

Two uncles

by [Brian Doyle](#) in the [May 13, 2015](#) issue



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Though I had but two uncles, I was rich in uncles, for they were honest and genuine men, wry and gentle, generous in everything but words; you never met two quieter souls, and many was the family event during which I sat alongside or between them, and every hour or so one would murmur yes, in response to some moppet's question, and the other would smile at the garrulity of his counterpart, and they would both sit back and again be as silent as mountains.

One was a telephone lineman, the other in the insurance trade; both had the swept-back hair of a certain time and sort of man in America; both were friendly and witty and gracious but somehow sad in the most subtle way; and it was not until years after their deaths that I began to learn of the real shapes of their lives when they were not silent and smiling uncles in the hubbub of a clan event. One had been a fine student, and saved his boyhood money for college, and lost it all in a day, when the market crashed, and dragged down millions of dreams with it; he then married and raised many children, and ran his business, but never loved his business, though he did it well; to spend a life doing something well but never liking it would be a sort of a prison, wouldn't it?

The other was in the army during the war, and met his wife on a train, and they were inspired by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin and Catherine de Hueck Doherty, and went into rural America, and tried to live simply, and attend to the holiness of the quotidian, but they were city people, not farmers, and they needed to eat, and many

children were born to them, so my uncle became a telephone lineman, and his hands were dark with pitch, and that was his work for many years, though he never loved it. I suspect he did it well, and never complained, or hatched schemes to get rich, but again, to do something well all your life that you never loved, what would a man think in the evenings, as he sat on his porch and smoked and watched for swifts to pour out of chimneys, and stitch dusk into dark?

They were polite, and courteous, and amusing men, if you listened carefully; and they never debated politics, or pontificated about sports and religion, or broadcast their own wisdom and prominence, as so many men do in the course of the social ramble; neither did they offer cutting remarks about anyone else, or commit calumny, or say sneering things seemingly in jest but not really joking at all; nor did they wish to be the wittiest, the most popular, the most handsome, the mayors of the room; nor did they seek to be seen as chieftains or pillars of the clan.

They were content to sit quietly in the corner, near each other, smiling gently, watching the swirl and whirl of the tribe at play; and while they would eat when the time came, and each sip his can or two of beer, I do not ever remember them walking across the room or yard, or circling the table of savories with a sopping paper plate, or even entering or leaving the room or the yard. To me they were always already there, seated, smiling gently, in the background—in the corners of the living room, along the fence in the backyard, off the main stage, observing their brother's family, or their sister-in-law's family, or their own families, as they mixed and milled.

What they thought, deep in their souls; what they so wished to be, and never became; the shape and yearning of their love, the seasons they loved best, the music they hummed when alone; which child they loved best and never admitted, which small habit of their wives drove them mad; which household task they hated most, which books they loved best; what gods they imagined when they prayed, what fates they hoped for after death—all things I will never know; unless someday somehow I will sit between them again, and this time turn to one and then the other, and to each say, Uncle, tell me everything, tell me all the stories in your heart, tell me, for now I am listening like I should have listened then; and for my own failure to ask then, for my ignorance of who you were as men, uncles, I ask your forgiveness; but now we have all the time there is, and my ears are yours to fill with stories.