# The Humanist and the General

**by Cristina Nehring (April 2026)**

# The First Born (Gustave Doyen)

Who knows—or cares—that March 21st was World Down Syndrome Day? Very few. And who knows how that date was chosen? Even fewer. (Individuals with Down Syndrome possess the 22st chromosome in triplicate, hence the 21st of the third month.) However, these factoids can occasion something salient: how Down Syndrome and disability writ large have been received by liberal secularists and crusty conservatives, and what that reception signifies. As if daring us to inquire, history offers two striking examples of the liberal humanist and the conservative believer facing disability. Both Arthur Miller, leftist secularist, and Charles De Gaulle, rightist general, had Down Syndrome children. How did they respond?

Let us begin with Charles de Gaulle.

When Anne was born in 1928 with Down Syndrome her father, recognized for his valor in World War I, was stationed in Germany. He was known for his huge ego and arctic character. And yet, defying the doctors of their time De Gaulle and his wife, already parents of two healthy children, elected to keep their baby girl at home as opposed to placing her into an institution, the recommended course of the day. And almost immediately, the general fell in love with his handicapped daughter. The taciturn and unapproachable De Gaulle—he addressed his wife with the formal French "vous" for their entire married lives together—became soft, tender and indeed silly with Anne—putting on screwball pantomimes for her, singing to her, talking to her in words she could understand, and drawing her to his breast. Whenever he was home in his country house his first stop was Anne's room; his first attention was to her. The two could be seen walking around the nine-acre estate hand in hand, communing quietly for day after

day until de Gaulle was summoned away again on military duties.

Anne was only twelve when her father made the path-breaking speech for which he would be forever known. His call from London in 1940, on the BBC, urging the French not to capitulate to Nazi Germany or the puppet Vichy government but to rally to him, Charles de Gaulle (at that time a virtual unknown) and liberty. That night he founded "La France Libre" —free France—which ultimately would prevail with the help of the Allied Powers to liberate Paris from the Nazis.

"She gives me strength," de Gaulle said to his wife about Anne. "I don't know if I could have done what I did without her." Part of de Gaulle's courage in the face of the Nazis was due to his outrage that the Nazis, between 1939 and 1941 were carting off children just like Anne (the "mentally or physically feeble") to be murdered in special killing centers, an operation known as Aktion T7. The killing of these vulnerable people became a model for the annihilation of Jews and other "undesirables" in the years ahead.

After the war the now famous De Gaulle headed the Provisional Government of France. While temporarily retired in 1948 his beloved Anne succumbed to broncho-pneumonia in her father's arms. The only word she knew how to pronounce was "Papa." Her papa was devastated. As he announced to his parish priest "*Je suis un homme aneanti*": "I am a shattered man."

Anne was buried in a family tomb at Colombey-les-deux Églises where her father would be laid at her side twenty-two years later. De Gaulle treasured her memory; wherever he traveled he carried a small portrait of Anne, as an amulet of protection. It may have worked. In 1962 armed militants who sought to keep Algeria French tried and failed to assassinate President de Gaulle. Hundreds of shots were fired; fourteen hit the presidential vehicle. De Gaulle believed that his child's portrait absorbed a bullet that would otherwise have killed

him.

But de Gaulle did not just cherish Anne's memory. In 1945, while she was seventeen years old De Gaulle and his wife Yvonne founded the "*Fondation Anne de Gaulle*," a home for young women with intellectual disabilities. De Gaulle put all the proceeds from his career as a successful military memoirist into this home, named after her. It exists today outside of Paris.

Arthur Miller's relationship to disability differed in kind. Miller was routinely dubbed the "moral conscience of America." Unlike the icy De Gaulle he was reputed to be a kind and gentle-hearted man. He devoted his works to great ethical issues, in particular, on father-son relationships. The first play for which he received broad international acclaim was *All My Sons* (1946), a tale about a successful businessman, Joe Keller, who, in an effort to fend for his two sons (and wife) during the second world war, sells airplane parts he knows to be defective to the US government, thus causing the death of 21 American fighter pilots. When his older son, Larry, himself a fighter pilot, discovers the misdeeds of his father he kills himself in a deliberate crash and when Joe learns he is responsible for the death of his own son as well as of 21 strangers—they were "all my sons" —he puts a bullet through his head.

The play was reputed to be a moral masterpiece—demonstrating, responsibility as it did not only for one's biological children but for all persons. Still: it is Larry's death that ultimately causes his father's suicide.

*Death of a Salesman*, Miller's next and most popular play, revolves around the fate of Willie Loman, a businessman as unsuccessful as Joe Keller was successful. A traveling merchant he prides himself on being "well-liked" by customers and colleagues and deludes himself about his success. He admonishes his shiftless adult sons Biff and Happy that they

should try to be as popular as he is if they want to realize the American Dream. But Willy Loman's boss fires him as no longer profitable to the company. Distressed his sons will make nothing of their lives, Willie Loman kills himself so they can get a life insurance pay-out and start a business. Virtually no one attends the funeral of this man who claimed he was so "well-liked."

