A Lovely Light

It was typically upbeat, so like the Romance Languages Ph.D. whose office décor included a miniature guillotine and an old Dom Perignon bottle still filled with memories.

But Professor Diane Brown wasn’t kidding around. Her letter of October 2, 1989, to honors students was totally serious. My dear sufferers, she began.

It’s so hard for me to be away from you—you, of all classes. Maybe we can work a date one Tuesday very soon when we can be together again. In the meantime, you will be in excellent hands, though those hands may belong to several different people.

This is a raw deal, that’s for sure, but remember that life isn’t ever a story with a ‘happy’ ending—and, anyway, that’s not the point. The point is that it’s a really good story most of the time, and I have had, am having, will have a lion’s share of joy. Don’t concentrate on the plot line; after all, everybody exists, suffers, dies. What counts is the characterization; what counts is the contribution your story makes to you, the author, and to those who matter to you.

You very much matter to me. Au revoir, till I’m with you again, and forever after, I wish you love, laughter, adventure, and meaning—if not in whatever suffering you must endure, then in your response to it and in your refusal to be conquered by it. Save me a seat. If I can, I’ll be with you.

Love, DB

Brown didn’t rejoin her class, whose name, ironically, was “The Suffering of Innocents.” She couldn’t; the cancer grew too fast. The doctor’s phone call had interrupted her 46th birthday party in September, and took her straight to the hospital, once again for surgery. She couldn’t teach that fall or plan her great interest, the Interim term. Instead, she went home in a wheelchair, unable to walk or return to campus, her body conquered by the terrible sequence of breast cancer, mastectomy, remission, the recurrence, and bone cancer.

Diane Seymour Brown, professor of French for 25 years, died July 17, 1990, at age 47. The college lost not only an ODK Excellence in Teaching recipient, and the Interim director for 10 years; it lost the woman whose faculty colleagues, then and now, revere with deepest respect. So much so that they established a travel scholarship in her memory.

“She was the whole French Department,” said Renee Norrell, whose career at Birmingham-Southern began as a sabbatical replacement for Brown. Nicknamed by students “the goddess,” Brown taught literature outside the confines of text by incorporating their life experiences.

Humanities Division receptionist Grace Burns retained the Diane Brown file for more than 10 years, as if expecting her dear friend to appear momentarily in her office to chat on her way to greet her class in French.

President Neal Berte entrusted her to lead the 1983 self-study. She responded by flipping tradition on its head by forming “action groups” of faculty, monitoring contentious discussions, and gathering staff and student opinions about proposed programs and structural changes. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools declared the final report “exceptional.”

Cinda York, a former student, was in the Interim group that Brown led to Zimbabwe. Upon learning of Brown’s illness in 1989, she wrote to The Hilltop News and credited Brown with teaching her “one of the most important lessons I’ve learned in college, different does not imply inferior … she’s a warm, communicative, and classy person whom I respect a great deal.”

Cheryl Ashford, class of 1984, went to work two days after graduation, thanks to Brown. Hearing a tearful Ashford describe a fruitless job search, Brown said, “Pick yourself up … and I’ll call you back shortly.” Said Ashford, “Even through her illness, she could say encouraging things to me.”

James Epperson’s memories remained vivid 25 years after he was Brown’s student, “Gatherings at her home for fresh-made pastries and hot chocolate, her boundless enthusiasm for her students, her dedication and her charm … I’ll die with French in my brain that Dr. Brown put there. She just made you work so hard and enjoy it.” Brown’s death, said Epperson, reminded him of the verse from Millay:

My candle burns at both ends; it will not last the night;
But, ah, my foes, and, oh, my friends—it gives a lovely light.