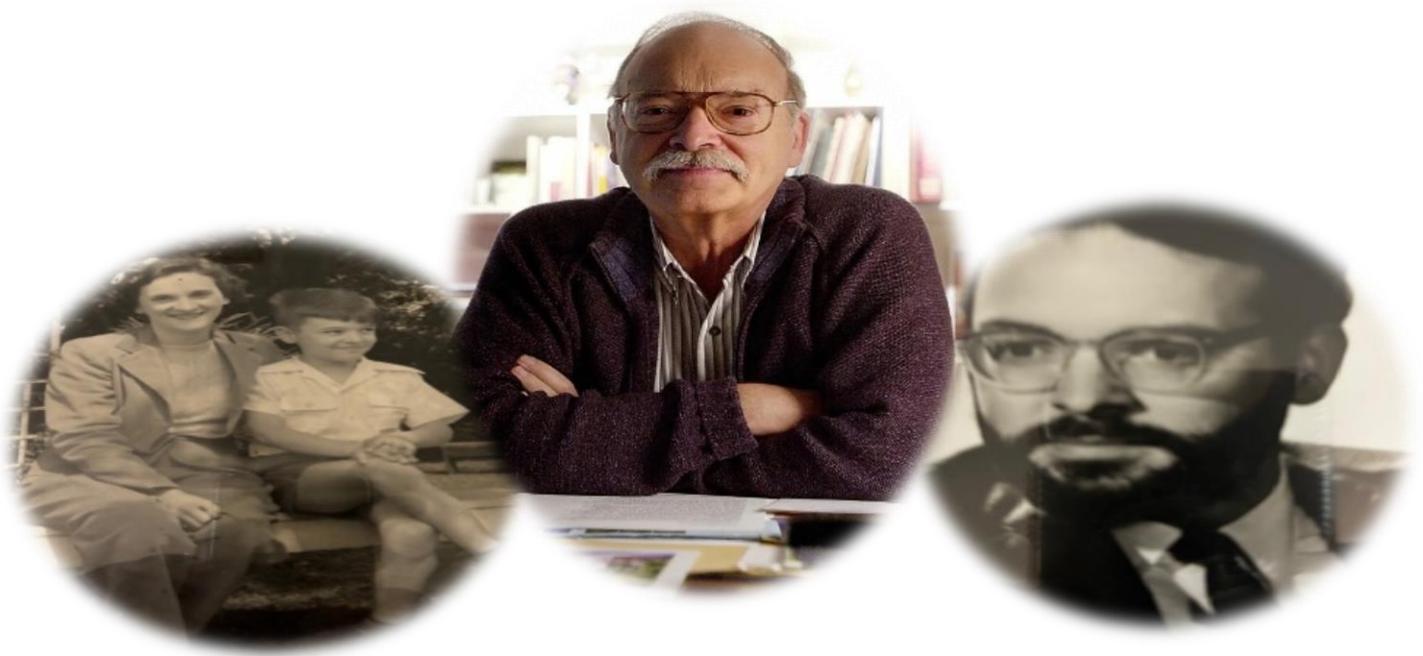


Charles Brock: *An Appreciation*

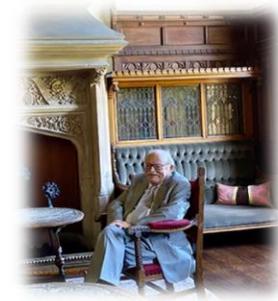


*By Andrew Roth
for the Jefferson Educational Society*

JEFFERSON
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

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“*Appreciation*” is an interesting word. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, it can mean “sensitive awareness,” a characteristic that the Rev. Charles Brock possessed in untold multiples. Sensitive to the people around him, sensitive to the world around him, Charles’ awareness of his time and place knew no bounds. As his wife, Mary Lincoln, told me, “Charles was never bored or lonely. He was always reading, learning, and heeding the people around him.”



“*Appreciation*” can also mean “judgment, evaluation,” especially “a favorable critical estimate.” Charles appreciated (love might be a more accurate verb) many things: his mother Arloween, to whom he signed letters “*your loving kid*” even as a man in his 60s; his extended families, the Zurns, the Brocks, and the Lincolns; his hometown Erie, Pennsylvania; his United Reformed Church in Wheatley, Oxfordshire, United Kingdom; his First Unitarian Universalist Church in Girard, Pennsylvania; and the Senior Common Room at Mansfield College, Oxford University.

On a less personal note, Charles also deeply loved American democracy and the promise of the American Dream providing liberty, equality, and opportunity to all, and the integrated education, the classical liberal education necessary to protect, preserve, and defend it. He co-founded the Jefferson Educational Society and founded its Brock Institute for Mega Issues as his contribution to seconding President Abraham Lincoln’s exhortation at Gettysburg that American democracy – “government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

“*Appreciation’s*” primary meaning however, is “a feeling or expression of admiration, approval, or gratitude.” Neither a biography nor an obituary, this “*appreciation*” is an expression of admiration and gratitude to Charles Brock from the Jefferson Educational Society, its Board of Directors, its President, Ferki Ferati, its staff, in particular Pat Cuneo, Ben Speggen, and former staffer Angela Beaumont, and its members for the life he lived, for the lessons he shared, and for the inspiration he provided.



As Jeffersonian Pat Cuneo, who shared morning coffee with Charles for years, told me, “Charles Brock was a champion. A champion of faiths ... a scholar ... a fierce defender of democracy, of decency ... a champion of the underdog ... he especially liked musicians. Why musicians? Because he was one of them. His days of playing the clarinet may have been long gone, but music ran through his veins. Who could stifle a belly laugh when he’d suddenly burst into song during a Jefferson program or a church service or even at his wedding to the lovely Mary Lincoln?”

