"Dr. Schweitzer, I Presume?" The Life and Times of Fergus and Ruth Pope

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Introduction

This article is the fourth in a special series that regularly appears in the Journal of Health and Human Experience. "Profiles in Courage: The Next Chapter" highlights individuals of our time who move us to a greater understanding of the human experience. The articles published in this section bring to our attention contemporary issues and initiatives that call each of us to be truly healthy. This article is based upon interviews with Fergus and Ruth Pope. Inspired by Nobel laureate, Dr. Albert Schweitzer, the Popes dedicated their lives providing medical care and education to needy communities on two continents.

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The photographs in this article were provided courtesy of the Pope Family.

This past year, the humanitarian community suffered the loss of Ruth Pope, one-half of an extraordinary team. Her husband, Fergus, a dedicated physician, pacifist, environmentalist, and advocate of human welfare had passed away three years earlier. The hallmark of the Popes' lives was their altruistic service to their community and the countless patients they cared for during a career that spanned more than half a century on two continents. Although I had the privilege of spending only a short time with them in their western North Carolina home several years ago, their story thoroughly engrossed me--and has stayed with me for the last several years.

As a young boy, I was captivated by the African continent, an interest sharpened by *National Geographic*'s sensational photographs. The story of Henry Morton Stanley's search through central Africa for missionary and explorer David Livingstone in 1871 only enhanced the allure. As an avid reader of *Life* magazine, several articles and photo essays dedicated to the legendary Dr. Albert Schweitzer naturally caught my attention. The white-maned icon with matching mustache had built, starting in 1913, a primitive jungle hospital, which at that time was located in an area considered "darkest Africa." He selflessly dedicated the remainder of his life to treating the sick. For his humanitarian work, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952. Nearly 60 years later, I interviewed two people who not only knew the fabled Dr. Schweitzer but who also worked by his side and tended him in his last hours.

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Ruth Pope was the product of a renowned Hungarian-born pianist and a wealthy Austrian mining engineer and businessman. Her mother, Lili Kraus, was considered one of the most gifted musicians of her generation. As a child prodigy, Lili trained at the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest, Béla Bartók, the celebrated composer and pianist, being one of her principal teachers. Lili was especially known for her renditions of Schubert, Haydn, and Mozart. She was also an occasional actress and linguist, fluent in seven languages. Ruth's Austrian father, Otto Mandl, met Lili in Vienna, and they married in 1930. Because Ruth and her brother Michael were born in Berlin and traveled widely with their peripatetic parents, Ruth always maintained that she grew up "all over the world."

When the Germans invaded Austria, resulting in the Anschluss in March 1938, the Mandls knew what they had to do. Within 24 hours, they fled Vienna. With father Otto in Berlin on business, Lili gathered her two children and what belongings she could stuff into a few suitcases. As Ruth remembered, "We left two beautiful Steinway grands, a grand library, beautiful carpets; you name it. We just took the clothes we had. We met my father on the frontier of Italy and Switzerland at midnight."

Taking refuge in Italy, the family lived on Lake Como in northern Italy, safely absent from what Germany was turning into under Hitler. "My father saw the handwriting on the wall with the Nazis and he wanted us out of Germany." Although her parents were Jewish, Ruth never observed their faith; she and her siblings knew virtually nothing of their heritage. It was not until 1952 when she was 21 that a relative visiting the family in Paris disclosed this well-guarded secret in a casual conversation. Ruth recalled him telling her,

"'It must be have been difficult during the war being Jewish'

I replied, 'We're not Jewish.'

He said, 'Yes, you are and I should know.'

We then confronted my mother, who was recovering from sunstroke at the time. 'How come you never told us we were Jewish?'"

Before she could respond from her sickbed, Otto escorted Ruth and Michael from the room and said, "Lili isn't Jewish. I'm Jewish."

But that declaration turned out to be confusingly untrue. A whispered rumor occasionally circulated that Otto had converted to Catholicism. Even more bewildering was another episode that occurred six years before. Lili had told her two children that she had a terrible secret that was weighing her down. "We thought she was going to disclose a rumored affair she was alleged to have carried on with her long-term violinist-partner, Szymon Goldberg." But that alleged affair was not the revelation Lili wanted her children to know about.

