

## Eulogy for Brian Llewellyn-ap-Dafydd

by Stephen Dinsmore

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Choir Room, Vanier College

Speaking of Brian now, suddenly, in the past tense ... seems an *incomprehensible ... grammatical* error....

And I half-expect him to burst in these doors now and set everything right ... the way he did so many things these past half-dozen years that Anthony and I were fortunate enough to share an office with his coffee maker – because it no longer fit in his.

The knuckle-rap on the door; the key in the knob before we could reach it. The cheering “Good morning, *chaps*.” And as he filled his mug, his sly frown would show that today’s *lesson* was brewing: equal parts entertainment and rant.

“What is...” – he squinted sideways, swished his academic gown aside, and sat in our rickety student-chair, the way I imagine Dylan Thomas or Ben Jonson holding court in a pub – “...the *whale-road*?” Quizzing us completely out of the blue.

Or without introduction he might read to us fully half of Bambara’s short story “The Lesson” – in a young Harlem girl’s florid, falsetto dialect – or else Jim Hall’s “Maybe Dats Your Pwoblem Too,” gesturing like a delusional Spiderman.

After the spontaneous pantomimes and tutorials, he’d stand briskly – “Mustn’t keep you. Good day, *gents*” – and soon he’d be loading his dolly with boxes (of *what*, I don’t know) and breezing through two or three more conversations – with a student; and a colleague; and a custodian – on his way to the elevator.

He treated all us co-workers as extended family.

The last time I saw him he was writing those probably hundreds of sweet, quaint Christmas cards – deep in his crowded museum that doubled as his office – and was looking forward to his recovery, and his next classes.

Always looking forward.

Yet at the same time, always telling the old tales:

Of his rock climbing and rugby days; his choirs and classrooms; his ancient and postmodern heroes.

Several weeks ago, before I substituted in his class on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, he acted out an entire crash-course – including a lesson on how to pull a very real, very *heavy* sword from its scabbard with the most intimidating *schklinck!* and

brandish it around as I recited King Arthur's challenge. I pictured my own green head rolling on the dean's office carpet.

Once he told about a time way back when he was a student in England – ...*young and easy*... – how every day for maybe five weeks, he drove to the foot of a sheer cliff and attempted to climb it freestyle. Day after day he fell back to the sand on his third step. But his determination grew to an obsession, and he understood that the challenge was in his *mind*....

And at this point in his story he started to climb our office wall – literally – and I feared for him: as he wedged the toe of his dress shoe onto a closet-door hinge; and gripped the thin molding with his fingernails; and then swung the other foot onto a nail that broke off in a puff of plaster. And then as he tried to steady his big spidery weight against a thumbtack – red-faced; and panting – almost *triumphant* now – he narrated how, on that very last day, long ago in his youth, *just* as he was about to throw in the towel, a long-invisible fissure opened to him suddenly: like a lightning-bolt in the rock – an *epiphany*; and he ascended it, as in a dream: as if he'd finally found his place in this *story* he'd been struggling so long to tell.

And then all at once: "Carry on, fellows – *must* be off."

His life seemed an epic of these stories, many of which are now stored in the memories within this room.

*He* always carried on, heartily – wearing his enormous *heart* on his long-draped sleeve. And sometimes also a pin on his lapel:

*Brian Saves!*

When he didn't show up one day late last semester, I emailed him. "Dear Brian:" (you always wanted to address him that formally) "...I send you well-wishes. The coffee is cold; the tales are few."

It feels like the end of an era. And it will be a long time before I stop expecting him to come fill his mug with us again ... and maybe even start climbing the wall: once more showing us how things should be done.

I am so sorry he is missing out on this gathering – of a community that, really, *he* has united here.

What can we do – but continue to tell the tales?

I picture Brian's personal heaven: where the coffee is warm; the tales are many; and the choir is Welsh.

Dear Brian: We'll miss you.