Or as a former student of Charles' who became a lifelong friend, the Rev. Dr. Colin Thompson, Fellow of St. Catharine's College, Oxford University, remarked: "I first met Charles and Carolyn (Charles' first wife, to whom he was married over 50 years until her death in 2017) on my first Sunday as an Oxford undergraduate, at a tea party for Congregationalist students at the Principal's Lodgings at Mansfield College. It was the beginning of a long and extraordinary friendship... ***(T)here was nothing negative about him, his vision was a positive one, his enthusiasm catching, his eyes focused on the future and the need to plan for it now.***"



Charles and I first became acquainted over 10 years ago because of our shared interest in this new thing in Erie – the Jefferson Educational Society – our shared passions for literature, history, and the American experiment, and our shared membership in a Friday lunch group.

Charles was a founding member of both the Jefferson Educational Society and that Friday lunch group. The lunch group has no formal name. On my calendar, I list it as "Noon, Friday, Erie Club, Curmudgeons," although to be fair to my fellows there is very little curmudgeonly about them. Well, maybe, a bit. In the autumn of 2022, we learned it might have other names when a well-known Erieite walked up to the table and said, "So, this is the famous Friday lunch group." She might have said "infamous," but we'll go with famous.



rarely the profane, but frequently lands on Erie's history and current transformational changes, which Charles found endlessly interesting.

Charles, however, always called it "The Notorious Nine." The number grew from the original four – Barry Grossman, the Rev. John Downey, William Garvey, and Charles – to nine or 10 at one point, but with deaths and other departures it has remained about eight. Conversation, as I suspect typical with such groups, can range rather widely from the profound to

Erie Guy



As Ferki Ferati, President of the Jefferson Educational Society, remarked at Charles' funeral, "Charlie's love for Erie was not just a sentimental attachment; it was a driving force in his decision to return and contribute to the community that held a special place in his heart." As Janet Grossman, a member of the First Unitarian Universalist Church in Girard and a long-time friend of Charles, told me, "Charlie's an Erie Guy!" Which, coming from an Erieite, is high praise. It means "you're one of us, you've not succumbed to

highfalutin notions of yourself, you've maintained the common touch, and you've remained grounded and rooted in the things that count." Whenever he could, Charles bragged about Erie, telling whomever he met about its virtues. As his Oxford friend Colin Thompson remarked after visiting Erie, "I was glad at last to see the fabled Erie."

If one recited the bare bones of Charles' biography – born into a prominent Erie family, graduate of Carnegie Tech, Harvard Divinity School, Oxford University, a Bancroft Fellow of Mansfield College, Oxford University – fairly or unfairly, a certain, stereotype comes to mind. That stereotype has nothing to do with Charles (“Charlie”) Brock. (*Curious Aside:* John Creaser, a friend and colleague of Charles' at Mansfield College, Oxford, told me in an email that in England it was always “Charles” never “Charlie”; in America, we ping-pong back and forth between the two – American informality?) Part of that informality was that Charlie had never lost the “common touch.” As his lifelong friend, Tom Hagen, said to me, “He was a *common* man with an *uncommon* background.”



The uncommon background can be glimpsed in those bare biographical details, but common, perhaps, needs a bit of explaining. In describing Charlie as a “common man,” one is invoking the spirit of Aaron Copland's “Fanfare for the Common Man.” Composed and premiered at the height of World War II on March 12, 1943, Copland's piece plays off then Vice-President Henry Wallace's proclaiming the “Century of the Common Man,” a century in which the good, decent people who are society's backbone would defeat the would-be tyrants. A “common man” was “everyman” – a man of the people. In the England Charles came to love those who endured the Blitz; in America, it was the patriotic upswelling of the people who preserved democracy. Although he traveled far, both literally and metaphorically, Charlie never lost his “everyman's” appreciation for or his touch with the people.



As Jefferson Vice President Ben Spегgen said, Charles “taught at elite institutions, yet I would've never, ever, used the word ‘elitist’ to describe him. Years ago, I'd heard him say, ‘We have to take it to the people!’, the “it” being civic education and lifelong learning. Rather than invite people to his table, he wanted to go to the people and build a table with them. He did it in many ways through many initiatives.”

As an “Erie Guy,” one of the things Charles loved was Erie's great ethnic variety. In Erie, he often remarked, you can meet people from anywhere and everywhere. One of his oldest friends, a school chum at Strong Vincent High School, Ron DiVecchio, is the impresario of the St. Paul's Italian Festival held each August in “The Heart of Little Italy.” Every summer, Charlie would attend as many of the numerous ethnic festivals celebrating the diversity of Erie's heritage as he could, from the Troika Russian festival, to the Polish Zabawa to the Greek Panegyri, to the newest of Erie's celebrations, Ameri Masala, hosted annually in downtown Erie.



“Ameri” is for America and “masala” is a mixture of spices because America is a blend.



Rooted in both Erie and Oxfordshire, Charles also had roots in West Virginia, home of his father Ralph Brock. Ralph came to Erie in the late 1920s and early 1930s to play professional baseball with the then Erie Sailors, a minor league team in the old Central League and then the Middle Atlantic League. Ralph met Charles' mother, Arloween Zurn. They married and Charles was born in April 1935. Although Charles' parents separated when he was young, around 5 or 6, he never lost contact with his father and his Brock family in West Virginia. One of the fruits of that relationship was the country music thread – more bluegrass than country, actually – in the fabric of Charles' vast and eclectic love of music. He particularly liked John Denver's country-pop "Country Roads," which sings:



“Almost heaven, West Virginia
 Blue Ridge Mountains, Shenandoah River
 Life is old there, older than the trees
 Younger than the mountains, growin' like a breeze

Country roads, take me home
 To the place I belong
 West Virginia, Mountain Mama
 Take me home, country roads ...”

