

Remarks for Bren Ortega Murphy's Memorial

Betsy Jones Hemenway
Loyola University Chicago

Dr. Hemenway shared this memorial at Bren's memorial service at Loyola University Chicago in August 2021.

SO MUCH HAS BEEN SAID ALREADY, and there is much more to be said about this remarkable woman, our colleague and friend Bren Ortega Murphy. But I only have a few minutes, so I will share some brief reflections that I hope will convey some of the qualities I observed in her and what she means to me.

One of the many gifts that Bren gave to me was to introduce me to a series of children's books by the Finnish artist, writer, and illustrator Tove Jansson – the *Moomin* books. If you aren't familiar with these characters and stories, I can tell you that the Moomins are a family of creatures who live in a mythical, magical place called Moominvalley. Moomintroll, Moominmama, and Moominpapa, the central characters, live in a house that seems to expand to accommodate their many friends and visitors (including Sniff, Snufkin, the Snork Maiden, the Hemulen, and others), some of whom stay on as permanent guests. Together, they go on adventures and face many trials, from storms and floods to a magical hat that transforms their house into a jungle. Most of all, though, they care for one another, share their wisdom, and celebrate life.

Every single time I think of the Moomins, I think of Bren – not only because of her dedication to collecting, studying, and sharing children's books (which came through in her teaching); not because the first time I heard of these beings was when she exclaimed "Moomins!" in the Helsinki airport; but because to me Bren embodied the essence of the Moomins – her eagerness for adventures, her wisdom as a teacher, her care for others, and her expansive home. Certainly, she went on adventures – such as her many road trips to visit family, friends, and women religious, or her journeys throughout Europe and beyond.

Bren also shared her wisdom – and as a teacher and mentor, that was a key part of her identity. She approached each class

she taught with enthusiasm, planning carefully and engaging in thoughtful conversations with students and colleagues. She listened to students, who she viewed as our most important teachers, even – or especially – when those interactions were about difficult topics, such as the complexities of gender, race, and language. This was one of the things I admired most about her – her determination to dig in and address conflict calmly and respectfully, rather than turning away.

It was, in part, as teacher and mentor that Bren demonstrated her care for others. But there was so much more. Every person she met was a full human being to her. An important part of this care was hospitality – creating welcoming spaces (with snacks!) where people could gather and settle. Her office and home were famously decorated with interesting books, figurines, *New Yorker* covers (which she and Chris transformed into the wallpaper for their powder room), postcards, scarves, and other objects of which I've lost track. Once the home and office filled up, she also “donated” things to the Women's Studies and Gender Studies program office – various posters, holiday decorations, stuffed animals, feathers, random decorative bottles with plant cuttings in them, old art projects, and on and on. This habit of hers was both infuriating, as it added more clutter to our communal space, and lovely – and of course now I cannot bring myself to get rid of any of it. Like the Moomin home, Bren and Chris's home welcomed anyone who entered. You often were greeted with a full kiss on the mouth, a hug, and refreshments. The conversation sparkled, along with her laughter. Beyond the various dinner parties or departmental celebrations was the seemingly magical expansion of their home to embrace all who were there, especially those who needed a bed for a few days, weeks, or months.

Outside of that protected space, Bren sent postcards from her travels to her large network and greeting cards for virtually any occasion. Many colleagues, I'm sure, have a substantial collection of such cards, which she hunted for and sent to us with such abundance and love. The last card I received – a feminist postcard, of course – she hand-delivered to me in March, at my home, with yet another gift from her office. On the back, she wrote:

B1 —

You continually amaze me.

You are generous, wise, loving, and strong.

You inspire and sustain so many including me.

B2

These words exemplify the essence of Bren's gifts to me and to so many others – words of encouragement, along with beauty, flowers, cookies, and love. She reminded all of us to do our work conscientiously, with discipline, but also to celebrate life and community. She not only gave gifts, she possessed infinite gifts – for wisdom, laughter, and joy. She was a gift to me and to all those whose lives she touched.

