

Uncle Ray

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Ray Casey died today.

Ray was the city cousin. My mother was the country cousin. They grew up as close as brother and sister even though he lived in Milwaukee and she lived more than an hour away on a dairy farm in St. Michael's near Kewaskum.

Their closeness grew after their marriages, because they and their spouses all liked each other – a magical thing never guaranteed to happen in any family. Thus Ray became Uncle Ray to me, someone much more important than “my mother’s cousin.”

I can see him with absolute clarity, a tall lanky guy with a shock of straight dark hair falling across his forehead, blue eyes alight, sly smile, head ducking down after making a goofy joke.

When my brothers and sister and I were growing up, we often visited at Uncle Ray’s house. Sometimes we went there on a weekday and Mum played cards with Uncle Ray’s wife, Vi (never “Aunt” Vi, I don’t know why). Sometimes we drove to see them on a weekend, when Pop and Uncle Ray were there too, home from work.

In the 50s, Ray and Vi lived in Milwaukee, like we did. When Ray and Vi came to visit, it was always a good time for us kids: cards, cigarettes, laughter, and Brach’s bridge mix. We loved getting up the next morning and eating the leftover chocolate covered nuts and raisins.

Uncle Ray’s family was growing and so was ours. There were plenty of us cousins to play together, and neighbor kids, too. When we visited the Casey household, we kids did a lot of running between their duplex and the one next door. It was dark between the two tall houses – I felt a little spooked. The duplexes were so close that the sun never shone there.

Ray and Vi’s kids had a toy that I loved: a big punching bag in the shape of a clown, I think. The clown was about as tall as I was. It had a weighted round bottom. We punched it and it popped right back again. I always wanted one of those.

Eventually the Caseys became the country cousins and we became the city cousins. They moved to an old farmhouse on Shady Lane in Menomonee Falls, and we stayed in a Cape Cod in Milwaukee. Our families kept growing until each had three boys and two girls, arranged in almost perfect steps.

Uncle Ray's farmhouse was a place of great fascination to me. It had an enclosed sun porch jutting out the front, where Uncle Ray did his artwork. I liked to be in that room; it seemed secret. Once he and I were in the sun porch together and Uncle Ray showed me a painting he had made of Vi. He loved that picture. He talked to me about the picture for a long time, and as young as I was, I figured out that he was really talking to me more about Vi and not so much about the painting.

The farmhouse had an upstairs with vents in the floor. We kids could open the vents to get heat from the first floor – and to spy on anyone below, a wonderful thing. Boy, did we giggle at the adults below. We were sure they had no idea about our covert activities.

Ray and Vi's farmhouse had a dining room, something I thought quite exotic. In the dining room was a hutch and on the hutch was a coffee grinder you could grind by hand. I marveled at that grinder, although I didn't understand it.

Outside in the farmyard there stood a Quonset hut that I never went into, and a huge old barn that was a world in itself. We kids wandered around the barn, all cobwebs and dust motes in shafts of sunlight. We always had a slight (and thrilling) feeling of danger in there.

The Casey farmstead included a series of Irish Setters of no great intelligence but great beauty – Uncle Ray laughed at them and loved them. And there was a small marshy area near the house that stayed a small marshy area.

Beyond the farmyard was open land where we kids ran, farm fields all around, a few houses here and there. In the summer, the humming of heat bugs was loud in our ears and everywhere around us. Once we kids walked on Shady Lane up the hill to a neighbor's house, where we took turns with the neighbor kid jumping from the top of the garage lean-to to the ground below. Uncle Ray and the other adults were indoors, playing cards as usual. Kids were used to freedom in those days.

Back in the farmhouse, whenever I talked to him, it seemed that Uncle Ray lived to make me laugh. When I was in his presence, I had his complete attention. That is special for any child – for an adult to be truly *present*. I never felt that Uncle Ray was in a hurry to get away from me and return to the adults.

He taught me lots of things....

He taught me to love fables. He shared with me a book of Uncle Remus tales. It was an oversized book with a shiny cover, produced by Disney after its Uncle Remus animated movie. It didn't matter if the day was sunny or rainy – every time we visited the farmhouse, my first stop was the couch with the big Uncle Remus book propped on my lap. I gobbled up every story of the always-clever Brer Rabbit, a small creature who

had his share of troubles yet consistently outwitted Brer Fox and avoided becoming stew. “Born and bred in a briar patch” – that cracked me up!

Uncle Ray taught me about art. He had graduated from Layton School of Art and was employed as an artist for *The Milwaukee Sentinel*. He found out I liked to do cartooning and drawing in general.

“Draw me something,” he said one day.

