

MY BROTHER SPEAKS IN DREAMS

Of Family, Beauty and Belonging



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AS I KNEW HIM

My brother Charlie died in 2016. When we lose someone, we try to catch reams of events and conversations before they vanish because we don't want our loved one to become a person no one remembers. To remember a man like Charlie who was on the autistic spectrum with cognitive and speech barriers, the rush is intense. He didn't read or write. He never married, he never had children. Our intimacies were private and subtle. He spoke by repeating words spoken to him—quick, emphatic echoes, vivid and succinct, a kind of poetry. I knew my brother the full fifty-nine years of his life, one that touched me so deeply I've never experienced a day I haven't thought about him and the gifts he brought to the world.

Charlie and I were two and a half years apart in age, born in the 1950s. When my brother was eight years old, he had to leave us for an institution for children with intellectual disabilities where he lived until he was sixteen. When it closed down my parents arranged for him to live with us in Kansas City, and then in group homes throughout his adulthood. He was a member of a particular cohort in a particular point in time—the first group of former residents of an institution, a state home, to be welcomed back into a community that had once shunned him and those like him. I was fortunate to witness the blooming of a person who in another time would have withered behind institution walls.

My brother came into this world on a mythic bolt, and then left us just as dramatically. He was a week away from an appointment with a gastroenterologist when he died in his bed of undiagnosed gastric ulcers. No one knew how sick he was because in our attempt to help him, we missed nonverbal cues that could have revealed his symptoms. As his sister, and the one who knew him the longest, I deeply regret not understanding those signs.

When the spirit moved him, Charlie communicated his passions not only through the echoes of words but through his wide, embracing smile. He also spoke the spare, resonant language of pictures. That Charlie was able during his lifetime to find a place in this challenging world was remarkable. Anyone who knows someone with a communication difference has witnessed how

difficult it is for that person to become visible, to be known and understood. Among his many lessons, I've received from Charlie an understanding that language moves beyond a simple transference of words and includes tone, gesture and expression. Nonverbal language speaks an entire universe of culture, if we pay attention. From knowing my brother, I've learned the importance of advocacy for language access, whether it be for interpreters and translators for non-English speakers or for better medical practices when serving someone with a communication disability. Each person has a right to be understood. It's a matter of justice, one that requires constant vigilance by all of us.

My brother was born into a family who took years to understand him. How we did is the heart of this story. Our understanding of joy, beauty, sadness and loss evolved the longer we knew him. The story told here is as much and even more about how my brother shaped the person I came to be, as it is about him. The only language I've ever found to tell it originates from powers of lyric, narrative, and image. The approach I've taken is to explore our relationship in the threshold between language and experience, the light and the dark, where a sense of a common beauty dwells. I'm a neurotypical observer, however, and my words are limited to what I felt and saw of our lives together. In these pages, my portrait of Charlie remains an approximation. I hope it's one he and many others who enriched his life would recognize.

MYTHS AND ORIGINS

The cold night of my brother's birth resonated like a myth in our family. We told the story over and over. We could never stop telling it because we knew no other way of understanding what had happened. Our account of Charlie's birth carried all the textures of old mythology: the time before, paradisaical, and the time after, sadness and bewilderment. Like a myth, the narrative was at once blurred and detailed with no clear evil identified to help predict a pattern sparing us a future round of damage. The theme emerging in each retelling was awe before a power no one understood and no one could control. In the following months and years after Charlie's birth when it was clear he was not developing normally, that feeling of helplessness was constant. My parents would say his birth transformed our whole family; we were completely different from any other generation before us.

This was decades before we were able to see Charlie's uniqueness as a strength, a human quality, and accept him for who he was, just as he was.

