

## Evocation for Charles Alexander Waller by his father

Welcome family and friends, pirates and land lubbers. We are so grateful that you have come today and Charlie would have been especially pleased to see his briny buccaneering comrades so well represented. Please note that the church cannot take responsibility for the mysterious disappearance of jewelry or wallets.

For more than two and a half years in the quiet moments of which Charlie and his sister Esther ensured there were very few, I have been trying to write this eulogy in my mind. Sensing what I was doing Abby once made a simple request. Don't over-intellectualize and, above all else, don't turn it into a history lecture.

In the year 731<sup>AD</sup> a monk known as the Venerable Bede, who spent his life scribbling away in Latin in the wind-swept monasteries of England's rugged northeastern coast, completed his *History of the English People*. He included a passage, set a century earlier, in which an English king and his lords decided to convert to the Christian faith. It contains a beautifully honest metaphor.

"It seems to me," says one of the lords, "that the life of man on earth is like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter's day with your captains and counselors. In the midst there is a comforting fire to warm the hall. Outside, the storms of winter rain and snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one window of the hall and out through another. ... So man appears on earth for a little while – but of what went before this life, or what follows, we know nothing."

How would Charlie have envisaged the flight of the sparrow after it left the banqueting hall? Certainly not as a realm of cold and storms. He would have imagined a Heaven in which zombies, pirates and landlubbers lived in perfect understanding and in mutual appreciation for bad teeth, popping eyeballs and badly sewn-on limbs. Pirates would have filthy beards, terrifying roars but gentle hearts and be bound by a mutual feeling that there really is nothing funnier than flatulence or people falling over so long as they don't hurt themselves. And everyone in Charlie's Heaven would accept his dubious claim at the age of three that mosquitos only sting because they are clumsy kissers. All animals, in fact, would be held in Charlie's Heaven in the same high regard as humans and the entire Halloween crew. Oh, and before I get carried away and suggest that Charlie was an absolute angel, his Heaven would also have instantaneous Amazon deliveries of plastic dragons and the heavenly credit union would unwisely extend his father unlimited funds.

When I think on the words of Bede's ancient lord I also see Charlie as the soaring sparrow, the gentle flaps of his wings fanning the flames of the candles below, making them burn with a greater intensity and spreading rich light and warmth thorough the banqueting hall. From his brief flight I think we can all learn or relearn the virtues that can make such a difference to the strength of our friendships and the health of our communities. So allow me to try to capture why Charlie found it so easy to make friends with children, grown ups, and other animals.

**Charlie showed us the simple beauty of connecting with others.** Not only with his much-loved sister, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins but also with adored friends like Lola, Annika, Alison, Sylvia, Vanessa, Matthew, and no fewer than three Madelines, Charlie showed that joy and laughter are always better when shared. Sometimes the intensity of his affection was too much even for Charlie. He prohibited us from mentioning Vanessa's name because it let loose feelings so strong that he ended up in a ball on the floor, fingers in ears, shouting 'don't say her name!' Children were drawn to Charlie by his passion for eliciting and rewarding affection in the form of tickles under the chin, rich laughs, heartfelt hugs, holding hands, collaborating over making deadly potions, and telling outrageously silly stories about zombies and eyeballs, pirates, planks and broadsides. With a confidence born of their love for him and his discovery that most people cherish pure affection, Charlie also found in adults like Kris, Melissa, Shannon, Victoria, and Matt friends with whom he could have play-dates, always coming back home with the same exuberant words, 'This is the best day ever!' Having gained his voice after weeks of radiation in the late spring of 2011, Charlie made many dear friends: at Pinecrest Elementary, where he persuaded his teacher to throw him a pirate party at her house, at Marble Elementary, where he spent 2 months as a kindergartner, even in the beautiful English village of Great Tew where he stayed for 10 days last summer.

I gained my first clear sense of the richness of Charlie's love long before then from his fondness for animals: the Mahler's dog Simone, Rosie of Heart Pond stables, Cynnie, Buster, and later our own sweet if rather challenged dog Boston. His love knew no distinctions of size or taxonomy. Summers involved collecting insects in special bug-catchers, chatting with ladybugs, and preparing homes for worms in Tupperware pots. Better at love than entomology, few of these precious friends lasted for long. Many a time we had to explain that they had asked to be set free to see their families, to Charlie's warm approval, as they were added to the makeshift insect graveyard alongside our deck. I feared more for the two pugs of dear friends for whom Charlie's boundless affection translated one Sunday morning into giving them a quantity of treats that could have hospitalized a horse.

**Charlie also showed the importance of paying attention to the feelings of others.** To those enduring fear, discomfort or hardship he had a ready sympathy. Among Charlie's greatest loves was Charlie from Chicago, another regional expert on the buccaneering business. Several months ago they sat together on the same hospital bed in Baltimore both recovering from MRIs, their hands closed tightly around one another's, their eyes glued to an old movie about pirates. They became soul-mates in an afternoon, the memory of Chicago Charlie inspiring days of collecting and drawing for a parcel to be sent to his new friend.

