

## How Radiation Oncology Nearly Made Me a Republican

Any Democrat, especially a liberal Democrat, does a lot of self-congratulation. It makes up for the struggle of being a liberal Democrat—voting for legislation that you think would help the planet or at least others than yourself—and the discomfort of thinking about painful subjects. It makes up for always feeling you ought to be protesting some evil of the day, or giving money you can't really afford. Self-congratulation works like a poultice for the annoyances of being a Democrat.

Two disappointments threaten any idealist: the first is that one day you find that mentors you admired have slid off the pedestal, and the second comes the day you yourself slide off.

I have always loved principled people, especially those who carry off more self-sacrifice than I would ever daydream of. I know it's a weakness to be that kind of follower that gloms onto admirable teachers. I know it, but having any leader or teacher to admire makes me happy. It would be hard to give up.

I had two friends of long-standing in Suffolk, England. We had been fellow churchpeople in the idealistic Thaxted (Essex) Church. C.S. Lewis, in one of his less exasperating diatribes, said that the best sort of friendship binds people who are servants of a serious cause. Whenever I could visit England and go to that church, I would sing in the choir with these two Labour-voting friends. The vicar was given to dramatic pronouncements. I especially liked his talk since American clergy were generally afraid that if an ethical issue involved more than three or four people it might have become a political issue and therefore something to be kept clear of. Jack didn't keep clear of any issue.

One year I was in England during a by-election. Jack announced from the pulpit, "In two weeks the British people go to the polls. Some of them will vote Conservative. Yes," and he paused, "Yes, they will vote Conservative, yet they think of themselves as Christians. A confusing idea, I think," he went on, as if thinking it all over aloud for the first time. "Yes—to vote for the privileged at the expense of the poor. Very strange!"

We choir singers sat at the rear of the nave, just in front of the bell tower where the ringers looped up their ropes and sallies once the actual service started. We got a great view of everything, and like all choir members everywhere, we thought we owned the place.

Now, from right in front of us, rose sharp male cries of "Shame! Shame!" I've always loved it that the British still, in our era, call out "Shame!" quite seriously. If you tried that in the United States the speaker would grin and say, "Hey, chill, don't go there!" or "Don't try to lay some retro guilt trip on me!" But this was England and the two men in the back row were now calling out "Now you've gone too far, Father Jack!" The men in their beautifully cut weekend tweeds, and their wives, then rose and filed out. We altos and trebles saw all this perfectly. If you remember the second paragraph of *Lord Jim*, Conrad tells us that Jim's father was a country padre who adjured people to be good but managed not to discomfit his conservative parishioners. That is the usual thing, of course. Jack, however, was a moralist. We joyfully admired him.

Some years passed. Fr. Jack, already in his seventies when I first sang in his choir, got still older and died. Lorna and Eunice, twenty years younger, got old. A decade or so younger than they, I was getting old, too. Once a year or so I would go to England to spend four days with Eunice and Lorna in their retirement house, in Southwold. By now we were bound not only by idealism but by a humorous build-up of remembered occasions. We all three recalled how from a distance the bells of any church slam down their changes, but from our place in the choir we had heard their actual workings—the wheeze of the ropes going over the blocks as the bell men stretched up and swooped down with them.

The Southwold Conservatives' Club at first felt sure of Lorna because of her accent and bearing. They were shocked to learn she was Labour. By then I had begun publishing essays based on the idea that everyone is born, naturally, a conservative. A baby looks out for its own needs, not someone else's. Then one grows, and with luck, you

should get imaginative enough to imagine the needs of others. This all felt exhilarating to me but it wasn't new. Friedrich Schiller had said this stuff in 1801. Then Erikson. Others. Jane Loevinger. By 1980 or so this was ordinary ethical stage-development thinking. Old hat, but since other writers stick up their nose at the mind sciences, I felt lonely and heroic. Well, liberal people like Lorna, Eunice, and me were always prone to feeling like sentries who stave off evil that is invisible to sleepers. The self-congratulation of it is wonderful!

