

War in Switzerland

From Adam Showalter's Blog 2012

Charles sat with his widowed mother in a small house in Lincolnshire, England. It was cold and almost Christmas. They warmed next to the fireplace, Charles on the floor and his mother under a blanket in her recliner. She was 93 years old and her face was wrinkled and thinning.

“Mother,” Charles asked, “What was the happiest time in your life?” He knew this would be the last time he’d see his mother alive. Her health was worsening, and he lived far away now. He was certain that the next time he saw her it would be at her funeral, and he wanted to make sure he didn’t squander their time by talking about the weather.

His mother had never struck him as a happy person. It wasn’t that she seemed depressed or angry ever; it was just that she never seemed to have any joy in her life. The occasional warmth Charles and his brother extracted from her seemed to come from a sense of duty rather than from joy or happiness. He looked out the window at the gray afternoon sky and waited for her response.

She rocked back in her chair and watched the fire. Charles wondered if she’d heard his question. “Mother, what was the...”

“I heard you, Charles.” She interrupted. “I just don’t know if you will understand my answer.”

Charles looked at her. Her eyes were closed and he saw the creases that extended outward from the corners. Not surprisingly they looked just like the ones on his own aging face. She took in a deep breath and then spoke. “The happiest time in my life was during The War. That was the happiest I ever felt.”

It wasn’t what he expected, and certainly it was not what he wanted to hear. Wasn’t her happiest memory when he and his brother were innocent little boys wrestling about on the ground? If not then, maybe her honeymoon with his father. Charles poked a stick at the fire and stiffened his back.

“The war, mother? The happiest time in your life was during World War II? When the world was consumed by death and violence?”

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“I was 20 years old when the war started. In all of my life since then, I’ve never felt so intensely alive,” She said. Charles focused on keeping the fire alive so he didn’t have to look at her. “I felt so...I don’t know - there was such a sense of unity. We all knew what we had to do. We didn’t question our purpose. We knew. Every day, when we woke up, we knew what our purpose was. To fight Germany. To beat the Germans. We had a clearly defined enemy.”

“Wartime, mother? That’s the happiest you ever felt?”

“You’ve not had a war of your own, so I don’t expect you to understand, Charles.”

“And I reckon I won’t ever completely understand it,” He tells me.

Charles is one of the most fascinating people I’ve met in the UAE, and he’s one of my best friends, despite the fact that he’s much older than I am. Almost 30 years older in fact. He is another English teacher at the school where I work.

We’re sitting alone in his classroom when he tells me about his visit home and the conversation with his mother. He is still wrestling with it - trying to make sense of it. The white hairs on his short beard hug thoughtful lines that cut deeply across his face and out from his eyes. Sun streams in through the open door to his classroom, and it lights up the student papers taped haphazardly on his wall. We are worlds away from Lincolnshire, England but his mind is still there.

A thoughtful speaker with a sturdy British accent, Charles doesn’t tell stories, he paints pictures with words. And that is probably why I always find myself in his room when I don’t have a class. I wish I were one of his students. A Cambridge graduate who has worked and traveled around the world, he’s intensely knowledgeable and thoughtful - a brilliant speaker, and an equally talented listener.

“It’s a bit jolting to hear your mum admit that she felt the happiest amidst the longest and most violent war the world has ever seen.” He says.

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"I can see how that would throw you for a loop," I tell him. "It seems kinda morbid."

"I suppose it makes sense though," He says. "Most of us go through life wondering what it is we're meant to do here. But when England was at war, mum didn't have to wonder. She had a clearly defined purpose and a clearly defined enemy." He leans back in his chair and clasps his hands together behind his head. We both sit silently for a moment and think.

A couple of boys laugh as they walk past the door to Charles's classroom. One of them punches the other in the arm, and a playful wrestling match ensues in the sunlit corridor.

Charles and I spectate as the two playfully fight each other.

"There are a couple of young men who know how vital battle is to their happiness." I say lightly, hoping to clear the air of lingering sadness Charles's story left. "Look how happy they are when they fight each other."

"I apologize. That was a bit dreary wasn't it? Not, perhaps, my most uplifting of tales. It's just something I've been thinking about. Shall we talk about something a shade less depressing? Have you decided what you'll do with your summer holiday? I reckon you'll do something more pleasant than visiting your dying mother on a gray day in England."

I turn away from the playful scuffle in the hallway and look back at Charles. He's smiling now and leaning back in his chair, the solemn look on his face replaced by a sideways grin.

"I'm going to fly to Switzerland for a week, and then I'm heading back to the States," I tell him.

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"Oh, wonderful. I love Switzerland!" Charles has been just about everywhere and done just about everything, so that he's been to Switzerland surprises me none at all. "What will you do there?" He asks.

