

Charley

by
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It's August 28th, Sr. St. Charles' Birthday. Of course in my growing up Catholic in Philadelphia the last thing that happened in a woman religious woman's life was celebrating her birthday. She gave all of that up when she took a new name at the time she received her religious habit. Actually it was more likely that she was given a new name by her religious superiors. She was supposed to die to all of her past, all that was "secular", and take on a new identity after some particular saint. More often than not, that saint was a male. From then on, her feast day or saint's day was to be celebrated. Her anniversaries of service in the congregation were also celebrated. She had been re-born when she took religious vows and so, until we became friends later in life and she told me the date of her birth, we celebrated November 4th of each year, the feast of St. Charles Borromeo, her religious namesake.

Once we had become friends, and not just student and teacher, she told me how she had worked in an office until she was about twenty-five and then she decided to enter the convent. She told me of her dismay when she learned that she would have to receive her habit after dressing as a bride. She mentioned how often she had been asked by her employer – I think he may have loved her – why she was going to the convent where she would have to take another name. She told him that if she married she would also be expected to take her husband's name so she didn't see that it mattered much. I don't think she would ever have considered reciprocating any affection he might have had for her because, after all, he was a "Protestant".

Sister had a younger brother whom she loved dearly. (I have no memory of her ever speaking about her parents.) Her brother had married a "Protestant" late in his life, in typical Irish fashion, and she worried about that a bit although the woman was a delight. Once I had a car I used to drive her to see her brother and sister-in-law now and it was obvious that they both delighted in having her visit. This was a loosening up of the original rule in her congregation that once they entered religious life they were never again to set foot inside their family home. In fact they had to choose between attending the funeral of either their mother or their father and could enter the home only then if the waking of the body were in it. Most sisters chose to go home at the death of the first parent hoping to be of some comfort to the survivor.

Occasionally I would also drive Charley to Atlantic City to visit two childhood friends of hers who had an apartment there. She was Annie to them. I used to know her "maiden" name but I forget it now. I remember thinking at the time how much the habit did for women this age. Her friends' wrinkles were so obvious while Sister's were well hidden behind the religious garb. The brownish spots on her hands and a few on her chin were about all that would have identified her as aged.

When we visited her family and friends, apart from the one that was in the home for the destitute run by the Little Sisters of the Poor – oh, how that place stank of urine – Charley would enjoy a drink. It was rye and ginger ale usually. In Atlantic City she would enjoy a walk along the boardwalk which she wasn't supposed to do. Her community was allowed to go to the seashore with proper companions but never to walk on the boardwalk. I think that's ridiculous. What were we going to do on a boardwalk in full habit and in the middle of the day? The curfew was still in place that she had to be home by 5:20 p.m. in time for evening prayer. Her community did have a summer villa at another seaside location to which she never went for some reason which we never discussed. I remember being there once and watching women, many of them rather large women, in bathing suits of my grandmother's vintage no matter their age, with white bathing caps on them, frolicking about in the water. It was very clear that there was no hair under those bathing caps. Other bathers kept their distance, out of respect I suppose.

When we went to Atlantic City to see her friends there, we made a trip to Fralinger's on the boardwalk for their soft salt water taffy which wasn't salt water taffy at all because that was all kind of chewy, but a soft, soft mint that came in several flavours. If anyone asked how she had secured them when she got back to the convent she would explain, and I was to confirm, that it was I who had gone onto the boardwalk for them as a treat for her. She reminded me that I didn't need to mention that she had joined me in the enterprise.

I met "Charley" in the middle of my Grade Nine year. She was standing at the end of the hall of the floor on which our high school was located. It was at the beginning of the second semester. She stood there tall, dignified, her headband tied in the "old fashioned" way. The younger sisters folded it smartly. The older ones had a kind of softness to the fold. I was always rather surprised that the community allowed these two variations on a theme. Three years later when I was to dress as a member of their community for a parade float, I got to see how the whole apparatus worked. I was rather amazed that they were expected to get into all of that without the aid of a mirror. The habit included kind of "blindlers", the sort that horses wear sometimes. It was to remind them to

stay focused on God, their spouse Christ, and was to be a "helmet of salvation". Many of them developed terrible ear problems and when it was finally permitted for some of them to learn to drive, the Philadelphia police department and the Pennsylvania State Police said they had to push the blinders back or they wouldn't be given licenses. The sister-drivers looked like women with terrible tumours on the backs of their heads.

