Barney Rudner's Second Career

By Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

Before his late-life change of careers, my Uncle Barney was renowned for the boundlessness of his energy and community spirit. The day he retired from life as he knew it, the town's Masons Society broke a time-worn tradition by appending his name to a cherished room, no longer the "Meeting Room" but now the "Barney Rudner Meeting Room." For a group of citizens infamous for contention, the unanimity of their vote proved another testament to the esteem in which the town held him.

Barney's status was well deserved, especially if you consider that he harbored no political aspirations, benefited from no financial reward, nor did he seem to succumb to any other influences that sometimes make altruism better understood as good commerce. Sure, you could say that his business ventures grew in the soil of his good works, but you'd have to be more jaded than even I to convince yourself.

After all, Barney's modest income derived from the comings and goings of scrap metal in the far west side of the town. We were never sure how rusted metal stacked in piles along a railroad siding provided Barney and his family with money for a house, let alone a car. My father said that Barney had good connections with junk yards and demolition companies throughout the region. I was never sure how that bought a Buick.

And I couldn't figure out how Barney had the time to move around his scrap. He was as visible about town as the series of three stoplights that hung along the main road. Some of us saw Barney more than we saw our own fathers, even if our dads didn't fly away on planes screeching from the air force base. Even if we had just about our

fill of paternal contact.

Barney Rudner organized the Little League. He raked the base paths and carefully walked the lime-filled line marker around the diamond each and every game. The concession stand was stocked by Barney and a volunteer crew of fathers who were shamed into more than just this one activity by his quiet request for participation. “It’s for the kids,” he’d say and no one dared an excuse. Not with all that Barney did for the town.

But it wasn’t just the Little League. It was also the Home for the Elderly, the town’s volunteer fire department, and the Crippled Children’s Society. He was a fixture at all the school sporting events and academic fairs. You get the idea. Barney was the epitome of a decent man.

If you’re wondering why Barney devoted himself so endlessly to good works, you’re in the best of company. It was a common topic of conversation amongst the citizens of our town. I’ve overheard the question raised by spectators on bleachers or shoppers walking together down store aisles. To be sure, they talked about other matters, but far less often. Next to every ounce of general gossip stood a pound of armchair speculation about Barney’s reason for his munificent efforts.

But convincing theories were hard to come by. He wasn’t unusually observant in his religion, nor did he hunger after the adoration of others. He wasn’t saintly in his demeanor either. Barney might have loved all god’s creatures but he was fully capable of losing his temper and letting fly and epitaph or two. You should have heard him chew out one of his drivers when the poor fellow ran a light and smashed into a parked ambulance.

What was unfathomable to the town couldn’t have been clearer to his family. We

all knew why Uncle Barney spent so much energy spreading good deeds. Each one of us understood his motivation to be among the citizens. It was simple. It had to do with Aunt Rose.

I suppose the world's seen people more physically unappealing than Aunt Rose, but it would be a small group. When I first saw her, I ran into the dining room and hid under the heavy mahogany table. She and Uncle Barney had come to visit, probably for a birthday or maybe Thanksgiving. I don't remember because I was too young or too frightened or just a lot of both.

My father tells me now that I'd actually laid eyes upon my aunt several times prior without incident. I'm sure he's right. Infancy carries with it many benefits, among them the capacity to dismiss the terrifying as simply the unknown or at least the unconquered. But I had apparently grown old enough to judge Aunt Rose as on the border of what passes for human. Although she was human-like enough to recognize as a fellow creature, she nonetheless stood well beyond the familiar and comforting.

After that one instance of panic and flight, I didn't again run away in terror upon seeing my Aunt (actually my great aunt). After that I'd be polite. I even got to the point where I could shake her hand without worrying that the mounds of dark liver splotches were contagious. As I got older, I realized that it wasn't her appearance that scared me. I've often grown close to people who were dealt a poor hand of physical features. To tell the truth, I once fell in love with a girl who rivaled Aunt Rose for unattractiveness. Even I, with my thoroughly shameless focus on the external, could look beyond a crooked nose or blemished skin to see a clear and honest soul.

So it wasn't Rose's dearth of beauty alone that sent me running when I was younger or kept me at a distance from her during my teens. What really scare me was her

singular capacity for fomenting misery. She had an uncanny ability to turn joy into sorrow, calm into crisis, and airs of giddiness into clouds of angry sputterings. My cousin said that Aunt Rose could turn the raptures of the Second Coming into the painful agonies of Hell. Maybe that's on the dramatic side, but Aunt Rose had that kind of effect on you.

I never knew Aunt Rose to be headache-free. They were always with her. It was the first thing you'd hear about before you could even get out a hello. Aunt Rose could tell you about her pain with the relish and enthusiasm of a proud mother describing her clever toddler. And she'd tell you the details of her infirmity with the precision of a draftsman. She'd describe the travels of each thread of pain from the back of her neck to the sockets of her eyes. You would hear a full account of its spread across the top of her head until it settled behind each ear. No medicine could touch them. Nothing helped.