BETSY JONES HEMENWAY (Ph.D., University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) holds a joint appointment in the Women's Studies and Gender Studies (WSGS) program and the Department of History and serves as the director of the WSGS program at Loyola University Chicago. Part of her research focuses on a gendered analysis of revolutionary narratives in Russia during the early 20th century; she has also written on the articulation of gendered identities in Polish and Soviet films of the late 1980s, yoga and feminist pedagogy, and Russian migrants and Catholicism. In 2012, she collaborated with Bren Ortega Murphy and other Loyola faculty to produce *Fefu and Her Friends* by Maria Irene Fornes, a play in which they also appeared as characters. This collaboration resulted in a co-authored publication, "Performance: An Approach to Strengthening Interdisciplinarity in Women's Studies and Gender Studies," *PARtake: The Journal of Performance as Research* (2016).

Bren Murphy: Feminist, Friend, and Bringer of Books

M. Chad McBride
Creighton University

I STILL CAN'T BELIEVE MY FRIEND, Dr. Bren Ortega Murphy, has passed. We first met through the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender (OSCLG), when she served as historian on the board and I was a member. I worked with her the last time she hosted the conference, while I was communication coordinator. Her conference was professional, thoughtful, thought-provoking, and personal. Just like Bren. She had a way of making people feel comfortable and creating a space where people feel valued and heard—perfect in life and for a conference.

Bren and I continued to work together when she joined the presidential rotation and I followed in her footsteps. I was vice president to her president and president to her past president. Anyone who experienced her in these roles knows how she made people feel as she presided with such poise and grace. Behind the scenes, she led the board meetings in the same way, even when we had difficult things to discuss. I have vivid memories of a meeting in which we were discussing the new travel grant designed to support graduate students and young faculty of color. It was the brainchild of Renee Houston, who worked to create it with Karla Scott. But, in those early years, it became clear from the applications we received that the language in the call was not clear. This was well before controversies within the National Communication Association (NCA) and the subsequent calls for more structured diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. The conversation at that particular board meeting became heated—not because of any resistance to the award, but around how to construct language to meet our intended goals of building structures to support said goals. As usual, Bren facilitated this conversation with grace, ensuring that all voices were heard and all ideas incorporated. If memory serves me correctly, it was during that conversation that Bren proposed the name the travel grant now carries, The Color Purple Award, a moniker

appropriately based not only on the color of OSCLG but also on its significance to feminism, and womanism specifically.

It is no surprise that Bren handled conversations like The Color Purple Award with such grace, since she had a fierce passion for social justice, specifically Jesuit education. I was on a Jesuit education panel with her at the International Communication Association earlier in my career where I learned a great deal about how she engaged her students in social justice topics through her pedagogy. This panel turned into a book chapter. I loved hearing her talk about using children's books to teach issues of social justice and how her students would use their service learning experiences to give a voice to marginalized and underrepresented groups. She was also very active in the Jesuit communication faculty network and conference.

More important than these professional experiences we shared together, Bren became a dear friend to me. She would take time to hear me lament on my struggles coming out to my Christian conservative family and always asked me for updates. And, critically, she was instrumental in helping me reconcile my sexuality with my own personal faith. I know that she did this for others too. She was unabashedly proud to be a Catholic and a feminist—I, as a non-Catholic, had a hard time reconciling the religion and feminism. Bren provided a model for how to be an advocate for making institutions better when it might have seemed easier to dismiss the patriarchy of the church. Undoubtedly, she learned how to walk this road partially from another passion of hers, women religious, aka nuns. If you have not seen it, check out her award-winning documentary, *Question of Habit*. It is narrated by Susan Sarandon, who won her Oscar playing sister Helen Prejean in the film *Dead Man Walking*.

One of the last things I read by Bren was a fictionalized case study about becoming a deacon's wife as a feminist. Erika Kirby and I had heard her talk about this experience for a couple of years, and we asked her to contribute to the second edition of our gender casebook. I have loved engaging with my Creighton students about this case and the tensions she wrote about regarding being a feminist in the Catholic Church, and also wanting to be a supportive partner to her husband, Chris. Bren is still teaching students now.

