

The Miracle of the Potato Salad

My father practiced theology through experience and not necessarily through academic studies. So when his parents had four boys in the 1920s and 1930s, each one was raised with the immigrant thoughts of Louis and Mary, who came from the old country. The 1930s and 40s were shaped by World War II and the Great Depression. As a result, my father had very little time for academic pursuits, as he and my mom married in 1942 on Flag Day. They soon had children; my brother was born in 1945, and my sister in 1948. Dad was a travelling salesman, and we lived a modest life in a modest suburb. Family was often important to them, even though there were squabbles between various members of his family.

One of the squabbles was related to his older brother Ruben, who married out. That is, Aunt Pat was a non-Jew. This caused trouble in the family as Jews were supposed to marry within the faith. But Ruben didn't care; he had fallen in love. They had three daughters: Ruth, born in 1944 or 1945, and Nancy and Barbara, born in 1950. My dad's theology was shaped by that, as he decided that since his brother had married out, it was certain that God would not bless and keep the family name going through them. An odd theology, to be sure. That was confirmed as Grandma Bessie's brother, Uncle Harry Stempleman, had converted to Catholicism around his 35th birthday or so. Why was

that? It seems as though the rabbi did not come to visit Uncle Harry in the hospital when he was unwell, but the Catholic priest did. So, just to spite them, Uncle Harry converted to Catholicism. I'm sure there were more pieces to that story, but that's the only one I ever heard. So, what would God do with such a conversion away from Judaism? Obviously, according to my dad's theology, Uncle Harry would have to have only girls through that marriage. And sure enough, that's what happened. So there were Julia, Betty, and Harriet, who actually became a Catholic nun down the road. "You see," my dad would think, "God would not bless that union, nor would he provide a male heir."

Skip forward several decades to 1977 when Patty and I married, just eight blocks from Mom and Dad. They not only refused to attend our wedding at Hillcrest Covenant Church, along with the hundreds of other people who attended, but they in fact told Uncle Lou and Auntie (Aunt Pauline) and all other family members not to attend because it was a "shanda," that is, a shame on the family. A few months later, it was clear that my mom and dad did not want to have anything to do with Patty and me. But I didn't think that was right.

So, come Mother's Day, 1977, just five months after we had married, I made Patty go with me into Kansas City to my cousin Janet's house, where the family was gathering for a celebration. We were not invited, but of course, if we showed up, we would not be prevented. It was there that Grandma Bessie stood up to welcome Patty, not only into that

room, but into her life and into our lives. That was a wonderful moment. My dad got up at the same time and walked out of the room. He didn't want to have to deal with it.

A month later was Father's Day, and my sister was the host of the family barbecue. This time, Patty made a potato salad, the way her family always made potato salad. I didn't know there were different styles. When we arrived on that June day, Patty was not so sure that she wanted to be there. The food was prepared. Judy's husband, Jeff, was on the barbecue grill, and it was a pleasant time. We sat down to eat, and my dad noticed the potato salad and wondered where it had come from. Someone said Patty had brought it. He took a small, minuscule bite to examine it, and he loved it. He asked for seconds and more helpings. Why was it such a big deal? It seems that Aunt Pat, Uncle Ruben's wife, had made potato salad early on in their life and brought it to a family picnic, probably out at Swope Park. Dad tasted it and wondered why it had this particular flavor, and it turns out that Aunt Pat put bacon in her potato salad. My dad's theology, of course, was that all Pats, who are Gentiles, would put bacon in their potato salad. But when he discovered that Patty's did not have any, he was delighted and ate it. I called it "the miracle of the potato salad." That culinary moment allowed him to welcome her into his life. It was unusual, to be sure, but a gift. Of note, of course, is that a couple of years later, our first child was born, and my father was sure, theologically, that it would have to be a girl. Because how could God possibly bless

a mixed marriage? Surprise of surprises, Nate was a boy. And my dad's theology was out the window, at least for that day.



Some 'first' moments

There have been a few firsts in my life. I'm thinking back to when they opened the Lane Cove bypass tunnel in Sydney on a Sunday afternoon, and after the emergency vehicles went through, there I was coming back from a deputation meeting in Sans Souci. And I was the first person through on that Sunday afternoon, about 2:00. I was making my way home, and I had to take that tunnel. It was free that day, but it was fun. As I drove in, I waved, left, right, and just carried on.

I was the first of three male candy stripers in the United States back in 1966. Maybe it was part of my 'I want to be a doctor' considerations. I was 14, becoming 15 later that year. And I was privileged to wear white. I didn't have to wear the pink and white stripes of the female candy stripers. I worked around the hospital, and most of the time I merely transported people from their rooms using wheelchairs to the surgery, or to see a doctor, or x-rays, that sort of thing. I especially enjoyed wearing all white. It was also a good way to meet girls.

