

Patricia Ellis Kendall writes about Charles Crane, the former UBC student whose collection of books in Braille formed the basis of the holdings in the Crane Library for the blind and visually impaired. Located in Brock Hall Annex, the Library opened in 1968 and was managed for 35 years by Paul Thiele.

The Touch of Greatness

I don't remember when I was first introduced to Charlie Crane, but I do remember when I first talked to him. As far as I was concerned, Charlie had been around forever, this big man with a booming voice and a book under his arm, the regular guest whom Dad brought home every few weeks just after Sunday lunch. Dad would lead Charlie into the living room and close the door, and there they would sit, in mysterious silence, for the next three or four hours. Then Mother would announce that dinner was ready, Dad would convey that to Charlie, and Charlie would stand and offer his hand to her, saying, loudly and invariably, "Gree-TINGS, Mar-gar-ET! You are WELL?"

Mother would not respond, because she didn't speak his language. For Charles Allen Crane had been both deaf and blind since cerebral meningitis nearly killed him at the age of nine months. The only way to communicate verbally with him was to spell out each word on his left hand, using what was called the "hand alphabet." Mother had never learned that alphabet, but Dad was thoroughly proficient in it, because he had been Charlie's "reader" at the University of British Columbia. The two young men had met in 1931 when Dad was beginning his fourth year of university and Charlie had received tentative permission to try his hand at university-level classes, accompanied by a paid "intervener": someone proficient in the manual alphabet who could translate lectures and examination questions into Charlie's hand. That, of course, was only the beginning, for then there was the matter of out-of-class reading. Almost no books existed in Braille at that time, so Charlie needed volunteers to read texts to him. Since his passion was the classics, Latin and Greek language and history, he joined the campus Classics Club. And Dad, an equally classics-mad club member, saw an opportunity to serve a fellow scholar that turned into a lifelong friendship.

That much I knew by the time I was six or so and was occasionally allowed into that Sunday-afternoon sanctum. I also knew that those long silent sessions consisted mainly of Dad "reading" into Charlie's hand whatever Latin tome he had brought this time, Charlie's great left paw still as still and the fingers of Dad's right hand flying so fast I could barely see them: swish his hand across Charlie's palm, tap a fingertip, tap palm with curved forefinger, close Charlie's hand into a fist and pound it lightly, tap another finger, draw a line on the palm, etc., etc. It was astonishing to watch and Dad could keep it up quite literally for hours at a time.

By the time I was seven, I was as hooked on books as my mother and father, and could spell most words. That was when Dad taught me the hand alphabet so I could talk to Charlie "my very own self." Charlie was clearly thrilled; I'm pretty sure I was the first child he'd conversed with since his own childhood. I was a bit intimidated at first, knowing how slowly I was going,

but he patiently helped me, anticipating the next letter of a word and flattening his hand for the swish of an H, forming a fist for a G or offering the correct fingertip for a vowel (A E I O U, thumb through little finger), and so on. Later on—I'm guessing I was about ten—we'd make a game of it, me trying to trick him by starting a sentence and then throwing in a word he wouldn't be expecting. He loved it when I fooled him and would throw back his head and laugh, sometimes bellowing, "Ver-y good TRICK, Pat-SY!" By the time I was 13 or 14, he no longer prompted me as I talked to him, which I considered a great compliment, though I did sometimes miss our game. But I'm convinced that this man who "couldn't read" helped me develop my great passion for words and how they can go together in unexpected ways...

Not that we had long conversations. I never really got to the point where my fingers, deft from constant practice, automatically translated my thoughts, so it was tiring to converse with Charlie for more than a few minutes. And then there were his responses. For, like Helen Keller before him but very, very few other congenitally deaf-blind people of his generation, Charles Crane could, and did, speak aloud.

Locked in his dark, silent inner space, Charlie had nonetheless been taught to speak at the age of ten at the Halifax School for the Deaf on the other coast of Canada. (The teaching process created by the school's brilliant principal is fascinating to me, but since, astonishingly, not everyone's as interested as I am in the mechanics of language acquisition, I'll spare you the details.) Charlie pronounced each syllable clearly, distinctly, loudly—and separately. What made it tough going for the listener was his in-a-BIL-i-TY to ADD em-pha-SIS ON the right syl-a-BLE, or to use pitch to indicate a question, command or statement. Everything was an exclamation! It embarrassed me to have to ask him to repeat, so I would take a stab at what he'd probably said and respond to that. I think I got it right most of the time, but it was tough going at times, even in my late teens.