Bren also became a member of my chosen family. When my husband Allen came to his first OSCLG, she sat beside him at the awards dinner. She engaged with him the whole time and made him feel comfortable and welcome. She was one of the people I called when we found out about the possibility of adoption. I will never forget where I was sitting in our basement when I told her the news and she expressed her hope and excitement for us. She was thrilled and asked for updates as we planned our wedding and welcomed our son, Jackson, into our family.

When I was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), she reached out early and often. The last time I saw her in person was in October of 2020 when she drove from Chicago to Omaha during a pandemic so she could see us. I am so thankful she made the trip, especially now. She brought us homemade Halloween cookies and some Joe Biden cookies from a local bakery in Evanston. We talked about my shitty disease and how she was struggling in her first semester of retirement. We updated each other on our families.

When Bren arrived, she brought with her a book she had picked out especially for Jackson, *The Ghost Who Was a Quilt*. I often got recommendations from her about books for Jackson, but this one was extra special. I wish now that I had asked her to inscribe it. Even though we only had a couple of hours together that day, it was a bright spot of my fall, and the book quickly became one of Jackson's favorites. She also took the time to write Jackson letters and postcards over the years, and he was always so excited to get them and read them to us. These are just small examples of the kind of woman and friend Bren was.

After Bren's death, we got one more card from her. Chris, Bren's husband, put a note in it that said he found the card addressed to us. He didn't know what the intention for the card was, but he wanted us to have it and us to know how much she loved our family. Needless to say, Allen and I both shed tears.

I only met Chris once, when they hosted the OSCLG Executive Board in their home for a homemade meal he made. For anyone who was friends with Bren on Facebook, you can appreciate the care and intentionality with which she created her home space, especially around holidays. I was particularly amazed by one room, the guest bathroom, which was decorated with *New Yorker* magazine covers as wallpaper. When I heard

they were downsizing to a condo, my first question was about her bathroom.

I only met their youngest child, Laurie, when Bren was inducted into the Wise Women's Council in Tacoma. Like Bren, Laurie was an engaging dinner companion and conversationalist. I never had the pleasure of meeting their son, Connor. Even though I barely met her family, I felt like I knew them well. Bren's face would always light up when I asked her about them, and I loved hearing the updates—anyone could see the love she had for all of them. My heart has been hurting for the loss of my friend, but I cannot imagine how they have felt dealing with the hole she has left in their family and hearts.

I learned a lot from Bren: the importance of family and letting your kids blossom into the people they were meant to be, how to integrate feminist values with a personal faith in a church with a patriarchal system, the importance of teaching social justice to college students and young children, a zest for life, and being fully present in the moment and in conversations. The list could go on and on.

I will never forget Bren's smile and infectious laugh. Over the past year, Jackson and I have pulled out *The Ghost Who Was a Quilt* and some of her notes to him. We read together, talking about and remembering a good friend.

M. CHAD MCBRIDE (PhD, University of Nebraska-Lincoln) is professor and chair of the Communication Studies Department at Creighton University. He has published over 40 articles and book chapters in a variety of outlets. He has also coedited two editions of the book, *Gender Actualized: Cases in the Communicative Construction of Realities* and is currently working on a memoir, *Family Lost, Family Found*. He is a past president of OSCLG and a member of the Wise Women's Council in the organization.

So Herself

Helen Sterk

Western Kentucky University

BREN ORTEGA MURPHY'S ABSENCE FROM THE Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender (OSCLG) will be felt as long as people remain whose lives she touched. Given the generational reach of her influence, that will be a long, long time.

From the newest undergraduate student to the longest-lived charter member, each of us who met Bren experienced an authentic human being, one who lived life as epideictic discourse. As such discourse does, she brought the past into the present, honoring people and traditions, bringing their values to life in the moment. While Aristotle may not have thought of how one lives life as ceremonial, or epideictic, Bren's example shows what that looks like: passionate about tradition, authentic in interactions, and care-filled in professional and personal practices.

