

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie  
Arlington Street Church  
31 October, 2021

### **Lessons from Charlie**

for *El Día de Los Muertos* ~ All Saints and All Souls

My grandfather, Charlie, was the fifth of six kids born and raised in the heyday of the whaling port of New Bedford, Massachusetts. He described his childhood classroom as a mini-United Nations — his friends were the kids of captains and crew members from around the world, a rainbow of skin color and accents. He's someone who grew up to understand the privilege afforded white people but who never, ever understood prejudice.

He was named Charles Hunt for the childless obstetrician who delivered him and who later put him through Bates College — the chance of a lifetime. His best friend there was Benny Mays. You may know of Dr. Mays — born in the Jim Crow South to freed sharecroppers, he became an American Baptist minister and is credited with laying the intellectual foundations of the American civil rights movement. He served for nearly three decades as president of Morehouse College, and had a profound influence on Julian Bond and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., among many others. He was so proud of Dr. Mays, and so honored to be his friend. The two men died within three months of each other — the only thing that made sense to me about their deaths.

Charlie had two additional friends who were very much in my life. One was Joe Arcaris, the wild animal trainer at Benson's Wild Animal Farm in Hudson, New Hampshire. I have no idea how these two teamed up, but I do remember Joe helping me high up onto the head of Betsy the elephant. I fell madly in love with her, and Joe liked that. Charlie's other friend was Stewart Swaffield. Stewart had been raised at a trading post in the Alaskan wilderness. He had a big, circular scar on his forehead from a bite by a hungry sled dog, and he was missing toes, which had been lost to frostbite. I remember the look on my mother's face when he offered to take off his shoes and socks to show me at dinner one night. Stewart lived in the trailer park nearby. When my grandfather died, my sister Lisa went to tell Stewart. They sat together at his little kitchen table. He put his head in his huge hands, and wept.

These extraordinary friendships — Benny, Joe, and Stewart — were models for me. Clearly, my grandfather was not so interested in people who were just like him. He was catapulted from those wildly diverse classrooms in New Bedford into a life of being drawn to people whose stories were very different from his. I aspire to be that friend.

At college, Charlie contracted the flu in the 1918 flu pandemic. His voice was always tinged with amazement as he told the story of all his hair falling out and then growing back in as a jet-black pompadour. He survived, but many of his friends did not. He nearly died again when he inadvertently disturbed a hornet's nest. And his first wife died in childbirth, leaving him with an infant daughter. I'm not sure if tragedy inured him, but by the time I arrived, he had perfected the expression that his children and grandchildren invoke to this day: He would say, "It's a detail."

"It's a detail" is an incredibly useful perspective on things not going as we'd like, a way to self-regulate when there's shake in the system. Memorably, I put a softball through a window and was quite certain my mother would kill me. Thankfully, my grandfather was there. "It's a detail," he said before she could even get going, and he took me to the hardware store to buy a replacement pane, putty, and glazier's points.

He never lectured, but another Charlie lesson gleaned from watching him was his devotion to moderation. For breakfast, he would eat the smallest portions of store-bought coffee cake, a soft-boiled egg, and a few ounces of orange juice and whiskey. For a snack, he'd eat a single square of chocolate. He owned two or three of most articles of clothing, but never more, and he never let things pile up — he had a daily ritual of burning the trash in the little pot-bellied stove in his basement. He was entirely self-correcting and never veered into abstinence or sloth. And though there are times that "moderate" feels constrained and boring to me, I have never doubted that Charlie was right. He was right.

And he was patient. He was mythically patient. I had a book of children's fairy tales from Japan that I loved, although they were even more violent than Grimm's. I begged Charlie to read them to me, but he was a gentle man; his way around my request was to make up different story lines, veering away from the gory parts. Although I hadn't yet learned to read, I knew what he was up to, and protested. Very patiently, he explained to me that there are lots of ways to tell a story. His creativity and that affirmation — there are lots of ways to tell a story — has served me well.

Looking into the lives of many families, it's pretty clear who the favorite child is. It's probably not as terrible as it sounds, but it horrified my grandfather. As a result, each of the eight of us was secretly sure that we were his favorite. We even had different pet names for him! What does it look like to make every single kid feel like they're your favorite? That's a question whose answer is worth living into every day. And I should say that Charlie invented unconditional love. Here's one last story.