In the beginning, the details were ordinary. On the front of my brother's birth certificate is a handsome rendering of Harper Hospital in Detroit, Michigan, a seven-story brick building with an American flag flying in front. Below, in black Gothic script is the testament of the birth of Charles Edward Anderson on Sunday, the 27th day of January, 1957. The time of birth is 7:28 a.m. The birth certificate is signed by "the Director who has caused the Corporate Seal of this Hospital to be hereunto affixed." What has always intrigued me is the flip side, with my mother and father's names, my brother's weight of 7 pounds, 15 ounces, my mother's fingerprints at the bottom, and symmetrically balanced to the left and right, my brother's infant palm prints, resembling two gray stones. Over sixty years old, the birth certificate, printed on thick vellum, is only slightly yellowed, and the Hospital's affixed golden seal remains as shiny as the day my brother was born. The signature of the doctor, often blamed by my parents for neglect during what was a difficult birth, is written at the bottom in green ink: Owen C. Foster, M.D.

Another image, a memory I have right before my brother was born: I was over two years old, standing up in the front seat of the blue '52 Studebaker

SOUTH JEFFERSON STREET

"You don't love Charlie!" I yelled at my father one Saturday morning. I felt like he had it coming. He had just lost his temper over another thing Charlie had done accidentally, dumping sugar which he craved irresistibly, and spreading it all over the floor. Dad was red-faced, standing in his bathrobe with a cup of coffee, his slippers making a tacky sound. He called Charlie "simple," which upset me. It meant the same thing as the word "retard," one I knew from chants I heard at school directed at anyone who didn't kick a ball fast enough, or missed an obvious punchline to a joke. I was on guard if any one of those kids saw Charlie and called him names, and I wouldn't let my father get away with it either. He immediately froze and didn't respond to me. He was probably tired after working the night before and just wanted sugar for his coffee. My accusation was cruel, but I could tell in an instant when a child was loved and when he or she wasn't. I knew this because my grandmother Helen, my father's mother, a widow who worked as a substitute kindergarten teacher in Saginaw, never ceased to show me that I was loved unconditionally.

Charlie was to inherit a bag of shiny silver dollars from our grandfather, but I received an abundance of care from this grandmother who combed her fingers through my hair and knelt with me to say my prayers. I saw her only at Christmas, and for a number of weeks in the summer at her home in Saginaw, but it was enough tenderness to carry me through childhood. I wish she had loved Charlie in the same way, but he may have been too difficult for her to understand. When he didn't respond to her hugs or prompts to sing "You Are My Sunshine," she'd frown, then pull back in bewilderment, and I think, hurt. She embraced the dominant myth in our family that something terribly wrong had happened at Charlie's birth. She avoided the phrase "mentally retarded" when discussions about him came up, and she never asked my parents any questions. She certainly must have picked up on my father's quick irritation with Charlie, but she never rose to his defense. Instead, she lavished her attention on me, something I needed, she claimed, referring to

BEGINNING TO SPEAK

My brother Charlie's journey toward speech, so valued by my family, was a long one. By the age of three, my mother and father recalled, Charlie had uttered only one nonsensical sound: "gwee." My mother had substantial professional experience training children with disabilities to speak, yet nothing prepared her for the challenge of her own son. To teach Charlie, my mother gathered her collection of what was known as the tools of a speech correctionist, described in her 1919 *Manual of Exercises for the Correction of Speech Disorders*: flags, feathers, candles, bags, plastic rings for soap bubbles, whistles, popsicle sticks, pinwheels, handbells. To me the most fascinating of all were the hand puppets she created. She put all of these to use in her attempt to encourage Charlie's speech, a deeply physical process requiring a mastery of breath the manual explained in words that would never duplicate the reality of my brother's struggle: "The air must make no noise in going in or coming out. It should be inhaled and exhaled without straining, the body being perfectly relaxed. Before beginning to speak we must inhale quickly and deeply with the mouth slightly open. We speak on the outgoing breath." Charlie showed no interest in this complicated feat. His hearing had tested normal and he had no anatomical barriers to speech such as a cleft palate, unlike other children my mother had taught. What was making it impossible for him to speak?