Bren's scholarly passion, as anyone who has met her knows, focused on Catholic religious, particularly nuns. While some may say academic scholarship should remain objective, distant from the heart, Bren never did. Her writing and presentations on nuns were impeccably researched and critically examined the value of that work as embedded within the Catholic hierarchy. However, her research also showed a real love for the faith and the humanity of these "brides of Christ." She showed us that people of faith can be rigorous, even critical, scholars, even when speaking about their own faith traditions. Unapologetically, Bren opened up OSCLG to authentic conversations not only about religion, but about faith.

Bren honored people and traditions through her scholarship, but even more so through her authentic interactions with people, whether in a professional or personal context. Indeed, knowing her in the professional context of OSCLG, as Wise Woman, as President, as respected scholar, was also knowing her personally. In any context, Bren spoke her mind, laughed, hugged old and new friends, and respected everyone. Bren looked at you, listened to you, responded to you, and remembered you. She lived out feminist values of equity, fairness, and inherent value

in persons, showing as well as speaking the values that form the foundation of OSCLG.

Because of Bren's grounded self, she proved to be a generous care-taker of both persons and institutions, particularly OSCLG. Bren was an uncanny gift-giver. Many of us in OSCLG have received gifts from her, whether as a board member, Wise Woman, conference planner, or just someone in her orbit. Those gifts always felt as if she knew just what would be most meaningful to that person. That is a rare skill. Many of us received a rubber stamp from her collection, sent to our homes after she retired. Mine, of a "50s housewife," reminds me of winning the "Betty Crocker Homemaker of the Year" award in high school. The stamp, like the award, makes me laugh. The biggest and best gift Bren gave OSCLG, arguably, was locating the organization's archive at Loyola University of Chicago. We needed a permanent place within which to keep and to grow our history. It just fits that Bren acted to secure our history and traditions.

Bren lived life fully, well, grounded in the past, embracing the present, and affirming the values of faith, scholarship, and care. As long as we and OSCLG live, we will remember her as "so herself," a loving, wise, fully human being.

HELEN STERK (Ph.D. University of Iowa) is Professor and former Head of the Department of Communication at Western Kentucky University. Her research focuses on the intersections of rhetoric, religion, culture, and gender. Dr. Sterk's collaborative interests include teaching across disciplines, coaching people internationally in presentation skills, and sharing her expertise with various colleges and universities. Dr. Sterk is past president and an active member of the Association for Communication Administration and the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language and Gender; former Executive Director of the Kentucky Communication Association; and has been a member of the Legislative Assembly of the National Communication Association. A productive researcher, Dr. Sterk's recent books include: *Mothers and Daughters: Complicated Connections Across Cultures* (co-edited with Alice Deakins and Rebecca Lockridge) and *Gender, Culture and Physicality: Paradoxes and Taboos* (co-authored with Annelies Knoppers).

Remembering Our Sweet Bren Ortega Murphy

Judy E. Battaglia
Loyola Marymount University

Paige P. Edley
Loyola Marymount University

A Poem for Bren by Judy Elizabeth Battaglia

The Women

Wisest You

Of Three Names

Hair of copper, then platinum, and The Purest of Hearts

A Queen of

Your Cups

Luscious

I will never unsubscribe

Volcanic

When you passed, the women came to pay visits virtually with
their pain and diffidence

You were never elusive, never indifferent

Do you remember, Jeanine's panel in Nashville where we played
with cobb, to construct new homes for the houseless, I bought
both air dry and modeling clay today

I think of Sylvia Plath's "The Disquieting Muses" after a
visit to Mood

I swear I am not bored,

It is just a great vision,

Under the fullest pink Scorpio supermoon,

I have ever seen

At thirty-eight and of the greatest ache

82 Battaglia and Edley

Peaking through the grey clouds

The women

Their bodies call out to me wrapped

In Crinoline and Lace

Cloth and Newsprint

Bewildered and Broken-Hearted

I mostly see you, water-colored

Purple and Black

Green and Gold

Humming the 23rd Psalm

With love and plastic beads

Adorning your Earthly body

You photographed a dragonfly's wings

Their iridescent shimmer

A testament to your eye

Octagonal and holographic

I would never have known

What I was looking at

I could describe but I could not see exactly – not quite identify

But you, your gifts of generosity

Creativity

Like spun sugar on a summer day

Yesterday's remaining butter cake in my refrigerator,
left untouched

My hands ceramic, claw-like, our eating habits birdlike, just
today I developed an almond allergy, like my academic twin,
Paige, whom you inducted to the Wise Women's Council, who is
everyone's council, she is copper, silver, and amethyst too,

Just like you,

Eyes brilliant and sparkling—forever written on our hearts.

