

Remembering Bruce Carlson

By Paul Edward Johnson

Back in 1984 I met Bruce Carlson. He gave me access to a newly needed life. He died on July 28th 2006 at age 66. But today, as I write this, he's still Bruce Carlson. He just changed his address is all. How can I say this with such certainty? You'd have to know Brenda Ueland to understand.

The first time I met Bruce was in Brenda Ueland's bedroom. Brenda and her daughter Gaby would love that I said that. So would Bruce. All three of them had a way of saying things in a manner that would get your attention.

Thanks to Bruce and a friend of his, Brenda got my attention back in 1984. I wrote a story about her and called it "Serendipity." But the story wasn't exactly true. Few things I write are exactly true.

At the time I wrote "Serendipity," I felt if I wrote the exact truth, nobody would believe it. What I have to say about Bruce I would like to make exactly true, not because Bruce and Brenda would appreciate that, but because Bruce and Brenda deserve truth.

Back in 1984 I was an emotional basket case. I had placed too much importance on what I had then felt was a faltering career in the advertising end of newspapers, and a previously self-supposed failing career as a teacher for high school students. I was unemployed and down in the dumps.

Back then in 1984, Tracey, my wonderful wife of 30 years now, let me move into her apartment over by the University of Minnesota. It seemed to me while living so close to the campus that I should enroll in a course so as to regain my teaching certificate and give teaching another try.

I enrolled in a University of Minnesota correspondence class put together by a poet I had been admiring, Patricia Hampl. It was a class on memoir writing. As a teacher I had encouraged my students to write journals.

Memoir writing seemed to me to be the next step to take if I aspired to develop ability to help others develop their creative writing skills.

This correspondence course included cassette tapes Hampl had put together as lectures. On the first or second tape, she spoke about a memoir she much admired, a book by Brenda Ueland titled *Me*.

After hearing Hampl read from her copy of the book *Me*, she lamented the book was no longer in print.

I was especially upset to hear on the tape that it was no longer in print.

The passages she had read from had more than “resonated” within me. What she had read from Ueland’s book made me want to stand up and sing and dance with Brenda. In the passages Hampl read from, Brenda was recalling a first memory of hers. It was identical to my first memory of being a child.

Several days later I walked a few blocks down to the Mississippi River and happened upon an outdoor kiosk in front of a bookstore. In a cart at this kiosk were a pile of books by Minnesota writers.

Under the pile I discovered a paperback copy of Brenda Ueland’s *Me*, recently republished by some outfit in St. Paul that called themselves the Schubert Club. I had no clue what the Schubert Club was, but I sure as hell was happy they had republished her book. Only problem was, I didn’t have any money on me.

Days later Tracey and I moved from her apartment to an apartment located over in the Linden Hills neighborhood in southwest Minneapolis, about a block from Lake Harriet.

The librarian at the Linden Hills Library apologized to me for not having yet purchased the book *Me*.

During our first week in the new apartment, we went off to a nearby bookstore and found a copy of the Schubert Club’s publication of *Me* and another book of Brenda’s that the Schubert Club had republished, a book Brenda had titled *If You Want To Write*.

I think I can count on just the fingers of my left hand books that seem to have changed my life.

Let’s see. First there was *Tom Sawyer*, a book that let me see that being me was not all that bad a person to be.

Then there was the one Mom helped me write a book report on when I was in 10th grade, an Edna Ferber book titled *Giant*.

Mom helped me describe to my classmates that it was about the insidious effects of racism.

While I was reading the book I had failed to sense that *Giant* was essentially about racism (there was no such word back then) until Mom pointed it out to me.

That book report she helped me write changed my life.

While presenting our book report to my classmates I discovered the great personal gratification that can be gained from captivating the attention of kids. That experience made me feel I would enjoy being an English teacher.

And then, a few years later, there was a book about Christianity and American literature that then helped me clarify what orthodox Christianity was about and how it impacted the lives and works of many American writers.

The book helped me resolve my struggles to develop a relationship with God. I'm sure it was not the intention of the writer to do that. However, that book, in conjunction with the many theologians I had been struggling to read and understand made clear to me what the theologians could not. The book, more than any other book I had been reading, brought me closer to Jesus and God.

