

## ***Channeling Prof. Brown***

Prof. Huntington Brown taught me this lesson during my sophomore year at the University of Minnesota in the spring of 1964 . . .

He was an elderly English professor with abundant white hair and a bristling white mustache. Tall and stooped, he seemed to hover over the classroom.

I had sailed blithely through two introductory Shakespeare classes with a different professor who was unable to look at any of his students: He spent the entire 50 minutes of every lecture pacing feverishly around the front of the room wiping rivers of sweat from his brow with a rapidly disintegrating fistful of kleenex – and staring the entire time at the intersection of the ceiling and the rear wall of the classroom. I diverted myself from his embarrassment by occasionally inking messages into my wooden desktop that were answered by a girl who occupied the same desk at a different time of day. She and I never did meet . . .

Despite his nervous disposition, however, the wandering professor did know his stuff and left me hungering for more. I enjoyed reading the plays and listening to his rambling commentaries, survived his classes, then signed up for an advanced Shakespeare class with Prof. Huntington Brown. (How could I *not*? With a name like *that*? Teaching *Shakespeare*?)

As it happened, Prof. Brown was leagues beyond brilliant and the journeys he led through Shakespeare's most famous plays were mesmerizing. But he also felt it important to school us in the vagaries of the printer's trade in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century – a trade so slap-dash that key words, lines and entire scenes were often omitted from the published versions of Shakespeare's plays, to the consternation of scholars for the next 400 years. Prof. Brown rattled on about the glories and the failings of the rudimentary printing presses in use at the time, the technological difficulties of printing *anything*, the glaring errors in the original collections of Shakespeare's plays, the panic it caused among his admirers, the frantic and often failed attempts to correct the errors in subsequent editions, the . . .

Am I losing you here?

Well, join the crowd. I not only didn't understand much of what he was saying about the printing presses, I didn't *care*! I just wanted to read and discuss the *plays*!

Then came the day of reckoning when one-third of our final exam focused on some of the arcane aspects of the physical printing presses and the technical reasons for the flawed publications.

I tried to write something intelligible in my blue book, but I was convinced my utter befuddlement would come shining through and I'd fail the entire exam.

Well, I was right, at least in part. The exam came back a few days later and I was astonished to see that I'd passed. When I opened the blue book to read Prof. Brown's comments, he taught me a lesson and gave me a gift I've tried to share ever since with my colleagues and students.

"It is apparent to me," he wrote in careful script next to my pitiful attempt to answer questions about printing errors in the *Third Quarto* (don't ask), "that you do not understand anything at all about this subject. But I will not hold it against you."

Wow.

He had somehow glimpsed my love of Shakespeare, which blossomed after a few years into a graduate degree in dramatic literature. And instead of crushing that infatuation by giving me a failing grade and sending me off to, oh, I don't know, an accounting class?, he decided to nourish what was there to be nurtured and ignore the rest.

Fast forward 45 years to my classes at Carnegie Mellon University, where I taught a social enterprise incubator for three semesters. Each time, 16 students started the semester excited about their business ideas. Their energy and enthusiasm filled the room! Yet there I stood, knowing in my soul that most of their ideas were flawed and had no chance.

I never told them that. And I never tell anybody who asks for advice about their idea for a social enterprise that they should bag it.

Sure, I ask pointed questions, I make casual observations, I steer them in certain directions. But what I'm trying to do is create an atmosphere in which they can discover the glitches in their original idea without doubting their talents – or quenching their excitement.

After all, I might be wrong. Who am I to predict whether an idea for a social enterprise has legs? In the early stages, I'm as ignorant as my students and all the others who ask my advice. What I *do* know is that if you take the time to conduct a decent feasibility study your idea might morph into a genuine business opportunity. And if it doesn't, so what? Most entrepreneurs fail once, twice or many more times before they find a business idea that works.

So what right do I have to discourage people when they're at the very beginning of their adventures?

And what right did an English professor have to give me a failing grade at the beginning of mine?

Hey -- it's not a matter of having the right . . . it's a matter of doing the right thing.

Prof. Huntington Brown did that for me, and I've been trying ever since to do it for others.

So keep those ideas coming!