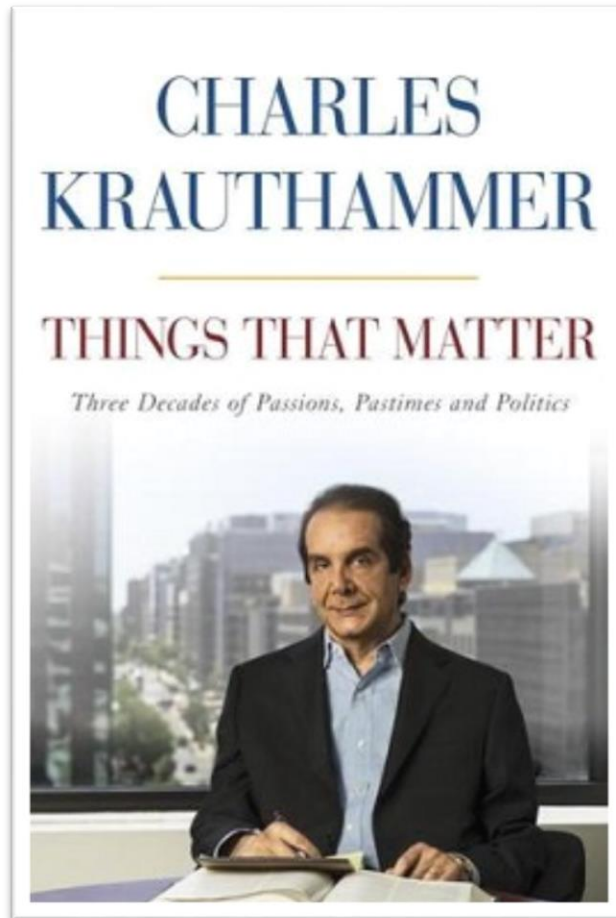


**Charles Krauthammer – A Unique Journalist
By Brigitte Battat**



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I decided to jot down reflexions on Charles Krauthammer

There is a cornucopia of articles about Charles Krauthammer. My write-up, however, is the desire to memorialize a personality that reminds me of my parents, who had been searching their entire lives for truth in a world drowning in a sea of chaos. Krauthammer's Washington Post contributions echoed my parents' political opinions. Charles Krauthammer and my father belonged to an almost extinct category of journalists, for they attempted to describe the realm in which they lived with a degree of objectivity, trying to put aside personal feelings.

In a write-up dedicated to my deceased parents whose fascination with knowledge, cultural events, politics, and diverse literature, implanted in me the seeds of my affinities in life, I added a paragraph from his book, *"Things that Matter, Three Decades of Passions, Pastimes and Politics"*:

"Politics, the crooked timber of our communal lives, dominates everything because, in the end, everything. . . lives or dies by politics. You can have the most advanced and efflorescent of cultures. Get your politics wrong, however, and everything stands to be swept away. . . Politics is the moat, the walls, beyond which lie the barbarians."

I used to read Charles Krauthammer's columns in The Washington Post; they informed and enlightened the reader with their pithy, detailed analyses of domestic and foreign policies. Krauthammer reminded me of my father's approach to journalism.

One evening, I met Charles Krauthammer at the Oxford Reunion in Washington, D.C., and spoke with him at length. What struck me the most was his modest and friendly demeanor. A pale looking figure and a shrivelled body in a wheelchair, he became the center of attention.

So how did it all start?

"In 1972, when he was a 22-year-old student at Harvard Medical School, he was swimming in a pool. Someone pushed the diving board out, extending over a shallower part of the pool. Charles, not realizing this, dove and broke his neck. At the bottom of the pool, "I knew exactly what happened. I knew why I wasn't able to move, and I knew what that meant."