Our house was filled with the varying sounds and expressions of language, ample background, one would think, for a child learning to speak. When they could, my parents invited friends of theirs from the large Eastern European community to our home in Mt. Clemens. I often fell asleep to the sound of accented English and laughter ringing through the house. The next morning, I would find the once energetic guest who had swept me up in his burly arms the night before now snoring on our living room couch. My father was known for his unique ability to plumb stories and anecdotes from immigrants with even the most basic English, picking up words from their language as he conversed. He often consulted dictionaries he bought in a number of the main languages of the communities of Detroit at the

BLUE STITCHES IN A PATTERN

On nights when Charlie was finally settled down in bed, and my father was working late at the newspaper, my mother stayed up waiting for him to come home. Across her lap was a linen tablecloth, seven feet in length, which she was embroidering in cross-stitch that told the story of the classic blue willow pattern. When I imagine her bent over her embroidery, it's winter, all the lights are off in the house except the one near her. She is thoughtful and focused on creating something she knows will come out well. Decades later as I unfold the tablecloth and smooth down the white-as-snow linen, I remember the story depicted in the blue embroidery of two fleeing lovers transformed into doves who meet in the sky above fishermen on a bridge. The story my mother told me was a simpler one about a runaway girl instead of a girl in love. As a child, I stared and stared at the bent willow trees, worked in navy and light blue stitches and wondered what the girl was running away from. I asked my mother this question, but she was not inclined to tell me.

I'm not sure how long it took my mother to finish the tablecloth, but I remember she loved it and I did, too. On holidays, my mother laid it out on our dining room table, the bright linen offsetting the dark and light of the willow pattern. Charlie looked on, fascinated as my mother continued the silent ritual of placing a dinner plate for each of us. One of the constants running through my brother's life from childhood through adulthood was delight in seeing the table laid out in preparation for a family dinner.

My mother the speech correctionist and my father the newspaper reporter covering the post-war European diaspora of urban Detroit were devoted to understanding the world by asking questions, shaping and reshaping the stories they witnessed and telling them not only to each other, but relying on them to understand the wider world. Back before them were farmers, merchants, laborers, and another newspaper reporter, my great-aunt Doll who ran the Warrensburg *Daily Star-Journal* when the men were called into action in the 1940s during the war. With Charlie's entry into the family came late night questions that could not be answered, such as why didn't this child speak, why wasn't he curious, why didn't he seek affection? My father



BLACK AND WHITE SQUARES

I have a snapshot of Charlie at Christmas time sitting on our beat-up couch. His dark, round eyes show the sheen of childhood delight—delight, one would think, with the glitter of a Christmas tree, or the dance of elves in a holiday song. Instead, it was the camera's flash, what we once called a "cube," with its pulse of white light that won his smile. Other photographs of us all together spin like the wheel of life: black and white squares, edges torn with the faint print of a date on the side. The majority are random, unposed shots of small spaces: two children sprawled on worn carpet in a room cluttered with newspapers; our mother in her nightgown feeding our baby brother; a dog licking his paws on a couch covered by a rug; or a child peeking through the torn hole in the living room blinds. These photographs fill silent spaces left empty. It is a way to bring family so distant and lost into the present. The ritual of creating photographs—waiting for the familiar smile, the attention or inattention of the person photographed, and then, the outdated habit of opening an envelope of photos and taking them in your hand—can be a kind of healing. Touching the tangible, paper presence of memory and looking into a still photograph, I see things I wouldn't ordinarily recognize in three-dimensional life, a moment that becomes an emblem because it refuses to disappear. And there's another paradox in the ritual of looking—one that magnifies how we can both have what we've wanted in an image yet know it will never be ours again.