I always visited them in January and February, not to interfere with their summer guests or family. Eunice and I would do miles of wind-shaken walks along the blackberry bushes in the moor. We were idealistic walkers—we always went faster than was comfortable. We nearly trotted down to the chilled inlet from the North Sea. We would hustle back, like people wearing packs. We liked getting exhausted. We'd earned the right, hadn't we, to crowd up to the fire with Lorna and the two cats, to have a speedy tea hour, a little drop off in our chairs like any old ladies. Those mini-naps took us to the cocktail hour. Then, brains brightened with whisky (madeira for Eunice) we would solve the day's *Guardian* puzzle.

I have to tell you that though both Lorna and Eunice were Labour, the English class system operated in that house just as surely as it permeated the whole island, that scepter'd isle. It was like some lighter gas that won't be contained. It got in everywhere. Because of the English class system, Lorna presided over the *Guardian* puzzle. She got to hold it on her lap and wave the pencil about, while calling out the clues to us. She had a right. She had been at Reading University and she owned that Southwold house. Eunice was the servant, because she had never been to training college. There was an edge to Lorna's remarks as she chaired our puzzle-solving committee. Either Lorna or I got the literary and historical allusions, but Eunice invariably got all clues with question marks or exclamation points after them. Lorna would announce the clue, in the enchantingly clarion tones of Englishwomen at play, and then she'd say, "It's one of those abominations with a screamer after it, of course—come on, Eunie, one for you!" Eunice *would* call the answer.

"You see!" Lorna would shout across to me, "You see! That's our Eunice! She can solve a pun or one of those bloody anagrams from a mile off! I can't touch her!"

Of course this was praise, but all three of us knew that puns and riddles and anagrams are a low wit. Such clues were the vile aspect of any crossword. Word play, Lorna's tone said, was meat and potatoes to the working class mind.

I had booked Sunday lunch for my last day with them. Eunice and I packed Lorna into the back of my rental car from Gatwick Airport. Retired people tend to go at their excursions as if they were serious campaigns. Eunice, map in hand, trilled out directions in her still wonderfully lyrical voice. "Left, left, left," she would sing. Her "Left, left, left" or "All clear! All clear! All clear! Now, go right!" kept us on our B-road route like a column of soldiers.

The sky grayed and lowered with rain.

This particular lunch party, Eunice and Lorna announced, they wanted to pay at least half of.

All right, I said, we will go shares.

The inn people showed us into their warm lounge. They put us three old ladies right in front of a genuine wood fire. To burn wood is nearly an affectation in the south of England. For over a century fireplace fuel was coal. Then came the ecologically correct "solid fuel," but never wood in my time. But this fire was not only wood but a handsome root cluster of what must have held up a huge hardwood. You felt the engineeringness of it, the core of a whole tree was giving over. Waiters brought us menus to choose from and whisky for Lorna, madeira for Eunice, and sherry for me.

Rain slashed against the soldered panes, but we were inside warm and dry. I am a cheap drunk, and what's more was not only grateful to be with these old true-hearted friends but—saying nothing of this—I rejoiced in having a few days' break from the United States. At home I felt a low-level but constant background shame for

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the politics. Here I could be lightweight, stunned with the trusty, nearly granular sherry. I felt resonant and intelligent. The weather outside was any old English major's dream of the Brontes, Hardy, and 1930s weekend murders in country houses.

Eventually a waiter took us to a large, coolish dining room where other English people were eating. They spoke in low voices, but the clashing of cutlery! Silver and metal jangled and smacked into other silver and metal all around the room. A wine steward instinctively went to Lorna for our orders. Good thing. I can't tell cistern water from well water.

We made our way through soup and fish and sheep and fragrant winter vegetables handed round again and again. A trifle of empire size, some Devonshire cream on it, but mostly custard and lady-fingers clubbed with liquor. At last the staff returned us to the lounge. Someone had brisked up the fire. They brought us a silver coffee service to pour for ourselves. A few other parties of eaters now sat around low tables here and there. Outside, the rain continued harder than before.

Now the bill. It turned out that for all the talk of going shares, neither Lorna nor Eunice had remembered their Barclay cards and they hadn't ten quid between them. I promptly said, may I put it all onto my VISA card and we will sort it out later—nothing easier?

Right, Lorna said.

But what about the tip? Eunice said.