Where I *could* help, though, from the beginning, was by introducing him to the other kids in the neighborhood and telling him their names. They were entranced by him; the news spread far and wide that Charlie could put a hand on your head and tell at once what color your hair was. (He was never, never wrong, either.) Always asking permission first, he would then run his fingers lightly over your face—and never forget you thereafter. Next time, he'd touch your face, beam his broad smile, and boom "Hell-O, Don-ALD Max-WELL," or whatever your name was, and you were his forever.

Nor was Charlie's prodigious touch-memory restricted to faces. Much, much later I read the account of one Paul Thiele about his first meeting with Charles Crane, toward the end of Charlie's life. Paul, aged 18 and severely sight-impaired himself, had been hired by the C-NIB (Canadian National Institute for the Blind) as a recreational director at the Institute's lodge on heavily wooded Bowen Island, just up the B.C. coast from Vancouver. That year Charlie, now in his fifties, joined the group for a two-week vacation. Though other staff members spoke of Mr. Crane with awe, young Paul was not impressed: "I felt somewhat disappointed," he said later. "To me, he had all the earmarks of being retarded. I sort of wrote him off." But, as Thiele's interviewer Rosemary Anderson puts it:

The young recreation director has a surprise coming.

“I took a bunch of holidayers out for a nature walk—these were blind adults—and Charlie wanted to come along. One of the things I did was to get the people to come up to a big tree along the path and put their arms around it . . . so they could sense the size and the feel of the thing. Well, Charlie came up, too, and put his arms around the tree. And then he asked me through an ‘interpreter’ who understood his speech, what kind of tree it was.”

Paul laughs. “Hell, I don’t know trees. So I faked it. I said, uhh, maple.”

The group resumed their walk. When they returned to the lodge, Charlie sent Thiele a beautifully typed note, thanking him profusely for the outing, then adding: “From the depth and texture of the bark and its moisture and the size of the leaves, I deduce that the tree couldn’t have been a maple. I assume it was a *Platanus acerifolia* (London planetree).”

“And I knew then that I’d been told, nicely, not to make things up,” says Thiele. “I’d been put in my place by a great man.”

Persons, plants, animals, buildings, conversations and books and all their contents—all were worth remembering to Charlie. Anything and anyone he touched was taken in with gusto, treasured—and remembered forever.

Meals, too. Supper time was a grand occasion for Charlie. Mother, a pretty good but far from gourmet cook, would make a special effort for those meals, Charlie’s sense of taste being, as she put it, “one of his few remaining pleasures.” At the time I had no idea just how strongly he had developed his three remaining physical senses to compensate for the two missing ones; in retrospect, I can certainly understand why eating was a sacred ritual to be undertaken with solemn, undivided attention. He did not attempt to converse with us over food; he ate, slowly and appreciatively, and we conducted our normal mealtime discussions around him. Then, after coffee, he would pronounce, equally ritualistically: “Thank YOU, Mar-gar-ET! A CUL-in-ar-Y a-chieve-MENT!”

Except once. One particular Charlie Sunday, when I was somewhere in my teens, Mother was having a disastrous cooking day. The roast was burned. The potatoes were underdone, the green beans a soggy mess. And dessert, an area where she usually outdid herself for Charlie, bombed as well. (I don’t remember what it was anymore, just that none of us could eat more than two bites.) She served the coffee, which apparently was decent enough. Then we waited with bated breath. He paused, longer than usual. Then with just the slightest twitch at the corner of his mouth, he announced: “VER-y good coff-EE, Mar-gar-ET!”

That was Charlie as I knew him then: uncompromisingly honest, faultlessly courteous, and brilliantly combining the two. That he was also much, MUCH more, I didn’t learn until many

years later.

Later on, Charlie would help me with my homework—or simply help satisfy my unending curiosity about the world and everything in it. This being wa-a-ay pre-Internet, I could either look up unknowns in the Encyclopedia Britannica we’d splurged on when I was 14 or so, or ask Charlie: Where is... what is... who is... when did... ? And he would always, *always* know. I never stumped him with a question, not once. (Okay, I admit it: this was the game I substituted for the defunct beat-the-prompting-fingers game. This one I lost every time.) I’d gallop down the stairs from my room when I heard Dad take his break, rush into the living room and spell “Hi, Charlie. What were the beginning and ending dates of the American Civil War?” (We were Canadian, remember. This wasn’t taught in our curriculum.) Or “Hello again, Charlie. Where’s Lake Titicaca?” or “Which Roman emperor conquered Jerusalem?” or “What were three main thoroughfares in 18th-century London?” And he would tell me. Always. Instantly and with no hesitation. Unlike the Britannica, Charlie was thoroughly cross-indexed: more Google than Britannica. It was at that point that I began to get just an inkling of the “more” that lay under his patient, beaming surface.

