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Recollections of a Brother and Friend

Thomas Black

I am Charles's brother. I feel sure that I have known him longer than anyone else here. Technically, I have known him since my birth. My remarks will address primarily personal rather than professional subjects concerning Charles. *I anticipate the latter will be the subject of later talks.*

I have a fantasy that Charles, along with his idols Abraham Lincoln and Louis Armstrong, is somehow witnessing this event, thrilled and proud that so many distinguished people are here to honor and remember him.

My childhood memories of Charles consist entirely of fun and excitement. He was thirteen years older than I, so he served not only as big brother to me but also as friend, counselor, and even as father. There was no sibling rivalry between us.

Charles was never interested in spectator sports, so we never engaged in the traditional activities like going to ball games or throwing the old ball around in the yard. Instead, we took many hikes and outings in the hills west of Austin, attended movies, or ate out at restaurants, mostly Mexican or Tex-Mex. An afternoon or evening with Charles was very special.

Later, after he began his travels, he would visit at home, and I remember long walks around town and long talks on random subjects. It was Charles who explained to me the birds and the bees and the stork. This came up during a dinner he was having at home with three or four of his male friends, and I, in ignorance, inquired as to the meaning of a word that made the subject unavoidable. Charles's friends understandably snickered, but Charles left the table and we walked around the neighborhood while he explained the process, not lewdly or lustily, but in very romantic, sensitive terms.

Through the years I often sought his advice—which was usually good. After I graduated from high school I wanted to get out of Austin, and he helped me decide what university to attend. Later I remember a discussion when I was feeling guilty about the breakup of my first marriage. He gave me very simple advice: "Thomas, you are not a saint." I knew this already, but somehow the direct simplicity of his observation served as an epiphany and resolved my guilt.

Through the years I found that when we differed on issues, he was right, and I adjusted my opinion—but not always.

The stories about Charles's love of Louis Armstrong are true. I was too young to have been aware of the time he first heard Louie at the Driskill Hotel in Austin, but I know that thereafter Charles was a devoted fan, and that Louie had more than a musical influence on him. His devotion to Louie in later years was almost exclusive, but at one time he had broader tastes in jazz that included Jelly Roll Morton, Bessie Smith, Count Basie, Bix, and many others. He had an extensive record collection, mostly 78s, but he never got into bop or cool jazz. One time, probably in the '30s, he brought Teddie Wilson into our home, and Wilson was kind enough to play a few selections on our piano, which forever honored it.

One occasion I remember well occurred in February 1962. I had not seen Charles for a long time so we arranged for me to fly to New York for a night on the town, thanks to the indulgence of Barbara, Charles's wife. We started out culturally at the Guggenheim Museum but later began visiting various jazz spots. At one place we heard Henry "Red" Allen, a trumpet player in the Louie tradition. We ended up at either Nick's or Eddie Condon's in Greenwich Village where a number of famous jazz musicians were playing, including Wild Bill Davison, whose playing and conduct earned him his name. We closed the place down at 2 or 3 a.m. at a time when taxis were scarce in the area. We finally found one and Wild Bill suggested we share it with him, which we were honored to do. On the way to Wild Bill's apartment, which I assume was far uptown, he asked the taxi driver to pull over and let him relieve himself. The three of us got out and proceeded to "cross swords" on the streets of New York, an offense I'm sure is barred by limitations. When I returned to Austin I was able to brag to envious friends that I had "crossed swords" with Wild Bill Davison.

In high school, and particularly college, Charles was wild and directionless. There were many occasions when he came home in the morning just in time to meet our father leaving for work. His genius was directed toward languages and literature. He had an excellent ear for languages, was fluent in Italian, French, and Spanish, and could get by in almost any Western language. He traveled in Italy and attended the University of Mexico. He wrote poetry—mostly ribald and bawdy. He was definitely not interested in law. One time, as a favor to our father, who was a successful lawyer, he audited some courses at the University of Texas Law School but dropped out very soon. When I attended U.T. undergraduate school I found that Charles was loved and admired by the professors who taught him.

He received a B.A. degree in classical languages and English literature at U.T. He then planned to enroll as an M.A. candidate at Harvard but, unbeknownst to our parents, either did not enroll or dropped out

immediately. Instead, he followed the Ballet Russe on tour in the United States and became infatuated with a prima ballerina (circa 1937 or 1938). He told me at one time that he had a small, nondancing part in one performance.

He returned to U.T. and received an M.A. After that he was well on his way toward a Ph.D. at Yale when he changed directions and enrolled in Yale Law School. He served in the military after law school until the end of World War II. He then worked briefly for a law firm in New York but was dissatisfied and was glad to join the faculty at Columbia Law School.

Charles always had good instincts about people and issues, but I believe his association with the *Brown* case focused him on justice, civil rights, and related issues. After that, he never wavered in his beliefs even though they often offended established power.

I talked to him often on the phone and in person during his work on his last book, *A New Birth of Freedom*. Although he was physically disabled and worn out, he worked intensely and deliberately to finish—as though he knew it was his last hurrah. His perseverance reminded me of Ulysses S. Grant's similar determination to overcome his last illness long enough to finish his memoirs. In my opinion, Charles produced a great book, perhaps his greatest.

Charles's and my relationship has been a highlight of my life, and I think he felt the same.

Charles was a loving and caring friend and a family man. He was also a fighter for the principles he believed in. I will close with a passage from *Beowulf* with which I am sure Charles, as a scholar of Old English, was familiar. *Beowulf* is speaking to a warrior who is on his way to fight a dragon:

For every one of us, living in this world
means waiting for our end. Let whoever can
win glory before death. When a warrior is gone,
that will be his best and only bulwark.¹

So let it be with Charles.

1. *BEOWULF* 97 (Seamus Heaney trans., 2000).