Charles always had a youthful zest about him. As his Mansfield College colleague, Tony Lemon, noted his “personality ... allowed him to relate to those far younger than himself.” Charles always maintained a youthful, childlike delight in things. I once chided him, “Charlie you're 88 going on 18.” One of his favorite songs was Bob Dylan's “Forever Young,” a song that embodied Charles' approach to life. It sings:

“May God bless and keep you always
 May your wishes all come true
 May you always do for others
 And let others do for you

May you build a ladder to the stars
 And climb on every rung

And may you stay
 Forever young

Forever young
 Forever young

May you stay
 Forever young
 May you grow up to be righteous
 May you grow up to be true
 May you always know the truth
 And see the lights surrounding you

May you always be courageous
 Stand upright and be strong

And may you stay
 Forever young ...”

Family Life

Despite the 35 years in England and the lateral roots in West Virginia, Charles’ home was in Erie, where he was born into one of its leading families. Charles’ mother, Arloween Zurn, was the daughter of John A. and Clara Zurn. One of three children, Arloween’s brothers were Melvin and Everett Zurn.



One photograph in this group is of Charles as a young man with his mother and grandparents. John A. Zurn, Charles’ grandfather, founded Zurn Industries. In 1900, he purchased a backwater valve patent from Erie City Iron Works; the product prevented storm and wastewater from flowing back into a building’s drainage system. Setting up shop in a barn in his mother’s backyard, John Zurn began manufacturing valves and other plumbing products. Having acquired two other firms, Keystone Brass Works and Lake Erie Foundry, in 1916, the enlarged company named itself J.A. Zurn Manufacturing.



Charles grew up on Seminole Drive in Erie's Frontier neighborhood in a house directly behind his grandparents' South Shore Drive home. Raised by his mother Arloween and stepfather Karl Knobloch, Charles experienced an archetypically American boyhood. Cousin Dave Zurn recalled sharing double-bunk beds at their grandparents' home, searching for ghosts in the attic and gremlins in the basement. Growing up during World War II, Charles and his friend Tom Hagen explored the cliffs overlooking Presque Isle Bay. Once discovering what many, many years later they realized must have been a hydrographic map of the bay, Charles was convinced it was a German document. They spent the summer on the lookout for German U-boats (submarines) threatening Erie's industrial port.



As an "Erie Guy," Charles enjoyed Erie's glorious summers with backyard picnics with his parents and grandparents and helped the family manage their way through Erie's legendary winters – with sometimes 20 inches of snow falling in an evening – by shoveling the snow-covered driveway.



Charles spent his life in education. As his cousin Jim Zurn told me, "Charles was a man of passions – he instilled passions in others." Two of Charles' passions were music and his belief in a free, high quality public education accessible to all. Charles was a proud graduate of the Erie Public School System. He attended Longfellow Elementary School, Gridley Junior High School, and Strong Vincent High School. Charlie played the clarinet. He was a member of the Strong Vincent High School marching band. He also had a jazz combo that at times played in the school cafeteria during the noon lunch hour. Not only a musician, Charles was also president of the Student Council.

After graduating from Strong Vincent, Charles attended Pittsburgh's Carnegie Institute, the forerunner of the current Carnegie-Mellon University. Always good with math, he graduated with a degree in engineering. Later, he earned a Masters of Divinity from Harvard Divinity School, a school of Harvard University and then earned an M. Litt from Oxford University.



Along the way, he developed a deep appreciation for the English poet John Milton. It might be more accurate to say that Milton was one of his heroes. Later at Mansfield College, Oxford, Charles would endow the John Milton Fellowship. In 2022, he delivered the annual Milton Lecture, exploring both Milton and Thomas Jefferson's educational values.

In at least one aspect of human endeavor, however, Charles has outshone his hero.

Milton believed that marriage should be based on the compatibility of the partners' mutual love and sympathy for one another. In the 17th century, *sympathy* meant something closer to "empathy" – the ability to see the world as the other sees it and seeing it as they do then accepting it as a part of oneself. In short, the two become one without ever losing their own individual identity and integrity, which is an exceptionally fine balancing act that few master.

Milton never did. Milton's marriage to Mary Powell was so strained that he wrote tracts advocating for divorce based on incompatibility.

Charles mastered it.

He met his first wife, the late Carolyn Dexter Brock, in the late-1950s. They were married for over 50 years, sharing their passions for music, the church, and people. When they first moved to Wheatley, with their good cheer the young American couple quickly won over the local villagers, who reciprocated, as one of Charles' friends shared, by teaching the Brocks all the "important matters such as how to make a proper cup of tea." After suffering a crippling illness, Lewy Body Dementia, during which she was cared for by Charles, Carolyn died in May 2017. As Charles' cousin Dave Zurn noted, "Charles' care for Carolyn was total and heroic." Sharon Downey, a close friend to Carolyn and Charles, called it "incredible."

During their time back in Erie from 1998 to 2017, Charles and Carolyn became friends with Howard and Mary Lincoln. The couples met at Charles' cousin Stuart Zurn's graduation from the U.S. Naval Academy. Howard and Charles shared many interests, including music, archeology, and religion. Howard helped Charles with several of his programs at Penn State Behrend. The Lincolns were married in the Unitarian Church and later joined the First Unitarian Universalist Church in Girard. When Howard died in fall 2017, only months after Carolyn's death, Charles and Mary's friendship deepened. They were married in 2019. Charles said about their marriage, "I had my head in the clouds and Mary had her feet on the ground. We made a good pair!"

