

# THE BOOK OF CHARLIE



WISDOM FROM  
THE REMARKABLE AMERICAN LIFE  
OF A 109-YEAR-OLD MAN

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DAVID VON DREHLE

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# The Book *of* Charlie

*Wisdom from the Remarkable American Life  
of a 109-Year-Old Man*

David Von Drehle

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*To Robert D. Richardson Jr.*

*Bob*

*1934–2020*

*Teacher, Captain, Friend*

# one

Nightly when my four children were young, I sat with a flashlight outside their bedrooms on the floor of the darkened hallway and read to them from chapter books. We read thousands of pages of Harry Potter and made hundreds of doughnuts with Homer Price. We spent time with Ramona and Beezus on Klickitat Street and sojourned in Narnia with the Pevensie children. We devoured diaries of a wimpy kid and reeled through volumes of unfortunate events. We thrilled to *The Red Badge of Courage* and wept over *Where the Red Fern Grows*. And of course, we returned more than once to the Arable farm, where miracles were woven into *Charlotte's Web*.

For many years, I enjoyed an audience of devoted listeners, but as the kids grew into their own concerns, I knew our shared time was coming to an end. They would soon have finals to study for, and crushes to FaceTime, and Netflix to stream deep into the night. The moment I was dreading arrived after we turned the last page of another adventure with Peter and the Starcatchers. My middle daughter suggested that we suspend our nightly reading indefinitely, and the others (more quickly than I would have hoped) chimed in to agree.

Sometime before we reached the end of our reading, the kids learned that Daddy was a writer of some kind, and they began asking me to write a book for them—the sort of book I could read aloud in the dark with my flashlight. I wanted very much to deliver

for them, to pull a bit of magic from my hat and spin it into a tale both bracing and amusing, a story of brave and resourceful young people making their way in a marvelous and dangerous world. But every stab I took at writing a children's novel failed in one way or another. Gradually, I realized that my reading days would run out with their wish still unfulfilled, and that my failure to deliver a suitable story would be one more in a catalogue of ways in which I would disappoint them. A father hopes to be as extraordinary as his youngsters, in their innocence, imagine him to be, so that they need never become disillusioned with him. Perhaps some fathers accomplish that. As for me, my children matured, took notice of their father's shortcomings, and gave up asking for a book written just for them.

But now, here it is.

Admittedly, this is not the book they wanted. While there are plenty of exploits and perils and tragedies and amusements in the pages to come, none of them involve castles or pirate ships or even much tender romance. The main character has undeniable charms, but he's no hero, certainly no superhero. This book is bereft of wizards, crime-solving orphans, time travel, or empathetic talking spiders. It's not the book they asked for, but I believe it is a book they will need.

For this is a book about surviving, even thriving, through adversity and revolutionary change. Today's children—yours as well as mine—will live out their lives in a maelstrom of change. Some of it can be forecast. Other challenges will arrive as abruptly as a worldwide pandemic. I expect that self-driving cars and conversational robots are only the beginning, puffs of wind on the mild side of the storm. For cars and robots are gadgets, and gadgets evolve without necessarily changing the world. My own generation, after all, came of age with transistor radios and nineteen-inch

Trinitrons. Now we have Spotify and eighty-five-inch UHD TVs. Yet we're still listening to music from handheld devices and watching two-dimensional pictures in motion behind a glass screen.

Revolutionary change is another matter. Revolutions have the power to remake societies and cultures and economies and political systems. Think of Gutenberg's printing press. Before print came along, there was no reason for most people to be literate. Information traveled slowly and unreliably by word of mouth or hand-copied manuscripts. Knowledge accrued very slowly because people knew only what they could learn from their elders in a family or village. The printing press made it possible for the first time to connect people cheaply and efficiently across broad distances and even across time. The follow-on effects were extraordinary: the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the scientific and industrial revolutions, the rise of democracy and free markets, the end of legal slavery, the age of exploration, including the exploration of space. All of these were made possible by print. If movable type—mere blocks of wood and slugs of lead—could do all that, what changes might be wrought through a revolution that places the world's libraries and languages in the palm of each hand and gives to every human being the power of mass communication?

