

## Irene Breland, On Reflection

Irene Breland is lunching at the Mayflower Café, seated amid the neon and worn booths of the downtown Jackson diner that she saw established in 1935.

Between courses, the retired high school English teacher is considering the things that endure, and how those are the good things, the right things. Truth. Beauty. The Mayflower, maybe, but certainly not one-way traffic on Capitol Street, which she says must go the way of all silly ideas if downtown is to survive.

Miss Breland, as she is known to generations of former students, graduated from Millsaps with a B.A. in the economically devastating year of 1929, and she has seen almost a century of change. But the tumult of progress, so caught up in its own noisy hype, matters not one whit, she says, because what ultimately counts does not change.

“They talk about how divided we are, the Democrats and Republicans all shoving and pushing each other,” she says. She’d have them do their homework—and look to the history of those Americans who kept the country dynamic and strong. “What was true for those people way back then is what we ought to be doing today,” she says.

Miss Breland is a devoted fan of that great orator Bishop Fulton Sheen: “He said that spiritual truths never change,” she says. You can almost hear the chalk on the blackboard, spelling it out: “*Spiritual truths never change.* He taught that what was beautiful then is beautiful today and always will be. And that is what I like to testify to in my living.”

Over a dish of broiled oysters that arrive dense and briny, Miss Breland recalls four decades of compelling students to savor the texture and flavor of Faulkner, Welty, Shakespeare. “English is something I love because English is life,” she says. “That’s what literature is. It is life.”

Miss Breland’s life was her classroom. Alluding to Tennyson, she says: “I’m a part of all that I have met. Those students are part of me. I meet them today, some I taught 70 years ago. I can also see the place where they sat, tell you what they had on.”

And she remembers those who shone. “It wasn’t the ones who sat down and memorized last night what they had for today or the one who diagrammed the sentence perfectly,” she says. “Throw them a William Faulkner subject when they come to class, something they don’t know anything about, and have them write.”

She was authoritative—even strict—yet students loved her so much that in 1994 Murrah High School alumni paid for her to spend three nights in Manhattan’s Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, a lifelong dream. She remains in constant touch with former students: One will call about a grammatical error in the newspaper, another to lunch with friends at Walker’s Drive-In.

Miss Breland’s most indelible memory of Millsaps is how difficult it was to finance a college education during the Depression. That she had to borrow money, she recalls, was humiliating. “There was a young man who met with those of us who were borrowing money, and I was so embarrassed. I just couldn’t stand for everybody to know we had to borrow. Years later, I told him, ‘You don’t know how embarrassed I was,’ and he said, ‘Did you know I was borrowing, too?’”

Miss Breland credits Millsaps with instilling in her the confidence to pursue teaching: “We had a liberal arts education, some science, some English, some math. Instead of being afraid, I somehow just was not fearful because of that Millsaps education.”

Over her last remaining oysters, Miss Breland reduces that most complex of dishes, the state of education, to its essential ingredients: “If you want to start a university, what do you need? You need a log, a student, and a teacher, and you’ve got a university.”

Likewise, she believes life can be boiled down to this: “Beauty is truth, and truth beauty,” she says, quoting Keats. “That’s all you know on earth and all you need to know. And if it’s not a spiritual truth, it’s not beautiful, and it will change.

“To me, that’s what the world needs to know today.”

—John Webb



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