It was also firmly fixed in Aunt Rose's mind that the cause of her misery, the trigger for her headaches, and perhaps the single leading antecedent for all the world's ills was none other than the beneficent Uncle Barney. She saw his every movement as a prelude to one more instance of irritation. His very appearance at the back door could send her into spasms of pain or, in the very least, the beginnings of another neurologic episode.

The vehemence of Rose's unrelenting dysphoria would drive even the most patient of us toward unkind acts. She'd rail at him to his face and complain bitterly about him in his absence. She'd blame him for all manner of family misfortune, of which there was no short supply. That same cousin I mentioned once told me that Aunt Rose was the single most potent reason he chose a life of bachelorhood and the love of men. Another cousin, this one female and "liberated," said that Aunt Rose was the only

reason she opposed the death penalty. I always assumed she meant that no person should die for ending torrents of unbridled animus. Like I said, Aunt Rose had that effect on people.

It wasn't easy to see, at least with an untrained eye, what it was Barney did wrong or was doing wrong or was about to do wrong that could cause Aunt Rose such upset and pain. I always assumed that Barney had sinned mightily against Aunt Rose in the past. To justify the force and breadth of her contempt he would have had to engage in some serious infidelity or other misjudgment. But it couldn't have been a single affair with one secretary. We'd have to be talking about improprieties involving a whole Girl Scout Troop or church choir.

What might have led some to a consideration of justifiable homicide prodded Uncle Barney toward an orgy of civic commitment. He found causes in every nook and cranny of the town's life. They swallowed whole his time and justified his frequent absences.

Every time Aunt Rose was building up to another bout of angst and anger, you'd here Uncle Barney say, "Sorry Rose, but they need me down at the fire department" or "Rose, I know I'm not here enough for you, but who's gonna take care of those old ladies and gentlemen at the Home? Don't forget, your own mother's there." But it was fire and medical emergency that stood as his more powerful excuses. We used to joke that Uncle Barney would start house fires just to have an excuse to run off from Aunt Rose.

Now you could say, and you'd be right, that Uncle Barney couldn't have been all that much of a person if he couldn't either just deal with Rose or leave her. I should be able to give you a good reason for his own particular adaptation to his Rose but I can't.

As much as I've asked my other aunts and uncles, I've never gotten much beside a clueless shrug or a piece of amateur psychologizing. I'm quite sure it wasn't ardent sexual attraction although, I suppose, you never know.

Armed with a piece of Introductory Psychology, I also asked about his parents and their relationship, but again, got nothing more than superficial descriptions. So we'll have to leave the reasons to filter their way through the story.

At the age of 67 Barney suffered what was by all medical accounts the mildest of heart attacks. It happened, as you might imagine, while Barney was lending his time to another cause, this one having to do with the building of an annex to the library. He was brought quickly to the hospital where he was prescribed medication and told to rest. After a two-week stint, during which it seemed every citizen came by to visit, Barney was told to return home to convalesce.

And so began Barney Rudner's second career. He became, with much enthusiasm I might add, what can only be described as a professional invalid. To a degree much greater than his medical condition warranted, Uncle Barney raised physical incapacity to a high art form. It was as if he decreed that he'd done enough for Rose and the world at large and that it was time for him to lay back and be served. The family figured that old Barney was exacting a fearsome toll on Aunt Rose for all her past sins of spite and unkindness.

Barney threw his energies into perfecting his newfound infirmity with all the gusto he had previously reserved for civic duties. He hacked and sputtered and grimaced and whined with abandon. It got to the point that every phlegm-racked cough seemed to signal his earthly end.

This is what you'd see when you'd enter the Rudner household during Barney's

reign. First you'd encounter Aunt Rose sitting on an old kitchen chair with cracked gray vinyl and ribbons of tape that had survived past efforts at cushion repair. She'd instantly regale you with accounts of Barney's evil doings and new-found illnesses. "Barney," she'd say, "Barney is driving me out of what little mind he left me with before he got sick." And on she'd ramble about the misery of her existence and, yes, the latest travels of her shooting head pains.

Come to think of it, these narratives changed over the years of Barney's extended demise. It was hard for the family to admit it, but she actually became a near-sympathetic figure as she fell more and more into the role of his nurse. You almost got the feeling that she was afraid of losing him, maybe just because she'd have no one to blame for all her ills. But love's been founded on far less.

Now having completed the Briefing for Visitors, Aunt Rose would commence to elevate herself off the chair. She'd fight the cruel pressures of gravity and the unbearable weight of her own anguish to attain sufficient altitude to move forward. This was a slow and painful process that took several minutes and generated its own accompaniment of moans and mutterings.

You would follow behind Rose as she shuffled down the short hallway into what had been the living room but was now Barney's Court. In the geometric center of the space was ensconced a crumpled Barney. He existed upon a throne of worn plaid cushion barely contained by an old maple armrest and frame.