BLACK DOG

After Charlie's departure the rhythms of our house changed forever. I remember noting unusual pockets of time when there was not one noise in the house except my little brother's chatter as he floated through imaginary worlds of play, something Charlie never did. My friends could now come over to visit and we played giggling games without disruption. Yet, our house seemed to have been marked for tragic loss. One of the kids in the neighborhood asked me, "What happened to your brother?" I didn't know how to answer him. Told by my parents to say nothing, nothing was what I felt, a hollowness. Charlie's bureau was empty of clothes. His shoes were gone. My brother Bill moved from a bed in my room to Charlie's old bedroom. His main possessions—his bed, marbles, and roller skates—were passed on to Bill. The house resonated with voices, but the tone was off.

In sixth grade, within that first year after Charlie left, I saw a purple and orange lightning-shaped streak pulse in front of my eyes as I took a math test. Later, I came down with a severe headache followed by nausea. My teacher assumed I was trying to get out of taking the test and reluctantly let me go home. This headache, which returned every few months, cast my mother into a new cascade of worry as she sat by my bed while the nausea subsided. I was the second child of hers to exhibit a strange, neurological ailment. I felt as if I had let her down by harboring this unusual illness. Outwardly she projected calm, but I didn't trust her to remain at ease for very long. By the time I was thirteen it was clear I needed to get an electroencephalogram (EEG), the main tool for testing brain abnormalities at the time.

At the EEG appointment, a nurse stuck over a dozen pins of electrodes into my scalp, small pricks that nicked the skin. I was told to lie back on a paper-covered table and count to ten. I couldn't fall asleep in the middle of the afternoon, and so I was told to begin reciting familiar names— "Mom, Dad, Billy, Charlie, Sam, George (our guinea pig), Ferris Street, Harrington Road." As I drifted off into the first phase of sleep, a purring machine turned out pages inked by a stylus that followed the rhythms of my brain. I wasn't sure how long I slept. It was a strange feeling to wake, at the age of thirteen,

FINDING HOME

While I was away at college, my eleven-year-old brother Bill was the sibling who first bore witness to Charlie's homecoming to Kansas City that fall. He was Charlie's opposite, with blond, hazel-on-the-bluish-side eyes, and a little short for his age. In contrast to Charlie, whose speech still seemed rudimentary, he was highly talkative, conjuring a rich imaginative world inspired by the adventure stories of Darwin setting sail on the *Beagle* for the Galapagos Islands. Bill could turn the whole backyard into his site for discovery. On a morning in July, he found a one-eyed tortoise munching mulberries fallen in abundance by the back fence. The tortoise's beak was stained a deep purple, Bill excitedly pointed out to us, as he lifted it briefly into the air before letting it wander the yard again. He named the tortoise Wiley Post, after the eye-patched aviator.

My brother Bill also once took over the whole first floor of our house on W. 63rd Street. He found old rolls of wallpaper the previous owners had left in the basement and on the reverse side he mapped our neighborhood—every house, and street within a five-block radius, including his elementary school, and all the local stores. He unrolled the wallpaper from the kitchen, showing off his designs as he moved through the dining room, into the living room, up to the front door. He created airplanes from cardboard and glue, and he made himself a chessboard and pieces out of screws, buttons, toothpicks and other spare parts. He tried to share his enthusiasms with Charlie, but just as I realized years ago on Ferris Street, Charlie was difficult to engage in play.

When I was home visiting on a weekend, Bill pulled me by the arm and said, "Hey, come up to my room. Charlie and I want to show you something."

Bill's room was filled with photographs of airplanes and animals, and on one wall, a huge poster of the Beatles. He made Charlie stand right next to it. "OK, Charlie, who's this?" he asked, pointing to the first Beatle, who wore a pair of wire rim glasses.

"George!"