Then there was *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. That book showed me successful teaching was all about helping people become successful learners. More importantly, the authors helped me see how we as readers and listeners are meaning makers.

That is to say, we as unique individuals assign our own unique meaning to whatever we hear or read by virtue of the fact that we bring our own unique perceptions and life experiences to everything we hear and read. What we hear and read is not always assigned the same meaning by each of us as was perhaps intended by the person speaking or writing to us.

And soon after that was *On Becoming a Person*, which helped me understand how important it is to each of us that we each be heard and understood.

Then in 1984 along came Brenda Ueland's memoir *Me* and her other book, *If You Want To Write*. Discovering those two books helped me find myself again. Books that helped me see, as did *Tom Sawyer*, that being me was not all that bad a person to be, after all.

So far everything I've expressed here is true. Now comes the part that may be hard to believe.

A week or so after Tracey and I moved into our new apartment near Lake Harriet, we discovered Brenda Ueland lived across the alley from us, in full view from our third-floor apartment windows.

And get a load of this: before we discovered Brenda lived across the alley from us, while I was in the midst of reading both her memoir and her book about wanting to write, I would from time to time gaze out our living room window and see Brenda and her daughter Gaby sitting upon a sofa in a lamp-lighted room, the two of them reading.

When from my apartment I would see the two of them reading, I would sometimes say to myself, "If ever there was a place in which Brenda might dwell, that living room in which those two women are reading would be it."

The theme tune from the "Twilight Zone" (do-dee-do-do, do-dee-do-do) is now playing again in my head.

What I'm trying to get at in what now seems to be a digression, is this: if ever I was destined to meet someone, it was Brenda. But before I actually met her in the flesh, I met her in her books.

And I would never have met her in her books if it were not for Bruce Carlson. It was Bruce, who while functioning as the executive director of the Schubert Club, had personally seen to it that her books became republished after his friend Patricia Hampl had introduced him to Brenda's memoir *Me*.

Tracey and I introduced ourselves to Brenda when we met her while walking in our alley on a bright October afternoon in 1984.

As Brenda was pushing a walker in front of her, we introduced ourselves as people who were reading and admiring her books. Brenda invited us over to her home, saying to us, "We'll write sonnets, one a day."

She would meet with us in her bedroom where she could prop herself up in her bed and feel most comfortable. We'd sometimes talk with her for several hours. Sometimes her publisher, Bruce Carlson, would show up to talk with her. We would then shake his hand and before departing tell him again and again how pleased we were that he had become her publisher.

Once, after spending hours talking with Brenda, I asked her daughter Gaby if Tracey and I were perhaps spending too much time engaging her in conversation, being she was 93 and virtually bed-ridden. Gaby's response was simply, "Don't worry about that. Trust me, my mother does not suffer fools. If you were not seen by her as being interesting, she would have no time for you."

When I asked her what Brenda generally perceived as being interesting, Gaby said, "Gossip is always interesting."

We never gossiped. But I found it interesting to hear her talk about writers and writing. Especially writers who would write about their spiritual insights.

We only knew each other for almost six months before she died in March of 1985. Every night she kept a heart shaped lamp lighted next to her bed, a light Tracey and I could see from our apartment across the alley.

One March night while shoveling snow from our alley parking place, I looked up to her bedroom window and noticed her light was not on. The next morning I saw her portrait on the front page of a section in the Star Tribune newspaper near a headline announcing she had died.

At the reception in her home following her memorial service, Bruce Carlson approached me and asked if I could meet with him in his office at the Schubert Club.

A week later, while sitting before him in his office within the Landmark Center in downtown St. Paul, we spent an hour or more talking about our mutual admiration and adoration for Brenda. And after we spoke about her, he offered me a job with the Schubert Club.

The Schubert Club's a nonprofit arts organization that had its origin in 1882. Each year it puts on about 75 concerts, some of them featuring world-famous musicians and singers, people like Yo-Yo Ma and Renee Fleming.

Why Bruce hired me, I had no idea. I didn't know much about classical music and the people who perform it and it was not clear to me what he wanted me to do at the Schubert Club. I didn't even have a job title. Every day I came into work I'd ask him what he wanted me to do and before he would tell me, we'd sit and talk about Brenda Ueland for about an hour. Then he'd hand me a stack of tickets for an upcoming concert and ask me to get out and about in St. Paul and distribute them to people who would attend the concert.

