ND House of Representatives from District 45, northwest Fargo.

In the process I had to visit 5,000 doors each election year for ten years. During that time I was elected twice to the ND House and once to the ND Senate. The experience was wonderful, and I looked at my time in Bismarck, and in Fargo when not in session, as another aspect of education. I learned how the state was run and met many of those who ran it, as well as the thousands of people who make it up. In 1984 as a senator I received a national award from the National State Employees Association as one of the ten best legislators in the country.

My interest in politics, of course, remains, in or out of office. I have stayed in touch with my district, making calls, encouraging new candidates, discussing issues that are important to the state and the nation. Once Michelle and I attended a national convention in San Francisco, where I was a delegate. That year Walter Mondale and Geraldine Ferraro ran for office, and though Ronald Reagan was elected, my passionate interest in those two Dems has never diminished.

When I married Michelle we traveled the state for educational purposes. Later as a part of her job, we traveled throughout the southwest and Alaska. But that was only the beginning of our travels. Since then we have been abroad, to Ireland, even Thailand and Machu Picchu in Peru, but always to visit or accompany relatives or close friends. In 2000 I helped fellow teachers, Jim Haney and Sr. Shawn Caruth, monitor 26 students studying art and artifacts while traveling in Greece and Italy. I also spent a summer studying Spanish in Guadalajara, Mexico.

Michelle and I also traveled widely in the US from New York and Florida to Hawaii, including a cruise down the California coast with a large group of her extended family. Such experiences are a part of my passion for education of all sorts. But while at home—and I used to teach Thoreau—I love to work on the grass, the bushes, the trees, the water. In the summer we enjoy time at our cabin in Detroit Lakes, which has been a haven, especially in retirement. And, of course, I continue to read and write.

No doubt Detroit Lakes has also been a place to entertain friends and relatives. Michelle and I never had kids, so this has given us the chance to know and love children and young adults in ways that otherwise would not have been possible. I even got to calling them “frogs and toads,” so now we have many images and references to these amphibians throughout the cabin. Truly, it has been our gift to watch many of these kids grow up and take their own unique places in the world.

I started this life journey by mentioning that because of a blood problem I nearly died at birth. Perhaps that incident was related to a heart attack I had on the tennis court at Courts Plus in Fargo in 1987. At that time there was a small blockage in one artery, but four years later, in 1991, I underwent a quintuple bypass operation. I mention this because a year later I ran a 5-K run that Meritcare—now Sanford—photographed through a young photojournalist I had known for years, Sheila Conlin. They now use that DVD to advertise their heart program.

I am now over twenty years away from that operation and “still kickin’.” I attribute this to good eating, regular exercise—I work out, swim, eat right, and play a lot of tennis. But also important in the early 90s was the advent of the statins, like Zocor, which I take each day. Anyway, I feel good inside and out, and good health has allowed me to teach the students I love, support the people in my communities, travel with my wife, mow the lawn with vigor, and of course, swim with “the frogs.”