Being a Jew in occupied Europe during the war was no recipe for longevity. The explanation for why her father had earlier denied his wife's Judaism had nothing to do with ensuring her safety. Otto felt it would have adversely affected her career. After the secret was out, Ruth noted, "We never talked about it again."

Shortly before the outbreak of World War II, the Mandl family left Italy and moved to London where Ruth and her brother attended boarding school. Ruth recalled that she was the only girl in a school with 72 boys. She was 8 years old at the time and that one year of boarding school was the only formal schooling Ruth ever had. All the rest was "catch-as-catch-can and by osmosis," she said.

She learned English in six weeks and over time became fluent in several other languages. Her father tutored her when he had the time, but his dedication to Lili's career made those tutoring sessions few and far between. By this time, Otto had given up his business career to become his wife's full-time manager. The couple had always communicated in German but they now spoke only English in deference to the country that had offered them asylum.

The Mandl's English sojourn lasted only a year. In 1940 Otto scheduled an international concert tour for Lili in Holland, the Dutch East Indies, Australia, and New Zealand. After arriving at their second destination, the family fell in love with the island of Bali, but soon thereafter the Japanese conquered Singapore and now had the Dutch East Indies in their sights. And so for the second time in a few short years, the family had to flee tyranny.

Ruth recalled Otto missing an opportunity for the family to escape to New Zealand by ship and how they ended up as prisoners of the Japanese. Their captors separated the children from their parents, and for a year the Mandls had no contact with one another. Ruth and her brother were originally held in Bandung, Java, but were then moved to an internment camp in Batavia, now Jakarta, Indonesia's capital.

Even her parents were separated. The Kempeitai (Japanese secret police) charged Lili with trying to overthrow the Japanese occupation government, and held her in a women's camp for "dangerous" prisoners. Otto was imprisoned in a men's camp. The children lived in what was called a "family camp."

Several days into her incarceration, Lili's prison commandant, who had listened to her recordings and was aware of her international reputation, asked if he could do anything to help her. She asked for a piano and to be reunited with her family. Six months later Lili got the piano. Six months after getting that piano, the family members were reunited. Although this was a most happy circumstance, lack of food threatened their survival. "If the war had gone on another year, all of us would have died," Ruth pointed out. When hostilities ended in August 1945, British forces liberated the camp and the Mandls went to Australia and then New Zealand.

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Fergus Pope was a native of Sausalito, California. He moved to Maplewood, New Jersey with his mother and older brother after his parents divorced when he was 4 years old. Fergus came from a Christian Science background and his mother raised him in that tradition. When he was 12, Fergus informed her that he would no longer attend Sunday school because he didn't believe in the Christian Science doctrine. At that point, he became an agnostic, filling the void with what he called a "humanitarian instinct."

After graduating from Colgate University where he majored in literature of the Western world, he enlisted in the Air Force during the Korean War, was commissioned an officer, and trained as a bomber pilot. The implications of that duty were not lost on the sensitive and introspective young man who was leaning increasingly toward pacifism. Risking court martial, Fergus informed his commanding officer that he was not cut out to be a bomber pilot. Surprisingly, the sympathetic colonel arranged leave for Fergus so he could reconsider his decision. Upon returning to duty, Fergus learned of his new assignment--flying observation aircraft from a base in England, to gather weather information. This arrangement suited him until he finally left the Air Force in 1954 to ponder an uncertain future.

The young Popes with Fergus in uniform.

A November 1954 *Life* magazine article, which featured a photo essay about Dr. Albert Schweitzer, changed his life. "After reading that article, ideas began crystalizing in my head," and soon thereafter, Fergus was on his way to Africa to meet the legendary physician. He drove a rented Land Rover across the Sahara before arriving in Lambaréné, a town in what was then French Equatorial Africa, now Gabon. Here Albert Schweitzer had established his jungle hospital in 1913. Caring for the local population, many of whom had never seen a European, much less a physician, Schweitzer and his wife Helene, an experienced nurse, ran the hospital. With the assistance of villagers they trained, the Schweitzers treated patients afflicted with tuberculosis, leprosy, yaws, and tropical diseases endemic to West Africa, such as dysentery,

sleeping sickness, malaria, elephantiasis, and yellow fever. Schweitzer also performed thousands of surgeries with Helene who acted as anesthetist.