Sometimes I'd have lunch with him two or three times a week for a couple hours at a posh restaurant within the St. Paul Hotel and we'd talk about Brenda Ueland some more. And if we didn't talk about Brenda, we would talk about her family and her friends and the writers she admired.

Or we'd talk about Vashon Island. Bruce enjoyed taking trips to Vashon Island, located on the Puget Sound, a 20-minute ferry ride from Seattle. Coincidentally, I had lived on the island for about six months back in the middle Seventies because my brother Larry and his wife and kids had been living on the island.

Or we'd talk about University of Minnesota English professors, mostly Patricia Hampl and two men who taught there when he and I had taken English classes at the university back in the early Sixties: Robert Moore and Allen Tate. Hampl and Moore had become Brenda's friends, and Bruce's, too.

He seemed to be especially fascinated by my stories about Tate, who during the 1920s and 1930s had become a

famous poet and during the 1960s became the head of the English Department at the University of Minnesota.

My first wife, Alice, lived on the third floor of Tate's Kenwood mansion before she married me in 1962. She was Tate's maid and also functioned as his secretary.

Consequently, I had many encounters with Tate and his wife Isabella, some resulting in embarrassing moments, such as the time while having dinner with the Tate's, I affronted professor Tate by asking him point blank if he had affected an English accent, so as to replicate the sound of the poems written by the British poets he would read during his lectures.

My only excuse for that impudent personal affront was the whiskey before dinner and the wine at the dinner table was flowing and I was only age 20.

After lunching with Bruce at the St. Paul Hotel, we'd go back to the office and cook up promotional ideas for the Schubert Club's concerts, or I'd write stuff for the Schubert Club's newsletter or just sit and address and stamp and stuff envelopes to the hundreds and hundreds of people on the Schubert Club's mailing list.

Whenever Bruce would introduce me to someone who came into the office, he'd say, "I'd like you to meet Paul Johnson. He's our marketing guru."

One day, after the people who worked in the office had gone out to lunch, I removed the Persian carpet from the floor in the reception area. It was an old worn carpet whose colors had faded.

I got the building's maintenance staff to stash it in a storage room and then had them carry up to the office a \$50,000 Persian carpet loaned to me by an Iranian who operated a carpet business.

He said, "All I ask is whenever someone who visits the Schubert Club admires the magnificent Persian carpet, please give them my business card."

When Bruce returned from lunch he was not at all pleased. Yes, he thought the new carpet was magnificent, and so did everyone else. But he quickly told me to get it off the floor and put the old worn out Persian carpet back.

He said, "This dazzling carpet is too impressive for a nonprofit arts organization. We're trying to convince people who donate money and funds to us that we need the money they give us. When they look at this carpet you brought in here, they'll think we don't need any money at all."

Perhaps the real reason Bruce hired me was that he knew I had become a friend of Brenda's daughter, Gaby. And

Gaby had told him that she had given me two wicker laundry baskets filled with Brenda's essays and diaries that I had found in her basement; going all the way back to 1912. Bruce had never known about the laundry baskets, and was curious as hell about what was in them.

I told him that among the hundreds of essays, there was more than enough material for a book. So each time we'd have one of our two-hour lunches, he'd be always asking me about the essays and diaries. Each time I'd reveal something, I felt as though I were gossiping, always recalling how Gaby had told me that gossip was always interesting.

Eventually, as months moved along, Bruce started introducing me to people as being the "world's foremost authority on Brenda Ueland."

I began getting long-distance phone calls from people who admired her, all asking questions about Brenda's life and work, all of them saying, "Bruce Carlson told me that you'd be able to answer my questions."

Somewhere during that period, Bruce commissioned a respected and successful composer, Libby Larsen, to write a song cycle about Brenda and her life, something to be performed at the Ordway Center, the finest concert hall in Minnesota, to be sung by a world-famous opera singer.

Somehow, some way, he got her, Libby Larsen, to sit down with me to create the libretto for the song cycle, as though I knew something about writing lyrics for songs!

And me, prone to being audacious, I would sit with her and not only suggest lyrics, I had the gall to tell her how she should compose the music, as though I were like a child who enjoyed playing with toy cars, telling an automobile designer how to design cars.

