

A Charlie Brown Christmas
by Rev. Ann Schranz
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation
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Charles Schulz was the only son of Carl Schulz and Dena Halverson Schulz. One of Dena's relatives gave Charles the nickname "Sparky," after a racehorse named "Spark Plug" in the Barney Google comic strip. Sparky downplayed his German ancestry and highlighted his Norwegian ancestry, yet it was all more complicated than that. In his childhood, Sparky's fragile sense of worth was bolstered by being "somebody" in his father's barber shop in St. Paul, Minnesota. By contrast, as a city boy and a sensitive boy besides, he felt lost among the many relatives on his mother's side. His mother's clan lived in the country on bleak farms protected by large, snarling dogs. The Borgens, Swansons, Halversons, Hansons, and Bredahls did not talk much -- except to tease each other with what sounded like hostility or (in the case of some of the men) to insult each other during drunken fistfights in the snow.

Sparky was born in 1922. He was small for his age and wore glasses. As early as his sophomore year in high school, his mother had been confined to bed, dying of cervical cancer. During her long decline, Dena was not told by doctors or loved ones of the nature of her illness or that it was terminal. She (and he) experienced deception early and traumatically. "Only Sparky's father and his mother's trusted sister Marion knew its source, and they would not identify it as cancer in Sparky's presence until after it had reached its fourth and final stage -- in November 1942, the same month he was drafted."¹

As his mother was dying, she said, "If we ever have another dog, I think we should name him Snoopy." "Snupi is a Norwegian term of endearment; a mother might so call her young child. Whether that was in Dena's thinking is not known, but the prospect of a dog named Snoopy had, for the moment at least, the quality of extending their life together into a future that it seemed they were no longer likely to have."² In 1943, Dena died, and the introverted young soldier grieved, with no role models and few friends. The facts about Schulz's life and the perspective on Schulz's life in this sermon come from the book *Schulz and Peanuts* by David Michaelis, a newly published biography. (Many of my remarks this morning are direct quotations from the writing of David Michaelis, and all direct quotes will be footnoted when the sermon is posted on the congregation's website.)

¹ *Schulz and Peanuts: A Biography*, David Michaelis, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 2007, page 4.

² Page 128.

Sparky always felt he was special. Whether this was in spite of (or, more likely) because of the forces that shaped him, we cannot know. These forces include his personality, the premature death of his mother, rigid gender roles in the mid-20th century, and a predisposition toward agoraphobia (the fear of open places, which phobia his father most likely had). He always felt that he was special, and he liked to “hide” in plain sight. “He was convinced that his ‘ordinary appearance was a perfect disguise.’”³ Sparky found solace and meaning as a Christian, especially after the war. He began attending church regularly and took a turn witnessing for his faith on street corners.⁴

Convinced from a young age that he would one day have a syndicated comic strip, he polished his drawing skills through a correspondence course. The course promised that participants would be a “class of one.” After many rejections, he found work in this field. One of his early colleagues was a woman named Freida Rich, a dwarf, whose body proportions and ways of moving may have provided a model for the proportions of the *Peanuts* characters would create.

“[Frieda] was proud to be Jewish. She did not consider herself a dwarf – dwarfs were, in her words, ‘characters in legends from the bearded old forests’; she was a four-foot tall woman. No matter how much the others mocked her, she maintained her dignity. She spoke her mind about anti-Semitism or any other subject that offended her sense of justice . . . [In *Schulz and Peanuts*, David Michaelis writes that] Charlie Brown never quits, and that unyielding quality had been prefigured in Frieda Rich, the ‘poor little Rich girl’ who was able to take as humor and with humor what would otherwise have produced bitter rage.”⁵

Sparky married Joyce, and they had four children. He adopted Joyce’s child from a previous marriage. “I have never been especially fond of children. I really haven’t . . . I never had any interest in children at all before we had our own children; and then I began to see the joy you could get from having your own children.”⁶ “Aren’t all kids egotists? And brutal?” Schulz asked, acknowledging in 1964 that “maybe I have the cruelest strip going.”⁷

³ Page 57.

⁴ Page 163.

⁵ Page 189.

⁶ Page 295.

⁷ Page 272.