In 1979, I was with Patty. The interview was on a Memorial Day weekend, in front of the Jews for Jesus Council. They had determined in February that year that there would be no new families hired onto staff, and Patty was pregnant eight months at that point. And they'd also decided that they would not take any new staff on, as in September that

year, they would have the Avodah year of training and reconnecting. So the last thing they wanted was a new couple and a family, but I fit some kind of bill that they'd been looking for for a while and continue to look for, that is, first-generation Jewish believers with a reasonable testimony and who have a history of working with others. The interview is here in the 'Firsts' category because ours was the longest interview ever, as it lasted three hours. Not continuously, but off and on, as they were trying to deal with the issues that we raised. We didn't fit the normal interviewing style of candidates at that point. I had been a pastor; no one before had done that. We were charismatic, and very few on staff were in that category. Patty was pregnant. She was not called to evangelism. I was not called to Jewish evangelism. So there were a lot of questions about who we were, and yet here we are, still 47 years later.

In 1985, Woody Allen was taping what would become 'Hannah and Her Sisters'. And in that movie, which he wrote, produced, and also directed, his character goes through a neurotic search for answers. He used Leo's Barber Shop as a location now and then for his movies on the Upper West Side. And he had contracted with Leo to use the barber shop that afternoon. It was about 11:15 in the morning, and I came into the shop, and no one else was there. Leo told me Mr. Woody Allen had rented and already paid for the use of the shop that afternoon. Who knew that it would be in that setting that Woody would make what was Leo's shop into a Catholic bookshop? And then, coming out of that shop in the movie, he bought a crucifix and a Bible, and a jar of mayonnaise, and a

loaf of white bread. A scene of real intrigue and uncomfortable culture clash. I wish I had been able to unpack with Mr Allen the meaning of my T-shirt I was wearing that morning which he saw when Leo finished my haircut. Yes, a "Jews for Jesus" shirt. That would have really fit with the questions Woody's character was asking at that point in the movie.

Ed Charles came to my Bar Mitzvah in 1964. He was the third baseman for the Kansas City Athletics and later, in 1969, played for the World Series-victorious New York Mets. I think he was the first baseball player to attend Kehilath Israel Synagogue. He certainly stood out as an athletic black man at the synagogue that morning. Dave Wickersham and I met several times, but it's the second time that is more memorable to me. He was a pitcher for the Detroit Tigers and the Kansas City Athletics. And Wickersham would always sign his autographs with "Colossians 3:17", a verse that I found later, after I became a believer, and it was and has become my life verse as well. "Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father of all." Well, I was intrigued when I found that on a baseball that Wickersham had signed. After I became a believer, I was sharing my testimony at Full Faith Church of Love in Kansas City, and told a bit of that story about Dave Wickersham testifying to everyone with that signature, and how grateful I am for that. It wasn't long until the end of that service when a man approached me from the back. A tall fellow, strong handshake, shook my hand, and thanked me for my words tonight, and said, 'Oh, by the way, I'm Dave Wickersham.' We stayed

friends until he passed away about 10 years ago.

It was in 1994 or so that I took Nate with me to Philadelphia, where I was the invited speaker at a Messianic cooperative banquet and fundraiser. And I had Nate share at the beginning. When they introduced me, he went up instead of me, and thanked them for letting me come, himself come. And then it was about 30 seconds in that I said, 'Ahem, I think they want me to speak.' It was a very funny moment, and he was definitely in a good space at that time.



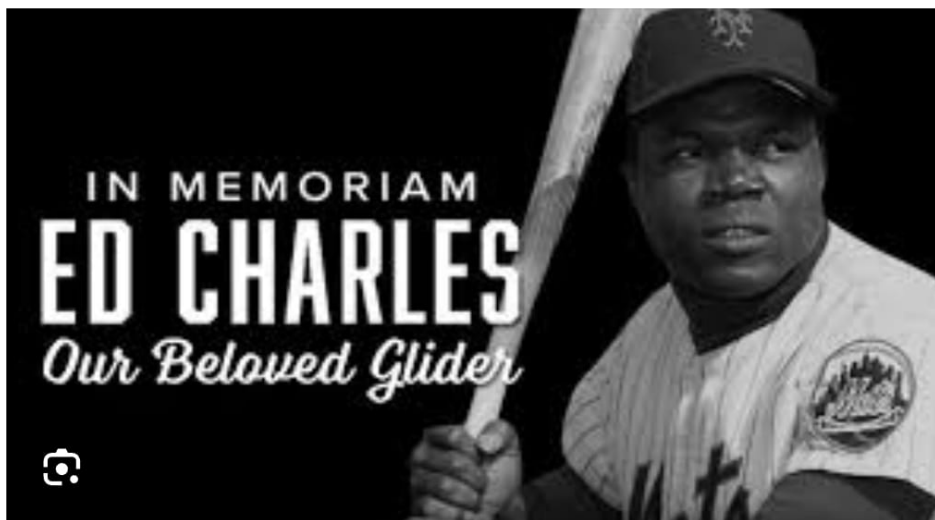
Lane Cove Tunnel opened that day, March 2007.



In the 1960s, this is what Candy Stripers looked like, and then I joined.



Patty pregnant before Nate appeared in June 1979.



After Ed Charles died, this 'in memoriam' came out in his Mets uniform.



The entrance to the Lane Cove Tunnel. Opened on Patty's birthday in March 2007



With Dave Wickersham (Col. 3.17) in KC at Full Faith Church of Love (Then Cross Points Church)