I insisted that the music be composed in the same style as some of Brenda's favorite romantic composers, and told Libby whatever she composed avoid dissonance in the music; me saying, "Brenda hated how modern composers made music that sounded like a wrecking crew tearing down a building."

The concert was "standing room only" and Tracey and I got to sit upon the stage, up behind the hot-shot opera singer. But no mention was made of me in the program as helping Libby with the libretto. And being she's a modern composer, the music itself might have made Brenda turn over in her grave had she not been cremated. Way too much dissonance.

After the concert, we all, Bruce and Libby and Gaby and her husband Jim and the opera singer and Tracey and

me, we all dined at the St. Paul Hotel, all sitting at Bruce's table 81.

And while Bruce and Libby and the opera singer talked with each other about how much the audience seemed to enjoy the song cycle, Gaby and I snickered about how Brenda would never have enjoyed it.

Does this sound like gossip? If so, I hope it seems interesting.

All the while I was trying to help Libby Larsen with that libretto for the song cycle that she was composing, I was also busying myself with the essays Brenda had stashed in those wicker laundry baskets.

Tracey tirelessly typed each one of the essays using our little Mac's word processing program, and after each essay became a "computer document," I then audaciously edited the essays here and there. Sometimes changing a word, sometimes deleting a word, sometimes, but not often, deleting entire sentences and paragraphs.

Perhaps sinfully, I'd change the syntax of some of the sentences. My only justification being Brenda had sometimes told me how it was the responsibility of the writer to always have the reader in mind, and on occasion, I felt she had forgotten about the reader.

And, if that was not justification enough, at a la-di-dah party honoring Brenda Ueland's accomplishments, held by some mover and shaker in the Minneapolis "arts community" in a Kenwood mansion, the woman who owned the mansion and was the hostess for the evening, grabbed me by my arm during the party, took me aside, and said, "I understand you have acquired Brenda's diaries and essays and stories she had written during her career and are preparing some of it for publication."

I said, "Yes, that's why Bruce felt I should attend your party here tonight. In case some of you might have some questions about Brenda that I might be able to answer."

She said, "The only question I have is how's it going? Are you finding it fascinating?"

I said, "Yes, of course. But sometimes I'm overwhelmed by how much material there is and all the choices I have to make about what to include and what to delete."

"Well let me give you some good advice, young man. Edit with a heavy hand," she said as she pounded a fist upon my chest.

For Bruce, and for perhaps Brenda's legions of fans, Brenda was to them someone who was incapable of writing a bad sentence.

To me, her sentences often leap from the page and grab me by the throat.

At the very least, her sentences arrest me.

But nevertheless, she would sometimes be reckless and perhaps too effusive in her prose. So whenever I would “tone it down” a tad, I’d look over my shoulder, anticipating a blow from her ghost’s heavy hand.

After editing more than 80 of her essays, I gave each one a title and grouped them thematically into chapters.

Then I approached Bruce and said, “Now all we have to do is find someone to write an introduction, someone who’s a respected author, and then publish this baby.”

Bruce had spent about 30 years directing the Schubert Club, building it into what people such as Yo-Yo Ma said was a haven for musicians, making it flourish as Minnesota’s oldest arts organization.

He had managed the organization in such an autocratic manner over the years that he had persuaded the board of directors that publishing books was part of their mission, which was acceptable to them as long as the books were about music and musicians and composers and musical instruments. But when he chose to republish two of Brenda’s books, *Me* and *If You Want to Write*, some board members felt he had wandered into territory that was not in their mission statement.

As a consequence, when it came time to print another edition of the two books because they had sold out, he met resistance from board members, some insisting the Schubert Club was about music and not about writing. They didn’t seem to understand that the books were really more about facilitating creativity than about writing.

Bruce was then compelled to turn the publishing rights of *If You Want To Write* over to a publisher, Graywolf Press, that wanted to republish the book, and, after he did that, *If You Want To Write* became their top seller, and for all I know it still is. And when all the copies of *Me* sold out, it became an orphan without a publisher.

I had incorrectly imagined it would be the Schubert Club that was going to publish the manuscript of essays I had compiled.

I titled the manuscript *Strength To Your Sword Arm* because of the inspirational nature of the essays and the fact that Brenda would often end her letters to her friends with that expression.

