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Russell Kirk

By Annette Kirk



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Life With Russell Kirk

By Annette Kirk

My estimation of Russell can best be summed up by an incident that occurred several years ago: After an especially tiresome travel schedule delivering lectures in several states, Russell returned home with a very sore throat. When I phoned the doctor's office to obtain an appointment for him, the receptionist said she had no appointments available for at least a month. Hoping to explain the urgency of my request, I burst out, "But he's a national treasure; civilization needs him!"

And so it did and does need the words of Russell Kirk and those other giants who serve as guardians of culture, transmitters of our heritage. We are but dwarves standing on the shoulders of these giants who provided the philosophical underpinnings of our present political discourse. Russell's own significant historical and literary contributions have been widely recorded. As Ken Cribb observed, "He lifted with his own hands our forgotten patrimony from dusty oblivion."

After almost 30 years of marriage to Russell Kirk, there is simply so much to say that it is hard to know where to begin. Russell recounts his life in his memoir, *The Sword of Imagination* (published by Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995). Today, I will offer my reflections on what life with Russell was like, and insight into how his conservative heart shaped his conservative mind.

Let me begin by answering a question I am often asked: "Where did you and Russell meet?" When I was a junior in college, and president of the student body, I attended many student gatherings, at which I met the young men and women who were later to emerge as the leaders of the conservative movement. During this time, I became involved in the founding of several conservative youth organizations. One snowy Saturday morning in February of 1960, I spoke at a conference in Manhattan on a book entitled *The American Cause*. At the luncheon, I was invited to sit next to the author, Russell Kirk. I found him charming and shy and, by dessert, discovered that we were kindred spirits.

The next year, as a college senior, I arranged lectures for him at my college, as well as at several campuses on the east coast. After graduation, I began teaching English and directing dramatic productions in a high school on Long Island, while also taking courses for a master's degree and remaining politically active. During these years, Russell and I saw each other on many occasions, but wrote each other even more often. The two years prior to our marriage, he wrote long missives daily—letters often amusing, but always full of wise insights.

In addition to writing long letters, Russell also sent me books as gifts—books such as W.H. Mallock's *An Immortal Soul*, George Gissing's *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, and *The Mind and Heart of Love* by the theologian Martin D'Arcy. It was this last book, which contrasts the classical concept of love as eros with the Christian concept of love as agape,

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that captured our imagination. We discovered that we both envisioned marriage as a vocation, an opportunity to serve not only each other and one's family, but one's community, one's culture. To explain how we got from this point of agreement on marriage in the abstract, to my writing him a letter agreeing to marry him in particular, would take at least another lecture. So suffice it to say that it had long been evident that Russell wished to marry me. Simultaneously, I came to the conclusion that I wanted to live all my days with him, to be part of his life, of his world—in short, that I loved him.

On March 17, 1964, I wrote Russell a letter announcing, "Our marriage is inevitable," which sounds rather dour at this distance. Amused, he replied, "Yes, inevitable like death and taxes." We were married on September 19 of that year at my parish chapel, named "Our Lady of the Skies" because it was located at, of all places, Kennedy Airport. A zither-player from a restaurant called the House of Habsburg performed, and after a small reception at my parents' home, during which Bill Buckley held court in the kitchen, we were driven to the airport to depart for our honeymoon in a 1929 Rolls-Royce Phantom II hearse, with a bumper-sticker affixed to it proclaiming "Goldwater for President." A classmate of Russell's from St. Andrews University was trying to sell this car and was eager to drive us to the church. This seemed a bit much, but not wanting to offend him, we had him take us to the airport instead, with our wedding party in the back of the hearse.

After a brief honeymoon on remote Beaver Island in the middle of Lake Michigan—a long way from the pleasant cafés and hectic pace of New York City where we had courted—we soon departed for California, where we feverishly campaigned for Senator Goldwater in the weeks before the election. This was the first of many campaigns in which we would be active, attending state conventions as delegates and hosting in our home innumerable gatherings for candidates for public office.

In Henry Regnery's preface to the 40th anniversary edition of *The Conservative Mind*, there is a description of Russell as a young man: "He doesn't say much, about as communicative as a turtle, but when he gets behind a typewriter the results are *most* impressive."

During the first few years of our acquaintance, I experienced the truth of that statement—Russell's preference for typing rather than talking. If he happened to be in New York when my parents held their Sunday evening gathering of conservatives, Russell would come. If he were asked a question, he would give an excellent response. When one asked him to tell a story, he kept us in charmed awe. Otherwise, he was mostly silent. Within a few days after the gathering, however, once he had returned to his typewriter, I would receive a letter from Mecosta containing wonderful comments and reflections provoked by our discussions.

