

## **Beatrice Jane Baxendale: An Appreciation**

Thoughts shared by Daniel A. Seeger at the memorial service held on January 10, 1998.

Medford Leas, Medford, New Jersey 08055

Our family has asked me to say a few words of appreciation for the life of my aunt, Beatrice Jane Baxendale. But first, let me express our thanks to Don Killian for his willingness to conduct this worship service for us. I would also, on behalf of our family, like to express thanks to our friends from Medford Leas for joining us on this occasion.

My Aunt Beatrice was born on November 19, 1906 and she died on January 2, 1998. Inevitably, a nephew's-eye-view of a long and rich life will not be perfectly balanced, nor anywhere near complete, but I will do my best to share some of the beautiful things which my Aunt Beatrice brought to our experience as a family.

Aunt Beatrice and my mother were the two children of William Henry Baxendale and Elizabeth Johnson Baxendale. My grandmother, Elizabeth, died before I was born, and so I never knew her. My grandfather, William Henry Baxendale, came to America from Wales, and he brought with him from Wales two traditions which were to be significant in the lives of his two daughters.

As we know, Wales is a kind of peninsula reaching west from England. Like Scotland and Ireland, it has been an area of contention between peoples springing out of the European continent -- Normans and Anglo-Saxons -- and indigenous, Atlantic-oriented people we know as Celts. The Celtic culture of Wales includes a rich heritage of poetry and music which can be traced back to the sixth century. The interest of Welsh-speaking people in their heritage finds expression in great festivals of poetry and music know as Eisteddfods. Poetry and choral singing were features of these events. My grandfather participated in these, and my mother has passed on to us stories from him about how Eisteddfod participants managed to ford flooded rivers on the way to the festivals while managing to keep their harps dry.

At any rate, a love of music and poetry was passed on to William Henry Baxendale's daughters. My mother was a frequently published poet until the time came when she had to give all her attention to a husband and four children. My Aunt Beatrice became an accomplished musician. She was a pianist and a vocalist. As a pianist she mastered a serious classical repertoire, and I can distinctly remember her playing some of the more intricate Chopin etudes and preludes, and even some Rachmaninoff. My mother often remarked, for example, how she loved to hear her sister play Rachmaninoff's *Le Polichinelle*. I was too young when Aunt Beatrice was actively doing this to be able to note anything about her interpretive approach. But I do recall quite clearly that she

played this ambitious music with great clarity and fluency, and with no fumbling or hesitation.

As time went on, Aunt Beatrice focused her musical activities on the needs of her church, the First Presbyterian Church of Palisades Park. She played the organ there, and directed the choir for many, many years. So, as I grew older Aunt Beatrice's musical efforts were focused exclusively on the church and no longer on the classical repertoire.

This brings me to the second thing that William Henry Baxendale passed along to his daughter, Beatrice -- a Christian faith nourished by the Presbyterian tradition. Non-conformist religion in Wales began as Methodism and was greatly enlarged by the Methodist revivalism of the eighteenth century. But, oddly, the movement's leaders in Wales turned away from the perspectives of John Wesley in favor of those of John Calvin, and so the Welsh Presbyterian Church is often known as the Calvinist Methodist Church. At any rate, my Aunt Beatrice was a life-long member of the Presbyterian Church, and her devotion to her Christian faith, and her activism in the church, was certainly a primary focus for her interest and energies.

Aunt Beatrice never married. She was a life-long career-woman, and, in fact, spent her



entire working life in what was then the New York Telephone Company (later to be NYNEX, and most recently incorporated into Bell Atlantic). My understanding is that she was an accounts manager handling the New York Telephone Company's relationships with larger corporate clients. I do know she took her work very seriously, and from what I know of my Aunt Beatrice she must have carried out her responsibilities conscientiously and with utmost competence.

Aunt Beatrice also developed an interest in photography. As with everything else, she pursued this with thoroughness and competence. She was active in a camera club. These were back in the days when, in order to take excellent photographs, one had to figure out what shutter speed and f-stop to use by employing light meters and calcu-

lating distances. Aunt Beatrice mastered all of this. I can actually remember the time when the technology of slide projection was new, and when we first made the transition from viewing photographs, usually black and white photographs, held in the hand or in an album, to seeing them in vivid colors brightly projected like panoramas on a screen. Aunt Beatrice was at the cutting edge of this revolution in amateur picture taking. She often came with her projector to share her latest efforts with us.

Aunt Beatrice was, perhaps, occasionally too thorough about this. Often she would show us all the rejected versions of a particular picture, explaining their inadequacies, before getting around to projecting the prize-winning version. I was at an age when I was an aspiring photographer myself, and I was able to withstand this well; my poor brother Larry, four years younger, inevitably had a different attention span, and some of these demonstrations were a trial for him. To this very day, as everyone in the family is well aware, Larry retains an acute allergy to family slide shows!