"I went in the back door of the hospital and met one of the nurses, who introduced me to Schweitzer," Fergus recalled.

The renowned physician, at that time a recent Nobel laureate, was less than cordial. Fergus remembered Albert Schweitzer's first words to him: "The next time you come, please write first. I don't like surprises."

Fergus added, "Schweitzer had a real temper, although he was as gentle as a lamb with his patients."

Fergus was undeterred by the elder's often irascible manner with staff and strangers. He saw something both grand and spiritual in the former theologian-organist-philosopher that drew him to Albert Schweitzer's lifelong mission. "After about a week, I decided there was a lot I could learn there and I decided to stay on and do anything."

Fergus began working around the hospital, doing carpentry and other construction chores. Much work needed to be done to keep the hospital's many simply built wooden structures in good repair. "Schweitzer didn't believe in plumbing in that kind of climate. There was one two-holer for men and women," Fergus pointed out. "I learned pretty quickly the simple things he

Fergus and Schweitzer in jeep.

wanted done and made peace with Schweitzer's lack of plumbing and electricity. He had what he called a 'disease of construction.' He was constantly building. Schweitzer obtained some construction materials, such as corrugated tin for roofs and cinder blocks and then emphasizing self-sufficiency, he used all his own sand and gravel and local okume hardwood for constructing his buildings. He was always looking for an excuse to construct a new building."

With speaking fees, money earned from selling local handicrafts and furniture made on the premises, and donations from all over the world, Schweitzer increased the size of the hospital to 70 buildings by the early 1960s. The expanded hospital of 350 beds could then hold more than 500 patients in residence, and a facility for lepers that could house an additional 200.

It was not long before Schweitzer told Fergus that he would not be very useful unless he could speak French. So he taught himself French from available grammar books and learned everyday usage from French-speaking African patients and staff. Slowly but surely, Fergus began to realize that he could be far more useful as a doctor than as a carpenter. When he asked Schweitzer what he thought of the idea, he encouraged Fergus to go to medical school.

Fergus then returned to England to attend St. Bartholomew's Hospital Medical College at the University of London. While in London, he met Ruth Mandl at a tea party. He was then looking for someone who could speak German because he needed some medical texts translated from English to German for his mentor, Dr. Schweitzer. Since Ruth was fluent in German, French, English, Italian, and Dutch, she fit the bill not only as a linguist but as a romantic interest. They married in 1959. Fergus graduated from medical school five years later.

Fergus and Ruth on wedding day.

After an internship at Monmouth Medical Center in New Jersey, Fergus returned to Africa with his growing family, not as Mr. Pope but as Dr. Pope, and assumed his medical duties alongside Dr. Schweitzer, setting up a clinic for infants and a physician's assistant training program for Gabonese students. When not caring for their three young children, Ruth helped at the hospital in any way she could, mainly by working as a translator.

Pope family with Schweitzer.

Fergus's reunion and collaboration with Albert Schweitzer was short-lived. On September 4, 1965, the 90-year-old doctor died from a stroke. Fergus and Dr. David Miller, an American cardiologist-epidemiologist, also noted for promoting human welfare and famine relief, cared for the doctor during that last illness. Miller had come to the Schweitzer Hospital to help direct a heart disease study and, as with Fergus, had developed a close friendship with Schweitzer.

Fergus, Ruth, and their three children stayed in Lambaréné for several months following Schweitzer's death, but an unexpected and shocking episode ended their work in Africa. In 1960, Gabon had achieved independence from France, and the political situation remained very turbulent as rival factions fought for power. One day, Fergus received an ominous message that his presence was required in Libreville, Gabon's capital. When he arrived, he learned that his association with the minister of education, who was suspected of conspiring against the government, threatened his status as a guest in the country. Shortly thereafter, all the minister's foreign-born friends and colleagues, now branded as enemies of Gabon, were to be expelled

within two weeks. Fergus was told that when he changed his ideas, he would be welcomed back. “That’s the first time we knew anything about changing ideas.”