Paralyzed from the neck down, he completed medical school, did an internship and, one thing leading to another, as life has a way of doing, became not a jewel in the crown of the medical profession, which he would have been, but one of America's foremost public

*intellectuals. Nothing against doctors, but the nation needed Charles more as a diagnostician of our public discontents.”*¹

Charles Krauthammer (March 13, 1950 – June 21, 2018) was an American political columnist. He has been defined as a “moderate liberal who turned independent conservative as a political pundit.” Krauthammer won the Pulitzer Prize for his columns in *The Washington Post* in 1987. His weekly column was syndicated to more than 400 publications worldwide.

During his first year in the Harvard Medical School, Krauthammer became permanently paralyzed from the waist down after a diving board accident that severed his spinal cord. After fourteen months of hospitalization, he returned to medical school, graduating to become a psychiatrist involved in the creation of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. In 1978, he joined the Carter Administration as a director of psychiatric research, eventually becoming the speechwriter to Vice President Walter Mondale in 1980.

Krauthammer’s first column appeared in *The Washington Post* on December 14, 1984, when he decided to quit psychiatry and become a journalist with a regular column in the newspaper. He considered such a job as “*being married to a nymphomaniac – as soon as you’re done, you’ve got to do it again.*” His words reminded me of my father, who used to spend nights editing his write-ups for the next day edition. And yet, my father was happy toiling on his columns. After all, how many human beings do what they enjoy doing? Rarer still are cases in which people discover their calling serendipitously. And this was Charles Krauthammer’s case.

He embarked on his career as a columnist for *The Washington Post* in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and in 1985, he began writing a weekly column for the newspaper. In 1987, Charles Krauthammer won the Pulitzer Prize for Commentary for his “witty and insightful columns on national issues.” [Wikipedia] He was a weekly panelist on the PBS news program *Inside Washington* from 1990 until it ceased production in December 2013. Krauthammer had been a contributing editor to *The Weekly Standard*, a Fox News contributor, and a nightly panelist on *Special Report with Bret Baier* on Fox News.

And now, to things that matter.

Krauthammer opens his book, “*Things that Matter*,” by summarizing the issues that engage him in life:

”Lives of the good and the great, the innocence of dogs, the cunning of cats, the elegance of nature, the wonders of space, the perfectly thrown outfield assist, the difference between historical guilt and historical responsibility, homage and sacrilege in monumental architecture, fashions and follies and the finer uses of the F-word.

¹ Opinion - The Charles Krauthammer I knew. By George F. Will, Columnist. *The Washington Post*, June 21, 2018.

What else matters? Manners and habits, conundrums, social and ethical: Is a doctor ever permitted to kill a patient wishing to die? Why in the age of feminism do we still use the phrase “women and children”? How many lies is one allowed to tell to advance stem cell research?

What matters? ... The Fermi paradox in which the great man asks: With so many habitable planets out there, why in God’s name have we never heard a word from a single one of them?

These are the things that most engage me. They fill my days, some trouble my nights.”

Part I of the book is a collection of columns on personal opinions. Charles Krauthammer opens Chapter 1 entitled “*The Good and the Great*,” with his brother’s story, an assortment of humorous descriptions and a tragic denouement. He “paints” images of legendary characters such as Churchill and Christopher Columbus and analyzes their uniqueness in the pantheon of humanity.

Marcel Krauthammer, Brother

Krauthammer’s fifty-years-old brother is brought to the Emergency Room, with shortness of breath. The doctor in charge at the time assures the patient that he will be fine once he is administered electrolytes, at which the patient responds: “*Son, you wait for my electrolytes to come back and I’ll be dead in 10 minutes. I ran the ICU here for 10 years.*” Krauthammer’s description of his brother Marcel oozes love and admiration; Marcel’s laughter every time he would mention his brush with death, is a mixture of pride and defiance.

And then, Charles would recall Marcel’s left arm draped around his neck in a protective manner which “*only older brothers know.*” At this point, I imagined life with a sibling, the sort of existence that would have reduced my parents’ obsession with their only child, and would have diminished the sense of loneliness at an old age.

The article ends on a despondent note:

“My brother Marcel died on Tuesday, January 17. It was winter. He was 59.”