Surpassing his hero John Milton, in both his marriages to Carolyn and to Mary, Charles understood what Anne Bradstreet meant in "To My Dear and Loving 'Spouse.'" A contemporary of Milton's of whom I am all but certain Milton never heard, Anne Bradstreet was a New England Puritan and the first American writer to be published. Her 1650 poem's actual title is

“To My Dear and Loving Husband,” but I will take the liberty to change it to “spouse.” The sentiment remains unchanged. It says,



“If ever two were one, then surely we...

I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold,
Or all the riches that the East doth hold.
My love is such that rivers cannot quench,
Nor ought but love from thee give recompense...”



Charles’ Many Facets

A man of many interests, Charles was also a man of many facets – facets he wove, like the education he championed, into an integrated and holistic personality.



He was a pastor, a scholar, a teacher, a musician, a seeker, and a “Jeffersonian.”

But, as the Rev. John Downey said in his homily at Charles’ funeral, above all, he was a pastor.

Returning to Erie in the late-1950s after graduating from Carnegie Tech, Charles worked for his stepfather Karl Knobloch’s firm Erie Art Metal. Erie Art Metal manufactured metal office furniture and fixtures. Many of them, such as the antique wastebaskets and strong box pictured here, are now collectors’ items. While working in the family business, two things happened that changed the course of Charlie’s life. I am not sure about the order in which they occurred, but that is not important. First, he met Carolyn Dexter, a young Oberlin College graduate from Deming, New Mexico. Carolyn was the newly appointed organist at the First Presbyterian Church of the Covenant, where her fellow Oberlin College alumna, Arloween Zurn Knobloch, Charles’ mother, was a very active congregant.





The second thing that happened, according to Charles' cousin Jim Zurn, was Charles decided to change his vocation. Charles and Jim's relationship was more akin to being brothers than simply cousins. Charles was an only child and Jim, five years younger than Charles, had no brother. They called one another "Bro." As Jim recounted, although Charles was particularly good with numbers and his engineering responsibilities, he got interested in the workers at Erie Art Metal. Laborers, they had little experience of the larger world. Charles became involved with them, their stories, and the challenges they encountered.

Charles discovered, in Jim's words, that he did not want to work with things, but that he wanted to work with people. Always interested in theology and matters of the spirit, after a year or two, Charles began to think he might want to be a minister. About this time, Carolyn, an accomplished and aspiring organist, decided that she wanted to go to graduate school in music. She was accepted at the New England Conservatory of Music.

Unwilling to let her leave without him, Charles decided to go to divinity school. Charles being Charles, he decided to start at the top – applying to Harvard Divinity School. At the entrance interview, the Dean was so taken with Charles's story of the young engineer who wanted to be a minister, that not only did he admit Charles, but he offered him a scholarship. Carolyn and Charles lived the life of young graduate students, with Carolyn supporting them by playing the organ at various churches in the Greater Boston area. Charles, for his part, somehow wrangled a job as Reinhold Niebuhr's driver. Reinhold Niebuhr was one of the foremost theologians of the 20th century. His socially conscious approach to a minister's responsibilities deeply influenced Charles.

Upon graduation from Harvard, rather than seeking a church to serve, Charles followed the Dean's advice to go to Europe to study for a year. Since Charles could speak neither French nor German, England it had to be. With the Dean's assistance, Charles secured a place at Oxford University and at a small church in the nearby village of Wheatley.

A year turned into 35.

Charles had found his vocation.

He became, and would continue to be, a pastor.

What's a pastor? Simplistically, a pastor is a minister in charge of a Christian church or congregation. But its root meaning speaks to what a pastor really is and does. In Middle English, it comes from the Anglo-French *pastour* and from the Latin *pastor* – a herdsman and is related to the Latin *pascere*, which means to feed. So, for those dependent upon him or her, a pastor is one who cares for, feeds, and protects a flock.

A pastor cares and protects.

As the Rev. John Downey, reading from *John* 10:14-16, said at Charles' funeral, a pastor is one who knows about themselves:



“I am the good *shepherd*; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one *shepherd*.”

Rev. Downey pointed out that Charles died on All Saints Day. Whether Charles was a saint will be for others to decide, but a saint is a person who is fully alive, fully human. To be fully alive, to be fully human, is to connect and care for others. And, from the beginning in Wheatley at the Congregational/United Reformed Church to his service in Girard at the First Unitarian Universalist Church – Charles cared for those in his flock. But he also cared for those not of his flock; he extended a sympathetic ear, a caring hand to all that he met.

A pastor is also a holy man.

A “holy” person is one who is dedicated to the service of God. As Charles’ Oxford friend Gregory Bowden said in a letter to Mary, “Charles very properly had his holy side ... but he showed great humanity and warmth in his work.”



From the beginning of his service with his congregation in Wheatly, Charles demonstrated both his theological acumen and his human compassion. When he arrived at Wheatley, it was beginning to change. As Colin Thompson related in a note about Charles, “the distinction between Church and Chapel, the Established Church of England and the Nonconformists, often based on class perceptions, remained strong and took a few good years to break down. But break down it did. Charles had a considerable hand in that process.”

While negotiating those changes, Charles did not lose sight of a pastor’s primary mission to care. His cousin Roger Zurn related to me an anecdote revealing Charlie’s caring side. As a young college graduate in 1965, Roger went to England to visit his cousin. Arriving at Wheatley directly from Heathrow, jet-lagged and more than a bit haggard, Roger joined Charles and Carolyn at dinner when Charles was suddenly called away. Roger accompanied him. A young woman, a member of the Wheatley congregation, who had found herself, as they used to say, “perhaps untimely with child,” was miscarrying and had no one to turn to. She turned to Charles, who responded as a pastor. Unjudgmentally, Charles went to her home; he called the emergency services; saw that she was taken to hospital and properly cared for. Charles stayed with her until it was clear that any danger had passed.

