Arriba! Abajo! Al centro! Al dentro! The Legend of Lyman Chandler

Lately, I've been spending way too much time in churches. It's a consequence of ascending age that people in my demographic—more than middle age, not quite ancient, gaining on elderly—will begin to die off and be the featured guests—non-speaking, unfortunately—at memorial services, and I understand that it's a blessing to awake each morning on the chlorophyll-producing side of the lawn. But it's still unnerving that so often these days I find myself in a dark oak church pew, fidgeting with an order-of-service program, mouthing the verses to a hymn and mumbling the prayers at a memorial service. Only a few years ago, weddings were my lone reason for darkening the doorstep of a house of worship; now it's funerals. On the plus side, at least you don't have to bring a gift to a memorial, and they usually feed you at the brunch afterward.

These services run the gamut from stiff to casual, from Bible-heavy to Dogma-lite, from a niece with a guitar singing "Amazing Grace" to a full choir intoning "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." In a good one, to my lapsed Presbyterian/failed Unitarian way of thinking, anyway, we mourners will find ourselves both in tears and in stitches. (Who can forget when the four Hoffman sons, memorializing their dad, the sorely missed town dentist, curmudgeon and noted practical joker Dr. Ray Hoffman, began the memorial by entering the sanctuary in tuxedos and sat, simultaneously, on four Whoopie Cushions?) Worst of all is when the deceased was an unconvinced Christian whose fanny rarely touched dark oak, and a visiting mercenary has to be brought in to go through the motions. That makes for a terribly uncomfortable, unsatisfying—even maddening—experience, leaving everyone thinking that they could have done much better by simply offering a toast in the parking lot.

All of which brings to mind probably the best memorial service I have ever been a part of.

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East Aurora, NY. 1973. I suppose that after nearly two millennia of intransigence, it should have occurred to us that the Catholic Church would not budge. The same gang that needed two centuries to admit that Galileo was onto something wasn't about to listen to a bunch of infidels who had a special request regarding the memorial Mass for a friend. So we had to take matters into our own hands.

In July of 1973, our friend, partner in crime, mentor and patron Lyman Chanlder, Jr., son of the Roycroft Print Shop manager of the same name, had died after an agonizing, contentious and often vocal battle with cancer and crippling arthritis. In other words he did NOT go gently into that good night. We were in our early twenties when he finally surrendered to that *pendejo*, the Grim Reaper. Lyman was somewhere north of seventy; no one knew for sure.

The way the Catholic Church comes into the story is this: As a condition of marrying his Mexican señorita, whose given name we never knew since to us she was always Señora Chandler, whom he had met while working as an engineer in the Mexican oilfields in the 1950s, Lyman agreed to countenance, if not fully embrace, Catholicism. According to him, it was an uneasy alliance, more for show than for substance.

In time, their son Roberto fledged and flew away from Guanajuato to Mexico City, and Lyman either retired or found the arthritis that inflamed his hip and knee joints with increasing ferocity too painful to allow him to continue in the oil fields, so he brought the Señora north to East Aurora, where they set up shop in the family homestead near the traffic circle at the west end of the village. Never very comfortable in the climate or society afforded by the American Northeast in general and East Aurora, in particular, she would go back and forth to their little *finca in* Mexico with the onset of cold weather, sometimes with Lyman in tow, but often leaving him to fend for himself for months at a time. That's where my buddies and I came in.

The details of our first encounter with Lyman have been subjected to vagaries of collective memory, but it goes something like this: some of the gang were cruising the parking lot of Tops supermarket, in the mid-'60s, when it still formed the end of Main Street where the circle began. They nearly ran into an older man struggling to manage a bag of groceries while walking with two canes in the slushy glop of late winter. It was Lyman, of course, and in speaking with him they discovered that he had walked the hundred or so yard. They helped him home, over his curse-laden protestations—"I'm not a cripple, damn it to Hell,"—and kindled a friendship. In time we all came to know the man and began to function as a support team for this aging and infirm man. We'd do his grocery shopping for him, handle chores around his house, keep office records, write correspondence and chauffer him to doctor, accountant and stock broker appointments, his faltering, increasingly arthritic hips making driving and walking more and more excruciating.