Somehow I flung off my flowing cape of embarrassment and pressure and managed to sketch a figure of a girl. My fingers felt as trembly as when people asked me to play piano for them.

“Here, I’ll show you how to do body proportion,” he said. He showed me that my girl was much too short. “You can measure figures by heads,” he explained. “A baby is three heads tall. A child is four heads tall. An adult is seven or eight heads tall.” He re-drew my figure and I saw the improvement (although I was a short person then and have remained a short person never reaching appropriate artist’s proportions).

Uncle Ray taught me about body language one day when he noticed me touching my nose as I entered a room.

“You can always tell when someone’s self-conscious because they’ll scratch their nose or touch their face some way,” he said.

That was a strong lesson for a young teenager.

One day, when I was much older, we had a long, serious talk about alcohol and about how husbands should treat their wives. I have never forgotten the things he told me that day.

Visiting Uncle Ray’s farmhouse all those years must have influenced me. “Country” became stamped in my heart, although I never lived there, growing up. When I became a married woman, “country” was where I lived.

First Mike and I bought a tiny house on an acre in Sussex maybe a mile away from where Ray and Vi had settled after leaving Shady Lane. Later Mike and I moved to a house with a barn and ten acres on Custer Lane in Menomonee Falls. Custer Lane used to be part of Shady Lane. It’s just down the road and around a sharp corner from Uncle Ray’s old farmhouse.

The big barn and Quonset hut are gone, but the marshy area is still a marshy area and the enclosed sun porch still juts out proudly from the front. I’ve passed by the farmhouse countless times on my bike, always tempted to knock on the door and talk to the folks who live there now. I bet kids still spy on adults through the floor vents. It

wouldn't be the same place, though, without the hutch and the coffee grinder and the Uncle Remus book.

Most of all, it wouldn't be the same without Uncle Ray

In my adult years, I got to know Uncle Ray in a different way. His string-bean frame filled out and his dark hair grew white... yet the sparkle still danced in his eyes, and he still ducked his head after a goofy joke. He remained tall, though somewhat stooped, and always ready to laugh. We became colleagues at Waukesha County Technical College. He taught water painting and I taught creative writing. My sister Sally taught math there, and all of us would get together with our spouses at WCTC annual dinners. Sally and Dale and Mike and I always looked forward to seeing Vi and Ray again.

Now I could ask him questions that never would have occurred to me to ask before. I asked him about my dad, long gone. Uncle Ray always spoke of Pop in the fondest way, referring to him as "Red" or "the Irishman." Ray and his sister, my Aunt Shirley, enjoyed the fact that Pop was half-Irish, like they were. The more I talked to Uncle Ray, the more it became apparent that he and Pop shared many secrets that I would never know. All I could know for sure was that the secrets were funny.

As a married woman, I saw Uncle Ray in a different light: as a married man. When I visited him and Vi, I found them to be a most loving – and ever-arguing – couple. He'd speak and she'd correct him, or she'd speak and he'd correct her. They argued, they smiled, and they so obviously loved each other that the arguing was just funny. They both had the driest of dry senses of humor, which gave perspective to everything.

In his later years, Uncle Ray experienced serious physical problems. At one point he became so ill that he lost a great deal of weight, proving his assertion that "you should always keep a little extra weight in case you get sick."

Eventually Uncle Ray experienced great depression. He gave up teaching and painting. When I saw him at our summer family reunions, I only saw an occasional flicker of the sparkle that had once danced in his blue eyes. The sparkle may have been gone, but the love never disappeared. I still felt the love when I sat to talk with him.

Vi told me they had explored every avenue but could find no cure for Uncle Ray's depression. I thought it especially cruel that depression cloaked the man who had lived to make others laugh.

I know Uncle Ray's depression was hard for Vi to deal with. Yet when I spoke with her, she didn't complain. She loved the man.

Before his depression set in, Uncle Ray decided to leave a legacy to his family: his art. He started distributing a print of one of his paintings. It's an abstract study of a waterfall with seagulls, in purples and greens.

“How did you do it? From a photograph?” I asked him.

“I saw the waterfall and painted it from memory,” he told me.

My print is number 46 of 500.

“I gave Sally a lower number, because she’s my godchild,” Uncle Ray explained, sheepish grin on his face.

Uncle Ray wanted all his kin to have his art, and I have a hunch that anyone who doesn’t have a print can still get one from Vi. (You won’t get as low a print number as Sally, however!)

I had the print framed. It’s the focal point on the wall behind my living room couch. I was proud to show it to Uncle Ray last time he visited at my house, during the summer of 2005.

How wonderful to be able to leave your art for your family. All I can leave for Uncle Ray is a little tribute in words.

Yet he and I knew the best gift, something we can all give any time: love.

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