Aunt Beatrice also liked to travel. She and her girlfriends would coordinate their vacations and go on jaunts in Aunt Beatrice's automobile to places like California, Arizona and Washington State. This was very amazing, exotic and enchanting to me. As I look back on my own childhood, it now appears quite idyllic -- we lived on peaceful and picturesque Pidgeon Meadow Road, which at that time was surrounded by undeveloped land which was wooded and in which I could play adventuresome games. But back then my world seemed to me to be very small and confining. Perhaps this is a universal experience. One thinks of the farm boy living in a Norman-Rockwell-perfect setting, but still gazing longingly and restlessly at the horizon in response to a distant train whistle. At any rate, when Aunt Beatrice came back from one of her travel adventures with glorious slides of the Grand Canyon or the Oregon coast I was thrilled and longed to set out myself on similar adventures.

I know my mother would want me to say something about what a wonderful sister and friend my Aunt Beatrice was to her. I observed a life-long loyalty between them, and I remember my mother's very genuine grief when, ten years ago, Aunt Beatrice's Alzheimer's Disease began to undermine her ability to recognize my mother or to continue their friendship in the traditional way. But this sisterly love and support was given a significant expression well before I could witness it. This occurred in connection with my mother's decision to marry my father.

For some reason this marriage caused a rift in the Baxendale clan, and in fact my grandfather, William Henry Baxendale, boycotted the wedding. It is a little hard for me to reconstruct just what the problem was. My mother's family had some traditions associated with the WCTU -- the old Women's Christian Temperance Union. My father's family had some traditions associated with Bavarian beer drinking. Perhaps this was the nature of the clash.

The boundaries between religions were much more formidable in those days than in our own more ecumenical age; perhaps the thought of mother marrying into a Catholic

family and converting to the Catholic faith was more than an austere Presbyterian could bear. At any rate, Aunt Beatrice refused to be coopted into this wedding boycott, nor to be cowed by my grandfather, no small thing in those more patriarchal days, but she stood solidly with my mother. I always appreciate that; whenever I look at my parents' wedding pictures and see lots of Seegers staring out at me, I also see Aunt Beatrice standing forthrightly next to my mother, representing single-handedly the Baxendale side of the equation.

But while this was probably the most dramatic occasion of sisterly loyalty, I observed it in a more low-keyed way throughout their lives. Each had taken a very different path in life -- my mother becoming absorbed in the domestic cares and responsibilities which a husband and four children entailed, while Aunt Beatrice remained a widely traveled single career woman and accomplished musician -- yet this life-style gap did nothing to diminish their "sisterliness" and friendship.

Aunt Beatrice named her car Jiminey Cricket. My parents did not own a car in those days, and Aunt Beatrice would come and take our family on much-appreciated outings. She also took us on cruises on the Hudson River Day Line to Indian Point, which in those days was not a nuclear plant but was an amusement park. So after a cruise-with-picnic on the very scenic Hudson River we would ride the caterpillar and the merry-go-round before heading back for the return voyage.

Aunt Beatrice was generous to our family in innumerable other ways. At Christmas time she would take us to Radio City Music Hall, or to The Nutcracker ballet, or to the ice show. If we went to a matinee we would eat lunch in Horn and Hardart's restaurant, where it was amazing how the change clerks could, in return for your dollar bill, toss twenty nickels at you without counting them. I would always get my favorite menu out of the glass-faced slots: macaroni and cheese, lemon meringue pie, and hot chocolate. If the show to which Aunt Beatrice took us was in the evening we would eat at a restaurant called Toffinetti's. Invitations to these annual events always came in a very proper way. Each child in the family would receive a personal invitation carefully penned by Aunt Beatrice, saying something to the effect; "You are very cordially invited to attend . . ." and naming the event, the day and the date. Later, when we were too old for these outings, Aunt Beatrice turned to making us personal, hand-made gifts, usually beautiful things which she knitted.

I mentioned the personalized and formally phrased invitations each child got when these outings occurred. There was what might be called a "gentility gap" between our household and that of the Baxendale's. Often we four children seemed like a little more than my mother and father could quite cope with and the flavor of our home was something that, on such a public occasion as this, I will simply term "informal." Into this environment Aunt Beatrice brought a flavor of propriety on her visits. We knew we should be on our best behavior, that it was time to be polite. The glassware and china which were usually stowed away for safe keeping appeared on the table. We used even napkins when she was present. Interestingly, this shift in the atmosphere was not

the result of any sort of stern visage or explicitly stated demand on Aunt Beatrice's part. Neither did she seem so super-sensitive as to give the impression that we had to change our ways out of deference to a too-fragile temperament. Nor was she condescending or critical. Any kind of "put-down" was very far from her nature. But somehow we seemed to catch on that the Baxendale household from which Aunt Beatrice came represented a window to a different world of decorum, civility, and grace, a world which we scarcely knew and to which we did not, perhaps, quite measure up.