Every morning, he unfurled the Stars and Stripes and fitted the flagpole into its metal bracket at the front door, but it was really only toward the end of his life that I began to understand that my sainted grandfather was not just patriotic but quite politically conservative. My first clue was when he made the excuse for Richard Nixon that "lots of other presidents did what he did; they just weren't caught." By the time our differences came into sharp relief, I was old enough to imagine that it could cause serious damage to our relationship.

My being queer didn't phase him; "it takes all kinds to make a world," he'd say. My being vegetarian worried him; he couldn't imagine someone refusing meat. On one memorable Thanksgiving, he poked small bites of turkey into my mashed potatoes when he thought I wasn't looking. But then I took to the streets to protest the Seabrook nuclear power plant, and, with my friends whom he loved, faced down state troopers at Seabrook's front gate ... and on national television. I remember my mother calling to say, "Your grandfather saw you."

I rode the 77 bus to Arlington from where I was living near the div school, walked to his house, let myself in, and found him seated in his armchair in the living room. There was no small talk.

"I saw you on TV," he said. I was well aware that, for someone in his generation, this could have been thrilling, but it was not. I steeled myself.

"I only want to say that any granddaughter of mine who stands up for what she believes in makes me very proud."

That was all.

\*

I am profoundly aware of how rare it is for someone to have a Charlie in their lives. I'm so happy to share him with you — he would have loved you! — and I'm curious about who inspired, uplifted, and upheld you.

I read an interesting article in *Inc.* magazine by leadership and management author Peter Economy (yes, he's a businessman and his last name really is Economy).<sup>1</sup> He was talking about what he experiences as the relative ease it takes to spot people who are not good for us and what he thinks is the harder decision to make about whom we should invite into our lives and keep close. This is not my problem — the reframe bent my mind a bit — but I appreciate that he actually breaks it down into five kinds of people to whom we should say Yes.

1. The leader. This, writes Peter Economy, “is the person that always takes you to the edge of where you feel comfortable ... to the brink of what you think you're capable.... They're unafraid to take charge, grab you by the hand, and go. [In their presence,] you never feel less than perfectly capable.”

2. The storyteller. “This is the [person] who colors your [days. They give you a new perspective,] inspire [you to keep] moving and trying for more adventure.... The storyteller reminds [you] of how much more there can ... be.

3. The listener. The listener is someone who makes time and space for you, sits and stays, and hears you out — someone who brings the kindness of the gaze of attention to your life is precious, indeed. The listener really listens and really hears.

4. The happy one. This is interesting: Find someone who brings you iridescent, inexplicable joy and draft off their happiness. At best, pass it on.

And 5. The one who forces you to think. This is the person that keeps you off autopilot, keeps you from phoning-in your life; the one who compels you to ask the hard questions and change direction if you're off the mark.

Who are your leaders, storytellers, listeners, happy ones, and the ones who force you to think?

And as they go on before you, what are the ways your dead have inspired, uplifted, and upheld you?

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Economy, These 5 People will Change Your Life for the Better. Please see [nc.com/peter-economy/these-5-people-will-change-your-life-for-the-better.html](http://nc.com/peter-economy/these-5-people-will-change-your-life-for-the-better.html)

Even in the face of grief, how are you called to carry forth their legacy, passing on what has changed you for the good?

\*

For a long time after my grandfather died, I was obsessed with wondering whether or not I had sufficiently thanked him for all he did for me — if he really understood that he had saved my life with his love. I knew that if I could have even one more minute with him, that was the thing I needed to try to say.

When I first heard Stephen Schwartz’s song “For Good,” from *Wicked*, I wished I could sing it to Charlie. I love that song. But along the way, I realized that whether or not my grandfather knew how deeply he touched and changed my life, what is really important is that I pass it on — that the only way left to me to honor him is by sharing him with everyone who didn’t experience the great gift of knowing him.

And so, my beloved spiritual companions, I leave you with these words from “For Good.”

I've heard it said  
 That people come into our lives for a reason  
 Bringing something we must learn  
 And we are led  
 To those who help us most to grow  
 If we let them  
 And we help them in return  
 Well, I don't know if I believe that's true  
 But I know I'm who I am today  
 Because I knew you....

Because I knew you  
 I have been changed for good

It well may be  
 That we will never meet again....  
 So let me say ...  
 So much of me  
 Is made of what I learned from you  
 You'll be with me  
 Like a handprint on my heart  
 And now whatever way our stories end

I know you have re-written mine  
By being my friend

Because I knew you  
I have been changed for good.