It turned out that Charley was to be our new mathematics teacher; the previous one had left in despair over our "stupidity". These were the days when sisters didn't demand much and I was surprised at the move, although some of us were surprised at the clout of the previous incumbent. She seemed to get whatever she wanted and we wondered at how that happened. Later we learned that she was a bosom buddy of the Mother General. I remember thinking that the accusation of stupidity was kind of strange because we had all scored so well in the archdiocesan examination programme. But she had gotten her transfer and Charley arrived. I soon realized that despite religious life or perhaps because of it, she was the intellectually gifted woman that I hoped one day to be. She encouraged my assorted interests and it was a sad, sad day for me when she was transferred at the end of my senior year. She was sent to an elementary school as a sister-librarian where it was thought that she would have an easier time because of her weakening heart.

It was years later before I would learn that our small Catholic girls' high school, attached to a parish, one of two schools which had been founded by the pastor to keep adolescent young men and women out of the textile mills and give them the rudiments of a liberal arts education, was usually sent sisters who were physically or mentally ill. It was hoped that they would recuperate in this smaller contained setting, and then get back into the mainstream. There were 250 girls in our school and 350 in the boys' school. The usual archdiocesan school had three thousand students. There were six sisters in all working with us and eight Marianist Brothers working with the boys. Some students in both schools, like myself, were from "outside" the parish, admitted because of our high academic standards in our elementary schools to the places that had been vacated by some parish members going on to a public high school or to a vocational school. We were all what would today be called academic "high achievers" and our archdiocesan test scores were the envy of all the other secondary schools.

I remember in Grade 10 memorizing geometry so that I could pass which I did with an astounding 98 %. It was really for Charley that I wanted this success more than myself. We learned only Algebra and Geometry in the girls' school. The boys got four years of mathematics and they got four years of Latin and Greek and French. We got two of Latin and two of French. We were "only" girls who might go to a convent but the young men might go to a seminary! But high school was a grand adventure for me and I was, as I am with most learning situations, like a dry sponge ready to soak up every drop of any new idea.

Charley was the butt of many jokes and I never understood why. My classmates considered her out of it big time. Perhaps it was her rigid bearing and perhaps because she didn't have a homeroom or moderate an activity that they didn't come to know her in any way but as a teacher. They baited her big time. One time stands out in my mind. Charley always began class by asking if there were any questions left from the previous lesson and if anything needed clarification. My classmate Joanne asked, "Sister, I'm not so sure about those questions of menstruation which you raised yesterday." Charley turned purple and I feared for a major heart attack on the spot. But then she controlled herself and said, "If you had been listening carefully, my dear, as you should have been, you will remember that the lesson was on mensuration, and I'm sure you above all others in this class would know the difference."

The class went dead silent. Joanne had a reputation among us for knowing more about the male anatomy and her own than most of the rest of us did. She used to talk about the crotch watching of males before most of us had any idea what was there to watch! But we thought that was a well kept secret among ourselves and has no idea that this regal looking woman who walked among us with such grace could have known as well about Joanne's reputation. Charley then proceed to smile and explain the next geometric nightmare.

I stayed in touch with Charley over the years. She was transferred eventually to the infirmary of her community's motherhouse. I used to visit regularly and take her boxes of Lifesavers which she also savored. Now and then I would manage to get her some of the soft Fralinger's salt water taffy and she would brighten. By then she wasn't allowed to leave the floor to which she was assigned. "The old ticker isn't going to last for much longer." She went into a balcony on her floor that overlooked the main chapel and attended mass and daily prayers from here. At communion time, the aged cleric who was their chaplain would come up the stairs slowly to the sisters in the gallery. She spent some time at a communal television which had been installed in a sitting area after Vatican Council II. She and a group of other sisters followed the Philadelphia Phillies with great passion. She was delighted when a friend of mine who had a contact with the baseball team got her a ball inscribed with the names of all the players. She kept it near her bedside.