The nature of work is changing, too, as more and more of the world's productivity derives from the interaction of humans and computers. History teaches that vast upheavals follow in the wake of workplace revolutions. When foraging gave way to farming, the world of tribes and nomads became a world of cities, states, nations, and empires. Cultures have been remade again wherever industrialization and market economies have replaced subsistence farming. The feudal world of kings and tsars became a mechanized world of finance and bureaucracy. For some, the new world was one of alienation and strife; for others, it was a world of freedom and

aspirations. Women were liberated to have fewer children, for example. Having fewer children meant longer lives and time to think. The children they did have were better fed and endured less drudgery. Longer lives came to mean time for an education, and education taught people to dream. Today, we might suppose that parents have always hoped that their children would sail into brighter futures, but for most of human history, parents expected that their children would endure lives just as brutish and short as their own. Palace or hovel, one's birthplace was one's destiny.

I believe the digital revolution has already begun to spin off effects every bit as dramatic and vast as these past revolutions produced. Politics is being transformed by the disruptive power of social networks. Our news and information sources—the wellsprings of civic conversation—are unraveling under the power of infinite choice. Mating rituals are being recast by algorithmic yentas and virtual singles bars. Institutions are being undermined, while formerly localized threats, from terrorism to novel viruses, have gone global.

Parents want to give children the tools they need to succeed in life. But our kids are launching into a world so strange and unpredictable that a parent can't help but worry whether today's toolkit might become tomorrow's burden. God forbid our advice takes them in the wrong directions.

As I've watched the growing magnitude of the digital revolution, I've come to fear that I don't know enough about change to be of much help to my kids. I know about change at the gadget level, but have seen comparatively little of it at the levels of entire cultures and societies. Though I've marveled at many technological wonders through the years, my life has not been all that different from the lives of my parents. My mother and father grew up when radio was new, and I've lived to see radio splinter into broadcast, satellite, and



wireless streaming. But my parents and I all lived in the time of radio. The same could be said of airplanes, newspapers, internal combustion engines, network television, Republicans-versus-Democrats, “modern medicine,” and a thousand more categories that have lent a stability to our lives even as the new gadgetry amazed us. During my children’s lives, however, the categories themselves may be erased, and new categories created.

It dawned on me that I must go back another generation or two to find a role model and scout for them—a true surfer on a sea of change. I had to get back to the last years of the agrarian past, that moment when middle-class people lived without electricity or running water, when humans didn’t fly and antibiotics didn’t exist. I needed to find someone whose early life would have been recognizable to farmers from the age of Napoleon, or of Leonardo da Vinci. Someone from the world where horse-drawn carriages far outnumbered automobiles, where pictures didn’t move, and where kings ruled empires. An American born in the early 1900s who managed to live into the 2000s would have one foot planted in the age of draft animals and diphtheria—a time when only 6 percent of Americans graduated from high school—and the other planted in the age of space stations and robotic surgery. Such a person would have traveled from *The Birth of a Nation* to Barack Obama. From women forbidden to vote to women running nations and corporations. From Sunday potlucks in neighborhood churches to Sunday frenzies at football games where every big play is instantly rerun on screens five stories high. No human foot had ever touched the North or South Pole or the summit of Mount Everest when they were born, yet they lived to see footprints on the moon.

Children of the early 1900s who lived to a great age saw their lives and their communities, their places of work and of worship, their families and mores shaken, inverted, blown up, and remade.

They entered the world at just the moment that (in the words of Henry Adams) history's "neck [was] broken by the sudden irruption of forces totally new," and they lived through the ever-changing consequences. What did it take to thrive and find happiness while experiencing so much disruption? Whatever it was, those were the tools I want to pass on to my children: the tools for resilience and equanimity through massive dislocation and uncertainty.

I decided to write a book for my children that would unlock the secrets of life inside the storm. And once I understood this was my task as their father, I would have gone to the ends of the Earth to find such a tale. But that proved unnecessary, because one blazing August morning I looked up from my driveway and saw my story standing there, just across the street.

## two

The year was 2007. My wife and I had uprooted our children—ages nine, seven, six, and four—from Washington, D.C., to replant them in the suburbs of Kansas City, Missouri. As Karen once explained our decision, she had grown tired of the hassles of urban parenting: the traffic jams, long lines, and dollar-per-minute swim lessons. I had grown tired of people arguing with each other, which is the principal pastime of the nation's capital. I was starting a new job that allowed me to telecommute, and after many exciting years on the East Coast, this Colorado boy was ready to get back to the middle of the country, where the skies are bigger than the egos.

