



“Moving Forward” January

“Let this truly be the celebration of a New Year, as we remember and appreciate and live rejoicing with each other.”

Mattie J.T. Stepanek

A message from Jeni Stepanek, PhD (“Mattie’s mom”)

When Mattie was working on his final book (*Just Peace: A Message of Hope*), he invited Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter to pen both a *foreword* and a *forthword* for the manuscript. Mattie and Jimmy had been sharing life as friends for several years by then, exchanging ideas for moving peace from a possibility to a growing reality. They had even discussed specific plans for this book, so the president was not really surprised by Mattie’s invitation to be a part of the endeavor. He was, however, perplexed at Mattie’s request for a “*forthword*” – even asking if this was a typo in Mattie’s outline. Mattie explained that just as a *foreword* prepares readers for the content of a book, a *forthword* prepares readers for the “*what next?*” beyond a book – so that the message continues to have power and impact past the words limited to the pages.

Mattie’s coining of the term *forthword* was rooted in his commitment to what he called “the powerful truth of moving *forward*.” We don’t have to happen into the future just *because* time passes. Instead, we can embrace and help shape the future as time passes. We cannot control the *facts* of any particular moment in time, and we cannot change our *feelings* related to any particular fact, or moment in time. But we *can* choose how we reflect on the truth of any fact or moment or feeling. We *do* have a choice in how we respond to any moment, through our thoughts and words and deeds – which will somehow, touch at least one other person, in some other moment, in some way. In any moment, with deliberation and purpose and choice, we have the opportunity to give shape to our “*what next?*” which one day, Mattie said, will become “*the essence of our existence, for eternity.*”

It is our opportunity, our privilege, even our responsibility, to be a part of shaping “*what next?*” – for ourselves, for our families and communities, and for our world. Regardless of how triumphant or tragic (or trivial) any reality (past or future) may be, in every moment at hand (our present), we can embrace the gift of free will, and make thoughtful and beneficial and faithful choices in attitude and action. We can choose to move *forward* – with purpose, and with goodness.

Mattie’s commitment to offering a *forthword* for messages and books and to moving *forward* in time and life is something that is especially relevant to consider as we transition from one calendar year into another. At a logistic level, that midnight moment that transpires between December 31 and January 1 is not really different from any other moment that ticks or tocks in time throughout the year. But at a symbolic level, to many, it represents a time to pause, and to *reflect* on what was and is, and what can be. It represents a time to be purposeful, and to *respond* with commitments for creating change. It represents a time to plan, and to *reach out* and into a new year with resolutions that motivate us.

For Mattie, every new year was a gift, but the transition from 2001 into 2002 was one of the most sacred and surprising gifts for him, after surviving multiple near-death health crises and outliving multiple end-of-life timeline prognoses during the previous 12 months. In his January 1, 2002 poem, “*Resolution Invocation*,” Mattie writes about truly celebrating the gift of time, and about the ever-present truth of moving *forward*, with choice. He encourages us to “*remember the past, but not dwell in it... to fully use the present, yet not waste it... (and to) live for the future, yet not count on it.*”

From Mattie, we can learn that what matters most in life is not really the facts or feelings that are a part of any particular moment – tragic or triumphant (or trivial), or any particular person – famous or faceless (or familiar). What really matters is that despite the ups-and-downs and ticks-and-tocks that are a part of our calendars and clocks, we take time to pause, and realize and celebrate the possibilities of moving *forward* – with deliberation and purpose and choice. What matters is realizing the life is about every moment, and every person – past, present, and future. And life is about choosing to do what we can, when we can, and resolving to do and be what is right and good – for any other moment and any other person, simply because we can.

Let us pray: Dear God, As we move from moments of the past into moments of the future, help us truly appreciate and celebrate the gift of the present. Help us live with purpose, which is Your gift to each of us. Help us move *forward* in life, and shape the future with our purpose, through choices that reflect your Will and goodness, and that bring goodness to others and to our world. **Amen.**