Barney always listed to the right with his head buried in a weakened hand. On the left arm of the chair was a Dixie cup he used to contain the phlegm that streamed from his lungs. Well, it held what phlegm actually made it into the cup. It seems Barney progressively lost interest in the accuracy of his expectorations as time passed. To this

day I wouldn't drink even the finest wine if it were served in a Dixie cup.

Barney's gray and reddened eyes were encircled by purplish rings. It was comprised of skin so thin you'd swear you could see the blood circulating behind. His skin was sallow, an almost perfect white except for the interruption of gray stubble that missed Rose's weekly attempts at shaving him. What few strands of hair remained atop his head were plastered back with more Vitalis than they required. Barney was a sickly sight if ever there was one.

At least while Aunt Rose was in the room. In her presence he'd wheeze a wan hello and ask about your trip. His eyelids would droop and his hands shake as he'd lean over to make another deposit in the Dixie Cup bank of expectorations.

But as Rose would trundle out the room to fetch the pillow he'd asked for, his physical condition would take a noticeable turn for the better. A smile appeared on his lips and his eyes would brighten. Somehow he found the strength to sit up straighter and speak in other than a death rattle.

We all came to know what would happen within the next few minutes. He'd motion for you to come closer and sit by his side. If you didn't know better you'd assume this wise but feeble man was expending some of his last energies to impart the wisdom only those close to death could comprehend.

So you'd move your chair near the throne and Barney would lean over and whisper in your ear. Not words laced with profundity nor insights into the human condition. Instead he'd let loose with jokes of such monumental filthiness that even I, with a well-developed appreciation of the off-color, would shudder with incredulity.

Where he heard these stories I have no idea. I assume he had ample visits from the lodge members to keep him in fresh supply. And he dispensed them with relish.

At the punch line he'd take his withering hand and push playfully against the side of your head (with surprising force I might add). He'd let go a laugh that showed his dark yellow teeth and white-speckled tongue. His emaciated body seemed to inflate with the energy generated by the telling of a dirty joke.

And then Rose would reappear, head bowed with strain and hand clutching a lumpy pillow. On cue, Barney would shrink back into the cushions and regain his former infirmity. His chest collapsed inward and his hands resumed their tremble.

Every time you'd start your departure from the Rudner household you'd involuntarily turn to take one last look at Barney. For even in his humor-induced invigoration, he was still a desperately infirm man. Nobody left that house thinking anything other than, "Well, that's definitely the last time I'll ever see Uncle Barney alive."

And that's how we left that house each and every time we visited over the next ten years. You'd say what you were certain were your final farewells, only to return the next month or two to see Barney ensconced in the middle of the living room poised to tell another joke.

Of course, Barney did eventually play out the final act of his second career. He died one evening in November while sitting in his chair. I always worried that his death and ensuing surrender to gravity would cause him to list perilously close to the Dixie cup. I prefer to imagine that he had the final fortune of slumping in the opposite direction.

In what most of us chose to see as a solitary act of love and solidarity, Aunt Rose died just three weeks later. The more cynical of our clan claimed she died so soon afterward because she didn't want Barney to enjoy heaven too much. The downright hostile retorted that Barney wouldn't have to worry about her intrusions in that no St.

Peter worth his salt would dream of allowing her entry.

If you drive to the southern edge of our town you'll see a side road that's marked by an abandoned junkyard. No, not one of Barney's old enterprises. Just some old scrap heap. Now drive up the incline and look to your left and you'll see a cemetery that's perched upon the side of a hill.

About half way down the center path, toward an old and bent elm tree, you'll find a cluster of eight or ten headstones. The second from the end marks Uncle Barney's final resting place. It's a pleasant spot that's covered by deep grass and a thatch of clover.

Directly to his right is Aunt Rose, her plot not more than a few feet away. And if you don't believe what I'm about to tell you, go there and you'll see for yourself.

No grass grows where Aunt Rose is buried. It's nothing but jagged stones and some dead leaves. Grass might have flourished there at one time because hay-like strands remain. But you won't see anything green around her grave.

The cynical crew claims that the acid from Rose's essence has destroyed any chance of plant forms reappearing this century. There was some nasty talk about declaring that area a toxic waste dump. The more scientifically minded pointed out that roots from the tree likely burrowed their way toward her section and deprived the grass of nutrients.

I'm of mixed minds about the defoliation surrounding Rose's grave. True, I'm of mixed minds about nearly everything in this life, but Rose has always been especially powerful in stimulating my ambivalence.

It seems to me that for every Barney there needs to be a Rose. She was a yin to his yang, a tweedle-dee to his tweedle-dum. Barney couldn't have been Barney without

Rose as his foil. No one achieves sainthood without the assistance of sinners.

My hunch is that Rose's plot is dusty and brown in order that Barney's could be green and alive. I suppose I just want to remember the two, with all their public hostility toward one another, as somehow connected and interdependent. And connected they were, in a manifestly disturbed way, but connected they were.