

The Older Person Who Has Inspired Me - December 2023

I am an 87-year-old retired nurse and health visitor living in Rainham – with Chatham, Rochester and Gillingham, part of the Medway towns in north Kent. After training to be a nurse at King's College Hospital in south-east London, I moved down here with my husband, Laurie, in the 50s. We brought up our two children, and I worked as a health visitor in Rainham and in Gillingham, especially with young Army families. I have been a member of various churches since my teenage years.

Very soon after my birth in London in 1936, my mother became ill, so much so that I did not meet her until I was seven years old. My father was away from home, working as a chauffeur, and I was placed during those years of my childhood in the care of neighbours, Molly and Charlie. And so it was that I spent the war and my early schooldays in Camberwell, often taking cover in the bomb shelter at the end of the garden.

Uncle Charlie was a huge influence in my early years. Charlie was a very cheerful person, who worked for the BBC. He told me many jokes, was full of fun, and encouraged me during the dark days of the Blitz. It was quite natural to me that Uncle Charlie would suddenly appear, dressed as Charlie Chaplin at my 4th birthday party! (much to the amazement of the other children)

Uncle Charlie loved to play the piano – he could play anything by ear – and naturally I learned a lot of songs of the 30s and 40s from the "Great American Songbook", as we now call it – song-writers like Gershwin, Rogers and Hart and Cole Porter. It was due to his influence, that I wanted to learn the piano. He did not have a formal piano education, so I only learned to pick out the tunes by ear.

Uncle Charlie's enthusiasm and encouragement made me clamour to have piano lessons when I returned to my mother and father. However, when eventually I learned to play, I only learned classical piano.

I have played the piano all my life, but now, in old age, I am enjoying trying to play some of Charlie's well-loved music more than ever. Thank you, Uncle Charlie!

In my teens, attending the Mary Datchelor Girls' School in Camberwell in south-east London, most of the girls looked up to our headmistress, Dame Dorothy Brock, who, I later found, became an influential figure in the world of education. Dame Dorothy showed me and my best friend, also called Dorothy, that we could aspire to be confident, professional women. I don't think my friend would have gone on to become a doctor nor perhaps I a nurse, without the inspiring presence of Dame Dorothy. But the older person who was old when I most admired her is Auntie Ivy. After my parents and husband had died and my children left home, I would often take myself off at the end of a working week all the way to Norfolk to spend the weekend with Auntie Ivy. Then, I simply enjoyed Ivy's company and the fun we had exploring the local area, especially The Broads, and playing games like Scrabble: looking back now, I find her very inspiring.

Auntie Ivy was not a blood relative. She had married Uncle Les. Les and my mother had both, as very young children, been fostered by the same family in a village in the depths of the Norfolk countryside, so they saw each other as brother and sister.

Years later, now that I too, am in old age, I think of Auntie Ivy frequently, and of her positive attitude. She acknowledged that she was growing older, but did not let it hold her back!

Ivy just carried on, walking, gardening, playing cards, travelling, socializing, but in a more stately, slower way... rather like the Queen! I never heard her complain about not being able to do anything. If faced with a challenge that might be too difficult, she would usually find another way to do it, or just say "We won't do that today."

Her whole attitude was of calmness and stability. There was no feeling of panic, sadness, for attributes lost. She just carried on, taking life as it came, coping calmly with every situation. She was stoic. And this continued to her dying day. (Writing this, reminds me that I miss her very much.)

Ivy's earlier life had had its challenges. Her third child was very severely disabled, both mentally and physically, from birth. Ivy looked after her little girl (as well as running the home and caring for her husband and two sons), night and day, for many years but by the time my mother took me to see Ivy's daughter, she was living in an institution, where she died.

Looking back, I realise that this was the experience of many other parents of severely disabled children. They were often encouraged to believe their child's life had little value and to forget about them in an institution. When they insisted on keeping the infant at home, the state gave them next to no support. Those times seem light years from the emergence of networks of voluntary organisations devoted to supporting family carers, still less the passing of laws giving carers the right to expect state help. In the way in which Auntie Ivy cheerfully coped with the limitations of age and infirmity, I also remember elderly men and women whom, as a pastoral visitor for my local church in Rainham, I would go and see. Several of these people, too, were resilient, resourceful and cheerful – though none of them inspires quite the respect and affection I cherish for Auntie Ivy.

Margaret Crystal