A Memorial to Dear Sweet Bren
by Paige Pettyjohn Edley

Thank you, Judy, for a beautiful poem and the loving connection and segue to my thoughts. We all miss Bren, but she is not gone. (In this Easter season I feel like I am almost plagiarizing Mary Magdalene.) Bren lives on in her works and her influence on each of us. My first, now ditched, introductory paragraph was self-serving and selfish as I cried out in words of my personal loss—wondering how Bren could leave us so soon and wondering why God would take her from us. We have so much more to learn and we have so much that we already learned through Bren’s teachings, her sense of care, and the ways she connected with everyone she met. Also, this is a chance to remember her and her love. Yes, we had more to learn and we had so much more to share with you. You meant the world to me/us, whether I/we told you or not. I wanted to “Be Like Bren,”¹ showing love and affection openly – not just hugs, but also kisses – kisses on the lips. Bren, you loved us and everyone you met—unconditionally. We can make the world a better place by enacting your teachings, your feminist philosophies, and how you made every single person you met feel special, connected, and loved.

I met dear, sweet, caring, feminist Bren at my first meeting of the Board of Directors for the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender (OSCLG or “OsClog,” as we affectionately call ourselves). Patrice Buzzanell had nominated me to the board at my first OSCLG conference and that door opened so many cherished experiences and friendships—especially with Bren, who took it upon herself to reach out to newbies like me. She sat beside me at the meeting, pulling up a chair to be near me, introducing herself, and making sure we sat together when the board broke for lunch. She made me feel welcome and took me under her wing, (wo) mentoring me, as I like to call it. That was just the beginning of my journey to “Be Like Bren.”

When I arrived home, there was a handwritten note from Bren, welcoming me to the OSCLG Board of Directors and to the feminist world of OSCLG in general. My reaction was “Wow, a handwritten note! Sent through the *mail!*” That was so

amazing to me that she extended a piece of herself—a piece of her heart—sharing kindness and sisterhood in a way that took time—and *stamps*—in such a thoughtful and personal way. I wanted to “Be Like Bren.” I thought I just couldn’t quite reach her heights of everyday feminist “wonderfulness” personified. She was special and one of a kind. Yet, remembering her as we do in this special issue of *Women & Language*, we really can Be Like Bren—reaching out to our feminist sisters and potential budding feminists outside of conferences, reaching out to wondering students both inside and outside the classroom, through our scholarship and through our care and interactions in our everyday lives—we can Be Like Bren. We can learn from her practices, her thoughtfulness, her love, and her sharing of herself as she taught us in so many ways. *We can* Be Like Bren!

When I began teaching at Loyola Marymount University, Bren reached out to me as a “Jesuit Sister.” We talked of Jesuit teachings and her ongoing research and daily performances of her admiration of the women religious on all the Jesuit campuses. Bren opened my eyes to their roles as the original feminists. I always thought of the nuns as oppressed, but she helped me see a new light in the lives of women religious. Thank you, Bren. When I applied for Full Professor a few years ago, she excitedly volunteered to write a letter for my dossier. We can do that, too. We can Be Like Bren. The next year, she inducted me into the Wise Women’s Council. Her presentation made me cry—both tears of joyful emotion and tears of connection (the little me inside my heart was jumping up and down with awe that they wanted me and included me in the Wise Women’s Council). Through all my overwhelming emotion that evening and since, maybe I really could Be Like Bren, too. I know we all can Be Like Bren—through our humanness, our flaws, our shortcomings, and our demons—we enact feminist compassion just like Bren. *We are* Like Bren.

