

ELIZABETH FAIR DREWS

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“Let us be grateful to people
who make us happy;
they are the charming gardeners
who make our souls blossom.”

Marcel Proust

A week or two before she left us, Beth was in her hospice room making funeral and burial plans—plans that include road trips to the three remaining states she hadn't yet visited. It gave her comfort to think about the future, to imagine how she would continue to be in our lives. She was propped up on pillows in her hospice bed, with Don, Tom, Ellen, and several friends in chairs and La-Z-Boys gathered close.



“What would make a really great memorial service?” she asked us. “How can we make it a terrific experience for everyone?”

“If you were there,” we said.

“Maybe you could all wear sunglasses like in *The Godfather*,” she said. “You can be the Presbyterian mafia.”



And that was the Beth Drews that we all knew and loved. Even in a moment that would deflate the heartiest of spirits, Beth was still being herself—wise and wise-cracking, energized yet calm, a person who was buoyed by optimism and warmth and generosity all the way to the end.

Beth felt the influence of both her parents.

Like her father, she was a scientist—an engineer of human operations. She was able to size up intractable problems and solve them without becoming distracted. In business, she was a fair and nonjudgmental presence—a Switzerland—able to balance competing ideas or people, and move projects forward to solution. She unfailingly saw the best in her co-workers and made others feel that she truly believed in them. She took on tasks that others were reluctant to tackle, and with humor and persistence pushed through to resolution. She had a great marketing mind, understanding both the big dimension of brand presence and the tactical details of flawless execution. If she said she'd get it done, it got done.



Like her mother, she had a quiet elegance, a gentility, grace, and devotion to her family. Beth was not a superficial person, yet she had an eye for surfaces. She could arrange physical things—rooms, gardens, clothing, flowers—to bring beauty and order to them. Her home in Oak Park, with its cottage garden and multicolored slate roof, was the prettiest house on the block, yet she would say that

she hadn't quite gotten the garden where she wanted it. When her friends and family rallied to support her in her illness, gardening chores were high on the helping-hands list. She



understood that gardens, like lives, are an ongoing labor of love, and she planted things that were not just beautiful but also meaningful— seeds she'd gotten from Monticello, or indigenous prairie plants she knew would return year after year.

One of her proudest accomplishments

was the formation of her book group, BrainFood. Instead of joining a book club that devolves into chit-chat, she assembled a group of curious, literate adults who hired their own professors to shepherd them through substantial books, keeping the conversation high-toned and their learning at its peak.

Beth was also an involved presence at church, attending First United in Oak Park because of its reputation for social action and spiritual education. Although she was busy with work and family, she still found time to volunteer in the Oak Park Food Pantry, serve on the Board of Interfaith House in Garfield Park, and commit time to various committees at First United.

Beth had a gift for friendship—with neighbors, fellow gardeners, work colleagues, members of her church community, parents of Tom's and Ellen's friends. Many friends were longstanding—someone she'd known since childhood, or bumped into on the first day of college at Indiana University, or

met at Graceland when she was 23 and covering the one-year anniversary of Elvis's death. Yet Beth always had room for new friends as well. She had a ready and unrestrained laugh, and her friends trusted her with their stories, their problems, and their hearts.

But it was family that mattered to her most of all. Her father's sense of purpose was an inspiration to her, as was her mother's devotion and big heart. One of the gifts of her illness was that it reconnected her with distant family—her brothers, cousins, extended in-laws. She was thrilled recently by a family reunion in Austin arranged by her cousin Drayton—creating for it a high-tech slide show, accompanied by piano music played by Don's cousin, that traced the family back to colonial days in South Carolina.

As a family, Beth, Don, Ellen, and Tom had many activities, traditions, and cross-country adventures. They'd find any excuse for a celebration, like getting together to have caramel apples when Ellen's braces came off. They vacationed yearly at a cabin in Minnesota with Don's parents, and loved road trips in a van—listening to Harry Potter books on tape, stopping for barbecue down through Missouri and Oklahoma, and nicking through Iowa because it was one of the states Beth had not yet checked off her life-list. They traveled with the Egnoto-Wallack family from the Grand Tetons of Wyoming to the





Outer Banks of North Carolina to the hills of Tuscany. They'd journey north to a combination B&B/organic farm near Madison, Wisconsin, where they would go on bike rides on reclaimed railroad trails, harvest

vegetables from the garden, or witness the squawking indignation of a hen laying an egg.

Beth felt that Don had given her everything she had ever wanted in life. But her main regret about dying, beside the pain and loss she knew she would leave us with, was that she would miss the continued blossoming of Ellen and Tom—whom she adored.

Toward the end of her life, knowing she was dying, she wondered about her purpose in life. She told Don, "You know, I just want to be a good wife and mother."

Don's reply: "Honey, you've already done that."





“Think where man’s glory
most begins and ends,
And say my glory was
I had such friends.”

William B. Yeats