

Charles Leighton – Celebrating a Life – a eulogy delivered by Ted Davis

On the way up to Vermont, I got to thinking about how folks up this way had of expressing things, You've all heard, "You ain't got the good sense God gave a chicken." Well, I was thinking of another variation of that – "I wish I had just a little of the great good sense that God gave Charlie Leighton." He was certainly a man gifted with a lot of that good sense.

Some of you also may remember back in the middle of the last century, a popular poem – a line of it got sewn into samplers that hung in many a kitchen. I remember it from the old farm house that the Brady family lived in when I was a little boy. The poet is pretty much forgotten.

"Let me live in my house by the side of the road and be a friend to man."

I was thinking that there was more to it, so I looked it up. There was more, and it sure did apply to Charlie Leighton.

The House by the Side of the Road

by Sam Walter Foss (1858-1911)

Let me live in my
house by the side of the road
Where the race of men go by-
They are good, they are bad, they are weak, they are strong,
Wise, foolish- so am I.
Then why should I sit in the scorner's seat
Or hurl the cynic's ban?
Let me live in my house by the side of the road
And be a friend to man.

For Uncle Charlie, that was just the way it was. A choice to live a life that was good and generous and honest and without pretense but most of all one that made sense. You were a friend to man because it made sense – it was what you did. Charlie was intent of making sense of things. I can remember his telling me about a decision on a school bus contract – he explained in terms of what was sensible and what wasn't. He believed in what made good sense. Believe me Wall Street could have used Charlie Leighton a couple of years back when they were peddling their "assets" around. He would have listened politely to the pitch and then said "Not worth whatever you paid for it. Doesn't make sense to me." And that would be the end of that nonsense.

We always looked forward to the visit with Joyce and Charlie. Ben, my Mom and I would make the rounds, and it wouldn't be complete without stopping by and catching up on things. Charlie just made you feel like he was interested in what you had to say – because he was.

Who was he, this man of good sense? I see the picture of Charlie in a tux for a wedding, milking his cows, looking happy as all get out about the wedding and the milking. He knew the real value of both things.

I see Charlie on a tractor hard at work, or sitting in his front yard welcoming a visitor.

I see him delighting at something a grandchild is doing. Or pleased to be listening to his flatland relations telling tales of the city.

All those times have one thing in common: Charlie – pleased to be where and who he was. Not looking past that minute with some great longing to be somewhere else.

Charlie – the man who listened, laughed easily, and knew the value of things.

In these days of reality television celebrities, Charlie had no interest in being anyone other than who he was – a Vermont dairy farmer who lived and worked in one place most of his life – connected to his family, friends, community. He was exactly where he wanted to be. How many of us can say that in this age of dissatisfaction?

And when he wept on the day he had to sell his small herd of dairy cows, he wept at the loss of a piece of who he was. Maybe that's why when Ben and I visited a few months later, he just happened to have two young steers in the newly emptied barn – “raising a little beef that's all” -- He just kept doing what he knew mattered to him.

And when he was down to his last two Surge customers (repairing their milking equipment), he carried them around in his shirt pocket as if they were a kind of gold. Because they were gold to him – a chance to be useful and helpful and part of the daily life of his neighbors.

The world was a brighter place because of Charlie's familiar gap-toothed grin. That grin was something to look forward to. In Judaism there is a blessing that goes with the loss of someone we love "May his memory be a blessing." Well, the memory of Charlie smiling will certainly be a blessing to Ben and I. I can see Charlie and Joyce just as clear as anything waving a greeting and looking pleased as can be to see whoever is coming in the door.

And if the next life makes any sense at all, Joyce and Charlie will be on a farm, with an old upright piano and a good barn -- Joyce will be sitting at the piano, rolling out a tune and Charlie will be heading for the barn to see how that new calf is doing.

May God see to it that the world will always be blessed with a Charlie and Joyce Leighton.

Uncle Charlie Left Town

Uncle Charlie left town today
and that pretty much brought
one little tune that always sits
in back of the ear to an end.
No final chorus, that was not
his style. He played rhythm guitar
for his darlin' Joyce stridin' the upright,
his farmers fingers cranking on
a tiny amp with broken knob.
Always glad to second fiddle.

Yeah, yeah, I know, Uncle Charlie
did leave once before in lost days
of no choice in such things,
and it turned out not to last.
That carrier group and Pacific fleet
had no long-term hold on his stay,
so, he reliably returned
to the company of cows.
The farmer's son did not leave again,
no reason to when all there was to see
lay inside a ridge line of known fields
and sturdy barns built to last
all manner of winters' blast
and spring floods as they do.

Uncle Charlie left town today
and the weather changed and
got a little less kind, and the wind
that took him gave not a whit
for us poor for the loss of one dirt bound
who knew that cows needed milking twice
a day and no way out of that number come
storm or flood or wedding on a hill.
And how he wept as his last 20 cows
went on the block and his workday
over, and then before long, Joyce gone, too.
Time to pack it up and head on out.
Uncle Charlie knew more than most
when the milking's done.