Memorial for Margaret Proctor, delivered on February 12, 2001

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Margaret Proctor Memorial  
Monday, February 12, 2001

The frightening diagnosis, the days in Ann Arbor, the battle with disease, and then the reprieve, the homecoming and finally the return to work. We had reason for hope. She had reason for hope. But it is a relentless disease and would not let go, and finally it defeated her body, but not her spirit. Margie’s last year and a half were a triumphant time for her spirit. During those months a story of love unfolded rooted in Margie and Bill’s relationship a love that began sometime in the late sixties. Obviously, it flourished because when it was called upon in the extremity between life and death it revealed to us a love relationship in full flower. Though I was never in personal contact the news that came from friends and Bill’s letters to all of us carried its full force.
How should one love? How should one care? We spend so much of our time trying to figure that out or neglecting to find it out. Occasionally, we catch a glimpse. Knowing someone who does it right and observing. One legacy Margie, along with Bill, left us was that glimpse of how to live when dying – how to squeeze the most beauty from an event that has so much sadness. “Love bears all things.” If it floods the room, the space, the hearts of those dealing with death perhaps death with its physical separation loses some of its sting. It certainly brings the participants in the final drama to an understanding of what the often unspoken commitment over the years really means, how it helps, how it illumines what is most important in life, the love we offer and the love we receive. Through Bill’s revealing letters he included so many of us in their extended family and permitted us to witness how profound the acts of caring are. We were drawn into the caring and feeling, and we, each of us, had to ask ourselves about our capacities to love and care.
The unintended consequence of the way the Cohen family worked their way to Margie’s death was to heighten our awareness of how this is best done, and that it was done as it was because of a long-tended relationship. We could see the positive power of love, and we wanted to claim it for ourselves in our relationships. And we admired, respected, and loved them for what they did for one another and for us in life’s most serious event.

My observations about Margie in her last days are consistent with two major characteristics in the practice of her profession. She came from a tradition of academic quality and she honored it in all of her teaching. She had a capacity to reach out to people and bring them into her orbit of influence. As the best in her profession she changed, directed, and inspired her students. When her life touched another’s there was an overwhelming, positive, response. She had an aura of appreciation. Over the years she used the hard personal times to deepen her own sensitivity and allowed the pain in her life to strengthen her.
Her contribution to the University was demonstrated in the classroom and in personal contact with students but in another way as well. The William James College period at Grand Valley had some special triumphs. As in any educational experiment the demands on faculty are nearly or, in fact, are overwhelming. Margie’s equanimity, her commitment and mostly her spirit contributed significantly to keeping the experiment on a positive track. William James College was especially important to women who after years of other responsibility entered or reentered the world of higher education. In this cause her name is written large. Her legacy is significant.
I close by reading my last letter to Margie written and sent on December 19th.

Dear Margaret:

As you and your family deal with the latest development I want to send to you words of appreciation. During your long tenure at Grand Valley you have affected positively the lives of your colleagues and your students. As recently as last week I heard a compliment for you from a student who said you had assisted him in such a way as to redirect his life.

You are one of the faculty who contributed to the creation of an ethos at Grand Valley that uplifts the spirit of those who sense it. You combine the qualities of high scholarship and human concern. You have none of the arrogance that is often apparent in those who have your intelligence and knowledge, and you have the ability to communicate. Your skill in communicating has endeared you to your students and made you an appreciated colleague.
Personally, I want you to know that your friendship and support are important to me. Thank you for your contribution to the making of a new university. You can reflect with contentment and satisfaction on the success of your professional contributions and your personal relationships.

With appreciation and affection,

Don

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I will miss the open smile, the friendly encounter, the conversation that always led somewhere.