After some years of marriage, one of Russell's assistants put the question to him: "Dr. Kirk, you and Mrs. Kirk are two very different people. Mrs. Kirk is very energetic, always on the move, and outgoing. You, on the other hand, are more meditative, stoical, and reserved. How is it that you have such a happy marriage?" Russell replied in his typical manner—without hesitation and to the point—"What you have said is true—we are very different. First Principles—this is the basis of our happiness." Needless to say, the young man was startled to receive such an encapsulated answer.

We did agree on all important matters. Yet, there were two items on which there was some contention—how much the monthly phone bill should be and whether we should drive home the 70 miles from the airport via the expressway or the scenic route. I'll leave it to you to guess who always wanted to take the scenic route.

Perhaps some background on my education can shed light on Russell's response to the question posed to him about our apparent differences, and in doing so touch upon his influence on my mind as well as on my heart. When I attended a Catholic college in the late '50s, the curriculum was designed to introduce students to first principles, to both the life of the mind and the realm of the spirit—to dispose them to what Newman termed a “philosophical habit of mind.” Philosophy, emphasizing logic, and theology, especially apologetics, were then at the core of the curriculum.

Unlike most of the young men I knew, Russell enjoyed discussing the essential questions in which I was interested—questions such as the metaphysical understanding of “being,” the proofs for the existence of God, and the meaning and purpose of life. While he agreed that what made man unique was his ability to reason and to know the difference between right and wrong, Russell also believed that pure reason had its limits and that logical proofs were not needed to validate religious truths. He persuaded me that even if a transcendent order were denied in the realm of reason, evidences of every sort—proofs from natural science, history, and physics—demonstrated that we were part of some grand mysterious scheme working upon us providentially.

Russell introduced me to the “illative sense,” an expression employed by Newman to explain a method of reasoning beyond logic. The illative sense is constituted by impressions that are borne in upon us from a source deeper than our conscious and formal reason. It is the combined product of intuition, instinct, imagination, experience, and much reading and meditation. (See *The Conservative Mind*, Chapter VIII, “Conservatism with Imagination: Disraeli and Newman.”) Quoting Pascal, Russell often reminded me that “The heart has reasons that the reason does not know.”

Russell's emphasis on things of the heart and the hearth became more evident after we were married and began to have daughters. So mindful was he of pleasing children that when building an addition onto his ancestral home, he instructed the carpenters to place the windows closer to the floor so little ones could look out more easily. He also made sure there was a room in a tower that could be used as a clubhouse and a winding staircase to a cupola set atop the house allowing them to view village fireworks on the Fourth of July. To entertain them he created a garden walk and called it the Troll's Path.

Perhaps an episode that occurred when our first three daughters were young will illustrate Russell's enjoyment of everyday life and display how he derived profound insights from ordinary events. In his memoirs, which he wrote in the third person, he recounts this tale:

At Mecosta, snowdrifts persist well into April; when the drifts vanish, the lilacs bloom. On the first warm and bright morning of April 1971, there burst out of the pantry door of the Old House Monica, aged three; Cecilia, aged two; and Felicia, aged eleven months—the latter two in their pajamas. They commenced to caper and sing.

Monica, emulated enthusiastically by Cecilia, began piling stones on the back steps. “Stones for breakfast!” she shouted, “We're going to have stones for breakfast tonight!” While Felicia writhed in an endeavor to escape from her father's clutch to crawl on the new grass, Cecilia, not to be outdone in fantasy, tried to feed her pebbles while exclaiming, “Tones for b'ekfas'!”

“Hush!” said Monica, “I hear a bird!” Cecilia spied a picturesque insect. Only [her father's] prompt exertions prevented Felicia from devouring pebbles in earnest.

Returning from the post office, Annette reproved [her husband] for surrendering feebly to the desires of their strong-willed daughters who might catch cold outside in their pajamas; he protested that their gamboling could not be restrained. Before their marriage, Annette had declared that any husband of hers ought to be ready to romp with the children. Now she found her Russell all too liberally fulfilling her commandment.

In the spring of life, Kirk reflected, nearly everything is wondrous. The fortunate are those who have not lost their sense of wonder; who subsist upon the bread of spirit, laughing at the stones of dullness and hard materialism.

“The life eternal is determined by what one says and does here and now”; so Martin D’Arcy had said. With these three playful daughters, that spring morning, Kirk enjoyed one of those moments in which time and the timeless intersect: a glimpse of immortality....

Those men and women who fail to perceive timeless moments are the prisoners of time and circumstance. Only by transcending the ravenous ego, and sharing their joy with others, do mortals come to know their true enduring selves and to put on immortality.