Not only concerned with his pastoral duties, Charles also enjoyed English pub culture. Here are two pictures of him at Donnington’s, his favorite spot for a chat with friends. The first is he and Carolyn with Colin Thompson and the second again with Colin and friends.



Cousin Jim Zurn and wife Jerry were frequent visitors to Wheatley. Here they are with Charles, Carolyn, and Erie visitors Kathy and Dan Dahlkemper across the street from the Wheatley Church.

An ecumenicist and student of comparative religions, when he returned to Erie, Charles was drawn to the First Unitarian Universalist Church in Girard. He first spoke there in 2003; he formally joined the congregation by signing the members book on Jan. 27, 2008. Theologically liberal, Charles was drawn to Unitarianism’s belief in “the unity of God, its rejection of the trinity and formal dogma.” A man of reason, Charles approved of Unitarianism’s “rationalist and inclusivist approach to belief.” A “universalist” takes this a step further, in seeing the redemptive power of all belief systems. A Unitarian Universalist believes that everyone will be saved.

As recounted by Dave Ungerman and John Schriefer, the congregation was founded in 1835 and the church itself was built in 1849. By the late 20th century, however, it had fallen on hard times. Saved by the work of Charles Ambrose in the 1990s, the congregation was still small. In 2013, Charles changed the church constitution and began to grow attendance and membership. As Schriefer told me, “Charles was a natural leader; wherever he went, he was the central guy.” His humor, his compassion, and his history-based sermons began to increase attendance. Ungerman said, “Charles was full of inspiration; relaxed and yet at the same time filled with energy” he drew people to the church. Schriefer said, “Charles had such a happy demeanor” he attracted people to the church. He built community by hosting after service “tea” on the porch or in the parlor, his conversation the magnet drawing people in.



Charles was the consummate “people person.” As in the anecdote about the young woman at Wheatley, Charles showed his compassionate nature by drawing into the church a military veteran who had fallen upon hard times and developed a perhaps too keen taste for bourbon. Several congregants shared versions of the same story of Charles sitting at a table drinking tea with the fellow, totally engaged in conversation, making the pastoral connection oblivious to the fellow’s unkempt appearance and occasionally unruly demeanor. Charles had moved beyond simple tolerance to accepting. He accepted the fellow as his equal and one worthy of respect and care.



A large part of that acceptance was fueled by Charles’s optimism, sense of humor and joy. Whether he had ever heard of the modern notion of appreciative inquiry, which solves problems not by looking for the errors and shortcomings in a person or process, but by first looking for the positives, Charles always sought the positive in any person and any situation. He felt that joy was an absolute requirement for a good life.

He had the image at left appended to the church’s podium. It depicts three men dancing; the Hebrew translates to “Be joyful before the Lord.” Charles was always joyful before the Lord. Several of his congregants remarked upon how Charles began every sermon or service with a “Holy Joke.” Charles loved jokes, both holy and some not so holy.



Among the holy jokes Charles loved was a short one asking, “What did Moses say when he came down the mountain and saw the Israelites worshipping a golden calf? Holy cow!”

Among the unholy jokes Charles loved were dozens, to put a bit of delicacy to it, about flatulence. He particularly liked the joke about the Earl of Oxford and Elizabeth I. This particular Earl of Oxford, the 17th, bowing before the Queen, happened to let out a fart, at which he was so embarrassed and ashamed that he went into exile for seven years. On his return the Queen welcomed him saying, “My Lord, I had forgot the Fart!”

Another reason I think Charles was so taken with this joke is that the Earl of Oxford in question was Edward de Vere, who some scholars think wrote the works of William Shakespeare. Without getting into the scholarly details rebutting the notion, Charles’ “everyman” personality rose to the surface as he dismissed the claim as a retrograde elitist attempt by “aristos still unwilling to believe that a glovemaker’s son from Stratford” was the greatest artist in English history.

Regardless of all of that, the First Unitarian Universalist Church congregation had a deep affection for Charles. Church member and frequent leader of church services, Dale McBrier, wrote the following poem to Charles shortly after his death.

Old Charlie

He called himself Old Charlie
 And grew younger by the day
 Too busy learning and teaching
 To have time for dying this way
 He Still had that smile and twinkle in his eye
 Maybe the cute girl he hung out with or
 Maybe he just wouldn’t give up believing
 That it would all turn out right
 That we would all get along
 That we would all understand
 Because Old Charlie, he was a believer
 He laughed in life’s eye
 And relished the irony of it all
 Then blew the storm of his indignation
 At the injustice of our crawl
 And then somehow he picked back up
 And taught freshmen in the fall
 And came to church to preach
 The breath of hope.
 There were many Charlies
 But I knew old Charlie
 The one that was matured and wizened
 And The one that was so sublime
 Godspeed Charlie
 Go and collect your wings
 Fly way over the mountain
 And see what eternity brings
 And we’ll
 Carry on

Musician and Musical Connoisseur

Charles loved music – all kinds of music. We’ve already noted that he played the clarinet in the Strong Vincent marching band and had a small jazz combo that performed at school functions. His friend Tom Hagen, in introducing Charles the night he received the Dignitas Award said Charlie “probably give it all up to be the lead clarinet player in a Manhattan jazz band.” Charles loved jazz, country music, and pop music, but he also had a deep appreciation for “classical” music learned at the side of his wife Carolyn. So accomplished was she as an organist that she performed concerts all over Europe. She also directed the Oxford City Choir. When they returned to Erie, she worked with many churches, had a term as director of the Erie Philharmonic Chorus, and organized and conducted the Erie Renaissance Singers, now known as Lake Erie Choral Artists. As Charles related in Carolyn’s obituary, “By sheer chance (or Providence) she died to the music of Gabriel Faure’s ‘Cantique de Jean Racine,’ which she conducted many times in Oxford.”



