

OUR MARRIAGE—FOR BETTER, FOR VERSE

Life With a Jewish Christian Poet

Watching a Jewish Mother “Let Go”

Marrying the firstborn son in a Jewish household was a gift I never took lightly, nor did his family. In the beginning I was probably surveyed with some apprehension, although his parents, George and Sally, and sister, Penny, hid it from me and I was oblivious, so in love was I. The evening Don and I announced our plans to marry, his father sat me down in his study to formally welcome me, treating me with engaging courtliness. I surmised that he was relieved his son had found a wife with good breeding and intelligence and that he admired my acumen in the world of work for what it might bode for Don's achievement in that arena. He had little comprehension of Don's vocation as an artist and poet. He himself was a lawyer who finally fulfilled his lifelong dream of becoming a judge, only to be tormented with clinical depression for which there were less effective cures at the time.



Sally, like any Jewish mother, let go of her son slowly. He had been her mainstay during the years of her husband's severe depressions, and Don's marriage to me meant she was losing her son's constant presence and care. Sally herself had been bereft at the age of eight, losing her mother to the 1918 flu epidemic. Her father had been at a loss to deal with her and her twin brothers, so he boarded them with a succession of relatives and friends. Sally said her happiest times were the years spent in a Catholic orphanage, which made her congenial to the marriages of one brother to a Catholic, the other to a Protestant. It also meant that Sally was less opposed to Don's finding a non-Jewish wife.

Sally became a legend among her community of friends and relatives. She was Gracie Allen to anyone's George Burns, and accomplished this artlessly. In her younger days, she had been a beautiful princess, having learned well the art of charming others in order to be accepted in the many homes where she was placed. Everyone who knows her has a "Sally story" featuring one of her characteristic malapropisms. Her quirky humor was never contrived but came up without guile. "Every time I talk," Sally told me one day, "I go off on a tantrum."



Sally and George as young persons

Don loves to tell the story about Sally sitting in Penny's kitchen one day and idly watching the garden. Suddenly a crested bird swooped down and landed on a post. "Oh look!" cried Sally. "There's a cardinal!" A moment of puzzlement came over her face. "But it's blue!"

Her son-in-law Stu tells of the time he took her to a concert that turned out to be less than pleasurable. Next morning he phoned her to apologize.



"I'm sorry I took you to that concert which turned out so miserably."

"Oh, that's all right," Sally protested.

"No," Stu persisted. "It was a bad concert and I don't like taking you to things you don't want to go to."

"That's all right, Stu. Sometimes I like to do things I don't like to do."

In the early days of our marriage, we were traveling one afternoon with Sally in the back seat of our car. Sally was chiding Don about something. I don't recall now what, but she was usually concerned about two things: what he was wearing (she had given up on changing his preference for long hair), and how he was earning money. She could never fathom that his work at the Urban Life Center counseling students was a real job, because it was a position we had created. To her, work in an art gallery or as a doorman were real jobs because they came with a regular paycheck from an established institution.

On this particular day, hearing her criticize Don, I rebelled and spoke up. "Sally, stop criticizing Don. I don't want to hear that anymore." I spoke sharply, and an uncomfortable silence followed.

A few minutes later, I felt a soft gloved hand on my shoulder. "We're still friends, aren't we?" she asked in an uncharacteristically small voice.

"Of course," I responded with warmth, grasping that tiny outstretched hand. The two of us had crossed an invisible barrier. Goyim could have chutzpah too and it was all right.

Sally's humor could have bite, too, but the marvel of it was how unconscious she was about its impact. Once we were gathered at the funeral of a family friend. Before the procession to the cemetery formed, Stu came over to Sally and whispered in her ear.

"Sally," he began. "I am not going to be able to go out to the cemetery with everyone because I have to go back to the office."

Sally looked up at him affectionately, "That's all right, Stu. Business before pleasure."

Sally came to visit us when we moved to Boston. I suspected she wanted to check out the suitability of our circumstances, which might cause question in the days when we lived on Maryland Street in Dorchester. When she asked how we were, as she did often, I sensed that she was concerned primarily over our financial and physical comfort, although she insisted our choices were fine with her "so long as you're happy." And she genuinely meant that, though her definitions of comfort were more upscale than ours at that point.

It was her daughter, Penny, who lovingly attended to Sally's needs as she aged, obtaining the best of care and devoting time to her as the end drew near. Sally basked in the attention, retained her humor and feistiness to the end, and we are sure she allowed herself to die the one time Penny and Stu were away from her side spending a weekend in New York City celebrating their wedding anniversary. We all knew she was making it as easy for Penny as she could.



Don mourned in his characteristic way. He dedicated a small booklet containing a long poem to his mother, and the other two women in his life—Penny and me. A year later, he directed and produced an artistic performance piece at a local museum based on another of his poems as a Kaddish tribute to his mother. He placed a small urn of some of her ashes in the center of the space to mark the occasion silently, since museum authorities were nervous about anything that might be construed as a religious ceremony. We think Sally would have appreciated the tribute, done in this unorthodox fashion.

