

Letter to Kathleen

Dear Kathleen,

The academic event organized by my dear colleagues on the occasion of your 80th birthday gives me the golden opportunity to look back on the past two and a half decades and try to reflect on your role in my coming of age as a student and later as an academic, as well as to express my gratitude to you, which I know is late in coming.

I think I first met you in 1998, shortly after I came back to Hungary from a year of studying in the US, a year that transformed me in so many ways and ultimately led me to focus on American literature and culture in my studies. I was full of energy and curiosity, filled with some newfound self-confidence and then boom, I'm sitting in your course on Middle English, sweating, trying my best, and at the same time also wondering why you pronounced the word "literature" *litritchoore* and donned those strangely colorful ties as part of your teaching attire. These were some of your idiosyncrasies many of us students were pondering at the time and they still characterize the Kathleen that I remember today.

Our conversations started during those endless bus rides from Piliscsaba to Budapest. I was attending some of your courses on American culture and our conversations on the bus largely centered around Benjamin Franklin, George W. Bush, *Lord of the Rings*, skyscrapers, my thesis, and later my Ph.D. project. To be honest, I was often a bit apprehensive about these conversations as I knew you would ask some fundamental questions that often wrongfooted my approach, which was probably overly influenced by certain poststructuralist theories I was reading at the time – theories you either didn't approve of or found outright pointless. Still, it was these fundamental, piercing, often uncomfortable questions that helped me rethink and sharpen my arguments, even if I knew you wouldn't be convinced. I want to thank you for these long conversations, your interest in my academic endeavors, your candid and constructive criticism, and especially your support during my first years as your colleague at the English Department at Pázmány.

Let me recall a memory from these early years of my teaching career that I hold close to my heart. The first seminar course that I had the chance to develop on my own was called "Architextura Americana," a special seminar (or spec. col.) geared toward intersections of architecture and literature within the context of American culture. I was excited and passionate but also nervous, not because of the course but because you wanted to sit in and help me out if needed. It was nothing less than frightening at the outset. But already in the first class, something truly great happened. You were sitting there not so much as an older colleague or my former professor judging my perfor-

mance as a teacher but as an enthusiastic visitor, even a curious friend, fully immersed in a subject matter we would keep discussing and debating throughout the weeks and years to come. At that moment I felt that we really crossed borders, moving from you being a teacher and me being a student to us becoming colleagues. “This is great stuff” – I remember you said to me after a class. And hearing this from you meant more than a lot to me. Your persistence in attending each and every class of this course and continuing our discussion afterward was a sign of true mentorship, collegiality, and a continuation of the support and inspiration that I had been receiving from you ever since I was a student. I hope you’ll accept my belated thanks for all this.

Kathleen, in your short life you have crossed so many borders, both geographical and academic, and you have done so in your idiosyncratic ways, always standing behind your decisions, never afraid of standing up for what you believed was right and, by doing so, also inviting your colleagues and students to become your fellow travelers and border crossers. At the same time, you also built several bridges – bridges that connected countries, institutions, intellectual traditions, and people. And you accomplished all this with a sense of genuine kindness, one that has little to do with social niceties and everything to do with true respect and loyalty to your colleagues and students. Your optimistic view of life, spiced with poignant humor and sharp criticism, definitely added a great deal to the good vibes that our English department was, and I believe still is, known for.

Dear Kathleen, happy 80th Birthday in Heaven,

Your student and colleague,
Laci Munteán