¹ Shauna MacDonald hosted an unofficial zoom memorial for Bren, where OSCLG members could share Bren stories. Melanie Bailey Mills shared the idea to “Be Like Bren,” which took hold and has become an OSCLG mantra.

JUDY E. BATTAGLIA is a Clinical Associate Professor at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. She has held her post at Loyola since 2007 where she is also a primary faculty advisor. She cherishes her relationships with her mentees and during the pandemic she became a co-founder of Lighthouse, Darkroom, a BIPOC, queer, femme, and disabled arts collective here in the city, publishing 'zines and hosting digital gatherings. Her work focuses on intersectional and intergenerational feminism, transhumanism, antiracism, sustainability, and critical biography. When she is not working she enjoys spending time with friends and family, watching classic television, writing poetry, reading, attending live music and speaking engagements, and rockhounding.

PAIGE PETTYJOHN EDLEY (PhD, Rutgers University at New Brunswick) teaches classes in organizational communication, gender and the workplace, corporate ethics and social responsibility, and qualitative research capstone. Her research interests include the intersections of power, gender, and identity in organizations, #METOO, rape culture, affirmative consent, alternative forms of organizing, feminist organizing, work-life balance, and women-owned businesses. She has published multiple book chapters and journal articles in such prestigious journals as *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Communication Yearbook*, *Electronic Journal of Communication*, *Women & Language*, *Argumentation and Advocacy*. In addition, Dr. Edley is committed to issues of social justice and tries to blend activism with her teaching and scholarship. She has participated in local, regional, and national protests of sexist, racist, and greedy organizational practices.

Blueberry Tea Towel

Shauna M. MacDonald
Cape Breton University

I'm sure you didn't know
When you handed it to me
On an October day,
In your "Oh, it's nothing, really" kind of way,
Looking over your readers
As if to say,
You knew it was something.

I'm sure you didn't know
When you handed it to me
That I would wait years
Before looking up those letters
Knowing they meant "blueberries"
Just not in Finnish.
(I'll bet you knew it was Finnish).

I'm sure you didn't know
When you handed it to me
How I would bring it out
In months far from October,
Tracing the stitching with my index finger,
As if to learn the language of berries
But you knew *something*.

I'm sure you didn't know
When you handed it to me
On an October day
How much I would miss you,
Looking over your readers
As if to say,
You *knew* it was something.

Something beyond October, or Finnish, or Blueberries.
Something I could touch.
As if to say,
You had something to tell me...

I am not fond of explaining poetry—my own or anyone else’s. So, here, I will simply say that one day at the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender (OSCLG) conference, after I had performed a part of a one-woman show about lighthouses, Bren presented me with a single, lovely, embroidered tea towel she had found in a local shop. The show in question has a completely unsubtle theme of blueberries, and when she saw it, she thought of me. A flour-sack style towel, cream-colored and embroidered with blueberries and the word “Mustikoita” (Finnish for “Blueberries”), this towel has been in each of my performances since, and is proudly displayed, completely out of context, in my campus office. She couldn’t have possibly known just how much this towel, and the care of the gift, would continue to mean to me in the years that have followed. But I’d bet she knows, now.

SHAUNA M. MACDONALD (PhD, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale) is associate professor in the Department of Communication & Languages at Cape Breton University, where she also serves as Associate Director of the Centre for Sound Communities. She is the author and performer of *To Catch and To Keep* and *Light*—two scholarly solo performances and has served as editor of *Kaleidoscope* and Associate Editor of *Text and Performance Quarterly*, among other academic roles. Shauna has published twelve peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles in outlets such as *Text and Performance Quarterly*, *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*, and *Women & Language*. Direct correspondence to shauna_macdonald@cbu.ca.