"I'm going to run a half marathon in the Alps," I spill, unable to hide my enthusiasm. I've never been to Europe and I've never run a half marathon either, so I'm really looking forward to my summer holiday. "I've been training for the race for a month, but just last night I booked my flight to Zurich."

"My goodness. You do realize that a marathon is twenty-two kilometers, yes?"

"Ya, but it's only *thirteen* miles."

The lines around his beard creep up into a smile. "A very American way to look at it, indeed. And you've already registered for the race?"

"I've registered for the race, booked the flight, and started the training. I've been running well over 50 kilometers every week for the last month," I tell him.

"That sounds awful, but good for you. That's splendid. Well, no actually I think you're quite mad. I admire your gumption, but I think you're mad. Why are you doing it?"

"What do you mean, why?" I ask.

"I mean why do you want to run 22 kilometers," He pauses and grins, "Or 13 miles? It's not something most people would do voluntarily."

Strangely enough - I never thought about it and suddenly I see what he means. What struck me as a perfectly reasonable fitness goal now strikes me as odd too. What sick trait do I possess that makes me want to wreck my body for 3 months in preparation for a race that will take less than 2 hours? Why do I feel satisfaction when I see my laundry basket full of sweat-drenched headbands and t-shirts? Why do my sore knees feel like badges of honor?

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"I'm not exactly sure," I admit to Charles. "If I'm honest, the training is physically exhausting. Last night I waited until 8:00 p.m and when I went outside to run my 11 kilometers for the day, it was still over ninety degrees. My throat was so dry when I finished that I could barely swallow any water. My heart rate was jacked up so much that I rolled around in bed unable to relax or fall asleep. My knees feel like they have cement in them. So I guess I don't really know why I'm doing it... except that I love it. It makes me happy."

Charles unfolds his hands from behind his head and leans in towards me; a mischievous smile dashes across his eyes, but it disappears as quickly as it appeared. I wonder what's on his mind. He doesn't talk though; he simply waits for me to carry on.

"It sounds miserable, I know. And it is. But somehow it also feels really good. When I run it's like there's this voice in my head that says you can't do it, and it's really fun to try and defeat it. I feel like I'm just rambling. What were you smiling about a second ago?"

"Tell me more about the voice and I'll tell you why I was smiling."

"You know the voice. It's the thing that tells you that you can't do something. Honestly, Charles, that voice is probably the reason I'm here right now. It's always been in my head telling me I can't do things."

"Really? How is it responsible for you being here?"

"It told me I was too small-town and too scared to go live in another part of the world. It told me I was stuck in Missouri, and I might as well accept it. I hate that part of myself - that voice. I've always felt compelled to fight it. That's why I started looking for ways to get out of America and experience the world. I wanted to broaden my perspective yes, but I also wanted to squelch that voice. A lot of what I do in my life is about killing that voice. Seriously, what were you smiling about?"

"I'll tell you after you finish telling me about this voice of yours."

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"Well, I always try to prove it wrong, but it never really goes away. It's my biggest enemy. It tells me I'm a lousy teacher. It tells me I'll never be a good musician. It tells me I'll never be able to do certain tricks on a wakeboard. It tells me I can't write well. I'm always trying to prove it wrong, and nothing feels better than when I do prove it wrong. That's probably the main reason I'm running this race. I want to prove it wrong."

Charles smiles and loosens up his necktie. "It sounds like you have a clearly defined enemy. Just like Mother did during the war. And it seems to make you very happy to fight that enemy." He pauses for a second to let me think about it. "Do you see why I was smiling?"

And I do see. My war with the voice is just like his mother's war with Germany. That voice in my head is what the German's were for his mother. It is my clearly-defined enemy. It gives me purpose. I don't have to wonder what I'm meant to do with my life right now. When I finish with work I glance at my training program, write the day's regimen on my hand with a blue pen, lace up my Nikes, and then go running.

It gives me a purpose, just like the war gave Charles's mother a purpose. I'm not just swinging blindly at an enemy that I can't see; I know what I'm fighting just like she knew what she was fighting. I've waged a war on the part of myself that I hate - that voice. And the war with that stupid voice is making me feel happy.

Most people couldn't understand why Charles's mom would identify wartime as the happiest stretch of her life. Most wouldn't understand why I want to run a half marathon in the oxygen-starved altitudes of the Swiss Alps. But I see a connection.

Charles shuffles some papers around on his desk and then looks up at me, still smiling.

It's funny though," He says, "You're going to Switzerland to fight the war with your voice. Switzerland is the one place that managed to stay neutral during my mother's war."