Oh, that goes right into the VISA instructions, I explained. I was already writing on the bill in its leather folder.

Well but how *much* tip do you think? Eunice asked. She faced Lorna, not me.

I said, "Let's see. There was the amazing service. Five, actually six, people served us the best drinks, the best food, the best coffee, and gave us the best place by the fire. How about the usual—twenty percent?"

I glanced up to see horrified faces.

"Well, seventeen percent then" I said. I stopped writing. All right, I thought. Some day I will be on a fixed income, too.

If they didn't hit the ceiling! They had somehow decided between them that although we had eaten and drunk sixty pounds' worth, a two-pound tip would do.

I said a lot of stuff.

Lorna struck back with something about when in Rome. Even Eunice, whose voice went to a scrim of desecant whenever there was any disagreement, turned to me very bravely and said, But wouldn't I agree, in the event, that two quid would be all right?

I couldn't credit their stinginess. Lorna remarked that this was not America.

"Look here," I said at last. "You've both voted Labour all your life. And now you want to clip six waiters?" I warmed to my fight. I told them, "I can hardly believe you two want to clip people who have given us such good service when you aren't even Tories."

That brought such a jeer from Lorna that people at the nearest tables glanced over with interest. I heard a couple of mild little "Oh I say's" from behind me.

But now my shock at finding myself wrecking a fifteen- to twenty-year friendship turned to a simple fury.

At last Lorna stopped arguing. She said in a low, crafty snarl, "Perhaps you would be ashamed to put such a small tip as two quid on your VISA card at all: is that it?"

"I would be ashamed," I said. "What's more, I won't do it."

I suppose everyone, like RAF Fighter Command, has some *Finest Hour*. This was mine: I said to Lorna, "How will they ever get *their* kiddies to Reading or any other university if you pinch their tip?"

Now she shouted, "I don't give bloody hell whether the waiters get their kiddies to university or not!"

This last gratified some people sitting near us. An elderly man pushed back his chair from the low table with

its drinks so he could comfortably cross one leg over the other. He turned his face now to Lorna, now to me, back to Lorna, back to me, not missing anything.

“Tell you what,” I said eventually, “I am going out to the car to cry for a while. You two can come when you’re ready.”

I finished writing up the bill and tip, retrieved my VISA card, and left.

The rain fell at an unbroken solid slant. Like any American I lunged first to the wrong side of the car, then back out into the rain and around to the driver’s side. The sky went darker. This was February, at fifty-two degrees of North latitude. Soon it would be totally black. I cried a good five minutes, but all the while I felt rightminded, as the Buddhists would say.

Lorna and Eunice joined me.

Our only talk was Eunice’s subdued direction giving. At one turn I couldn’t make out the curb, struck it, and we got a flat tire. I got out into the rain to open the boot.

A dark, rain-streaked lorry stopped. Its side bore a huge white star. Two American sergeants, paratroopers by their insignia, climbed out and offered to help. I let them. “You go back inside,” one of them said. “We’ll be done in a sec.” I said, “No, that’s OK.” They were so cheerful and kind as they changed the wheel that I nearly went back to crying. I urged a fiver on them though they didn’t want it.

“Look,” I said. “Please take it even though you know and I know you don’t want it. Take it though, would you? I have had such a terrible day! And now I have to get back in that car and quarrel with two Englishwomen. It’s like a bad dream!”

“Yeah?” they said and they both laughed. “Yeah? OK!” One of them snapped the toy jack into its niche. The other folded up the huge bill that a five-pound note then was—handsome money. Looking at Queen Elizabeth’s picture you’d never get the idea that woman’s family behaved themselves all up and down the moral range of human beings.

I got back in the car. “My countrymen,” I thought, watching the truck pull away. No matter how embarrassing my country’s foreign policies at any given time, it’s still my country. And even though soldiers are by definition people who will obey outright gross orders if they get them, these soldiers were my countrymen.

“Good of them to stop,” Lorna said as we started up again.

We began to make it up. It was the end of a friendship, actually, but we made some civil amends anyhow.

