



Charlie Noxon (Charles Augustus Noxon)

מרדכי אהרון בן יפה גילה ונחשון אברהם

January 5, 2020

Rabbi Sharon Brous

Charlie strove to make sense of the world. He read voraciously. He sought understanding. He never wanted to lose his faculties—even when going under anesthesia for surgery. Charlie wanted to make sense of things. But the refrain of the past few days has been: *This makes no sense...* because this time, we have reached the outer limits of human understanding. There are medical, technical explanations of what happened up on that mountain, but there are no existential answers. No theological answers. There is no sense.

And when there is no sense, there remains only deep, profound sadness, and love. All-encompassing, death-defying, universe-bending love.

We are here today because we loved Charlie Noxon. And we love you, Jenji and Christopher, Eliza and Oscar. And we would do anything in our power to reverse time and make the pain go away, but we cannot. So we will walk with you through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. And we will sit with you in the darkness. We will laugh with you and cry with you and remind you again and again with our presence how deeply loved Charlie was in this world and will always be, and how deeply loved you are and will always be.

The suddenness of Charlie's death has awakened us to the preciousness and precariousness that is the most profound truth of our lives. We know this—we're reminded every now and then—but we forget. We get distracted. This week, we've been reminded, in the most painful way, how fragile it all is. We are all a breath away from the abyss.

So today—fully awake—we lift up Charlie's memory. We grieve his death and celebrate his life because the world does not often get a Charlie Noxon in it. And when it does, it is our responsibility to gather up our broken hearts and build a sacred container to hold the memory of an extraordinary human being, taken too soon from this world.

*

Today we grieve a two-fold loss. We grieve the loss of the person Charlie Noxon was, and the loss of the person he was becoming.

The person he was, as you've heard, was magnificent. Most arresting was his exceptional mind, clear to me from the very first time we interacted. Charlie was given an assignment in school to interview a Jewish leader. Chris and Jenji were friends from Reboot, and they encouraged him to call me. I took the interview as a favor, but it was immediately clear that this was not just a kid getting through an assignment. I was astonished by Charlie's intellectual curiosity and spiritual depth. I told Chris and Jenji afterward that it was a better interview than I had had with seasoned newspaper reporters. Charlie was the real deal. He, meanwhile, determined that I sufficiently met his intellectual and spiritual needs and would be his rabbi. He was nine years old.

You've heard how Charlie mastered Latin and Mandarin, how he was a voracious reader. At 14, he walked around with Kissinger's biography under his arm. And he finished *Infinite Jest*. (Nobody finishes *Infinite Jest*.) He was insatiable. He convinced Columbia to let him pursue a triple major: South East Asian Studies, Economics and Philosophy. Because a double major at Columbia would not be a rigorous enough course of study. He pretty much always knew more than anyone else in the room, and he debated and argued with endlessly. Last week he got into a battle on the chair lift with a stranger over the health care system in India... it gave him no pause that the guy knew a bit about the subject given that he not only lived in India but also worked in the health care industry.

But it's not just Charlie's brilliance that made him exceptional. He was funny and awkward and stubborn and creative. He was romantic and ravenous. Ate as much as he read—never missing a second dinner, because one dinner was simply not enough.

He overflowed with love for his crew. He called Eliza four times a day. He'd do rap battles with Oscar, even though he was truly terrible at rap battles. He told his parents that he loved them. He razzed and mocked and loved his family with all his heart. It was sometimes hard for him to connect with other kids, because who could compare with the genius and sharpness and candor of his beloveds?

He was big and he was small. Courageous and cautious. Confident and humble. Maybe even insecure. His favorite Torah was the teaching of the two slips of paper, one in each pocket: one reading *בְּשִׁבְלֵי נִבְרָא הָעוֹלָם*—*for my sake the world was created*. The other, *אֲנִי עָפָר וָאֵפֶר*—*I am but dust and ashes*. He knew both were true.

He had a deeply developed sense of justice. He rejected absolutes and embraced nuance. He said what he believed.

Charlie loved stupid card tricks. Toyed with magic. Was fiercely competitive at board games: he was there to conquer. But off the board, he took care of everyone. Remembered the things everyone else forgot. Stayed up all night to drive Jenji to the airport for a 5am flight last week. He never half-assed anything.

And Charlie struggled a bit in this world. He didn't fully understand social dynamics. Maybe he was too brilliant, too curious, too hungry, too honest. It's hard for kids like that in middle school and high school.

But things were getting better for him. He was growing into himself. He found Izzy. He started to find happiness.

He loved Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind. I love it too. Charlie, with his espresso machine and five spice pasta and love of long walks, like Clementine: trying to live life to the fullest. Trying not to waste one second of the little time he had.

That's who Charlie was. That's the person we grieve today.

But that's not the only loss. We also grieve the person Charlie would have become. The books he would have written, films he would have made, or diseases he would have worked to cure, as long as it wouldn't have required killing too many mice. The love he would have realized. The dreams he would have dreamed and those he would have fulfilled.

There's a story told in the Talmud (Brakhot 42b-43a) about the death of Rav, one of the most prominent and prolific of the Sages. His students bury him and grieve him deeply. It is a terrible loss. Then they return to their lives. But before much time passes, they have a question, which they realize only Rav could answer. Once again, they feel his death like a punch in the throat. His absence tears at their hearts. Feeling the loss as profoundly as they did the day he died, וְקָרַע קְרִיעָה אֲחֵרִיבָא, they stand and tear their garments all over again.

The aching loss resurfaces endlessly, because there was so much more to give, so much more to live. Because he wasn't nearly done.

Charlie Noxon was just beginning. Just becoming. Not nearly done. And again and again, whenever there is a question to be answered, an essay to be edited, a Chinese food order to be placed (in Mandarin), the ache will return and there will be another tear, and then another and another.

And even still, we must remember: that enduring, relentless ache is the sign of Charlie's continued presence here in this world. *The proof positive that love does not die.* That

beautiful, terrible ache is the way that his soul reverberates in this world for the rest of all of our lives, and beyond.

We can no longer touch him. I know you want to. To wrap his 6'3" body in your arms.

But you can still feel him. And you will. Today and every single day. This dizzying absence is a sacred reminder of Charlie's eternal presence.

Charlie Noxon, you were magnificent. You spent years of your life apologizing for everything—even apologizing for apologizing so much. Here's my apology to you: I'm so sorry that we won't get to see the person you were becoming. But know that we will hold with care and with love the person you were.

We will not shrink from life in the face of this tragedy. This world is full of pain, and it's also full of beauty. So we will be brave and we will be big. We'll laugh and learn and love. We will lift up your stories and honor your memory. And when we ache for you—when we have questions that only you could have answered, when we need closeness that you alone could offer, we'll remember that that yearning is a testament to the blessing of your life.

I'm so sorry you didn't have more time, Charlie. We all are. But in your twenty years, you were a blessing beyond words.

Mary Oliver wrote of the box full of darkness someone she loved once gave to her. "It took me years to understand," she wrote, "that this, too, was a gift."

The gift, Charlie Noxon, was you. You with your 10lb newborn baby body and your allergies and asthma and quirkiness and brilliance and hidden creativity and love, sweet love. You, Charlie, were the gift.

The gift to Jenji and Chris, Eliza and Oscar.

The gift to Buz and Rhea, to Nick and Nicki and Mary and Pam. To Jono and David and Blaire, Olivia and Nora, Marti and Jed and Lane. And to all of us.

And for that gift, we are eternally grateful. May you now be bound up in the bond of eternal life. May your spirit shine forever.