Noticeable and Notable

Rachel E. Silverman

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

IN 2011, AS THE STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE to the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender (OSCLG) Executive Board, I was lucky enough to be invited to Bren's house for dinner. The conference that year was in Chicago and hosted by Loyola University Chicago. Admittedly, after years of the National Communication Association (NCA) conference being in Chicago, I had minimal desire to head back to the Windy City for another cold weekend. But arriving at Bren's house, the warmth, the smells of food, and the bathroom wallpapered in *New Yorker* covers changed all that. This was my first pre-conference dinner as a board member. I was nervous and excited, and Bren welcomed me into her home. I didn't know Bren at the time, and I still very much existed in the space where faculty were people to be feared and admired. Bren created a new space for me. She made sure I had a place to sit, and my voice was heard. She made me feel safe, she made me feel like I mattered, she noticed me. Bren made me feel like I deserved to be amongst so many amazing women. Throughout the conference that year, Bren repeatedly checked on me and smiled at me; she found small and meaningful ways to make me feel connected.

As the years passed and I continued to attend, the conference felt less scary and more like home. Bren remained an integral part of that feeling. Although I won't claim a monumental connection, there was an undeniable depth. Every year, I looked forward to seeing her and saying hello.

Bren and I shared an interest in religion and women. Her work on women religious and her collection of all things nuns was outstanding. When, during my graduate school years, I was discouraged from studying religion, Bren showed me that discussions of religious women mattered, that religion had a place in the academy, and that identifying with a religion could be an important scholarly endeavor. She supported my scholarship in a way few others did and again, she made me feel safe in my choices.

Weeks before Bren's passing, I reached out to her in my role as OSCLG's Communication Coordinator. She was serving as OSCLG's Historian and had done the work of having all our materials archived. Even in a casual interaction, Bren again demonstrated warmth and support. For all the stress and difficulties I was facing building a new website, that chance for one last interaction with Bren was well worth it.

Since her passing, the conference has been virtual and so her absence has been, for me, less noticeable. As we look forward to meeting in October in person, I know this will no longer be the case. I will miss her bright smile, her beautiful purple attire, her warmth, and the feeling of safety and welcome she created wherever she went. Her absence will indeed be notable and will be a significant loss to our organization and to all future members who will never have the chance to know her.

RACHEL E. SILVERMAN (PhD, University of South Florida) is an associate professor of communication at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. Her research focuses on the intersectionality of Queer and Jewish identity in popular culture and real life. She also specializes in reproductive health narratives and the role of communication in women's health medical education. Dr. Silverman is the founding co-editor of the journal *Feminist Pedagogy*, and her research can be found published in *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, *Sexuality and Culture*, *Television & New Media*, *Health Communication*, and *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*.

Memorial Service for Bren Ortega Murphy

Susan Ross

Loyola University Chicago

Dr. Ross preached this homily at Bren's memorial service on August 22, 2021.

CHRIS ASKED ME TO THINK OF a scripture passage for this service, and when I began considering which one I might choose, this one came immediately to mind: the parable of the persistent widow. However, interestingly, the subheading in the older version of the *New American Bible*, which is the one I have, calls it "The Corrupt Judge." The revised version calls it "The Persistent Widow." More on this in a moment.

We all remember how Mitch McConnell said of Elizabeth Warren, when she refused to stop reading Coretta Scott King's letter from 1968 regarding Jeff Sessions, "Nevertheless, she persisted." Bren got a sweatshirt with this statement on it and wore it proudly and often. Like Mitch McConnell, the judge in this parable was really annoyed at this woman – and we don't know what injustice she needed to get resolved – but she would not let it go, and the judge finally gave in, more out of exhaustion and irritation, it seems, than for the merits of her case, whatever they were.

Unlike the widow of this story, though, Bren was not a marginal figure as were widows in ancient Palestine. She had advanced degrees, many publications, productions, and honors, as well as a loving husband and children, and many devoted relatives, colleagues, and friends. Like this widow, Bren was determined to seek justice: for her students, her colleagues, for the forgotten nuns of American Catholic history, for refugees in need of shelter, for children who needed books that represented them. Yet in some ways, Bren – like all of us – *was* alone, like all of us who struggle to make sense of our own lives, with our weaknesses and anxieties, our hopes and dreams, whether fulfilled or not. In a very profound sense, we *are* all alone, needy, and vulnerable. But even in Bren's own weakness and vulnerability, she was always keenly aware of the neediness and vulnerability of others. I think of Sarab, the Iraqi student that she and Chris gave a home to, of students who needed a place

to stay for awhile, of nieces and nephews who needed a taste of home cooking – or, should I say, of home-baked cookies.