Apparently the continuing political unrest and a recent unsuccessful military coup, as well as French military intervention, had fanned the flames of political unrest. “My impression at the time was that this was a country struggling for its independence and not wanting any intrusions from the outside.” An American physician, who had occasionally expressed liberal and pacifistic notions, was indeed suspect.

The Popes departed Africa and traveled through Europe for several months before ending up in 1967 in Rochester, Minnesota, where Fergus completed a pediatric residency at the Mayo Clinic. During that period, he returned to Africa several times, setting up food and medical supply distribution systems in Nigeria for aiding victims of the civil war in Biafra.

When he completed his program at the Mayo Clinic, Fergus already knew what his life’s calling would be. His association with Albert Schweitzer and caring for the poor in primitive circumstances had determined his fate. Fergus entertained no doubts when he contacted realtors all over the United States seeking a farm for sale in a needy rural community. He wanted to serve an area that had little or no access to health care. He, Ruth, and the children decided on Yancey County, in the western mountains of North Carolina. A 600-acre farm in the small town of Celo became their home. Fergus set up his first clinic with two exam rooms. Realizing he would never prosper as a physician, the land was his safety net. When necessary, he sold small parcels to physicians he had encouraged to move to this area to assist with this community’s health care needs.

“Back then, the roads were bad, people were scattered all around, and many of the mountain people didn’t have phones,” daughter Frannie recalled. And since cash was often hard to come by among his rural patients, barter was necessary. “I remember people paying Dad in chickens. One patient, who had been injured in an auto accident, brought us three five-gallon tubs of ice cream after Dad sewed him up in the middle of the night.”

Fergus’s practice soon encompassed a seven-county region of western North Carolina. He served an estimated population of 150,000, and 40,000 of them were children. To cover such a large territory, Fergus often made house calls. But he also realized that the health care requirements were much too great to handle by himself and by his meager staff and volunteers.

He became a fund-raiser, another of his many talents, and helped obtain a $5 million grant in federal funds through the Appalachian Regional Commission to establish programs in maternal and child health, environmental services, and community mental health. He continued to recruit medical students, nurses, and other health care professionals, many of whom moved to the area. Switching from fund-raising, Fergus founded and directed the region’s first Head Start program, the Children’s Health Services Council, a Child Development Center serving Yancey and Mitchell counties, and the Developmental Evaluation Clinic in nearby Boone. He also created a seven-county program for children with developmental disabilities, and established North Carolina’s first rural primary care clinics, the Yancey County Health Department, and the Bakersville Medical Clinic.

In the early days at Celo, Ruth had assisted in running the home clinic. Despite her partnership with Fergus, her many interests soon led in other directions, down her own path and directly into community life. As with her husband, Ruth had much to give. She longed to teach others about personal development, including the use of meditation and yoga. After obtaining her teaching credentials, she organized and ran a Montessori school and also became an avid proponent of holistic health. She pioneered the teaching of health, nutrition, and fitness in Yancey and Mitchell counties and taught after-school music classes. Sandwiched in between this whirlwind of activities, Ruth found time to serve on multiple boards affiliated with cultural awareness, helping to found the Music in the Mountains program and serve as its president.

In 1982, a phone call from a hospital in Texas suddenly interrupted, or rather uprooted their frenetic rural life. Fergus and Ruth learned that their son Daniel had been seriously injured with a vertebral fracture incurred in a diving accident. Early reports suggested he might be paralyzed for life. The couple flew to Houston to help care for him and ended up moving there during his long treatment and rehabilitation, which happily proved very successful when Daniel again regained his ability to walk.