I have mentioned that Aunt Beatrice never married. I suppose in many families the "maiden aunt" is regarded as a sort of tragic figure, and such an attitude of pity did filter around, in a sotto voce way, among our family as well regarding my Aunt Beatrice. But the other day, when my brother, Larry, and my sister, Betty, and I were having lunch together we were unanimous that we did not share this attitude of solicitude. We felt that Aunt Beatrice was quite content with her lot as a single woman. It was a kind of vocation, rather than something she simply accepted with Christian patience. To me my Aunt Beatrice seemed deliberately to affirm the possibility of a woman experiencing a joyful, rewarding and fulfilling life without necessarily being attached to a man. As we struggle to find a new ground on which women and men can stand in equal dignity, without men being presumed to be superior or dominant, it seems to me that the image of women managing without men is an important part of the consciousness landscape. The single state is not a vocation for everyone, obviously. But when it occurs it helps erode the idea that women are dependent upon men, and that men do women a favor by marrying them, a favor for which they owe, in return, some sort of obsequiousness. Aunt Beatrice would never have felt comfortable being called a feminist or a liberationist. Yet I have always felt that in a subtle way her pattern of life was a statement about women's equality and dignity.

Aunt Beatrice died after a very long, isolating illness. She has been in a nursing home for over ten years. When she was interred last Thursday at Brookside Cemetery in Englewood, New Jersey, my sister and brother-in-law, Betty and Werner, my brother, Larry, and I were at the gravesite with the funeral director, who conducted a small service for the four of us before lowering the casket into the ground.

To have so few mourners may seem at first to be a sad and desolate business. And yet, if we think about it more deeply, the size of one's funeral is not necessarily indicative of anything very significant. It is simply a function of circumstances. When my late sister Enid died suddenly, in the prime of life, as a result of a highway accident, the church was filled with hundreds of shocked and grief-stricken people. Similarly, when my friend Lottie Bernstein died recently at an age we would regard as very premature, there was a very large memorial service. So the lesson might be that big funerals go with early deaths. Fewer mourners may simply mean that you have outlived your contemporaries, or that you were out of circulation for a long time before the end came. When I went to the cemetery last Thursday I assumed I was, in a sense, standing in for my mother and father, who could not go. But while I was there it came to me that

the four of us were standing in for many people who would have wanted to be present if they had been in a position to be conscious of the event. I thought of the members of the camera club, and of the Daughters of the Eastern Star, to which my aunt belonged. I thought of the many associates at the Telephone Company and among Telephone Company customers. I thought of the several church pastors who must have been grateful to have a choir director and a pillar of the church who was so able and so loyal and so thoughtful. I thought of her traveling companions, and also of the sopranos, altos, tenors and basses whose efforts to sing the praises of the Lord she supported and directed. I thought of the church congregations in Palisades Park and in Lakehurst. So, in effect, although there were only four of us, we represented many, many more people. And the fact that these others were not physically present was not to be lamented nor to be celebrated, but simply to be observed and accepted. That is the way the circumstances of this particular life had unfolded under the Lord's guidance. And I was also grateful that the four of us could be there.

I said at the beginning that a "nephew's eye view" will necessarily be partial and incomplete, and possibly even mistaken in some significant particulars. So I am reluctant to offer any summary conclusion. But I do think it safe to say that my Aunt Beatrice would have wished to be thought of, first and foremost, as having lived a faithful Christian life. One of the miracles and the mysteries of our Christian tradition is that the question "What is a Christian life?" has so many answers. Moreover, a great many of these answers are quite authentic spiritually and very worthy of respect. I belong to a branch of the church, the Religious Society of Friends, where we are apt to favor the radicals of the Christian tradition: Francis of Assisi, Bishop Oscar Romero, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King -- the movers and the shakers. We are apt to believe that Jesus came "to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable." We are tempted to dismiss a Christian faith which seems to blend too facilely into mainstream American middle-class values or into humanly conceived ideas of propriety and politesse.

But I have found my thoughts about this shifting as time passes. It is perhaps reasonable and natural that it is those Christians who have a sharper awareness of the divided nature of the human condition, of the fact that in addition to being made in the image of God we are also fallen creatures living in a disordered state, who will regard the steady building up, brick by brick, of habits of civility and decency in the community and in the church as a kind of bulwark against the worst that evil can do. When I go to the movies I choose the films I will see with great care. But one cannot choose the coming attractions, and I am often appalled at a coarseness, harshness, and violence which seems to pervade so much popular culture. And I am reminded of the intemperate and intolerant tone of so much of our public debate about issues facing our common life. Aunt Beatrice, in her Christian faith, in her sense of propriety and decency, stood solidly against these disturbing trends. And so it seems to me that we can indeed give thanks for many things, for many gifts of the Spirit, which Aunt Beatrice brought to us, but most especially we can give thanks for her life of authentic Christian faithfulness.

*Daniel A. Seeger*