Our new home was still full of half-empty moving boxes on the morning in question. An August heat wave had settled over the Midwest, and though it was only 8 a.m., a wall of steamy oppression hit me when I stepped outside to fetch the Sunday newspaper, as if I'd opened a dishwasher too soon. Halfway down the driveway, I looked up, and through the glare of an already angry sun I saw something that stopped me in my tracks. My new neighbor was washing a car in his circular driveway across the street. In my memory (this detail is a matter of some disagreement around the neighborhood) the car he was washing was a shiny new Chrysler PT Cruiser, the color of grape soda pop. I like to believe that my memory is sharper than the recollections of those who say it was a less distinctive car. And my imagination is too dull to conjure a

Fanta-colored automobile glittering in the neighbor's driveway. But if indeed I've dreamed up this aubergine buggy it can only be in tribute to the owner of the car, a woman of such charisma that ordinary wheels would not be worthy of her. (We'll meet her in due time, and she's worth the wait.)

This much is undisputed: my neighbor was, in the sunshine of an August Sunday morning, washing his girlfriend's car. I couldn't help but note that the vehicle in question was parked in the same spot where she had left it the night before. I deduced that his Saturday night date with the glamorous driver of the possibly purple car had developed into the sort of sleepover that makes a man feel like being especially nice the next morning.

My neighbor was bare-chested, dressed only in a pair of old swim trunks. With a garden hose in one hand and a soapy sponge in the other, he flexed his muscular chest with each splash and swirl, while his wavy hair flopped rakishly over one eye. This was Charlie White.

Age 102.

I had been introduced to the handsome doctor a few days earlier by his son-in-law Doug, who lived in the house next door to ours. Doug's wife at the time was Charlie's youngest daughter, and they had moved onto the street to keep an eye on her dad. Frankly, I didn't see the need. Charlie was hale and sturdy and razor-sharp. When we met, he offered what used to be known as a manly handshake—not a bone crusher, but a proper put-'er-there kind of squeeze, firm and sincere. His eyes were clear and sapphire blue. His hearing was good, and his conversation danced easily from topic to topic and from past to present to future and back. His flowing white hair and debonair mustache gave him an elegant, vaguely theatrical air—he reminded me a bit of Doc on *Gunsmoke*—amplified by the walking stick he held casually at his side. Even

better, the walking stick proved on closer inspection to be a pitching wedge held upside down. Such casual stylishness, using a golf club as a cane, can only be pulled off if it comes naturally. A little trouble with his balance was keeping him off the golf course, Charlie told me ruefully that first day, but (here he wagged the inverted club) he expected to be back in the swing soon enough.

In summary, Charlie was an extraordinary specimen. Even so, one does not expect, upon meeting a man of 102, to be starting a long and rich friendship. Actuarial tables have no room for sentiment or wishes, and this is what they say: according to the Social Security Administration, in a random cohort of 100,000 men, only about 350—fewer than half of 1 percent—make it to 102. Among those hardy survivors, the average chap has less than two years remaining. After 104, the lives slip quickly away, like the last grains of sand in an hourglass.

Yet on this muggy Sunday morning, when Charlie looked up from his car washing and gave me a jaunty wave with his sponge hand, there was something about him that made me think his odds were not to be found on any chart or spreadsheet. Life seemed to rest more lightly on him than on other men. Though, as we shall see, he knew more than his share of sadness and hard work, Charlie didn't resent life's insults or protest its humiliations. Nor did he fail to enjoy its fleeting kindnesses and flashes of beauty, among which he now counted the rare chance to hand-wash a girlfriend's car shortly after his 102nd birthday, beneath the broad canopy of an old tree that was dying faster than he was, as everything—the car, the tree, the soapy sponge, the startled neighbor shuffling toward his newspaper, the slumbering girlfriend, and Charlie himself—spun swiftly through space aboard the miracle planet called Earth.