My awe deepened after my one visit to Charlie’s place. I was about 15, as I recall. Dad had to drop off a book and I asked to come in with him. We went through a side door and down into the basement of the old house where Charlie rented a single room. Charlie, “hearing” our approach through the floor, invited us into a room that was one percent bedroom, 99 percent library. All four walls were lined floor to ceiling with bookshelves, and every shelf carried a full load of books, mostly old-looking, thick, unwieldy books.

“What do you think?” asked Charlie. (I’ll spare you the attempts to reproduce his pronunciation from now on; you get the point.) Seizing his hand, I told him, “This is incredible! I never imagined one person could have so many books! Have you read them all?”

“Nearly all,” said he.

“Do you know what’s in them all?”

“What would you like to read about?” he asked.

Playing still my private game with him, I grabbed for something that would be unlikely to show up here. In school we’d been studying the play *Abraham Lincoln*, so I said, “The death of Abraham Lincoln.” Charlie got up, walked straight to one shelf, ran his hand along the spines of the books, removed one, and said, “Turn to page 461.” I did. One-third of the way down the page was the bold title “Death of Lincoln”! I put the book down on the one small table and grabbed his hand again.

“How did you do that?!”

“When your father reads to me, he includes the page numbers,” Charlie said.

In a sighted person, we would call that eidetic memory: storing an exact visual image of the pages. In a man blind and deaf from birth, who had neither auditory nor visual access to the material? I call it the sheer, unimpeded genius of a man who, apparently deprived of so much outer beauty, had opened inward instead, into the boundless inner vistas of infinite possibility... There was no clutter in him, just unfettered space, and he used it well.

Very well indeed, as I later discovered. For Charlie's visits to our house were not the only times he and Dad spent together. Many Sundays Dad would spend the afternoon with Charlie in that book-crammed, ill-lighted, furniture-deprived, windowless rented basement room. I wondered at that; why not just bring him over to our much more comfortable house? Only much later did I learn what those "away" sessions entailed. Charlie's time in our living room, delving ever deeper into Latin and Greek books on history, geography, science, poetry—that was his playtime. His sessions at home were devoted to his life's work.

Together, all through the years, Charlie and Dad were busy translating books, literally thousands of books, from English, Latin or Greek into Braille. Dad would "read" a phrase onto Charlie's hand; Charlie would then use his Braille typewriter to transcribe it into raised dots for all those other students and scholars who couldn't read print. His great purpose in life was to provide his university—the university that had found an interpreter for him for one glorious year, but was unable to fund his dream of a full college education—with what he had never had himself: a library of books in Braille. In total, he and Dad, and perhaps a couple of other occasional readers toward the end, translated over 6,000 books into Braille, letter by letter, paper to eyes to hand to Braille transcriber to paper again.

Charlie then willed all his Braille books to UBC. Here, from the Vancouver historical archives, is a summary of the outcome:

One of the most remarkable people in Vancouver history, Charles Allen Crane, who died in 1965, was both blind and deaf. He couldn't see anything, he couldn't hear anything. Yet he attended UBC for two years, worked as a reporter for the *Ubysey*, wrote for the *Province*, became a star varsity wrestler and worked as a "translator" for blind students, converting books into Braille. He read *thousands* of books. Those 6,000 Braille books were Charlie's, left by him to the university. It was Canada's largest Braille collection.

Today, the Crane Library is the Crane Resource Centre and Library, the principal resource for UBC students and other people who are blind, visually impaired or print-handicapped. There's an eight-studio book recording and duplicating facility there, computers that convert print to synthesized speech, computer work stations with voice synthesis and image-enlarging, a computerized Braille transcription facility, a talking on-line public catalogue, closed circuit TV magnifiers, and more. And it all started with Charlie Crane.

The founder and longtime administrator of the Crane Library with its core collection of Charlie's 10,000 Braille books? A certain Paul Thiele, who then went on to get his doctorate and teach at UBC for 35 years. Charlie's touch of greatness was contagious, it seems.

