



Taking a 'Dive'

an interview
with
Mark Matousek

By Matt Kailey

When journalist and author Mark Matousek was diagnosed as HIV positive many years ago, he was living a life of glamour in New York City, working for Andy Warhol at *Interview* magazine and rubbing elbows with the celebrity elite. But when he saw his friends start to die and was forced to face his own mortality as well, he realized that he wasn't really happy, and he made a conscious decision to live his values –

and to finally find an answer to the question that his sister had asked him before she committed suicide. That answer is reflected in his newest book, *When You're Falling, Dive*, available now. I was able to ask Matousek about his new book, the changes in his life and the book's importance to the GLBT community.

Matt Kailey: You worked on *When You're Falling, Dive* for five years, I believe you said. What made you decide to write this particular book at this particular time?

Mark Matousek: Shortly before she killed herself – this was 25 years ago – my older sister

asked me a question that has haunted me ever since: How do you live? How does a person survive his own life? How do we stand up to our own demons – “the terrorists within,” as one therapist describes them in my book – those inner maniacs of cynicism, hopelessness, fear and self-loathing that threaten to stop us in our tracks? Where does hope come from, not only in extra-difficult times, but in the course of our everyday lives? How do we resurrect ourselves after being knocked down, reinvent ourselves after major changes? I'd been chasing answers to that question for most of my adult life and wanted to put everything I'd learned down on paper. Having just turned 50, I realized that it was time.

MK: When you were diagnosed as HIV positive, you were living a life that many would consider a dream, yet you weren't really happy. Why do you think that was?

MM: I was chasing a carrot that no longer mattered to me. I'd come to New York to be a serious writer, not a limousine-chaser. Though I was fortunate enough to meet a lot of amazing people, including artists I admired – interviewing Annie Lennox was a high point, for example – I was starting to lose my self-respect. Believe me, I've got nothing against cheap thrills and celebrity culture, but as a steady diet, it was becoming lethal. The magazine's values didn't match mine – fame, beauty, money, the-next-hot-thing. It all began to feel so empty. When friends started getting sick – and I thought that I might be dying – the emptiness grew intolerable. I didn't want to die as ignorant as I was, obsessed with worldly success and status, but with no idea who I really was. Dying ignorant felt like being a sleepwalker stumbling off a cliff. I needed to find some kind of inner life, to figure out what really mattered, before it was too late. The atmosphere around Warhol was many things – exciting, notorious, campy, fun – but nurturing or soul-searching, it wasn't.

MK: You say in the introduction to your book that HIV saved your life and that survivors are our greatest teachers, the second of which is basically the premise of the whole book. How do you think that life-threatening or catastrophic illnesses and experiences actually help us?

MM: It's simple – they remind us that we're not immortal. This is the greatest gift we can be given in our lifetime, though it may not be easy to receive, is the wakeup call that shakes you out of your everyday trance and forces you to pay attention. Remember that scene in *Moonstruck* when Cher slaps Nicholas Cage and screams, “Snap out of it!” Provided it doesn't paralyze us, that's what crisis can do in a life, whether it's illness, loss, emotional trauma. The fear becomes fuel for change – the loss becomes grist for self-realization.

(continued on page 43)



a convergence

of art, culture and nature

Centuries-old architecture and cutting-edge contemporary art. Innovative cuisine and timeless natural beauty. Santa Fe offers a breadth of treasures in an environment that's welcoming and accepting. Journey to a world as unique as you are. Come to Santa Fe.

Santa Fe

Call 800.777.2489 or Visit SANTAFE.ORG/GLBTQ

(continued from page 15)

If you're only going to be here for a few more years, say, how do you want to spend that time? One woman says in my book that in deep grief, there's no room for anything but the truth. This is the paradox of so-called misfortune – it can bump up the quality of our life. We're no longer willing to waste so much time. We focus on the things that give us joy. We separate the wheat from the chaff (including relationships that aren't healthy or helpful), drop mediocre old habits. Our time on earth becomes more precious to us. The reminder that we're not immortal becomes an enormous blessing. For me, it was HIV – but the wakeup call can come from anywhere. The irony is that I never got sick, so I've been able to apply the principles I learned on the gangplank to life as a healthy person. Anyone can do this – get off their own "bed of woes" and use life's fragility to their advantage.

MK: You feature an impressive array of well-known figures – Joan Didion, Byron Katie, Lucy Grealy and Eckhart Tolle, to name a few – in the various scenarios that you present in the book, as well as "everyday" people who have had life-changing experiences. Did you know all these people prior to writing the book? How did you manage to collect all these stories?