"That's right, Charlie, now who's this?" Charlie gave the correct Beatle's name again, and then again, pronouncing each with precise emphasis. When

INTO THE WORLD

One of the bravest things I saw Charlie do was sign his name to a paycheck and cash it at the grocery store. It must have been in the late 1970s after he started living in a group home and working at a sheltered workshop where he and other people with intellectual disabilities packed boxes, attached labels to mail, and performed other light tasks. He was paid per piece of completed work, and because his production was slow, his paycheck was usually not more than twenty-five dollars per month. This was his money to spend on treats like candy or soda pop. My mother and I were with him at the local grocery store on a busy Friday evening, and I had just come home for a holiday visit. As we waited in line at the service counter, my mother said, "this will take a while." She directed Charlie to the side, helped him find his state issued I.D. and pull out the curled paycheck from his pocket. The cashier offered him a pen and patiently waited as he climbed the mountain of his long name, Charles Anderson, printing it out in large block letters at the bottom line of the check. She counted the twenty-five dollars into his hand and my mother helped him put it back into his wallet and then his pocket. People gathered behind us, but no one hurried him. He was regarded with the same respect and attention paid to any adult in a public space. I was very proud of him that evening.

My brother's eight years of childhood in the institution was time lost we could never recover. On his return home we knew that by encouraging him to speak, look people in the eye, and master the skills he possessed in neatness and motor dexterity, a better life could open up for him. We were getting used to the idea that my brother could find a niche, despite the accelerated American work culture surrounding him. As a family, we seemed to have traveled from relying on the frightening generalities of the myth of his birth and disability to the daily specifics of his life. And our Kansas City community was growing to accept Charlie as he was. Charlie's inherent soul, his personality and depth as a person were coming into focus.

By the late 1970s I was living in the cold and rough-hewn city of Syracuse for graduate study. Although I tried to keep in touch, I didn't see my



HOUSE EMPTY NOW

Before my mother died in August of 1999, she gave us the words we needed to talk about her death with my brother Charlie. Tell him this, she said: "Mother loved Charlie very much, but Mother got sick and couldn't come home again." She phrased it in the idiosyncratic grammar my family used when speaking with him—direct, to the point, and without personal pronouns like *you* or *she* because Charlie didn't use these words.

Our mother also didn't speak the word *death* when telling us what to tell my brother and she didn't raise the expectation that we take over his daily care. She did expect me to become my brother's legal guardian once my father, who survived her, passed away. And she expressed a hope that Charlie's life would continue without change at the Bates Residential Home and the sheltered workshop. Over the years I tried, with effort, to fulfill that promise. I am the eldest child and only daughter in the family, my arms permanently open to catch whatever falls.

Mom had a lilting Southern cadence to her speech, given to generous descriptions and well-turned metaphors. She loved the beauty of the human voice, as expressive vehicle or musical instrument. This love led her to assist people from all walks of life, especially in her early years in Detroit—children born with cleft palates, wounded war veterans, refugees new to the English language. The shape of the tongue reaching for the letter "r" or the stop of breath required for the sound of "d" at the end of a word were movements whose perfection she knew instinctively, the way a dancer knows the forms of the bolero or the saraband. I've always thought that one of the central ironies of my mother's life was to give birth to a child who needed her full professional expertise to learn how to talk. She certainly rose to the challenge, as difficult as it was. Both Charlie and I learned our love for the sensual beauty of nature from her, our mother born in the peninsular state of Florida with its palms and coasts, and Charlie and I born on another peninsula to the north, known for its pines and lakes. Even though we conflicted so many times, my mother and I sustained a deep connection. I was with her in her last days. I remember another thing she said when Charlie came to visit, "It

CHARLES ANDERSON WAS MY FRIEND

At the door of God's House of Praise, we heard crickets chirping in the grass, a perpetual beat in the last humid days of summer. Both Pastor Pardy and her husband were a little cautious on seeing two people—me and my friend Robert—park a car they'd never seen before in the small lot in front of the even smaller two-roomed brick church abutting a Pride Cleaners factory. When introducing ourselves, I thanked them both for letting us use their fellowship room for a memorial gathering of Charlie's friends and roommates. I mentioned the name of a group home staff person who had recommended their center, and they both relaxed.