Charley liked to talk about a trip that she had taken to Rome, Lourdes, and Fatima, one of the last things she was able to do before she was assigned to the infirmary. She won it in a draw sponsored by the tailors that made all the girls' school uniforms in the archdiocese. She was gone for three weeks and "had" to ask her superior

to accompany her although that wasn't what she wanted. "It's just how it's done, Catherine." She had a very close friend who was a superior in another house and she wanted so much to take her. Her present superior had already had the experience of this trip as a gift from her family for her silver jubilee of her religious profession. "You'd think she'd be generous enough to invite me to take someone else, but not her. She's too greedy to be that thoughtful." By then I had come to know of the many sadnesses of Charley's religious life and the few joys. She never once encouraged me to join her religious community or any other. "I can't really recommend it to you." I often wondered but never asked if she meant religious life in general, or the life for me in particular. I don't think I really wanted to know.

The community eventually did assign me "family member status" so that I was able to visit her in her room, once her brother died. There were no other family members, except for her sister-in-law, broken hearted at the death of her beloved. This happened after I came back from five months of study in Rome during the last session of Vatican II. Maybe that made me "safe" in the superior's eyes despite my "secular" status.

About two months before her death, my parents and my husband-to-be and I had our last visit with her. It was at a kind of open house and I went to her room and brought her to the communal area where most of the sisters gathered. It was Bent who saw how tired she was and how exhausted by the visit although she claimed to be enjoying it. We cut short our visit accordingly. She and Bent liked each other. She could not come to our wedding. He "heart" wouldn't permit it she said. I didn't persist in the invitation because technically I was marrying "outside the church" and I wanted to respect her wishes. Was it her physical heart or her spiritual heart that was prohibiting her coming? Again, I didn't care to ask.

The friend who had secured the autographed baseball for Charley called me very early one morning to say that she saw Charley's death notice in the paper. The funeral was that day at 10:00 a.m. at the motherhouse. I was aghast. No one from the convent had called. I was to learn later that her dying took two weeks, this from her closest friend in the community. "But, surely, Sister, someone could have called me. Surely, I deserved that much." "Mother asked her to offer her dying and death for the welfare of the community," Sister Clara replied. "All that Sr. St. Charles did most of that time in reply to Mother was grunt. Maybe they thought outsiders didn't belong here at that moment." Outsiders! I pondered that I might have been truly the only insider in Sister's life after her brother's death, perhaps but for Clara, and Charley told me once that it didn't make much sense to talk with her brother about the difficulties in her religious family. He had enough of his own to deal with. She had also told me what would happen to her few possessions when she died.

"They'll take everything I have and put it out in the community room and others will be allowed to come in according to rank and take whatever it is they want. That's how it's done." It felt and sounded ghoulis to me. I knew that nothing of hers would be left by the time I got to the convent that morning and doubted that Clara would have taken anything of hers for me. I often felt that she resented our relationship, that in spite of my attempts to make clear that I knew how important Charley was to her and vice versa, Clara really didn't believe that.

Charley was buried in the "new" habit of her community and I dearly missed that old-fashioned head band and the "helmet of salvation". This wasn't my Charley. The coffin was surrounded by potted palms and a kitschy crucifix and six candles. She wasn't there and that was all that mattered. After they closed the coffin, I sobbed my way up the aisle with the few lay people who accompanied the coffin. I was inconsolable. No one else was shedding a tear.

Some of the Knights of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, alumni taught by the congregation, who had been her students in elementary schools were there, most of them aged men. The younger ones would have been at work. They formed an honour guard for her coffin. I was weeping among other reasons because I had in some sense abandoned her during the first few months of my marriage and even before that after I came back from Rome when I decided to finish my undergraduate degree and to take a teaching position. Things Jesuit and communitarian had become my new passion and I didn't think Charley would really understand. I never even gave her the chance to try to understand and it was for that that I grieved most.

Today, on the 114th anniversary of her birth I can see her as clearly as ever, standing with her brother and sister-in-law in a photograph I took of the three of them which she cherished. She believed in me often when I couldn't or wouldn't believe in myself. She confided in me when I didn't think I was worthy of anyone's confidences. She would not condemn me when I was in my most self-condemnatory moods. I console myself that as long as I am, she somehow still is, and perhaps my abandonment of her was not total after all.