Teacher

Somewhere in his *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer says the sign of a great teacher is neither how much they know nor how demanding they are of their students. Although in my experience being demanding without being demeaning is a skill few teachers possess. No, the mark of a great teacher is “*the ability to share one’s passion* with one’s students so that they, too, become passionate about the subject.” In speaking with Charles’ friends, former colleagues, and students several words continually reappeared: passionate, enthusiastic, exciting, boundlessly optimistic, stimulating, positive, and forward thinking.

Named an Emeritus Fellow of Mansfield College, Charles taught at Mansfield for 35 years and served as Chaplain of the College from 1965 to 1998. As director of Ministerial Education and Ordination Studies, he guided the formation of young Congregational/United Reformed Church ministers. In his academic work, Charles always thought of himself as a theologian, one who studies religions, rather than an apologist for a particular sect.

In 2020, he was named a Bancroft Fellow, the highest philanthropic honor the college can bestow. In announcing the honor, the college quoted Professor Michael Freeden, who said in his *Manfield: Portrait of an Oxford College* that “Charles Brock [was] a colourful and liberal Chaplain [at Mansfield] who epitomized the atmosphere of change in his spiritual generosity and mischievous sense of humour. The ease of passage of the college into a new relationship with its religious origins was due in no small part to his vision.”



Among his Oxford colleagues, the Rev. Dr. Colin Thompson told me, “He had profound things to say but they were always laced with a keen sense of humor ... stimulating and exciting to listen to.”

Tony Lemon, Mansfield College, Oxford University, recounted that Charles had “a wonderfully lively, outgoing personality, and a great sense of humor ... which allowed him to relate to those far younger than himself.”



John Creaser, also of Mansfield College, Oxford University, said that Charles had “expansive intellectual horizons and enthusiasms.”

When Charles returned to Erie, he began teaching at Penn State Behrend. Beginning in 1999, he assumed numerous roles at Behrend. Concerned that Americans were losing faith in America’s ability to deliver on the promise of the “American Dream,” he founded the Institute on the American Dream at Behrend in 2000. Charles was also active in establishing The Public Policy Initiative at Behrend. As a senior research associate in religious studies, he taught Comparative Religion, Religion in American Life and Thought, and Introduction to Islam.

As at Mansfield College, Oxford, Charlie’s Behrend colleagues were equally effusive in their praise. John Gamble, a Distinguished Professor of Political Science and a member of the “Notorious Nine” lunch group said of Charlie (John always called him “Charlie”): “...a towering, versatile intellect. A nice guy, friendly to (almost) everyone, but with an iron core of principles.”



Dean Baldwin remembered Charles as “endlessly curious.”

Former U.S. Congresswoman and Erie County Executive Kathy Dahlkemper, who team-taught a course with Charles titled “Mega Issues in America,” told me that Charles “brought reality to the project ... youthful and forward thinking ... his passion was contagious ... his energy palpable ... his love of teaching so very apparent.”



The “Mega Issues For America” course Dahlkemper refers to provides a glimpse into the encyclopedic nature of Charlie’s intelligence and interests. The following excerpt from its Fall 2012 syllabus describes its purpose, its underlying philosophy, and its methodology. They are all vintage Charles.

<p>MEGA ISSUES FOR AMERICA (condensed version) – PBBPL 305 – T R 11:00A – 12:15P Fall 2012</p>

<p>3 Credit Honors Course at Penn State Erie the Behrend College taught by Rev Charles Brock and Hon Kathy Dahlkemper</p>

Purpose: There are huge issues confronting the United States related to American self-understanding, the attack by Al-Qaeda, questions about who really controls the country, aspects of gender, environment, religion, science, and culture wars. These are interrelated issues and involve aspects of politics, economics, history, law, art, music, education, philosophy, religion, and science. The teachers will not try to force comparisons, but it is important to let class members see some interrelationships to better understand the world we live in and to be able to effect change.

What Is Integrative Education? Instead of specialist work where students know too much about not very much, this method immerses students in an enriched academic environment that reflects the complexities of the nation. We provide a holistic context for learning that leads to a greater ability to make connections and solve problems. Reintroducing an older method where students learned how to think in broad spheres they emerged wonderfully versed and well prepared for mastering the issues of their times. It is sad to compare our Founders with today's leaders in any field.

Method: The course will offer weekly two 1.5 hour classes in the Fall Semester. It will use the "three C's" – critical thinking, oral and written communication, and collaboration. The course will be taught by those who have interdisciplinary experience (academic and worldly) with interests in integrative educational and political activity. Teaching methods are flexible using multi-media and there will be required handouts before the next class. Honors students will also do a book review and all take a final exam.¹

Daily discussions covered topics such as "Discuss Lincoln's aims and compromises in the Civil War. Examine his Second Inaugural regarding God's judgment on America." And "Analyze Ike's [that would be President Dwight Eisenhower – Charlie's "everyman" spirit brings Eisenhower off the mountain to meet students as just a "guy"] view of the military-industrial complex for now." Or one of my favorites, "Are colleges failing the nation?" Or "The Culture of Violence: Look at the 'guns, God, and guts' and war-like ethos."

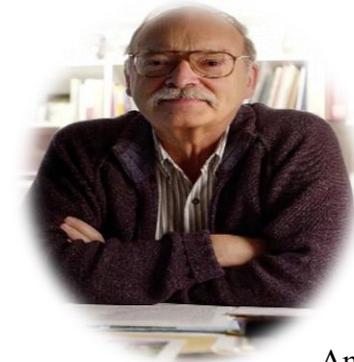
His Penn State Behrend colleague Lena Surzhko-Harned told me, "Charles had a great enthusiasm for tackling the 'big questions' and tying them into people's individual lives." No, Charles didn't dodge the big issues, as this excerpt from the daily outline for his "Debating the Purpose of Government" course makes boldly clear.

