

Charles Chu *1918-2008*

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REMARKS AND TRIBUTES

I Make Sketch

— Paula Chu, daughter of Professor Chu



On behalf of the entire Chu family, thank you for coming and for helping us celebrate Dad/Pop/YeYe/GungGung's life. Thank you to the wonderful team of people at the College who made this event happen. Though I will be talking this afternoon about MY dad, please know that my intention is to include the entire family in this tribute.

I make sketch.

I make sketch. That's how my dad might say it, and there's a part of me that wishes I could write this tribute with the quirky laser beam of some of his conversational English. Who needs articles? No need. Past, present, future – all same. He/she/it – all same. All nature, all same. All life, all same. All people, pretty much same.

Let me make a sketch in your minds. Begin with a little boy in a small village in China.

The year is 1918, and the entire village is illiterate. To everyone's amazement and bemusement, the boy has an insatiable desire to learn, to read, to grow. His mother calls him "Little Frog," surely with an exasperated sigh at times. This desire to learn, to experience, and to savor pulls him beyond the village, away from the yam fields and into the city. It pulls him through high school in Beijing, college in Chungking, around the Cape of Good Hope, and the desire remains, builds, only grows stronger. You can by now draw his life path from there, but that picture is distorted without your understanding how profoundly this desire to learn lived in my dad.

Words: from 'snuggle down' to 'slasher movie'

So to this sketch you are working on – add pads of paper in every room, every pocket, every glove compartment, inside cupboards and medicine cabinets. There are his own sketches of things, pads and pads of birds, flowers, Walter Cronkite, squirrels, Margaret Thatcher, the view from a roadside nearly every trip and walk he took. There are thousands of these in his home right now.

But add into your *mind's* sketch this: papers with *lists* of words on them. Pads of paper – like this one – with *vocabulary* lists. Add more and more and more of these pads into

o your sketch. Let them multiply in your mind, organically, and see him writing down each word, intent in the moment of writing, on learning that particular word.

Today you've heard about my father's artistry, his teaching, his joie de vivre. If those are the *heart* of his being, these notes and lists are the cells. As my father read, anything, he wrote on these pads. I will place a small fraction of them – along with a couple of his many sketch books – on a table at the reception so you can see that I am not making any of this up. I urge you to spend a minute looking at them. Many of you, I know, will be happy to see his particular scrawl again.

Every time my dad read, he intended to learn these new and delicious words: freaked out, snuggle down, sundry dogfish, anabiosis, moniker, commentariat, peppered, bodacious, thwack, galvanize, mayhem, conniptions, nincompoop, mental shenanigans, burrowing, cakewalk, vamoose, interlopers, nubblly buttocks, huzzah, probity, pipsqueak, Gordian knot, charlatan, hullabaloo, wonk.

Art: 'the silent language'

Some are *phrases* that he must have wanted to keep in his arsenal: in a soupy gloom, surf on the waves of success, a pyrrhic victory for the bloggers, under his belt, hanging on by fingernails, hubba hubba, dead presidents, pay on Tuesday for hamburger today (joke, he notes), developmentally arrested adolescent, howling success, cheesy chick flick, gobs of money, gloves come off, holy Toledo, get bang for the buck, new digs, herding cats, the sizzle sells the steak -- here I will leave off the *s*, as he did: *going banana*.

What kind of article must he have been reading here? Predicament, loathing, demonize, virulent, vituperation, run amok, deride, aversion, botched, plodding, cacophony, disdain, pandering, posturing.

Or this article: Testaceous, scrotum, slasher movie, fleshy, spongy, smearing, spandex bike shorts. ???

Colonic, oddly enough, appears on several lists. That just must not have stuck.

Other notes, many with multiple exclamation points, reflect the depth of thought he gave to his art: pure-seeing, standpoint of feeling, art is the silent language, we must know that GREAT ART must always be on high intellectual level, art is not for the indifferent, love is required to appreciate art, capture the essential meaning of things, not just appearance!!!!, transcend reality through art.

A month after Pop died, I read in the *New York Times* something about the "oogedy boogedy" religious Right, and my heart squeezed with not being able to pass that one to him. Oh! my mom, pop's life companion and vocab coach, would have had fun explaining that term. He would have added it to this list I found, which mom must have generated with him, some Saturday afternoon over jasmine tea, the leaves refreshed for the fourth time that day. Razzle dazzle, hoity toity, chit chat, hurry scurry, higgledy piggledy, shilly shally, wishy washy, mish mash, super duper, bling bling, artsy vartsy (vartsy spelled with a v, which I think is kind of sweet).