The Washington Post, January 27, 2006

Winston Churchill: The Indispensable Man

This personal story is followed by a detailed analysis of Winston Churchill, a man labeled as “indispensable” to humanity:

“Person of the Century? Time magazine offered Albert Einstein, an interesting and solid choice. Unfortunately, it is wrong. The only possible answer is Winston Churchill. Why? Because only Churchill carries that absolutely required criterion: indispensability. Without Churchill the world today would be unrecognizable—dark, impoverished, tortured... Take away Churchill in 1940 ... and Britain

would have settled with Hitler—or worse. Nazism would have prevailed. Hitler would have achieved what no other tyrant, not even Napoleon, had ever achieved: mastery of Europe. Civilization would have descended into a darkness the likes of which it had never known.”

Science and technology, culture, arts and humanities are certainly important parameters pushing progress forward, yet once in a while during the course of history, a man like Churchill comes to the rescue of our very existence. Nevertheless, *“Churchill is now disparaged for not sharing our multicultural late 20th century sensibilities.”* Krauthammer defines Churchill as a *“19th century man parachuted into the 20th.... It took a 19th century man, traditional in habit, rational in thought, conservative in temper, to save the 20th century from itself.”* As Krauthammer says it, *“The uniqueness of the 20th century lies not in its science but in its politics.”*

Charles Krauthammer died in the year 2018. I am curious to know how he would define the 21st century at a time when humanity has barely survived the COVID pandemic and is undergoing earth-shattering changes and deletion of individual identity by social media, robotics, and Artificial Intelligence.

Hermann Lisco: Man for All Seasons

Charles Krauthammer defines Hermann Lisco as *“a man who saved my Life”* (*The Washington Post*, August 25, 2000). He worked in secret at the University of Chicago studying the biological effects of plutonium. A decade later, he was instrumental in producing a landmark United Nations report on the effects of radiation on humans and on the environment.

As a professor of Medicine at Harvard University, *“Hermann’s goal was to keep us human, in touch with a larger world and larger possibilities... His mastery of science was complemented by deep knowledge of the humanities. With his supple and sophisticated mind, he discoursed easily on art, literature, politics, history... As for me, well, he made my career possible. Toward the end of my freshman year, I was paralyzed in a serious accident.”* Professor Lisco enabled Charles Krauthammer to finish Medical School.

At a time when subjects such as philosophy and classical literature are becoming a footnote in the annals of culture, Hermann Lisco’s memorialization should be a moral requirement. Krauthammer describes Lisco with love and admiration for his contribution to science and humanities.

So how did Krauthammer’s life end?

Krauthammer died on June 21, 2018, after a prolonged battle with cancer. The April 4, 2022 *Washington Post* issue dedicated to Krauthammer’s journalistic contribution articulates the following comments:

“Over the course of his 34 years at The Washington Post, Charles Krauthammer wrote some 1,600 columns on subjects that ranged from his passion for chess, his frustrated love of the Nationals, his affection for dogs to, above all, politics. That is, politics in the most elevated

sense of that word — not simply mundane partisan maneuvering, but the grand design of the Constitution and the role of America in the world.

Krauthammer was, by his own account, an improbable, accidental columnist. But for four decades he served as an unswerving bulwark against the barbarians — endlessly erudite, charming, independent-minded and ... remarkably relevant.”

On June 21, 2018, George Will wrote the following comments on Charles Krauthammer’s death:

“Charles was one of those vanishingly rare Washingtonians who could be both likable and logical. This is not easy in a town where the local industry, politics — unlike, say, engineering; get things wrong and the bridges buckle — thrives on unrefuted errors.

*The health problems that would end Charles’s life removed him from the national conversation some 10 months ago, so his legion of admirers already knows that he validated this axiom: **Some people are such a large presence while living that they still occupy space even when they are gone.**”*

Conclusion

Charles Krauthammer’s contribution to journalism is unlikely to be reproduced. Krauthammer’s skills in analyzing the political milieu and writing on diverse topics related to history, literature or the lives of personalities such as Christofer Columbus and Winston Churchill are irreplaceable.