I would later hear a story about Charlie that seemed to represent this distinctive quality of grateful attention to the beauty of life,

what the French call *joie de vivre*. It's a fleeting moment, nothing elaborate or abstruse, yet it points somehow to life's most liberating—and empowering—lesson. Maybelle Carter, matriarch of country-and-western music, strummed her Gibson guitar and sang forthrightly about keeping on the sunny side of life. The fourteenth-century mystic and visionary Dame Julian of Norwich survived the Black Plague to write with confidence that “all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.” The lesson, so simple yet so difficult, is that life can be savored even though it contains hardship, disappointment, loss, and even brutality. The choice to see its beauty is available to us at every moment.

The story involved Charlie and his beloved game of golf. Long after his peers at the Blue Hills Country Club had passed away, Charlie continued playing in the company of much younger men—men barely past eighty. One day, Charlie found himself standing on the green as his partner descended into a sand trap to play an errant ball. Sometime after the man disappeared from view into the deep bunker, Charlie saw a spray of sand along with his companion's ball, which hopped and rolled to a stop on the putting surface. Then... nothing. After some time passed, Charlie walked to the edge of the green and peered over to find the younger man struggling without success to climb out of the hazard. Charlie doubted his ability to pull the man out. What to do? Charlie's reaction was not concern or alarm. He didn't think: *What are we doing out here? We're too old for this.* He burst out laughing, and kept laughing until his friend was heaving with laughter, too. They were still laughing when the group behind them arrived to rescue the stranded octogenarian.

Charlie made an art of living. He understood, as great artists do, that every life is a mixture of comedy and tragedy, joy and sorrow, daring and fear. We choose the tenor of our lives from those

clashing notes. Even when Charlie's strength was fading, when the golf course had become an obstacle course, when the infirmity of encroaching time could no longer be denied, he chose to turn his wedge into a walking stick and to carry it with panache.

Our arrival across the street from Charlie White turned out to be the start of a seven-year friendship. He defied the actuaries to become one of the last men standing—one of only five fellows from the original 100,000 expected to make it to 109. (Statistically speaking, only two make it to 110, and the last one winks out at around 111.) Charlie was among the last living Americans from the presidency of William Howard Taft, among the last surviving officers of World War II, among the last physicians who knew what it was to practice medicine before penicillin, among the last Americans who could say what it was like to drive an automobile before highways existed, among the last people who felt amazement when pictures moved on a screen, and sound emerged from a box. By the time Charlie was done, he lived nearly half the history of the United States. Born years before Walter P. Chrysler built his first car, Charlie was still around more than seven decades after Chrysler's death—enough years to see the soaring Chrysler Building age from a symbol of New York's glorious future into a totem of its past; enough years to find himself swabbing (as I remember it) a high-gloss purple roadster wearing the long-dead Chrysler's badge, a Chrysler equipped with remote keyless entry and an iPod jack.

Charlie was a man of science. As a physician, he knew how the human body goes—and how it stops. He was the first to say that his extraordinary life span was a fluke of genetics and fortune. Still, as I've reflected on this remarkable friend, I've come to see that he was more than a living history lesson, and more than just the winner of a genetic Powerball. He was a case study in how to thrive—not just

survive, but thrive—through any span of years, short or long. People often asked him the secret of longevity, and Charlie was always scrupulously honest: there's no secret, just luck. But if he knew no secrets to a long life, he knew plenty about a happy life. Through tragedy and loss, poverty and setbacks, missteps and blown chances, he maintained a steadiness, an evenness, and a self-reliance that today might be called resilience. He had a gift for seizing joy, grabbing opportunities, and holding on to things that matter. And he had an unusual knack for an even more difficult task: letting go of all the rest.

His daughter Madelyn once told my wife a story that captures something essential to Charlie's personality. She had found herself enmeshed in some sort of neighborhood angst in which this person says something to that person who turns around and does something to somebody else, and can you *believe* anyone could do or say such things? Inevitably, Madelyn found herself on the receiving end of an irate phone call. Listening from the kitchen table, Charlie waited until she finally extricated herself. He waited some more while she described the situation. After a pause, he counseled his youngest to let it go. You'll kill yourself getting worked up, he told her. "I don't have time for people like that," he said.