'You mattered, very much, to him'

Many of these words probably *didn't* stick. Doesn't that happen for most of us with

things like etiology and etymology?

But every now and then, he latched onto a particular word and used it until it stayed with him forever. We would all hear about that word for quite awhile, and, if you crossed his path during that span of time, you did, too. Xanthippe comes to mind. Xanthippe, the shrewish wife who emptied a chamber pot over Socrates' head, now has come to mean simply a shrewish wife. Oh, that must have been a long week for my mom, the antithesis of Xanthippe, but the recipient of the new moniker until neither of them would ever forget it. Happily, he redeems himself on another list with this: "My wife is impeccable! Means faultless!"

A good play on words, once he solved its small puzzle, brought Pop such delight. Opening the newspaper was thus a linguistic amusement park for him. "Buddies Cash In When Friend Cashes Out" – some of you may remember this headline – couldn't have been more than a year ago – about two guys with the chutzpah to wheel their dead friend's body to the Social Security office in an attempt to cash his check. "Mama. What is this?" After she explained it to him, several of us got a call that went something like this – here we are fortunate enough to have found a crib sheet of his script: Ellen! He writes -- I found big check. Do you want me to CASH OUT? Though he was CRACKING up, we each reassured him that we did NOT want him to cash out – though oddly, this is one of the very few times I heard him make even an oblique reference to his own death. I was glad to hear that he could laugh about it.

Stuck in among these lists of words and sayings are other notes of import – Susan may have new hip! Toinette's books! Marian and Ken back to U.S. May 7. William and Richard will stop by. Toby Friday lunch. Heidi has BAD cold. These things mattered to him. A majority of you sitting here appear somewhere on the lists Pop kept. You mattered, very much, to him.

His legacy: unremitting curiosity, delight in small things

I want to be frank about something here. Charles Chu had the kind of bouncy spirit and childlike bearing that belied his intellect. Certainly he was not the formal, dignified professorial type, and I know many underestimated him. Words were a *plaything* of his intellect, not its weapon. But for true, creative fire-in-the-belly, a true hunger to learn for the delight of learning, he could not be surpassed.

This, then, aside from embodying love, is his legacy to his children and to the grandchildren he adored – unremitting curiosity and delight in small things, the promise of new knowledge and discovery at every turn. I'm focusing on words in this tribute, but it was also often the shape of an animal in a dumpling, or – as your program notes, Confucius in a napkin. Sometimes we were not to throw away or move objects that, well, you'd think you could. For one two-week period Pop would not allow Mom to remove her brassiere from where it sat on a pile because it resembled two distant mountains and was inspiring him to paint.

A grandchild – or a student, or an unsuspecting neighbor for that matter – could not escape even a brief visit without a lecture about what matters in life, or seeing if they were familiar with a new word he had found. The grandchildren will attest that he was always amazed when they already knew a word he had stumbled upon – which is part of how he came to believe, as he would often say, that they are *all genius*.

Words and sayings were touchstones for my dad; he rubbed them in his mind for

grounding and inspiration. Pop was always seeking center, seeking meaning with words and the ideas they allowed him to form. Spend any time with him and you were likely to hear an aphorism of some sort, some principle, something meant to inspire and guide you, whether you wanted this or not. He wasn't just spouting truisms and reciting lists of how to live. He thought in lists and aphorisms – they delighted, guided, and comforted him. He loved through them.

'To dance in the light in the time we have'

We have daily letters written to my mom throughout 1946 and half of 1947, and many contain some kind of list. "An interesting and healthy, meaningful life to me is: 1) a work for people, 2) a faithful wife who can share with me in life, 3) a comfortable life, 4) ETC."

Such lists and notes continued until he could no longer write. Later in life, as his energy flagged, his notes to self were particularly poignant: if I rest, I will rust. Charles, you are not a zombie! And a month before he died, he wrote, "Half hour to climb stairs! In high school I climb high mountains outside Beijing. Beijing! Oh, well. Now old. Every day is a good life. Thank god."

So, the calligraphy and inscriptions on my dad's paintings aren't merely the conventions of Chinese literati painting. Pop wrapped himself in words, reminders of what matters, and aphorisms that cajoled.

I will read to you in closing a piece of calligraphy of my dad's, owned by Sharon Tripp Griffis, that gives one of the best examples of what I am talking about, and how Charles Chu lived. It reads:

We have met in this life to dance in the light in the time we have.

And, as he would do, I will say it once more so that it sticks: We have met in this life to dance in the light in the time we have.

This just sketch.

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