Bruce shopped the manuscript to more than several potential publishers, including the Minnesota Historical Society, but none seemed to be all that interested in it.

Then a friend of mine suggested I contact a publisher in Duluth, Jim Perlman, a man who owned and operated Holy Cow! Press.

The publisher coincidentally had been my youngest brother's grade school and high school buddy and room mate while they had been attending the University of Minnesota.

Rather than call Perlman myself, I asked Bruce to contact him, being I was just "a nobody" in the literary world and Bruce was the man who had most recently published Brenda's books.

When Perlman spoke with Bruce, he took an interest in the manuscript, saying to Bruce, "My father was a pediatrician. Brenda's daughter was one of my father's patients when she was a child."

During the months that followed Perlman would meet at Gaby's home with Bruce and Gaby and me, going over contractual matters and talking about photos to include in the book and what the cover should look like. And who should write the introduction.

Moreover, and more importantly, Perlman also agreed to republish *Me*.

Somehow Bruce and Perlman persuaded Susan Allen Toth to write an introduction to *Strength To Your Sword Arm*. At that time she was an English professor at Macalester College and had been receiving rave reviews for her books, which included *How to Prepare for Your High School Reunion and Other Mid-Life Musings*.

In her introduction, Toth describes Brenda's essays. Here's some of what she expressed in her introduction:

When I first read these selections from Brenda Ueland's writings, I felt before long that I was being pulled irresistibly, forcefully—though sometimes under protest—into the orbit of her personality. To read Brenda Ueland is to feel you are in her immediate presence, talking to her, arguing with her, and listening, half-mesmerized, with a mixture of admiration and irritation, curiosity and amusement, and laughing-out-loud pleasure.

She is no stylist. Direct, almost abrupt, she sometimes writes in a passionate flow of words that tumble over each other. Her adjectives frequently rush on as if they were a stream that could batter down an opponent. In her enthusiasm, she is apt to find everything recurringly “wonderful.”

What one reads Brenda Ueland for, in the end, is not just what she says or even how she says it, but for the stimulation of her company. She makes one want to get to know her, to observe her, and to learn from her something about how to live a full, rich, and exciting life.

And she is eager to tell us. In fact, as any reader of this collection will soon see, she can hardly be stopped!

“Don’t be grim!” she cries. “Be careless, reckless! Be a lion, be a pirate! Be a knight! Strive for a cheerful, flexible, liquid, open, bouncy, spirit! Keep the fountain clear! Now watch me doing hand-springs by the lake! Pay attention! Listen to me! *Listen to me!*” She would be delighted, but not surprised, that readers still do.

Strength To Your Sword Arm was released to book stores in late 1992 with a 1993 publishing date.

It not only received good reviews, it was rated by what was once known as The Hungry Mind Book Store as being the best Minnesota nonfiction book of the year.

It earned a 1993 Minnesota Book Award nomination.

Jim Perlman and I spoke for a half hour about Brenda and the book on a radio talk show and Bruce and I appeared for 20 minutes on Minnesota’s Public Broadcasting Station, the TV show beginning with a ten-minute filmed pictorial introduction by Patricia Hampl describing Brenda’s life and accomplishments.

During the show I held up a manuscript I had found in one of Brenda’s wicker laundry baskets, a manuscript Brenda had written about her mother, a woman who had formed one of the first kindergartens in Minnesota.

Looking into the camera, I said, “This manuscript is not only about her wonderful mother and father and family, it’s about how to be a great parent. It too deserves to be

published. Brenda told me that when she gave the manuscript to Putnam to be published they told her it was too many pages and before they would publish it they would have to delete at least 100 pages. She refused to delete a single page.”

Years later, after many attempts to get the Minnesota Historical Society to publish that manuscript, Bruce finally found a publisher who edited and published it under the title *O’ Clouds Unfold*.

I’m going to take the liberty of including what Brenda had to say about Bruce, from some of the paragraphs she wrote about him in one of the essays I chose to include in *Strength To Your Sword Arm*.

Three years ago Bruce Carlson wrote me a kind and cordial letter asking if he could take me to see the Museum of the Schubert Club—a piano that Brahms had played and other remarkable things. I wrote that I am not as athletic as in former times and disliked troubling people to lug me around.

