Tribute to Ken Brown
by Julie Garber

Ken will think this tribute issue of the Bulletin sounds like a eulogy, but eulogies are last words about somebody without fear of retort. I’m sure we haven’t heard the end of it. Besides, we should probably honor the good work of teachers and colleagues more than we do, so given this chance to commend something about Ken, I would have to say he’s a little off.

I mean that in the best way. His take on the world is the freshest I know, unencumbered by convention, and reliably piercing. As students we noticed right away his disregard for convention. First of all, his classes met in his home, beginning after 9:00 p.m., with tea, coffee, and popcorn. When we gathered at 901 Wayne for Philosophy of Civilization on Monday evenings, Viona disappeared to the family room with Kate and Chris, while Michael, the youngest, snoozed on the couch in the middle of our classroom. Just before class, Ken scooped up Mike and deposited him in bed upstairs. It was the first time I observed the principle that the body will tell a person when to sleep without a hard and fast bedtime.

Then, inevitably, the phone would ring in the middle of class . . . and ring and ring. We were squirmy and anxious for Ken to pick up the phone, as if answering were legally binding. Voice mail was still futuristic, so a missed call was missed forever, but Ken never diverted his attention from the class.

When class finished at 11:00, a few of us hung around until 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning to drink tea, eat popcorn, and talk about ideas around the table. Ken and Viona never asked us to leave or even acted as if they wanted to go to bed. In fact, Ken would sometimes return to the office after we left or work at his roll top desk at home for several more hours. Nothing was more energizing than a teacher who was so interested in the conversation of naïve college students that he and his family would welcome us and engage with us well into the night, week after week. I don’t ever remember leaving the Browns’ house in the wee hours ready to sleep. The air was often crystalline clear and cold, and the whole world, except for a few of us, was asleep. I felt especially conscious and awake, glad to have experimented around the table at being a little off myself.

Ken’s genius as a teacher has been his ability to teach students how to think, not what to think. It was a skill he honed when he first set foot on campus. He came to Manchester with no particular experience in philosophy. His graduate degree was in history and his dissertation was on the writings of Washington Gladden, a social gospel thinker of the late nineteenth century. But Blair Helman persuaded him to teach philosophy, sure that Ken could learn it as he went along. He became a student of the ever offbeat Socrates and, consciously or not, modeled his teaching after the master.
So, if we learned anything, we learned the Socratic method from Ken. Even if we failed to fully escape the gravitational pull of convention in our lives, Ken has convinced us at least to question assumptions and look for weaknesses in our own reasoning. When politicians and generals declare there is only one way forward, Ken sees many options. When the church confuses faith and nationalism, Ken questions whether either is sound. When the world believes the war against Hitler was a just and necessary war, Ken points to the intellectuals, politicians, and elites who assented to Nazi policy and the treaty after WWI that created a perfect medium for Hitler.

Even the way we learned this method was unconventional—on sailboats, on donkey carts in Cuba, on all night drives through Mexico, at waffle house counters, on marches in Washington and New York, in church basements, at Gandhi’s ashram, crossing police lines, testifying before judges, and talking, talking, talking ... with lots and lots of coffee.

But the off-beat life is not just the province of college students. Once converted, we can never go back. We won’t be satisfied with slavish complicity with convention. Ken and Mike and I recently spent the night with peace studies graduates Dan (’86) and Celia (’86) Cook-Huffman near Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, on their 13-acre spread where Dan putters at making goat cheese and milking his own cow. