

# Reflections on a lonely friend named Brenda

*“There comes a moment in everyone’s life when we have to decide if the pain is worth the reward. We either move forward to see where the path leads or we go back down the same road forever wondering, ‘Did we make the right decision?’”*

— **Anthony T. Hincks**  
Author, philosopher  
“Verbs in Storyland”  
(b. 1962)

Not so many days ago my thoughts drifted to Brenda Hubbard.

It happens about this time every year with the approach of Martin Luther King Jr. Day and Black History Month.

Then again, memories of Collierville’s youngest pioneer surface wherever, and whenever, I am reminded of what it’s like to be alone. Although originally published at about the time of Brenda’s birth, the 1957 Pulitzer Prize-winning volume of short biographies written by John F. Kennedy — “Profiles in Courage” — epitomized her strength.

That’s what Brenda was: Strong ... and courageous, but mostly the latter.

I first met her in the sixth grade at Collierville Elementary School over on the state’s western end, just outside of Memphis. It was the late 1960s — probably ’67 or ’68 — and the court-ordered desegregation of schools was underway.

Brenda, already a quiet girl and naturally shy, became our school’s first black student.

I didn’t know where she

lived. I didn’t know what school she had attended before ours. I didn’t know her parents, her family or whether she had siblings.

Like most of the kids in school, I didn’t talk to Brenda in the beginning. In class, I don’t remember my desk being close to hers. In the cafeteria we didn’t share the same table nor did we mingle at recess.

Those were the early days of Brenda’s first year. Most of the white kids kept their distance. Most had little to say to Collierville’s only student of color and they rarely approached, unless one of the pale-faced bullies slung a racial slur in her direction or even raised a closed fist near her face.

Denial serves no purpose. It happened. I saw it. Once, it was even done by one of my best friends. And I did nothing to intervene, other than to scowl at his actions. These were the ’60s, a time of reckoning for communities across the South and a day of unrest for those who called it home ... both the white families, and the black.

The day I finally spoke to Brenda didn’t come with reason. Rather, by circumstance. Thanks to another new student — another Brenda, this one named Brenda Moss — the opportunity arose.

I’ve written of them before, the last time being three years ago.

Talk about polar opposites, they were like day and night. Brenda Moss had long, blonde hair that stretched to her lower back, pale blue eyes and

## Commentary



**INKSPOTS**  
Rick Norton

unblemished skin as white as milk. Brenda Hubbard had big, brown eyes, pitch-black hair cropped closely just below the ears, and her cover was dark as coal.

Brenda Moss was short, verging on itty-bitty. Brenda Hubbard was tall. One Brenda towered over the other, but it didn’t matter. It just gave them something else to joke about.

Being new to the school, Brenda Moss had few friends. Being black, Brenda Hubbard had fewer.

So, they found one another, and it became the start of a lasting friendship. I don’t know why. It just did. Perhaps one needed the other. Maybe Brenda Moss saw life as something more than color. Maybe Brenda Hubbard had tired of the word.

On a day that Brenda Moss had soundly beaten me in

another class spelling bee, I approached her in the cafeteria. There, she sat with Brenda Hubbard at a small round table. They sat alone, probably sharing stories that young girls tell, perhaps whispering secrets that others would never hear.

I don’t remember my words ... probably something like, “Congratulations, Brenda. How did you know that last word? It was a doozy!”

Back in the day, I wasn’t a sore loser. A disappointed loser, yes, but not a sore one. Brenda might have been tiny in frame, but the girl could spell.

“Thanks, Ricky!” she offered with a modest, but cute, smile. The girl also had great dimples. “Cute as a button,” as my mom would say.

Beside her, Brenda Hubbard was also looking up. While they sat, I stood across the way, suddenly speechless at the awkward moment.

Glancing at little Brenda’s dark friend, I briefly held her gaze before looking away. But what I saw was a smile.

“Hey, Brenda,” I managed, peeping again at her brown face.

“Hey,” she mustered, again flashing a gentle smile. She had dimples, too.

“You can sit down ... if you’d like,” little Brenda suggested.

The guys were waiting for my return at a distant table. And probably, they were giggling, the kind of giggles that little boys do when one of their own is caught in the company of a little girl. And caught smiling, to boot.

But I sat anyway ... at the far side of the table.

“You finish your lunch, already?” little Brenda asked.

“Yeah,” I managed. “I kinda like fish sticks ... especially with ketchup.”

“Me, too. Brenda also likes ’em ... don’t you?” she asked, looking over to her buddy.

Brenda Hubbard nodded, but without words.