MM: As I said, I've been pondering my sister's question since the age of 20. Like anything we hold dear, this question – and the quest for truth, in general – became a motif in my life. I was pulled toward friends, books, teachers, journalistic subjects that could help me with my own struggle. Some of them, like Lucy Grealy, were people I already knew. Others had read my earlier books, *Sex Death Enlightenment* and *The Boy He Left Behind*, and contacted me. Kindred spirits tend to converge. Shortly after 9/11, when I began to think about writing this book, I realized that I'd amassed a huge amount of material – interviews, personal anecdotes, spiritual references – tied together by the theme of soul survival. It's uncanny how they all came together.

MK: Your life changed when you were diagnosed with HIV and again when you learned that it wasn't a death sentence for you. Did the process of writing this book cause additional changes, and if so, what were they?

MM: When you come through a fire, you're never the same. In my experience, this process of transformation goes on and on – the more truthful you are with yourself, the more there is to learn. We're on this planet to know ourselves. Authors write about what they need to learn. Writing (this book) only intensified this quest in my own life.

MK: Who do you see as the audience for this book?

MM: Anyone who's lived long enough to realize that they're not controlling the big picture. We can't change what happens to us, but we can learn to cultivate our responses to life's great surprises and

challenges. As someone says in my book, fate is what happens to you, destiny is what you do with it. Anyone who knows what it's like to suffer, to lose what you love, to feel utterly confused, to be tempted to give up, shut down, turn away, turn off – in other words, anyone who's experienced adversity or heartbreak – can benefit from reading this book. Isolation and self-pity are our greatest foes. Connection and the willingness to re-imagine our lives, to remain inventive, curious, game in the midst of great changes, is our ace in the hole. We see that if others can not only survive, but prevail through unthinkable things, so can we. We all have suffering in our lives. The trick is not to waste it. Plato talked about *techne tou biou* – the craft of living. *When You're Falling, Dive* is about this craft.

MK: What special significance, if any, does this book have for the GLBT community?

MM: Gay people are weaned on adversity. Hardship – the struggle to remain ourselves in a world that would have us be different – is the life's blood of this community. We know what it's like to struggle, to live outside the margins, as outlaws, renegades, rejects. We know what it's like to invent our own lives, discover our own rules and parameters, to learn to be happy outside the boundaries of so-called normal society. Even though this is painful at times, it's also what makes us defiant and strong. We're survivors by nature – against-the-grainers – familiar with what it feels like to be threatened. Every survivor I've spoken to, regardless of their particular situation, has admitted to this feeling of "otherness," and to being treated (at one time or another) like a freak in the course of overcoming personal hardship. For the LGBT community, nothing could be more familiar. Our language is a survivor's language. We can empathize with anyone whose identity has been under fire. That's what my book is all about. Its subtext is 'we shall overcome.'

MK: If readers take one thing away from this book, what would you like it to be?

MM: Simply this: that we're stronger, more flexible, innovative and brilliant than we even imagine ourselves to be, and that sometimes it takes a shit storm – a life-changing battle – to make you realize that you're a hero. "In a dark time, the eye begins to see," Theodore Roethke once wrote in a poem. That's what I want to communicate – that after darkness, resurrection happens, figuratively (and non-religiously) speaking. By persevering through the worst, we can develop a kind of second sight. Pain is fuel; wounding is power; the seeds of redemption are sown through loss. This may not always feel great to the ego, but the soul grows enormously when we surrender to the truth of things. We view ourselves and the world through different eyes. It opens up a whole new life. ■

For more information, go to www.markmatousek.com.

TRAVEL

GAYLASVEGAS.COM

GAYLASVEGAS.COM

GAYLASVEGAS.COM

APPLE VACATIONS

Packages to Mexico

Riviera Maya
Riu Yucatan,
4A+, all-inclusive,
SU, 1/4-1/25,
5 nights
from
\$1129.99

*Prices per person based on double occupancy and charter air for select dates. \$2.50 per segment Sept. 11 security fees and other taxes and fees up to \$130 not included. Restrictions apply.

All-Inclusive Vacations



303-980-6483



all-inclusivevacations.com

ONE Great Community Three Great Resources



COLORADO

PRIDE GUIDE

GayColorado.com

GAYDENVER.COM

For Advertising information,
Call or E-mail Jim McNulty
McNulty & Associates, LLC
303-596-6085
GayRockies@aol.com

Interested in
being an
online sales
representative?

E-mail lynette@outfrontcolorado.com
or call 303-778-7900
for more
information