There's a whole, whole lot more I could say about Charlie, some of which I knew then, more of which I discovered only after his death. About the fact that this brilliant man earned his day-to-day living *making brooms*—and loved it, for it brought him into contact, if only for a moment, with others. About his delightful humor and playfulness. About his unerring ability to identify any plant, tree, animal or previously encountered human being by touch alone. About his unending courtesy and implacable pursuit of truth in any form.

And, sadly, about how the man now lauded as “Canada’s Helen Keller” lived through his days in that single stuffy room, almost entirely alone. In December 1949 the Vancouver *Province* published this poignant letter to the editor: *“Please note, dear readers, that this is from a man who, though in good health, is both deaf and blind. Because of my double handicap, I am left practically alone – in fact, extremely lonely... If there is anyone among you who will make my acquaintance, why not come and see me any time? ... Charles Allen Crane.”*

Much later, Charlie remarked to a reporter, “I have had just one real friend.” I suspect, and hope, that he was talking about my father. And I deeply regret that I, young and inevitably self-centered as I was, had neither the insight nor the wisdom to make it *two* real friends.

In our voracious appetite for words and facts and ever-expanding knowledge of this world and all its inhabitants, Charlie and I were two of a kind: more than enough basis for friendship as I grew into adulthood. I knew this somewhere inside, but did nothing about it. And I haven't even the excuse of distance, because by the time I was in college I was using a Braille slate and stylus to correspond with a former classmate. But I was about my own life by then, changing coasts and countries to attend graduate school, ready to weave my own web of relationships and experiences. When Dad told me of Charlie's death sometime in my first year away at Yale, I noted it with nostalgia but no real sense of loss. After all, he belonged to my childhood. He was my father's friend, not mine, a long generation away from me.

What stands out for me now about Charles Allen Crane is the simple fact that this was a completely selfless lover of humankind. Alone so much of the time, left to his thoughts in the darkness, he nonetheless shone a great light into his world. Dependent entirely on touch for his human connections, he was severely touch-deprived. Largely ignored by his fellow humans, he spent his life working on behalf of a future generation of visually impaired students, so that they might live lives denied to him. I believe the Buddhists might term that the life of a bodhisattva, a soul who returns here solely to serve.

We always hope that if such a one walks among us, we will recognize the touch of greatness as he or she passes by. Perhaps my father did; I did not. Who, then, was blind and deaf?

-- Patricia Ellis Kendall, BA '64

Contributor: Patricia (Ellis) Kendall, BA (French) '64, received her MA (Linguistics) from Yale, then combined teaching, consulting and back-to-the-land farming in Louisiana, California and Colorado for the next quarter-century. Since acquiring a Ph.D. in Metaphysics (impractical but fascinating!) in 1993, she has offered deepwork psychotherapy to clients on four continents.

Pat's comments on her UBC experience:

"Three memories encapsulate my experience at UBC. Here they are:

"The starting point: walking tentatively into the newly-completed Buchanan building for my first-ever class there—and being suddenly confronted with the gaze of my beloved grandfather, Daniel Buchanan, his official portrait more stern and regal than I remembered him, certainly, but nonetheless posing the question all those little old ladies had been asking my mother since I was about five: "Will she do her grandfather proud, do you think?"

"The bottom line: being called into Dean Walter Gage's office near the end of my third year. Walter Gage was a family friend, but he, too, was exuding official responsibility that day. 'Pat, you are in line to receive the Governor General's Gold Medal for top academic performance if you just push a little harder next year. Are you willing to do that?' 'But—but I'm already working just as hard as I can. The only time I take off is to eat my sandwich for lunch!' Dean Gage leaned back in his chair. 'So, could you cut it down to half a sandwich?' he asked. Seriously meant or not, for me this was a command from on high. Half a sandwich it was.

"And the final frame: having received said medal and standing before the fireplace at the Faculty Club in my white dress with my bouquet of red roses, smiling and murmuring inanities as faculty members offered their congratulations—and wondering how tall a stack all those missed half-sandwiches would make. "I might make somewhat different choices now. And still, despite myself I learned one of the most important things all great universities have to teach: that an education encompasses far, far more than what is absorbed from lectures and books. This awareness I have tried to pass along to students and clients alike over the past half-century."

NB: *Trek* magazine for Spring 2013 includes "The Useful Citizen," a biographical article about Charlie Crane by Rosemary Anderson (<https://trekmagazine.alumni.ubc.ca/2013/may-2013/features/the-useful-citizen/>)