I like how the judge in the story was a little bit afraid of the widow. He says, “Because this widow keeps bothering me I shall deliver a just decision for her lest she finally come and do violence to me.” Even in first century Palestine, we see this fear of the angry woman, the woman who won’t let go of her determination and sense of injustice.

Bren’s persistence was something to behold. Consider her attention when it came to special occasions. Her holiday decorating – and you know, I don’t just mean Christmas! – was legendary. As Claire Noonan put it so well at Bren’s funeral, “2550 Marcy is ready” – ready to celebrate every holiday, to bring joy to those just passing by the house, and especially to those who were lucky enough to be invited into her home. I think of how Bren was always on the lookout for the right thing, be it Legos (that is a story in and of itself!), another picture of the annunciation, the perfect card – remember all the bow tie cards for Chris’s 60th birthday? Part of persistence is being aware of all the details, as no opportunity to learn more about children’s literature or the nuns of St. Vincent’s Hospital could go unnoticed. She even had birthday cards addressed in advance (here is the card that Bren had all ready for my May birthday this year, which Chris found and kindly sent!).

So we can hear this story as Bren’s solidarity with the persistent widow, who will keep on keeping on, as our friend Carolyn Farrell used to say, until she gets what she wants: justice! Women’s persistence will ultimately find an answer, just as God will finally hear the cries of God’s people, we are told, even more so than a corrupt judge. Thus the earlier title, “The Corrupt Judge,” which of course does not focus on the woman but on the man, since who else could represent God?

But there is another way to hear this story, and this other way actually came to me very recently from Bren herself. (Let me explain!) Bren would often send to her friends via Facebook Messenger some interesting article or website that she wanted to share. I kept all those messages and I was scrolling through them the other week, looking for inspiration, when I found a link to a sermon preached by a minister at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago *on this very same text* almost five years ago. It was shortly

after the revelation of the audiotapes of the former soon-to-be-president bragging about his sexual powers, but before the 2016 election. So I want to borrow some ideas from this wonderful sermon of the Reverend Shannon Kershner, Pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church. She asks, “What happens if *we* sit in the seat of the unjust judge and *God* takes on the persistent cries of the widow?” Rather than seeing God as the omniscient power who might or might not grant our prayers, Reverend Kershner suggests that it is in fact God who is the one who will persist in bugging us relentlessly to hear the cries for justice in our own day. She says, “I must ask you a question. Today, in your life, as you sit on that judge’s seat, what do you think God is persistently calling you to do, to be, to say as a disciple?”

I cannot help but think that in some mysterious way, Bren sent me that message then *and now* to challenge me and all of us to think of how it is that we too can act like that divine persistent widow in looking out for people and seeking justice, as Bren did. Remember that justice is not simply having things go the right way, but also having things be in the right place. Bren was always on the lookout for something beautiful, something funny, something appropriate. Going shopping with her was truly an experience! She had an uncanny ability to find just the right gift, just the right decoration, that cemented her bond with her family and friends. A number of us were gifted with small tokens of friendship and gratitude that she brought to us this spring since she wasn’t able to thank us at her unfortunately canceled retirement party – here is my “thank you note” stamp, with the obvious reference to my love for music. What would it mean for each of us to think of how we too could be that persistent widow who doesn’t forget what is needed, who notices, especially one who doesn’t forget the details that can make an occasion more than routine. I treasure the gifts I received from Bren over the years, but I think her greatest gift is to remind us to pay attention, persistently, to the details that really matter.

As we honor the memory of Bren Adair Ortega Murphy, I invite us all to think of the ways that she persisted. Maybe it is remembering birthdays, or baking cookies; maybe it is searching for ways for children to see themselves in stories. But maybe it is something that *you* do well: writing articles, advocating for untenured faculty, listening to students. Or maybe it is gardening,

sewing, playing with children or grandchildren. I invite you to do what you love to do and do it well, persistently and graciously, keeping in mind the ways that we can all make the world a more just, generous, and beautiful place, as Bren did.

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