In return, Lyman gave us a wonderful gift: he treated us teenagers like adults and opened the world this bunch of myopic kids. Yes, at Lyman's we could smoke cigarettes and later marijuana with impunity, unlike at home. And there was always alcohol to be had. In fact, one of our challenges was making complicated cocktails from his bottomless cabinet that featured unheard of liquors and liqueurs from all over the globe. While our contemporaries were up on the railroad tracks waiting for the eighteen-year-old they'd paid to get them some Koch's beer, we were down at Lyman's mix a little of this and a little of that into a cocktail, giving it a name, usually showing off our gradually increasing Spanish vocabulary. "I dub thee the Cabrónyhuevos (Big goat with balls)," for a tequila martini with little perl onions. After each cocktail, Lyman would teach us a toast in the language of the liquor's origin. Tequila from Mexico, the real stuff from the outlying districts with the worm in the bottom, though, was the house favorite, as was the

toast that followed, “Arriba! Abajo! Al centro! Al dentro! Y quién come el gusano, tendrá buena suerte un año.” “(Hold your glass) Up high! Down low! To the middle! To the inside! Who eats the worm has good luck for a year.” Hey it rhymes in Spanish. Damn, we had some laughs.

But it was much more than a naughty boys hangout. At Lyman’s there was conversation. He was a magna cum laude graduate from MIT. He spoke half a dozen languages, and had books in a dozen more—Hebrew, Russian, Sanskrit, Safartic. From him we learned the most colorful curse words in Spanish and a few other tongues. He had read about all the world’s religions, had visited temples, churches and mosques worldwide but favored no religion over another. Catholicism, it’s safe to say, fell far down on his list, and he rarely, never, went to church. The house on the circle was a cluttered warren of fascinalia —chess sets carved from onyx, guns from World War I, books piled upon books, brass from the Orient, pottery from Latin American, wood statuettes from the rain forests. He had traveled the globe and now brought it to us in his living room.

He taught us how to do research on the penny stocks he was certain would secure his fortune. From nickel mines in “Frozen Penguin Arse, Yukon,” as he said, to papaya futures in “Piranha Feast Harbor, Brazil,” we tallied credits and debits, learning to cast out nines (“castrate nines”) to check out math in those pre-computer, pre-calculator, hand crank adding machine days.

As fascinating as he was, he was also cantankerous; paranoid about governments, all law enforcement agencies, anyone, really over twenty-one; and almost devoid of social graces. Perhaps the pain, which persisted in his arthritic hips despite his attempts to counteract it with as eclectic and resourceful (albeit not always legal—he knew about the benefits of medical marijuana fifty years before it became the rage, and dabbled in peyote with unclear results) a pharmacopoeia as was available, made him unable to behave in public. Perhaps it was the notion that as a cripple—his word not ours—he was treated like a second class citizen so he might as well act like it. Whatever, it was always an adventure when he would declare a need to go to Buffalo to see his investment broker. Then we’d fire up the Chevy Corvair Spider (take that, Ralph Nader) and head off to the big city of Buffalo where after his meeting, he’d want to have a cocktail at a fancy restaurant, just to spite the bastards. He’d double cane up to the door of a place known to be a hangout of local bigwigs. “Let’s lower their standards some, caballeros,” he’d say. Undoubtedly, he’d find fault with his martini, raise a ruckus, start swinging his gold-tipped, hand-carved canes about in a threatening manner, and we’d be asked to leave, one step ahead of the police.

Lyman served as a patron of sorts, for us, as well as a mentor. If we had a date with a special young lady, he’d lend us the Corvair and push a few bucks our way. He’d make reading lists of great book and demand that we read them. When I told him of my plans

to escape to Florida for Spring Break in 1968, he loaded me down with all manner goodies from his paranoiac's arsenal: switch blade, mace, exploding fountain pen."