“You like school here?” I asked tall Brenda, stealing another look.

She shrugged her shoulders, a universal code for “not really.” Even as a sixth-grade boy, I understood her discomfort.

“Maybe you will, after a while,” I offered. It was the best I could do.

She smiled again. But it couldn’t hide the sadness in her big brown eyes.

“Well, I gotta go,” I said, now standing. “I’ll see you around.”

Meeting Brenda Hubbard’s gaze with one of my own, I added, “... Both of you.”

Our sixth-grade Brenda’s remained best friends well into junior high until little Brenda moved away. In years to come, probably early in high school, I lost touch with Brenda Hubbard. She, too, left the school.

I never saw her again.

But I often think of her ... especially when I’m feeling alone.

*(About the writer: Rick Norton is an associate editor at the Cleveland Daily Banner. Email him at rick.norton@clevelandbanner.com.)*

## Cold shoulder after divorce

### Advice



**DEAR ANNIE**  
Annie Lane

**Dear Annie:** I recently went on vacation with my mom, stepdad and siblings. We went to the river where my stepdad has been going for about 30 years. Everyone else in the community has been going there every year for just as long, if not longer. Now, my mom and stepdad met each other while they were married, and, well, you can put the rest together. Many families we know have taken sides ever since, so being the daughter, I’m no stranger to weird vibes in social situations and people choosing sides.

Upon meeting the rivergoers, I quickly realized that some of them were on my stepdad’s ex-wife’s side. How did I know? They avoided talking to us and didn’t invite us to partake in group watersport activities. In one case, after I introduced myself, the woman looked at me, scoffed and walked away. There were plenty of nice people, though, so we still had a great time.

This isn’t something I take personally. The situation has nothing to do with me, and the affair happened six years ago. If they’re getting all hung up about something that’s not even their business, that’s their problem. But I never know whether I should stand up for myself, kill them with kindness or just ignore them. What do you think? — Boating With Baggage

**Dear Boating:** It sounds as if you’re expert at navigating these treacherous rapids, so kudos. It’s incredibly mature of

you not to take the antics of your stepdad’s ex-wife’s friends personally. The bitterness and resentment they’re holding on to is only dragging them down.

Continue being pleasant in the face of their ugly attitudes. Pretend you’re oblivious to their bad vibes. They can scoff until they’re blue in the face. But don’t be a doormat, either. If one of them says something outright rude to you, you have a right to stand up for yourself.

**Dear Annie:** What is the etiquette concerning who pays for a date these days? I am realizing I may be a bit old-fashioned, as I still think that a man should pick up the check at least the first few times he goes out with someone. I’ve been on three dates with a guy recently, and we’ve split it every time.

For our first date, he picked out an expensive restaurant that I would never normally go to, as it’s way out of my price range. I assumed he would only invite me to such an expensive place if he planned on covering the bill.

Before I was seeing him, I dated a man for about six months, and we always split everything, too. If I didn’t have cash on me, he expected me to pay him back later.

I work full time and can support myself, and I don’t need or expect anyone to spoil me. But I still appreciate small gestures of chivalry. Am I out of step with the times? — Halfsies

**Dear Halfsies:** A good rule, widely used today, is that the person who does the asking does the paying — at least on the first date. So, if this man asked you out, it would be courteous of him to pay, and vice versa.

*“Ask Me Anything: A Year of Advice From Dear Annie” is out now! Annie Lane’s debut book — featuring favorite columns on love, friendship, family and etiquette — is available as a paperback and e-book. Visit <http://www.creatorspublishing.com> for more information. Send your questions for Annie Lane to [dearannie@creators.com](mailto:dearannie@creators.com).*

## Letter to the Editor

### AQUATIC: Biologist tasks senator on invasive species

FROM PAGE A4

no water circulation, no light for photosynthesis, the water gets hot and stagnates, and fish cannot survive, nor can the invertebrates in the benthos that they feed upon, and the ecosystem is destroyed. TWRA biologists completely agree with this. If you don’t think so, ask them.

Senator Bell, you cannot speak for TWRA. Let them speak for themselves as biologists. Please, ask the fishery chief or the biologist if dense mats of invasive plants are good for the fish or the ecology. Ask them what part of my testimony they don’t agree with. Senator, there is not a single fishery biologist, aquatic ecologist or limnologist in the country who believes dense invasive vegetation is good for the fish or the ecology. Not one. You intentionally make the TWRA statement that plants are good for fish appear to mean they think the dense mats are good for fish when that is not what they are saying.