The wisdom of centuries was packed into that laconic advice. Though Charlie was not a student of philosophy, I recognized in his words the essence of Stoicism, one of the most durable and useful schools of thought ever devised. It is a philosophy equally as compelling to an abused slave like Epictetus, the first-century Roman who smiled as his sadistic master twisted his leg until it snapped, as to the second-century Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius. The Stoics taught that a life well lived requires a deep understanding of what we control, and—more difficult—all that lies beyond our control. We determine nothing but our own actions and



reactions. Our willful choices. A true education, Epictetus taught, consists of learning “to distinguish that among things, some are in our power but others are not; in our power, are will and all acts that depend on the will. Things *not* in our power are the body, the parts of the body, possessions, parents, brothers, children, country, and generally all with whom we live in society.”

For the slave, this insight spoke to the determination of Epictetus to live with purpose and dignity even as a master controlled his body and actions. He could be bought and sold and worked like an animal, but he could not be made to think or act or *be* like an animal. “It is circumstances which show what men are,” he taught his students after gaining his freedom. “Therefore, when a difficulty falls upon you, remember that God, like a trainer of wrestlers, has matched you with a rough young man... that you may become an Olympic conqueror; but it is not accomplished without sweat.”

For the same reasons, Stoicism spoke to Viktor Frankl, an Austrian neurologist who survived the Nazi slave labor camps as a prisoner at Dachau. From his observation of exemplary prisoners who maintained their dignity and goodwill even in those hellish circumstances, Frankl concluded that “everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way” of meeting whatever life presents. This same philosophy has spoken to generations of alcoholics seeking to be free of an enslaving addiction. “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,” their prayer goes, “courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.”

What Marcus Aurelius understood is that all of us are slaves in certain respects, even the emperor of Rome. We are slaves to time and chance; we are indentured to fate. “Love the hand that fate

deals you and play it as your own,” he wrote in his *Meditations*. In another gem, he observed that “it never ceases to amaze me: we all love ourselves more than other people, but care more about their opinion than our own.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson arrived at the same wisdom: “A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition, as if every thing were titular and ephemeral but he.” Rudyard Kipling praised those who “can meet with Triumph and Disaster / And treat those two impostors just the same.”

“Let it go,” counseled Charlie of the things beyond one’s control. But Stoic self-possession is also the bedrock on which the qualities we now speak of as grit and resilience are built. Stoicism is the human fuel that gives us the greatest mileage. Kipling’s famous poem goes on to praise the self-reliance that allows us to

*...force your heart and nerve and sinew  
To serve your turn long after they are gone,  
And so hold on when there is nothing in you  
Except the Will which says to them: “Hold on!”*

*Let it go and Hold on!* In the way of so many great philosophies, those apparent opposites prove to be two sides of the same coin. To hold securely to the well-formed purposes of your own will, you must let go of the vain idea that you can control people or events or the tides of fate. You can’t change what was, nor entirely control what will be. But you can choose who you are and what you stand for and what you will try to accomplish.

I’ve been learning and losing and relearning this lesson for some sixty years. But I think Charlie learned the essence of it in a single day and never forgot. He was a quick learner—and a prodigy,

because he absorbed this wisdom, this elusive key to contentment in life, as a mere boy of eight. Remarkable.

But then, he had a heartless and harshly effective teacher.

## three

Charlie was the third Charles Herbert White in his family tree, but the name did not mean much to him. “My mother just fell into that, I guess,” he once said, “fell into the family tradition of naming sons after fathers.” He was deeply proud of his connections to American history, though. Charlie traced his roots through his mother’s line to Captain Thomas Graves, a Jamestown settler and member of the first legislative body in the colony of Virginia. Through his father’s line, he connected with Virginia’s aristocratic Carter family, which also settled at Jamestown. A century before the Declaration of Independence, Robert Carter was amassing such large holdings in land and enslaved labor, and wielding so much political power, that other Virginians nicknamed him “King.” His descendants included two U.S. presidents and the Confederate general Robert E. Lee. Not to mention Charlie White, who felt a tingle of destiny about the convergence of bloodlines within him. “It’s a strange thing, and unusual, that these two families, after about twenty generations, finally came together. That’s about a one-in-a-billion chance,” he mused. “You might say these two families are the original pioneers of America. I’m lucky to inherit that situation.”

Born August 16, 1905, Charlie entered a world in which the Civil War was tangible. Veterans of the blood-soaked trauma of blue and gray were a part of daily life, their battles closer to Charlie than Vietnam is to a child born today. Though his first home was in