But was Miller in his life a conscientious and impassioned father to "all his sons?" Miller had three marriages and five children. His last son, Daniel was born with Down Syndrome in 1966 to Miller's third wife. He ignored her pleas that the baby remain at home. In the 34 years since the birth of Anne de Gaulle, the reception of handicapped children had shifted, but Miller immediately put Daniel out of sight and into a home for infants. From there he graduated to a large state facility, the Southbury Training School, which has been criticized as unfit for a dog. Miller never talked about his son, even to his closest friends and family members; he goes unmentioned in his 640-page autobiography, Timebends. He did not allow his presence at his mother's funeral in 2002; nor does he appear in any obituaries of her.

Miller obliterated his Down Syndrome child from memory. Only shortly before his death did he agree to lay eyes on his grown son for the first time. Dragooned by his daughter's husband, the actor, Daniel Day-Lewis, he briefly visited him. Greeted enthusiastically by his son who never knew how to hold a grudge, Miller made only one comment: "Well, he knows I'm a person, and he knows my name, but he doesn't understand what it means to be a son."

It might be more accurate to say that Arthur Miller did not know what it means to be a father.

How does one account for the behavior of the humanist and the general? Our professional life does not reflect our personal life, nor does our public profile shed much light on our

private relationships. Arthur Miller cut a great figure, not only as a writer holding a mirror up to his fellow American citizens but as a friend and civil libertarian. When hauled before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1956, he refused to name the names of Communist sympathisers other than himself and was cited for contempt of Congress.

But when it came to his own flesh and blood, to his own son, he failed. While his wife Inge sometimes visited her son at the Training School, her husband never did. He never asked about him and never indicated to anyone his existence or fate. Only on his deathbed did he consent to see his son.

Compare him to the "great asparagus" (as Charles de Gaulle was nicknamed due to his prodigious height), sometimes a killing machine, always an advocate for nuclear weapons, a president unperturbed when the 1961 Algerian uprisings in Paris left hundreds ~~of~~ protesters drowned in the Seine, beaten or crushed to death by police. De Gaulle's response: a shrug. And yet this is the same man who founded a home in the name of his fragile daughter, who adored her and very nearly gave up the ghost when she died in his arms.

The way people treat their disabled children is a litmus test for the truth they bear within. And by this litmus test General Charles de Gaulle comes out on top, and America's great moralist comes out at bottom. The gods, it might seem, give us our children to test us to reveal our inner selves.

When I gave birth, I did not even know what Down Syndrome was. I had skipped the prenatal test most pregnant women take, the amniocentesis. My pregnancy was accidental; a footloose freelance writer I had not planned to have children: a child itself was a bummer, a disabled child would only be a second bummer.

My long-term Greek boyfriend desperately wanted a baby and I supposed he would assume much responsibility for the child.

Once our daughter was born—a deep purple for lack of oxygen, a short neck like a small Buddha and a perpetually thrusting tongue—the doctors knew immediately that she had Down Syndrome. The response of the doting father? He fled back to his native Greece where he changed his phone number, his address, and his email in order never to be contacted again. In the meantime, I fell in love.

Eurydice was not an easy child. She barely survived Down Syndrome-related leukemia before she was two years old; she was subject to endless pneumonias; the moment she could walk she developed runner syndrome—a condition that makes kids with DS love to dash off and hide, not answering to their name. But while at seventeen she has only a handful of expressions in English and French she is full of love, beauty and joy, ~~s~~howering me daily with *"Je t'aimes"* and "I love yous." Eurydice loves to travel; unroutinized, she sleeps easily in a hotel drawer when the bed in our room is too small for the both of us. She loves trespassing onto other people's boats and pretending to steer them. She is game for everything, intimidated by nothing. The future is still uncertain but the two of us are thick as thieves.

And the icing on the cake? My boyfriend of the last seventeen years adores her. Like me he hadn't wanted a(nother) child; he already had two. But once he met Eurydice he became smitten. And the feeling is mutual. When her godfather is abroad, Eurydice sleeps with a photograph of him next to her bed. When they are in the same corner of the world they hardly emerge from each other's arms.

The way we deal with our disabled children means everything—more than our public personas, more than our published works. It is a measure of our soul. Arthur Miller did not pass the test. Charles de Gaulle aced it. Both the character of Eurydice's biological father and the character of her godfather are shown by the way they respond to the Down Syndrome children in their lives. So on this World Down

Syndrome Day, I will be celebrating not only disabled children but the people who cherish them, the people who sacrifice for them; not the losers who cast them aside but the winners who love them.

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**Cristina Nehring**'s most recent book is *The Child Who Never Spoke: 23 1/2 Lessons in Fragility*. She is also the author of *A Vindication of Love* which made the front page of the *New York Times Book Review* as well as two books in French. She writes for *Atlantic, Harper's*, the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. She lives in Paris with her daughter. See more at www.cristinanehring.net.

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