So deep did Charlie's empathy run that he lied shamelessly to protect others. He kept from his parents how much pain he was experiencing and that he had lost the sight in his right eye; he tried to persuade us that he positively enjoyed going into the MRI machine; and he lied unashamedly to his sister when she showed him a wart on her finger about which she was very embarrassed and coolly said "What wart, Eddy? I don't see one." A moral calculus that Charlie recently worked through well illustrates these capacities for empathy and loyalty. Charlie met at a friend's house a three-legged dog called Cleo. Affection poured out of him on seeing Cleo's disability and he spent a long morning holding and over-feeding her. On the way home he began to worry that the strength of his feelings for Cleo amounted to a betrayal of his

own dog Boston. It took him a few minutes to solve the problem. He loved Boston this much more than other dogs because she was part of his family. But he could also love Cleo the same amount because she deserved greater affection by only having three-legs. In doing so he showed not only great loyalty but a mathematical intuition far beyond that of both his parents.

Two people in particular nurtured Charlie's simple virtues of kindness and understanding. The first is his beloved, wonderful, kind and patient sister 'Eddy' who would share with him imaginary worlds in long hours of intense play. Her dolls made friends with his zombies, the dolls becoming less bourgeois and the zombies semi-domesticated. Charlie's sister was lovingly protective of her brother and felt deep pride in his resilient playfulness. The other person is, of course, Abby. A better mother it is hard to imagine. A game she and Charlie developed when driving gives some sense of the depth of their mutual understanding and appetite for shared fun. 'Charlie', mum would say, 'Yes?' Charlie answered with affected eagerness as if he did not know the game they were about to play. 'Oh, nothing', casually replied Abby. 'Mum!' said Charlie, 'Yes?' mum replied excitedly, 'Oh nothing.' 'Charlie', mum would say next, 'Yes?' the same eager response, but now harder to say through a big smile, 'I love you.' 'Mum', said Charlie. 'Yes?' 'I love you too.' Sometimes Charlie would hold back his expression of love for three or four cycles of their game before finally saying the word and descending into delighted giggles.

I too had the profound pleasure of a deep connection with Charlie. Asked what he wished to be when he grew up for a school activity in Kerry Sung's much-loved kindergarten class, Charlie answered firmly, a 'zookeeper, doctor and dad.' His desire to be a dad will always fill me with pride. With an almost unbearable poignancy, in the days before he passed away, Charlie worried that his favorite toys might not be available to his own children. So he asked us to start boxing them up and putting them somewhere safe. I will always cherish from this episode the fact that his dearest aspiration was to care for his children as I did him. I have received no higher praise.

Although our hearts now bleed they also pump hard with pride. We have all lost a friend but have also I think received a fine example of the importance of preserving some of that innocent trustfulness of others that age often strips away. Charlie has too fast completed his flight through the banqueting hall, but I sincerely hope that we can all feel that the candles within ourselves burn brighter. Nor, in the future, should we miss any opportunity to perfect our pirate 'aarrgghs' and our zombie walks. For as well as being sillily fun, they remind us that Charlie lived to make others laugh and to feel his embrace.

## **A letter to Charlie from his mum read at his Memorial Service**

Dear Charlie,

Two weeks ago today you passed away, at home, in our arms. Charlie, I don't know what to say at your service today. The truth is I've never actually been to a funeral of a loved one.

Charlie I know you knew how much I loved you.

All I want to say today is 'Thank you'. 'Thank you' for picking me to be your Mum. 'Thank you' for loving us so beautifully. I loved being your Mum.

The four days before you died you were incredible. You coated us in so much love. You couldn't stop kissing us - You must have kissed me a hundred times in one day. You couldn't stop telling us how much you loved us. Your love has been our armor against sorrow.

Charlie I am so sorry we could not stop the cancer. We tried. Many people tried, and hoped.

When you were diagnosed on April 1st 2011 you were 2 years and 9 and a half months old. I remember holding you in the hospital and thinking if my two year old died my broken heart would never be fully understood. At age two I knew who you were. It was easy to see your loving heart, your gift for fun and laughter, your empathy towards others. But I longed for others to see your heart too.

And they have Charlie. People came to know you.

Thank you so much for bringing such lovely people into our lives - both children and adults.

And for those who never got to know you. They didn't turn away. They listened. They watched. They read our story and reached out.

You reminded all of us that the only thing that matters in life is to be kind.

We feel you in our hearts Charlie. Your body may be gone but so much love is left behind.

Daddy, Esther and I are going to miss you, and long for you forever (you have the best sister ever Charlie). But we are going to be okay.

The world is now a kinder place because of you.

Thank you sweet Charlie.

With all my love forever,

Your Mum