The Poetry of Our Life

I knew I married a poet. After all, that was Don's introduction of himself to me in the beginning. He knew better than I did what the cost of that might be. Marrying a poet was a natural move for me, since my father also wrote poetry.

But I had not reckoned on Don, who was not like anyone else I had ever known. In those wild crazy first days of our romance, Don would bring his trumpet over to my apartment in the evening, and hunch down on the floor in my room to play free jazz by the hour. I was content to listen, happy to be in his presence, though the jazz genre was new to my ears. I could try to interpret this man by every conceivable category at my disposal—his Jewishness; his identity as an artist, poet, and musician; his favored firstborn son status; his abstract way of speaking—but nothing computed in those terms.

I knew I could count on him, not in the sense of being monotonously repetitive and predictable, but in the sense of being true, being utterly and forever himself. What I saw was indeed what I got, and at every moment in time. But with him, each moment was fresh and might mean he would disagree today with what he had stated with brash authority yesterday. And he wanted to be able to disagree again tomorrow. Don't fence him in. He both infuriated and intrigued our peers on the Urban Life Center board one time when he declared, "I just want to be able to not be a Christian on Tuesdays!"

At times we would engage in passionate conversations about Don's work as a poet. One of these heated up to fever pitch one day as we talked about our two worlds. Don posed a question to me that felt climactic and ominous: "What is a poet?" I fumbled about for an adequate answer, appalled and frightened at the space between us at that moment. I sat there tongue-tied.

Later that same day, a friend came in. We put the same question to her. She was meditative for a brief moment, then said, "A poet is someone who loves words." Don's response was immediate and strong, "Yes!" I felt twice as dumb. An impelling question rose: What was it about this New England peasant preacher's daughter that had attracted this postmodern poet? How did a member of urban intellectual Jewish culture tolerate this incurably romantic woman who cried at movies and during hymns at church?

We were alike in our intensity, Don about his art, and I about my psychological and spiritual explorations. In practical matters, my competence kept our daily lives on an even keel, both in our counseling work and in providing nutritious meals. Don's temperament gave him the necessary detachment to support me in my times of struggle with physical symptoms and night terrors, allowing me to follow my solo journey when this was essential. I understood and completely accepted this separateness. To me, "*every man/woman is an island.*" A journal entry records a moment of stepping apart from each other during my ordeal of the dark night of the soul.

Today I walked in the arboretum, mostly alone. Don sat in the shade. He told me at breakfast, almost harshly, that he is having to pursue his separate path (poetry) and not keep up with my journey, either by reading, or being a sounding board.

The tone was hard to hear, not so much the contents. I feel cut off or as though it took extra energy for him to cut himself off. I felt numb, silent, unable to respond.

In the arboretum, I felt as alone as I ever remember feeling, and the old familiar gag-in-the-throat soreness arose. I walked in the trees with my camera, only taking pictures of tree crotches, and cried aloud. All I could get out was a continuous desolate chant of the one word "I"—"I"—"I"—"I-land." I am alone in what I am going through. It is different from loneliness, It feels whole. But deep, and alone.

At home now, I feel humble, small, wanting to remain hidden. Not deflated, and in opposition to inflation, but desiring hiddenness.

A little later, during the week we spent together on retreat in Nova Scotia, I was given a wonderful dream fragment that became a benediction on my soul journey, and on the particular character of our marriage. I marked how Don and I were in the sea, swimming separately, while at the same time there was an image of a woman alone who felt at home under the sea. This exemplified the way Don stayed near me during my solo journey during those turbulent years in the abyss.

Our separate togetherness does not fracture our marriage, but opens it up to a deeper togetherness, a togetherness of soul. As I sit here this afternoon at my computer, Don is two rooms away tussling with his latest poetic opus. A cord of energy and love binds our hearts. And when we come together in a few hours, we will talk or be silent, touch or be each in his/her own space, going through the predictable motions of eating or walking or taking a bath by candlelight. It is very different not to need each other, but to *want* each other.

We do not process our relationship psychologically very much. There is a deep underlying assumption between us that has been there from the beginning. We seemed to know very soon after we met that we would be husband and wife, so we worked things out with that assumption firmly in our minds and hearts. I cannot imagine anything more secure. God is between us forever.

A Jewish Christian

The essence of Don's poetic endeavors has to do with his dual identity as a Jew and as a Christian. For years, he lived in the shadow of images he first saw as an eight-year-old in 1945 looking at pictures of the death camp at Buchenwald. As he grew into manhood, he saw that his Jewish peers were assimilating into the society that gave them new respect. They were achieving status and wealth through this newfound acceptance, born of the outpouring of sympathy for the terrible tragedy of the Holocaust.

Don turned instinctively and resolutely from this path of worldly success, immersing himself in jazz. His uncle ran the Sutherland Hotel Lounge on South Drexel, where he got Don to run sessions for him, thus introducing Don to a wonderful world of innovation in a music that was evolving from that spot.