CLASSES OUTLINE

1. Economics & Government – Who is running America?
 - a. Monetary Power Charles Brock Institute on the American Dream Aug 25
 - b. Practical Power Kathy Dahlkemper County Executive; former
Congresswoman Aug 27
 - c. Inequalities Balaji Rajagopalan Director, Business School
Sept 1
2. Foreign Affairs & Business – What is at stake?
 - a. Asia Xin Zhao Business School - Finance
Oct 6
 - b. Europe John Gamble Distinguished Prof of Political Science
Oct 13
 - c. US neighbors Val Vlad Business School - Economics
Oct 20
3. Science – What are our hopes and fears for science and technology now?
 - a. Intelligence Dawn Blasko Dep't of Psychology
Nov 10
 - b. Atomics Jonathan Hall Dep't of Physics Nov 17
 - c. Drones Ralph Ford Dep't of Engineering & Acting Chancellor
Dec 1
4. Health Care & Community – Why are we the most costly with worse outcomes than Canada, Cuba, and Europe?
 - a. Medicine Geoff Dunn & Asif Shakoor Hamot Hospital

Angela Beaumont, Charles' former longtime assistant at the Jefferson Educational Society, captured the spirit of Charles the teacher. "Working with Charles Brock was a great experience," Angela said. "The way he shared his deep knowledge in the humanities gave such confidence that there's hope and that we can become better people if we just start thinking. Take it to the street, he said, open the doors to science, to history and politics for everyone. And make learning and knowing about the world we live in part of your life and education."

Scholar



The catholic, in the sense of universal, scope of Charles' interest is revealed in even a cursory glance at the over 75 talks, papers, and presentations he prepared and delivered for the Jefferson Educational Society. In his 18-part "Probing Education" series, his attention spanned from "Amazing Ancient Universities-Then and Now," to "Isaiah Berlin, 'Historian of Ideas'," to "Cheyney University of Pennsylvania: The Oldest Black College in America," to "Harvard and Benazir Bhutto."

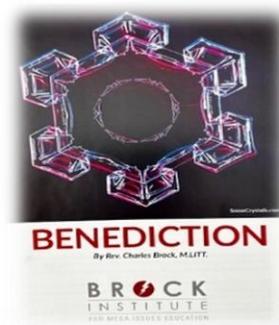
Among his other talks, one finds Charles never straying far from his deep commitment to American spirituality and religious values in essays as varied as "Jefferson and Lincoln on Passover and Good Friday;" "Religion and Politics: Washington, Lincoln, and the Power of Providential Deism;" "Mysticism, Politics are Central to Great American Hymns;" "D.H. Lawrence: Get Cracking With Your Definition of God;" "Mysticism of Buddha: Finding Nirvana Can Be Goal for the World;" and "Obama the Mystic."

Among his many lectures at the Jefferson Educational Society, one discovers Charles' deep commitment to the American experiment in self-government and the forces threatening it. In his last year, Charles spoke on "Thank God for Jimmy Carter" (July 11, 2023) and "White Supremacy & Christian White Nationalism" (May 1, 2023). Over the years he spoke on topics as diverse as "The Gardens of Monticello and Little Italy," "Jesus Christ – Redeemer, Reformer, or Revolutionary," "The Politics of Climate Change," "Jefferson's Jesus," and, during the 2008 political season "Religion and Politics: From Sarah and Hagar to Sarah and Hilary" (the contemporaries being Sarah Palin and Hilary Clinton).

Charles' main scholarly interests were three: religion, the American narrative, and preserving American democracy. In addition to the numerous talks, short papers, and presentations he gave on these topics, he also wrote two short books and one lengthy unpublished manuscript. They are *Mosaics of the American Dream*, *Benediction*, and *Holy Warrior Presidents*.

Charles and I often talked about religion, but, of course, he was far ahead of me. I remarked to him once that all the world's religions essentially teach some variation of the same ethic: "Do unto others as you'd have them do unto you." All of the religious strife in the world is about secondary and tertiary characteristics. People are killing one another over religious trivia, when they are all seeking the same thing: an apprehension of the ineffable and ethic by which to live. Charles looked at me and said, "You're a universalist and don't even know it." He also shared his then current project, which was *Benediction*.

A benediction is a blessing, especially the short blessing with which public worship concludes; it is an invocation for divine help and guidance. Charles' *Benediction* sought guidance from the major religions of the West and East by blending them into one invocation seeking to bring a fractured world together. Charles said, "Religion itself contributes to a dangerously splintered world which includes politics, economics, culture, gender, class, medicine, understanding of history, and aspirations."



He sought a way through the maze of these conflicting "isms" by unifying the Western exodus tradition for freedom with the Eastern emphasis on the unity of all things. As he said, "Nations can have yin/yang and liberate the oppressed." To do this, Charles created "an 8-minute-long liturgical act that can be used on its own or at the end of any service." He defined his "Benediction" as "a liturgical act viewing chief symbols of eight world faiths. In viewing instead of eating, it follows an ancient Catholic rite. We make connections between faiths for tolerance and understanding and to seek common causes for personal fulfillment, freedom, and justice for the world."



As Charles explains, the Infinity symbol expresses that God is in and beyond the universe. Brahman is the all-encompassing divinity of Hinduism. Yahweh encompasses Abba (the name of God that Jesus used) and Allah. Kwin Yin is the Indian and Chinese goddess of compassion.

A round rice cake symbolizes the Oneness of all things. A chalice of tea characterizes the Ocean of life. Bread denotes the One God of Jews,

Christians, and Muslims. A chalice of wine exemplifies the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Peace (Shalom, Salaam) is victory, health. Om is the syllable of the Infinite. Amen is affirmation.