Our parents, as you can imagine, thought the worst: old man, befriending young boys, plying them with alcohol and God knows what else equals perversion. I introduced him to my parents a few times, but he was uncomfortable in their presence and preferred the company of "the sophisticated rabble," as he called us.

We boys scattered some after high school, but we'd meet up with Lyman on breaks and summers. By then Señora had stopped coming to East Aurora except on the rarest of of occasions. By 1973 I was back in town, and I was there when Lyman's diagnosis of cancer became known. I helped as I could; others did as well. Near the end Señora returned to sit with her husband in his last months. She, a fervent Catholic who, with good reason, feared for her husband's soul, enlisted the aid of the local priest, Monsignor D _____ to to make Lyman as presentable, spiritually, as possible when he went to meet his maker.

Lyman, as you would guess if you've been reading carefully, could not stand Monsignor D_____. He was pompous, condescending, overbearing, unforgiving, uncompromising, and seemed to be pleased with the thought of Lyman's inevitable descent in the fires. Most irritating of all was the fact that Lyman found Monsignor D_____ ignorant and myopic, uneducated about other beliefs, uninterested in further study of theology. Hardly a match for Lyman's towering intellect. There was an associate pastor at the church in those days of full seminaries and flush coffers—Father N_____—who was more to Lyman's liking. As the day of Lyman's demise became imminent, and as Lyman realized that his good wife would haul his carcass to the Catholic Church for a funeral Mass whether he wanted it or not—"Over my dead body," he'd roared before realizing the joke and exploding into a cursing fit that dissolved at first into laughter and then into coughing, and then into a difficult, silence. As a compromise we asked if Father N_____ could say the Mass, since he wasn't as likely to dwell on Lyman's many sins, and might shine a small light on his virtues before the box went into the hole at the cemetery.

When the day came, though, and as I, with five friends, wheeled the pall into the church, there was the monsignor, with a sardonic look on his face, to greet us. Father N_____ was nowhere to be seen.

Half an hour into the Mass, as the priest was dishing lustily about the wages of sin and slim chance of admittance to Heaven for certain of us, we had had enough.

With our ringleader Teddy Nichols at the fore, we pallbearers, a scroungy lot of non-believers if ever there was one, in rumpled trousers and shirts from the need-to-be-ironed pile, took hold of the coffin, still on its caisson, rolled it, top speed, out of the church to

the gasps of horror and the protestations of red-faced Monsignor D_____. “In the name of God! This is blasphemy! I’ll have you arrested. The bunch of you.”

With ushers and elders in hot pursuit, we hurried to the back of the parking lot where I had been directed to leave my old pickup so it wouldn’t clash with the sedans of the decent folk in attendance. The caisson was about the height of my truck’s bed. After sliding the coffin into the bed, Teddy Nichols and John Bradigan jumped in to steady the thing while I fired the truck up and lurched away toward out the back, over the lawn at the nearby convent, through the Roycroft’s driveway, onto Grove Street, then onto Main Street, under the railroad tracks and out of sight behind the Agway Feed Store.

There, in the sunshine, our pursuers temporarily stymied, we hooted as loud as we could. Teddy produced a bottle of tequila, the good stuff with the worm in the bottle from Guanajuato and passed it around.

“Arriba! Abajo! Al centro! Al dentro! Quién come el gusano, tendrá buena suerte un año.”

Goddammit! That’s a good story. I’ll always wonder what might have happened if we’d actually done this during Lyman’s service. We’d probably still be in in jail. As it is, we behaved, except for shooting daggers from our eyes toward the priest as he droned on for an hour, an hour and a half in the July heat. We didn’t have our tequila toast until everyone had left the graveyard later that afternoon. The worm, the gusano, we left with Lyman and wished him the best.