

Forty-eight hours have passed since the world learned the shocking news of Heath Ledger's untimely death. Funny how our minds put an indelible marker on the passing of a public persona, who has personally made a profound impact on our lives. And the news of this young actor/icon was one of those occasions.

Tuesday afternoon I was tuned into CNN, following the latest updates on the current political wrestling match among the two major political parties, when a photo of my hero flashed on the screen:

Heath Ledger: 1979-2008.

No further details accompanied this announcement.

Shocked and disbelieving I surfed other news channels until I found MSNBC had a reporter on the scene outside Heath's apartment in Soho, and the rest of the story unfolded piece by sorrowful piece.

Since then, I sat transfixed to my TV, sorrowing, tearful no less traumatic than the loss of my beloved brother last summer.

This was a deep personal loss of someone I had never met; yet his powerful portrayal of Cowboy Ennis in Brokeback Mountain, had captured my heart far more than any other public figure in my lifetime of 81 years.

Yes I mourned President Kennedy's murder, Jackie Kennedy's early demise from cancer, JFK, JR's tragic plane crash off Nantucket, but losing Heath was equally as personal as any passing I have encountered.

The tears flowed unashamedly.

My cowboy stud was gone, never to return. How my heart ached for him as Ennis facing the unexpected death of his cowboy lover, lamenting too late how their affair could never move beyond their bi annual trysts on "hunting" trips.

Looking into "Ennis's" soulful brown eyes, I suffered with him the loss, the agony and the frustration with himself and society.

He was telling my story, one of passion, unrequited love in Iowa farm country.

He brought to life a deeply hidden secret.

By his total transfixion into Ennis' rough-hewn corn fed masculinity, Heath Ledger helped me relive a love buried, dimmed but not forgotten in the deep dark days of the Depression and World War 2.

I cried during Brokeback Mountain's beautiful love story as I am crying now, but I must look beyond my tears to pay tribute to the actor, the man, the cowboy who took me back in time and in many ways, healed a broken heart and gave me hope.

He also gave the world a new insight, a new perspective of how homosexuality pervades all society, far beyond Hollywood's effete stereotypes.

He was 28. I will be 82 in May. Even in reverse numbers we are connected and I am grateful.

Thank you Heath Ledger.

Next time I saddle up, next time I admire the thoroughbreds at the Kentucky Derby, I will remember you.

If I were in NYC, I would leave denim Levi jacket on top of the stacks of flowers strewn across your doorstep.

Maybe someday we might meet for the first time but then it won't be the first time, will it?

"Tilting at Windmills"

Daryl James, Jr.

January 24, 2008