By this time *Peanuts* was near its zenith in popularity. Sparky was still looking for love. The question of his life was this: “Will I be – was I ever – truly loved?”⁸ “Cartooning allowed him to harness his melancholy as the alternative to exploring what was making him so mad or, more pertinently, confronting what was hurting him.”⁹ “At every life stage from youth on, the mainspring of his character had been the belief that no one would care about him or pay attention to him or even love him if he did not get out into the world and perform . . . he had to *become* someone or be clearly seen *doing* something; he could never just be himself.”¹⁰ His ex-wife Joyce said, “He was always depressed. I think he liked being depressed. And he said he wouldn’t go to a psychiatrist because it would take away his talent.”¹¹ “But for someone of his work capacity and intellectual curiosity – especially his capacity to do things with unhappiness itself – unhappiness became part of a strategy; indeed, it became his life,” according to David Michaelis in *Schulz and Peanuts*.¹²

In terms of religion, Sparky read the Bible through four times, marking it up, then later found himself looking at his own markings in puzzlement. He said, “It is almost as if a friend had secretly opened the book and made some markings just to tease me. What was the spirit trying to say to me then that I no longer need to hear? Or, what was I listening for then that I no longer care about?”¹³ “The article of faith that most sharply divided Schulz from strict fundamentalism was his belief that *everybody* was destined for salvation . . . he wanted to be the world’s most popular cartoonist, but he knew that he would be drawn into these questions, and he didn’t want to disappoint people or upset them with his own theology.”¹⁴ “My own theological views have changed considerably over the past twenty-five years,” he wrote in 1975, “and I now shy away from anyone who claims to possess all of the truth.”¹⁵

In terms of ethics, Sparky cheated on wife, apparently with more than one woman. In a particularly callous and tacky deception, he sent love notes to one of the women encoded in the *Peanuts* comic strip itself, having the characters utter special terms of endearment and other “inside” jokes. At age 75, he took his first break in 47 years and was back at work after three weeks. He died of colon cancer about seven years ago, without having ever retired, having created nearly 18,000 comic strips. “[A friend] visited him [during his final illness] and recognized that his illness had raised “the same question as ‘Did

⁸ Page 198.

⁹ Page 275.

¹⁰ Page 408.

¹¹ Page 435.

¹² Page 518.

¹³ Page 350.

¹⁴ Page 352.

¹⁵ Page 351.

my mom love me enough?’ Or ‘Does this woman love me enough?’ Now it was ‘Does God love me enough?’”¹⁶ “The estate of the late Peanuts creator Charles Schulz earned [\$35,000,000] from syndication and licensing fees. Seven years after the legendary cartoonist’s death, the strip continues to run in more than 2,400 newspapers around the world, while drawing audiences of more than 14 million to annual specials like “A Charlie Brown Christmas.”¹⁷

Why is it that we read biographies? Are the lives of others merely cautionary tales or “can do” tales reminiscent of Horatio Alger? Do biographies simply illustrate that truth is stranger than fiction? Unitarian Universalist religious educator Sophia Lyon Fahs said, “Each night a child is born is a holy night – a time for singing, a time for wondering, a time for worshipping.” In learning about the lives of others, we are encouraged (in a not so gentle way) to answer these questions: Just exactly *how* is each child special? How are *we* special? What if we do not *feel* special? At this glitzy time of year, when having a little extra money sounds appealing, the life of Sparky Schulz reminds us that wealth does not necessarily bring happiness. His life reminds us that we can look for love in all the wrong places – that is, we can look for love outside ourselves. We may or may not have been loved “enough” in the past (“enough” is a moving target, after all), but we can love ourselves and each other “enough” in the future, starting *now*.

The fragile ego of Sparky Schulz gave the world an astounding cultural inheritance. Charlie Brown, Snoopy, Lucy, Linus, Peppermint Patty, and others – our lives are richer because they live in our imaginations. Yet I personally would forgo this vast cultural inheritance if Sparky might have felt loved for being himself, without feeling driven to perform, without trying to be as well liked as his father, without trying to prove to his mother that he was somebody. In this holiday season and always, may we focus less on whether we were (or are) loved enough and focus instead on how to love ourselves and others wisely and well. May it be so!

¹⁶ Page 562.

¹⁷ “The Numbers” in *Spirit* (magazine of Southwest Airlines), December 2007, p. 58.