Later, he turned to performance art, fascinated by the “Happenings” popular in the early 1960s with their emphasis on the unexpectedness of change and the absurd. When he discovered painting, he began working out his existential terror and angst onto large canvases. He had a show at the well-respected Hyde Park Art Center in 1958. When the medium of painting dried up for him, he turned to poetry, and that took deep root and continued throughout the rest of his life.

It was in poetry that Don worked out his dual identity as a Jew and as a Christian. An underlying beat in much of his poetry lay in his reworking of the Jewish experience, and in particular the Holocaust. I have watched him over the years trying to exorcise this element in his work by moving to a comic absurdity in his poems. This more humorous genre will placate his muse for a time; then abruptly he will find himself turning back to writing more somber pieces about the darkness of those World War II years in Germany and Poland and Russia.

Oddly enough, both Don and I feel a connection to the Jewish experience. I cannot explain how it is that when I read a line in the Psalms, such as I did yesterday, “God led us into the wilderness, and sustained us,” that I believe the “us” refers to me. Not that I feel Jewish; I do not. But their history is so much my own as a Christian. Don says, “Christianity is a sect of Judaism.” I understand that viscerally. From the time we first met, we found we could talk on the same wave length, Jew and Gentile, but both Christians.

It is then significant that the deepest beat in the heart of Don’s poetry emanates from that fundamental decision of his life—to become a Christian. Don’s complex relationship to his dual identity is exemplified in many of his poems, such as these:

With the Children

No, this long ritual
I can not stay Jewish;
This full ritual
I must go out in the other Pale.

Into the future Pale
Spreading through Sabbaths
Generations,
Blessed and sleeping.

The children await me,
Bathing their child.
No holidays contain me;
I will not stay Jewish.

Christianity: Unconditioned

Judaism's a rigidity now.
Temple is inviolate.
Out at God, among the forces
Her destruction is found.
Where the true, elemental "turning"
Cuts well into dominion
The Temple lies, immutable.
Her freedom, since, lies there.
Converted into religion
And religiosity:
While over her lost immediate
Christ life is shining.

This is my Shul

This is my Shul: what is melodic,
What exists in painter,
In apprehensive sky,
In possible stars of curlicue.

This is my Service: smelling the Evening,
Cutting the patina with my spacious prayer,
Plucking the Cantor,
Snatching man's helter-skelter voice.

Becoming a Christian allowed Don to break free from past definitions of religious experience and to affirm his upside-down values—the belief that the “other world” is the essential one. The Jerusalem in Israel is not his ultimate reality, but the Jerusalem in the human heart, and the new Jerusalem of future glory. He sees how Judaism, as well as Islam, and some aspects of Christianity, become mired in materialist assumptions: “do these rituals and get the reward.” For Don, that kind of gospel was exploded when Jesus was crucified and refused to become just another interesting rabbi.

In the days following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, we both had to reassess our faith, and take a hard look at the three faiths at war in the world: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. What was truly radical now? Was it to effect change through physical means—dropping bombs, or sacks of wheat? How important was land, a shrine, a holy place? Some of the themes in my own spiritual journey emerged with new clarity: the essence of my faith rooted in that “other world” as my home and the necessity of remaining centered in the inner life of union with Jesus as I went about daily tasks.

For Don this meant collecting the entire body of his poetry into a single volume entitled *Fear Itself*. He is writing now from a reinforced awareness of his Christian home in the new Jerusalem. He signs his work with the name Isaiah Israel,” as indication of where his soul abides.

In 1994, we celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary by taking an extended trip to France that entwined our two heritages in a single strand. We had seen Pierre Sauvage's film *Weapons of the Spirit* and read Philip Hallie's *Lest Innocent Blood be Shed*, both of them about the little Huguenot village of Le Chambon Sur Lignon that had sheltered thousands of Jews during the Nazi occupation of France. It had been of incalculable comfort to me to know there were some Christians in Europe in World War II who had stood firm in their faith and followed through on the consequent actions of that faith, when so much of civilized humanity caved in before the Nazi juggernaut of power. "Let's go to France, and to Le Chambon!" The trip turned instantly into a pilgrimage.

We traveled first to Provence, looked up Camus' grave, walked the roads near Cezanne's studio and by the castle where Picasso had lodged, before heading north to Le Chambon. There we found Ernest and Rose Chazot.

Ernest and Rose were an elderly couple, kindly grandparent like folks. Many years had passed since they sheltered a Jewish family from Vienna in their home during the war. Graciously, they invited us inside, lit the fire already laid in the fireplace, and we began to speak as best we could across the language barrier. I knew enough French to convey to them that my husband was Jewish, and that he had been affected by images of the concentration camp as a young boy, and had been writing poetry to honor the memory of the Holocaust. I told them we came to thank them for what they and others in Le Chambon had done for Jewish refugees during the Nazi occupation in World War II. As I spoke, both Don and I wept. Just as the book and film indicated, the Chambon folks are modest and unassuming about what they did. Rose made it very clear that what they did is what everyone should do as a Christian. "C'est normal."

We will always remember our visit to Le Chambon. It was a wonderful way to spend our wedding anniversary.

It has also been a wonderful way to spend my life—this life with Don and with God. It continues.