Until I got breast cancer I went on taking myself and other liberals as people better than Republicans. At the same time, I went on admiring Republicans for what I had always admired them for—the tireless raising of money for civic beauty and the tireless raising of money for medical research. If you have a thriving chamber orchestra in your city chances are the “Friends of the Orchestra” who keep it going are mostly Republican volunteers. Rich Republican males, perhaps females, too, for all I know, give millions of dollars to their own and each other’s favorite public causes. Republican women do hours and hours of cordial, exasperating committee work. They maintain the playhouse, the museum, the symphony. They maintain the public aesthetic. These women, so often the butt of political jokes—well-shod, bravely dieted, who appear to spend whole lifetimes strengthening their backhand volley and their serve, these ethically blithe people who find every play they see “stimulating” or “delightful” without discerning what the playwright is actually saying to us—these are the people who show up for dull but necessary meetings when they *said* they would show up. They keep promises. They notify you when they have to break a pledge.

All this is compute of terrible generalizations, of course, but it is what I felt about Republicans I had worked with.

Until I got breast cancer, I felt superior to them. Then in September and November of 1998 I went to the University of Minnesota/Fairview Hospital to get cured by lumpectomy and radiation oncology.

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It was a late 1990s style of Minneapolis and St. Paul college-educated women with breast cancer to be loudly self-piteous and exacting of service. Even executives sometimes behaved badly to their own colleagues in their own workplaces, and then announced sweepingly, “Well—sorry! But I’ve got breast cancer, so what did you expect?” That was considered not only all right, but a goodish sort of feminist bravado. To me it just looked like more of privileged people feeling safe and entitled to behave any way they liked.

Some of that bad behavior showed up on the radiation oncology floor of our hospital. Some patients would one day denounce the technical therapy team for being impersonal and the next day complain of someone else.

In truth, the hospital staff were wonderfully kind to us. At one point I decided I had never been treated so kindly for so many days together in my life. In all the seven five-day weeks no one ever snapped at me.

I was trying not to be self-centered. Cancer patients do let themselves be very self-centered. Even the born-again Christians whom I would meet in the Naked Ladies’ Waiting Room—that was where we sat about in blue hospital wrap waiting to be called for treatment—even those Christians were self-centered. They were glad enough to testify to their good feelings about God and one told me she had “made her peace with her cancer,” but none of them would respond to anything anyone else said.

Of course fear curls our consciousness inward. Of course it does. We scared people get going round and round upon ourselves, like plants whose doomed roots have begun going round and round in too small a pot. But I was determined not to act self-centered or irrational.

Still, one day I freaked. I asked the nurses to send for a building engineer to come up to our floor to talk to me after my morning’s forty second radiation. He showed up and I led him to the Men’s Naked Waiting Room (where males waited in the same blue robes we used). One of their walls sported a spacious oil print of a 19th century ship tearing across the Atlantic, well canted, spray flying, royals, top gallants, mainsail, the skinny forward jibs, filled with wind. It was the kind of painting that retired workmen and industrial executives do who have always wanted to paint. It was grand and it was clearly a ship and a serious ocean.

“And now look here,” I said, leading the engineer to the women’s naked waiting room: “Look what *we* got—a bowl of dead flowers. A still life. Did you know what the French call a still life like that? They call it a ‘nature morte’—dead nature. That’s what they call it and that’s what it is.”

He said he had not heard that, but like the nurses at the station, like the young technicians who every day picked up a little radioactive scatter from us patients, and like the head physician for radiation oncology, this engineer had kind manners. He did not say, “Cool it, why don’t you?”

“I think a Phillips screwdriver would do it,” I said. “Would you please take that nice ship picture out of the men’s naked waiting room and give them our painting of the spooky flowers and then give us women their ship for *our* waiting room.”

Fear or not, the fact is that any thirty or forty second activity that you do thirty-five times in seven weeks is boring. As I drove each morning from St. Paul to the hospital ramp and presented my ticket for a discount stamp I felt intensely alive. I listened to audio books in the car. But once in the actual room, lying properly positioned for the gantry—once the staff had thumped a fat button on the wall that tells the machine that all non-patient personnel are out of there—when all that has happened, and the machinery has begun its click-cluck, click-cluck, click-cluck—I was bored.

