

Paul McComas' Eulogy for Janet Martin, Wausau, WI, August 17, 2012

Mike has asked me to say a few words; I deeply appreciate the honor and the opportunity.

By the way, Mike asked me to explain that the seeds attached to the prayer cards came from the blooms of his and Jan's evening-primrose plants—which *themselves* came from Jan's late mother's plants. Please plant them atop or just underneath the soil, either outdoors next spring or indoors this season, in memory of Jan. That way, we'll all be able to watch them take root, grow, and bloom, as a symbol of the undying love we feel for Jan. The flowers will remind us that, even in the midst of our loss, the last word belongs to love.

Jan's newspaper obituary describes her as having “helped hundreds of students achieve their goals.” That may well be an understatement, for Jan's was a high-school teaching career that spanned three decades—the 1970s, '80s, and '90s—in their entirety. It's fitting that she so ably introduced her students to Robert Bolt's inspirational stage play about Sir Thomas More, “A Man for All Seasons,” for Jan herself was a *woman* for all seasons, from “the dawning of the Age of Aquarius,” all the way to Y2K. Just think of the changes she witnessed during that time, in student hairstyles and study habits, fashion choices and social mores. But, more to the point, think of the positive, dramatic, revelatory, even life-altering changes Jan effected in her students—not just hundreds, but *thousands* of them, over nearly one-third of a century.

Let me tell you about one of those students.

Growing up in the conservative, buttoned-down suburb of Whitefish Bay, I never really fit in. I didn't have a lot of friends—and my two closest ones, John and Julia, didn't even attend my school, for they lived in Milwaukee. Truth be told, my best friend in high school turned out to be a 36-year-old English teacher.

What's more, in her Modern Literature class, Jan introduced me to five of *her* “friends”—
(*hold up books*)

—William Golding, John Gardner, Aldous Huxley, Tom Stoppard, and Robert Bolt—who soon became *my* “friends” too, as Jan brought these books and their characters to vivid, breathing life. She used Golding's *Lord of the Flies* to show us symbolism ingeniously deployed in the service of decrying Man's inhumanity to his fellow man. She used Gardner's *Grendel* to explore point of view, the anti-hero, alienation, and the unreliable narrator. She used Huxley's *Brave New World* to discuss the role of satire in speculative fiction, as well as sci-fi's function a modern prophetic and cautionary voice. She used Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* to introduce absurdism as perhaps the most apt way of chronicling the human condition. And through Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, Jan fostered in us an appreciation of character over popularity, integrity over status or “success.”

(You know, I think she'd be tickled to see five of her favorite books “in attendance” at her funeral!)

Throughout the term, Jan's enthusiasm for 20th Century literature proved downright contagious as she shared her insights and wisdom; better still, she encouraged and fostered discussion, always challenging my classmates and me to develop insights of our own. She expected much of us; we repaid her respect by working hard to be worthy of it. And she taught literature in a way that not only deepened our love of reading, but also made at least one of us positively itch to *write*.

I only had Jan for that one class, in my junior year. But one class was enough for her to profoundly influence my development: as a scholar; a writer; a teacher myself, eventually; and a human being.

In my senior year of high school, while I was writing my first book-length manuscript—a 35,000-word novella—Jan, bless her soul, read each chapter after I'd finished it, then met with me one on one after school, on her own time, to discuss and critique it. She always provided supportive, insightful feedback, and she always took my work quite seriously—probably before it actually merited that response!

Twenty years and dozens of short stories later, when I was finally working on my first full-length novel, *Unplugged*, I mentioned to Jan that the book appeared to be heading for a length of ten chapters. Jan told me, “Twelve is better, Paul; all the best novels have twelve chapters”—and then she named a few. The next year, when *Unplugged* was under contract, Jan—by then in so-called retirement—proofread a pre-publication draft of it, once again lending her acuity, sensitivity, and expertise to my work . . . that is, to all *twelve* chapters of it.

It was a privilege to dedicate one of my anthologies, 2007's *Further Persons Imperfect*, to Jan—just as it was always an honor to acknowledge and thank her in public, sometimes with a trophy or other presentation, at the Milwaukee in-store readings she faithfully attended each time I launched a new book. I'll say again, now, what I always said then: If not for Jan Martin, I wouldn't be an author today. And I doubt I'd be much of a teacher, either.

Educators are criminally undervalued and under appreciated. They don't earn gobs of money; they don't have Swiss bank accounts or Caiman Island holdings; they are not considered “Masters of the Universe,” nor do their portraits grace the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*. Yet their impact is at once vast and incalculable, for they shape young lives, fill and expand hungry minds, and brighten entire futures. No teacher I've ever known, from my kindergarten days through Northwestern grad school, ever did these things any better than did our beloved “Miss Martin,” with her sly grin, and her husky laugh, and her generous heart, and her adventurous spirit, and her keen, clever, ever-curious mind.

Thank you, Jan: my teacher, my mentor, my role model, my hero—and my dear, dear friend.