Russell believed that we all long for immortality, for the garden before the fall. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why he derived such pleasure from gardening. Our fourth daughter, Andrea, who has tended sheep, and shared her father’s love of the land, has written:

When he first took up residence at Piety Hill, my father found the land shaved of its lush trees by the family’s first settlers, earning it the name “Stump Country.” So to make amends for the sins of his ancestors, he planted hundreds of trees on our land and in the village. Despite this great number, it seemed as though he could remember when each tree was planted and any other interesting detail about it.

Agrarian life was well understood and appreciated by my father. Under the dimming September sun he and I worked together planting and pruning. He loved to watch the progress his labors had achieved; the growth of new life from his ancestral earth. The most precious objects in my father’s life were his family, his home, and his five acres of land.

With Chesterton, Russell believed that all life is an allegory and could be understood only in parable. Thus, he relied chiefly on myths, fables, and imaginative tales to teach his children how to live in a bent world.

In an essay entitled “A Literary Patrimony,” our second daughter, Cecilia, recalls:

Night after night my father read aloud to us, all of us delighted by the stories. Sometimes we listened for hours. Occasionally, he was even more eager to read than we were inclined to listen: when we fell asleep, we were carried up the wooden hill—the stairs—to the land of nod.

My father also invented his own tales. He related these stories as installments beside the fireplace, the traditional place for a community’s stories, developing the characters and plots as he spoke. We followed “Hew and His Knife,” “The Elusive Earl,” and other tales. Often he would conclude an episode with the protagonists caught in a perilous predicament—surrounded by bandits or the like—which on one occasion so infuriated us that we

demanded that he “get those children home to their mamma.” Laughing, he appeased us with a more satisfactory conclusion.

Haunting works, far removed from the tales he told us, my father’s published fiction often considers the eerie, the macabre, even the diabolic. For the sheer pleasure of their evocative titles, I specify: *Old House of Fear*, *The Surly Sullen Bell*, *The Princess of All Lands*, *Lord of the Hollow Dark*, and “The Invasion of the Church of the Holy Ghost.” His published fiction and unwritten children’s tales do, however, share a common element: the appeal to the normative consciousness, touching upon struggles of an ethical nature.

During our three decades together, Russell and I enjoyed the company of dozens of people who became, for months or years, part of our extended family. Because of their presence, we were able to celebrate more fully holidays, feast-days, and birthdays. At one point, we had so many celebrations that Russell conferred upon one of our “little platoon” the distinction of “Mistress of Revels.”

Halloween was always an especially festive night. Russell wore his saffron-colored St. Andrews academic gown. The village children always referred to him as “The Great Pumpkin.” Later in the evening, after the doorbell stopped ringing, he would gather us all around to play an English game called “Snapdragon,” which involved snatching flaming raisins soaked in brandy from a brass tray and eating them while they were still burning.

During those years, our household included students, refugees, several musicians, and Russell’s 90-year-old aunt, who lived in a log cabin next door. Every day at 5 p.m., tiny Fay Jewell invited all of us to join her in her daily drink, a single glass of whiskey and water. The students always liked to join her to hear her tales of Mecosta and to take a break from their more scholarly pursuits.

One could give innumerable examples of Russell’s hospitality, shown in large and small acts of kindness to others regardless of age or stature. Perhaps the best illustration of this hospitality was his acceptance of the hobo who lived with us for six years until he died. A stalwart white-haired Viking with piercing blue eyes, Clinton Wallace came to us on probation, having done time for stealing from church poor-boxes. He reasoned that he was the poor, and so he was justified in taking what he needed. Other than stealing on occasion, his only vices were laziness and buying lottery tickets. For years he had kept himself warm while on the road by visiting libraries, where he actually read the books. He memorized reams of poetry and loved to recite it at our seminars, especially Shakespeare and the *Rubiyat of Omar Khayyam*. Russell wrote his best and, to my mind, most beautiful short story about Clinton and called it “A Long, Long Trail A-Winding.” In it, the main character, Frank Sarsfield, patterned after Clinton, dies in a snowstorm. Ironically, just one year later, Clinton died in a snowstorm, on his way home after seeing the movie “Across the Great Divide.” He is buried in our family plot, next to Russell.

For two decades, we held formal weekend seminars several times a year, sponsored by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute. These seminars addressed a wide variety of topics, including “Our Classical Patrimony,” “Historical Consciousness,” “In Search of the American Spirit,” “Literature in an Ideological Age,” and “Can Virtue Be Taught?” We also held hundreds of informal seminars for the many graduate students who lived with us. All together, some two thousand students and professors attended these gatherings.

Several of these ISI/Piety Hill seminars were held over the New Year’s Eve holiday, and so naturally called for a celebration. After three days of serious discussion, furniture in the drawing room was pushed back to accommodate the dancing of reels, the singing of carols,