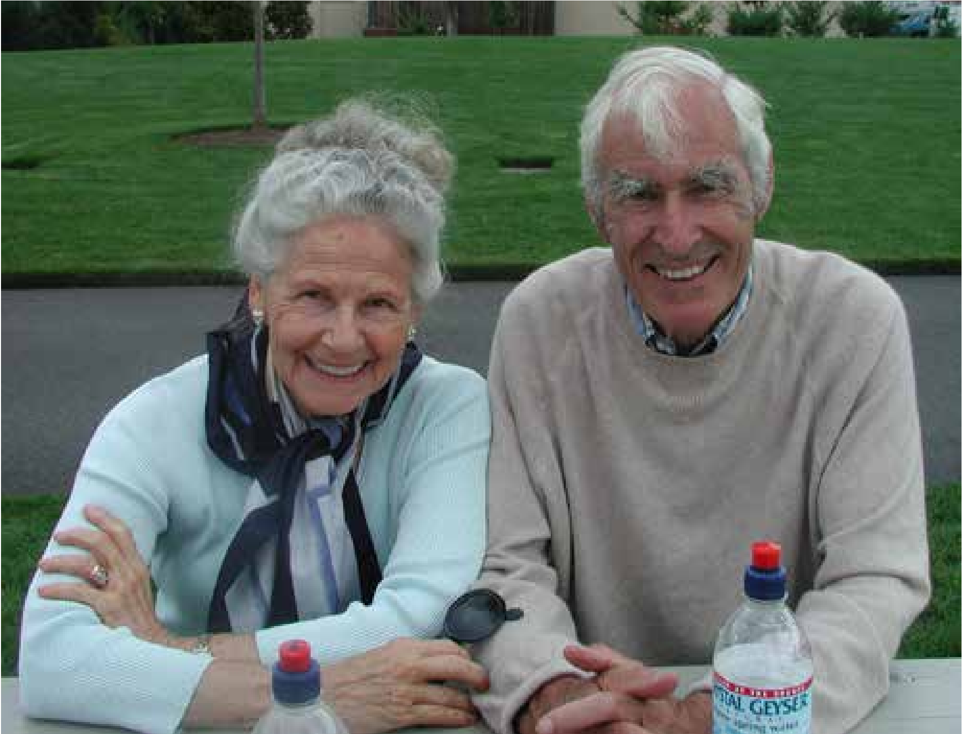
Always quick to turn adversity into something quite the opposite, both Fergus and Ruth decided to add to their resumes. Building on his pediatric specialty, Fergus completed a two-year residency in child psychiatry at the University of Houston, and then a three-year residency in general psychiatry at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. Ruth obtained her GED, then enrolled at the University of Houston studying psychology, eventually fulfilling her lifelong dream of having a college education when she graduated from the University of Asheville in 1990 at age 60. It was quite a triumph for a woman who up until then had but one year of formal education.

The Popes returned home to North Carolina, where Fergus joined Blue Ridge Mental Health Center in Asheville as a staff child psychiatrist. While there, he helped obtain a $2 million grant to develop a continuum of mental health services for children and youth in western North Carolina. But despite a slight change of venue, “Celo Farm” was their permanent home, the only one Fergus and Ruth had ever known. Fergus spent the last 15 years of his life at his beloved farm before succumbing to Parkinson’s in 2013 at age 83.

Ruth, always seen as a radiant fixture in their community for her warmth, humor, elegance, and creativity, decided to leave the farm after Fergus’s death and move to California to be closer to her daughters, Zazi and Frannie. While visiting Frannie in January 2016, she suffered a debilitating stroke. But such was her passion for life that Ruth did not count herself out just yet. Almost immediately, she committed herself to a grueling regimen of physical therapy for the next seven months. But a week before her 86th birthday, she had a second stroke which proved fatal. She died on September 15, 2016.

The couple I had met at Celo Farm in 2011 were not only gracious but eager to recount their stories. Almost 81 years old at the time, but still spry and with a warm smile and wonderful sense of humor, Ruth spoke animatedly about her larger-than-life mother, Lili, and their improbable circumstances during harrowing times before and during World War II.

Although infirm with Parkinson's, Fergus's eyes brightened when I inquired about his quest to meet Dr. Schweitzer and how that relationship forged Fergus's mission in life. Frannie later related that the father she had known as a child had transformed himself significantly over time. "As a young man, he was perceived as being very direct and intimidating. Yet he grew into a sweet mild-mannered man. He was always compassionate and wanted to do good things."



The Popes in retirement.

Ruth and Fergus Pope were considered humanitarians by all who knew them personally or who benefitted from their dedicated and tireless work. The word "humanitarian" is a label and itself vague and ambiguous. That word cannot possibly do justice to what they, as a couple and as individuals, achieved and to the people they touched.

If being compassionate and doing good deeds are the hallmarks of a meaningful life, Ruth and Fergus Pope accomplished that--and much more.