Then he came over to my house bringing Patricia Hampl—both of them young, slender, comely, lively. After that he came regularly—say once a week and never failed. It was a strange and astonishing thing, a kind of eerie faithfulness, really love.

He always brought presents—Yeats, Mozart’s letters. I gave him Swedenborg, Blake.

He is a listener and I would talk far too much. He had read my biography written in 1938 and a smaller book, *If You Want To Write*, one of those awful “How To” books. But it is better than that. Its true title should be *Helped by the Nine Muses*. He and the Schubert Club published them both.

And now I come to the power and mystery of this extraordinary Bruce Carlson. I was immediately projected upward into a kind of famousness: letters from San Francisco, visitors from everywhere, a young woman (frighteningly

handsome, stylish) came from Chicago, a kind of advertising tycoon who flew in from Brazil to Sante Fe to New York and back, and she quietly wept, wiping and wiping her eyes because I was “so great” (I had told her in a letter she could never write anything worth a damn as long as she wrote advertising).

Well now Bruce Carlson, my incomparable friend. (Patricia Hampl calls him “our Swedish nobleman” and that is just the way he looks). He has that talent for promotion—for the bright and beautiful enlargement of any person or thing. Now usually I dislike it, indeed despise it, because it is the flattening out of persons and events into a kind of monstrous vulgarity.

But the thing about Bruce is his taste, his instinct for what is first rate in music, beauty, and historical events. He knows why Mozart is great, and Schubert.

A young relative of mine had an important job in Philadelphia. She wanted to work in Minneapolis. I asked if he could find her a job. “Sure.” Within an hour he had talked to Mrs. James Ford Bell, chairman of the board, on the phone about a new head of MacPhail School. Mrs. Bell said, “If she’s your man, she’s my man!”

I think his great talent for success is explained in this way: His final objective is always so distinguished, so beautiful, so unflawed. There is an oratorio written for Plymouth Church by Patricia Hampl and Libby Larsen. Another instance: A lot of “modern poets” were going to read their own work for a prolonged evening. Bruce added a musician with an ancient seventeenth century harpsichord. Thereby the evening became alive, very, very interesting, marked by special beauty.

He goes to innumerable plays, concerts, meetings and the odd thing is most often alone. There he will be on the top row far over to the

left. And he is so radiantly and delightedly suggestible.

I say: "Drink a pint of hand-squeezed fresh orange juice a day." And he does it.

I say, "Read Swedenborg."

He not only does it at once but plans a museum for the great Swedenborg at Landmark Center.

He has two arch-especial male friends (he sees that his friends know his other friends): Art Mampel, a poet and a clergyman in Seattle, and Tom Tredway, the president of Augustana College in Illinois. They meet and talk with great seriousness several times a year. And they come to see me.

And so from all this I hope you will see what he is like.

He makes me think especially of what George Bernard Shaw said in *Back to Methuselah*: "Discouragement is the only illness."

During her long remarkable life, Brenda experienced some very high highs and low lows.

Her daughter Gaby sometimes suspected she might have been what psychiatrists call "bi-polar." From my point of view, Bruce converted her "declining years" into what were justifiably among the happiest years of her life.

At a time in my life when discouragement was my only illness, when doctors had diagnosed me as suffering from clinical depression, Bruce elevated my life by not only bringing Brenda Ueland into it, but by also bringing me into his life and the lives of people he loved.

Eventually he "installed me" in the Schubert Club's Musical Instrument Museum, allowing me to take on the job title of docent, and affording me the opportunity to each week meet fascinating people who become fascinated by what they behold in the museum.

Recently I wrote a personal essay about how my moments in the museum seem to be to me moments in which dreams come true.

As tempted as I am to attach that essay to what I've attempted to express here, instead, I'm going to respect this is about Bruce and not me. And yet, that's not exactly true.

Some of the best parts of my life are about Bruce. And as you can perhaps now understand, some of the best parts of Brenda's life were about Bruce. I like to think we're all a part of the same fabric, maybe each one of us, Bruce, Brenda, Patricia, Libby, Gaby, Jim, and everyone else Bruce brought into our lives, that we are all threads woven together, combining to bring joy and well-being into each others lives and the lives of others.

Thanks be to Bruce, and thanks be to God, I'm sure Brenda would approve of this message.