As Charles put it, "The world is a huge place. It is full of wonders. We must value and use them."

His *Mosaics of the American Dream* seeks to link the founding of America to the exodus tradition of escaping out of slavery to freedom to discover fulfillment. Charles worried a great deal about the "American Dream;" that Americans were losing their faith in its potential; that Americans had corrupted it to simply a consumerist vision; or, slightly better, to a Horatio Alger vision of "making it." Earning a good living, having a nice home, and other material creature comforts.

Charles recognized that all of those were part of the “American Dream,” but they were not its essential of foundational meaning. Since, as he quoted Lionel Trilling, “America is the only nation that prides itself upon a dream and gives its name to one,” it is absolutely crucial to know what that dream means, for the Dream is about the self-definition of America. Charles argues that its meaning can be found in understanding two concepts: 1) American civil holidays reveal our ideas of the past and what we value, and 2) many of America’s founding ideals came from the Bible, in particular the Old Testament and even more specifically the exodus tradition – the escape from slavery to freedom.



Charles suggests that, yes, the material interpretations of the American Dream are, indeed, part of it, but they are not all that the Founders sought to create. The Founders meant to integrate the personal with the communal. That is, the American idea originally meant that the community could only prosper if its members did, and its members could only prosper if the entire community prospered. It’s what John Winthrop meant in his sermon “A Model of Christian Charitie” (the ‘city upon a hill’ sermon) when he said, “wee must brotherly love without dissimulation, wee must love one another with a pure heart, wee must beare one another’s burthens, wee must not looke only on our owne things, but allsoe on the things of our brethren...”

Charles develops that notion by linking Columbus Day and Christopher Columbus to Noah, our Thanksgiving Day to the story of Miriam, Independence Day to Moses, Memorial Day and remembering to Aaron, assimilating to Martin Luther King, Jr. Day and the story of Ruth, Presidents Day and leadership to David; and building on Labor Day to Solomon. For Charles, the metaphor of America as the new Israel “is a vision of promise and challenge” – the promise of freedom and prosperity and the challenge to protect the democracy that makes that possible.

For Charles, the American Dream was the promise of liberty, equality, and opportunity for all. Defending, in his mind, requires educating Americans to understand their past to make sense of the present as they move into the future. For Charles, that



meant integrative education, in pursuit of which he founded the Brock Institute for Mega Issues “to encourage students to learn on a (broad) scale in order to understand and respond to the many issues affecting America and the world today.”

Charles advocated an integrative approach to learning, which in essence is the classic liberal arts education in the

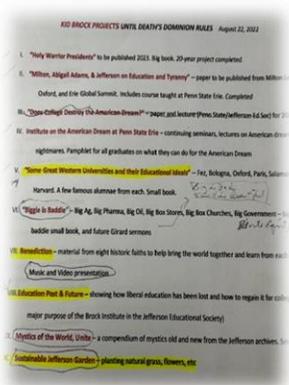
humanities, social sciences, sciences, civics, economics – the entire gamut of human understanding.

Charles believed, as did John Milton, that the purpose of education is “to fit a man (*sic*) to perform justly skillfully, and magnanimously all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war.” In short, education was for citizenship. In order to protect American democracy, Americans needed to do a better job of educating themselves and the young about civics – how government works; about economics – how the economy works; about how not only to earn a living, but how to live a life, which comes through an appreciation and understanding of the arts, literature, music, and religion.



Charles preached that necessity to the very end. In accepting the Jefferson Educational Society's Thomas B. Hagen Dignitas Award, in his remarks on about John Milton, Abigail Adams, and Thomas Jefferson and the defense of democracy, he said, "all three believed education should be for learning, not for getting a job. They wanted an inclusive education to include most of the major subjects of their time." And, most importantly, he added that "they wanted the major purpose of an education to be to educate leaders who were sympathetic to democracy, and who would work hard to save the nation from tyranny with good religion, law, and science." For Charles agreed with David Brooks, that "What we call the 'West' is not an ethnic designation or an elitist country club ... it is a moral accomplishment, it aspires to extend dignity, human rights, and self-determination to all."

Closing



Charles (Charlie) Brock was "a common man with an uncommon background" who remained true all his life to his multiple loves: his deep faith in the unity of all things, the people in his life, Mansfield College, Oxford, to his beloved hometown of Erie, and to American democracy. Of the many things about Charlie Brock to appreciate, his loyalty to those he loved and his determination to never stop working in their defense ranks high. As the list at the left states: "Kid Brock's Projects Until Death's Dominion Rules" (August 22, 2022), he intended "to keep on keeping on" defending his faith and the things he valued.

As his dear friend Colin Thompson said, "There was nothing negative about him. His vision was a positive one, his enthusiasm catching, his eyes focused on the future and the need to plan for it now."

As his Jefferson Educational Society colleague, Ben Speggen said, "Perhaps Charles was such a good preacher because he didn't really preach. He taught. And perhaps Charles was such a good teacher because he didn't really lecture. He listened. He learned. And then he spoke, and then listened and learned again."

As Ferki Ferati, Jefferson Educational Society president who considered Charles a mentor, said, "Charlie's down-to-earth nature endeared him to everyone he encountered. His approachability and mischievous sense of humor made even the most complex discussions light-hearted. He had the rare gift of balancing gravitas with a genuine, human touch."

As his wife Mary Lincoln said, "Charles had many sides to him and his enthusiasm for life extended to all his sides. A great teacher, his enthusiasm lasted to the very end."

As his "Benediction" ends, "Go in Peace. Walk in Beauty – Om, Amen, Alleluia."

Acknowledgments

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