I tried to stay interested. I asked one of the technicians to show me the Block room. To go into the Block room you must step on a magnetized pad so that your shoes won’t carry radioactive dust here and there. The walls are covered with danger warnings of one kind or another. At the right stands a huge stove that looks for all the world like a 1920s kitchen range. One grill top held a pitcher of a molten gray stuff. This was Alloy No. 158, basically cerebium, which blocks gamma rays. The technicians would custom-design and then gouge out a hole in a block for each of us patients. The block fits into the gantry somewhat the way film frames fit into X-ray apparatus. Then the

gamma rays get to charge down through the gouged-out hole to burn out every cancer cell in their range. I was impressed. Those technicians looked such kids to me, yet they did exacting work. That work, what's more, might years later in their lives prove to have been dangerous for them.

Each morning, I was hopeful and bored. I daydreamed.

In one of my last sessions I daydreamed that a thirty- or thirty-five year old woman crept up to me. How had she ever gotten past everyone?

"Listen," she whispered, fast, "Get off there. I am in my thirties. I'm from the Bronx. I am a single mom. I have three young children. I have no insurance. I can't even afford a store-front clinic visit, never mind radiation to cure my breast cancer. You're old. You've already raised your family. You don't need to get well. I *have* to get well! Get off! Get off! Let me on!"

"You're right," I said.

I removed my left arm from the ingenious support that kept my left breast in the position cross-vectored for my treatment. I sat up to jump off.

Then, my feet already dangling overside, I stopped. I said, "Actually you know what you can do with yourself. I want to live. Get away! Get away!"

I couldn't look her in the face of course. I dropped my eyes. There were her eight thin fingers already coiled around the gurney edge like plant roots. She'd been all set to pull herself up. That was a near thing.

I added, "I have a right." Maybe that would fix her. I did have a right.

I woke from the daydream. I held still because the radiation treatment was still going, click-cluck, click-cluck. I said to myself, "How charming you are, Carol, how enchanting! What a principled person you are! How charming to get to be sixty-eight years old and have no real fairness in you! Oh, *talk* about fairness, yes! But no actual *wanting* fairness, no. Push had come to shove and as always, this time with you doing it, it was the privileged who gave the good push and it was the poor who got the good shove."

I said to myself, "You really may as well be a Republican."

At last the machine stopped and the young tech sailed back into the room. She looked into my face. "Let me help you!" she exclaimed. "Take your time! Don't be anxious," she said. "Here—take it slowly—don't fall. It's O.K., Carol."

By then my left breast was uniformly tanned, an odd, smooth tan that someone who goes to Miami in February gets on their face.

That was four years ago. I have only now just figured it out.

What actually makes someone behave like a conservative? I finally—these four years later—have figured it out.

It is the kindness in their lives. For forty-five days—I included the time spent with the surgeons before the radiation therapy—I was in the presence of highly educated, kindly spoken people. I never once in those forty-five days got yelled at or scorned. Driving to and from the hospital parking ramp, I listened to high baroque music on tape. (Recently, too, I learned something of great interest from an audio of The Teaching Company. I paid attention because Professor Greenberg on the tape told us to. He tells anyone with ears to hear exactly how Bach invented such complex and beautiful sound. Bach made himself and his composing students first get the Central idea, whatever the central idea was. After that the melody, after that the bass, and only late in the composing should we think through the connectives—development and so forth.)

When I was receiving thirty-five mornings of radiation therapy I did my own writing in the afternoons. In the evenings I talked only to loving family members. I kept clear of anyone who was broke or frustrated. I let myself discard without reading all the pleas from Friends for a Non-Violent World, the National Democratic Party, Women Against Military Madness, and the Minnesota DFL. After all, I had breast cancer, hadn't I? I had a right not to be

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hassled. I had a right.

For those forty-five days I was like a little kid in a very good prep school. In such schools, the classes are small. The teachers make it clear we are all learning together, all the time. The faculty are respectful. They make each of us anxious to become whoever we long to become. No one makes us feel guilty if we don't want to change the world, make it fair or anything like that.

In those forty-five days I stayed in that sort of kindly atmosphere. Anyone would want to live in such a frame of mind. Who'd ever want to give up psychological comfort like that?

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