Senator, I gave you a bibliography of 225 fisheries/ecological studies — over five decades on over 300 lakes — that prove exactly what I explained. Yet, you chose to ignore those studies.

I named professional fishermen who are spokesmen against the weeds. I told you the nation’s premier bass fishing organization, B.A.S.S., states in their publication “Bassmaster” and on their website: “The second most serious threat to bass and bass fishing are invasive species.” Go look senator, it’s right there to read.

You won’t believe me. You won’t believe hundreds of scientific stud-

ies. You won’t believe professional fishermen, and you won’t even believe B.A.S.S. Yet, you believe a few ill-informed fishermen who have no concept of ecosystem dynamics, fecundity, biodiversity, limnology, benthic ecology, who “think” the weeds are good for the fish because the weeds make catching fish easier as they gather at the edge of the mats.

Can you explain why you believe them over everyone else? You and those fishermen don’t have a “single” study that shows a “single” positive attribute of dense growths of invasive plants. But you continue down this path of ignoring ecological and fishery science — constantly stating untruths.

If you truly believe what you say, you should call B.A.S.S. and tell them they are wrong, and ask them to change their second most serious threat to read, “The second-best thing you can do to advance the bass fishery is to plant invasive species.” It’s obvious that you believe this, senator, for you are sponsoring a bill to protect and advance their spread, and tell B.A.S.S. that the TWRA biologists testimony proves them and Dr. Joseph wrong.

I give up on you, senator. I tried, but I’ll try no more to educate you, for you can’t accept the science, even though you have stated publicly twice, “I have to go with the science.”

However, I do ask you to stop questioning my education, research, experience and life’s work by telling the press, “TWRA professionals disagree with Dr. Joseph.” Does the title “senator”

make you a smarter ecologist than every ecologist in the country, including those with the title “doctor”? ... If I sound upset, I am ... for you keep trying to make me look bad in the press.

Senator, as I asked you after the recent meeting at the marina, do you really want the state of Tennessee to be the only state to draft a bill to protect and promote an invasive species when every other state, and the federal government, spend billions of dollars annually to control them? How embarrassing will that be?

I can see the press release in the New York Times and every newspaper and TV station throughout the nation if your bill goes through: “Tennessee, the only state dumb enough to protect an invasive species.” Will that make you proud, senator? Will it advance your political career? The newspapers will know, for I will explain it to them.

Senator, stop thinking politics outranks science, and believing there is a compromise regarding invasive species. There is none. They do not belong in any ecosystem, aquatic or terrestrial. Kudzu, hydrilla and all other invasive species only destroy, and if you can’t understand this, take college Ecology 101.

Please, stop all further action toward drafting a bill to protect, and advance, the spread of invasive aquatic plants. It’s a waste of taxpayers’ money, and totally wrong.

— **Dr. Timothy Joseph**  
Fishery biologist  
Rockwood

## Today in History

(AP) — Today is Sunday, Jan. 20, the 20th day of 2019. There are 345 days left in the year.

**Today’s Highlight in History:**

On Jan. 20, 2017, Donald Trump was sworn in as the 45th president of the United States, pledging emphatically to empower America’s “forgotten men and women.” Protesters registered their rage against the new president in a chaotic confrontation with police just blocks from the inaugural parade.

**On this date:**

In 1649, King Charles I of England went on trial, accused of high treason (he was found guilty and executed by month’s end).

In 1887, the U.S. Senate approved an agreement to lease Pearl

Harbor in Hawaii as a naval base.

In 1937, President Franklin D. Roosevelt became the first chief executive to be inaugurated on Jan. 20 instead of March 4.

In 1942, Nazi officials held the notorious Wannsee conference, during which they arrived at their “final solution” that called for exterminating Europe’s Jews.

In 1953, Dwight D. Eisenhower took the oath of office as president of the United States; Richard M. Nixon was sworn in as vice president.

In 1964, Capitol Records re-leased the album “Meet the Beatles!”

In 1969, Richard M. Nixon was inaugurated as the 37th President of the United States.

In 1981, Iran released 52 Americans it had held hostage for 444 days, minutes after the presidency had passed from Jimmy Carter to Ronald Reagan.

In 1986, the United States observed the first federal holiday in honor of slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

In 1989, George H.W. Bush was sworn in as the 41st president of the United States; Dan Quayle was sworn in as vice president.

In 1994, Shannon Faulkner became the first woman to attend classes at The Citadel in South Carolina. (Faulkner joined the cadet corps in Aug. 1995 under court order but soon dropped out, citing isolation and stress from the legal battle.)