Pastor Pardy and her husband led us through the church area with its blue pews and decorated altar and into the fellowship center in the next room. Soon followed Juan Williams, the assistant pastor in his thirties who knew Charlie well. He showed us a group of tables, decorated with artificial flowers in small vases. In the front room where church services took place, he made sure we saw the chair where Charlie always sat—first seat in the third row as he joined everyone on Sunday, clapping and singing with the congregation. Juan recalled how Charlie loved that first seat and if he found someone else sitting there when he came in, he just stood by them, waiting for them to move. And they all did, no one complaining. It was clear that this was a place where he belonged.

As everyone arrived, we greeted each one with a hearty handshake. A man who had known Charlie for decades made the first entrance through the door, all smiles, using a wheelchair and helped by one the group home's longstanding support staff. We cheered and applauded everyone's entrance. Everyone knew me as Charlie's sister and Robert as Charlie's friend. As each person entered, we handed over caramel, cheese and plain popcorn and diet Pepsi. The small room became louder and louder, filled with nineteen of us.

Carinne, who had known Charlie since childhood, came in with Lorenzo and their son Elijah, along with Donna, who entered like a movie star. Also, Crystal was there. I regret I hadn't met her before, but I learned that she knew Charlie because she worked some of the night shifts. We showed everyone the

AUTHOR



Catherine Anderson is the author of four collections of poetry, *Everyone I Love Immortal* (Woodley Memorial Press), *Woman with a Gambling Mania* (Mayapple Press), *The Work of Hands* (Perugia Press) and *In the Mother Tongue* (Alice James Books). She lives in Kansas City where she works with new immigrant and refugee interpreters.

What a deep and powerful journey Catherine Anderson takes us on in her beautifully written book, *My Brother Speaks in Dreams*. I was instantly engaged as her story unfolded, showing us the difficulties of loving, accepting, learning from, and living with a beautiful soul who thinks and communicates differently. Anderson's authentic voice, her intricate introspections, and her empathetic observations make this unique tale a universal story. The characters, issues, stigmas, confusions, and deep connections stayed with me long after I turned the final page.

—Deborah Shouse, author of *Love in the Land of Dementia: Finding Hope in the Caregiver's Journey*.



Catherine Anderson's memoir about life with her neurodivergent brother, Charlie, is both gripping and poignant. It is well written, intimately considered, and revealing, an unflinching portrait of a unique family and brother facing uncommon circumstances over changing eras and environments. As the parent of an adult special needs child of my own, I appreciate well how daunting and challenging such a lifelong journey can be. Anderson navigates hers with Charlie with the sensitivity and understanding that only a sibling can share. Without exception, she does so with honesty, insight, respect, and perhaps most importantly, deep compassion and love.

—William Cass, author of *Something Like Hope & Other Stories*

Anderson speaks with eloquence about "the complexities of loving a child with intellectual disabilities in a world that rejects such imperfection." Ultimately, sometimes through tears, the reader will come to know intimately what life with Charlie taught the author and what her insights can teach us: that language is only one way to communicate, and our culture often fails to recognize and honor other ways.

—Maril Crabtree, author of *Fireflies in the Gathering Dark*



Catherine Anderson writes she has "arms permanently open to catch whatever falls" in her intimate telling of the universal story of growing up with a sibling who is neurodivergent. The reader feels her mother's desperation to teach her son fluent speech, and the family's trauma of separation and shame when her sibling is sent away to "school." Our country's recent history of institutionalizing children like Charlie was driven by ignorance. Born in this century, the resources available to Charlie and his family would have altered the paths of all their lives and their ability to connect with each other. Catherine's deep love for her brother ultimately motivates her to learn his language in order to connect. She is shaped not only by her responsibilities but the common humanity of their relationship. *My Brother Speaks in Dreams* is a beautifully written memoir that will feel personal to some and profound to all.

—Jeanne Henry Hoose, retired special educator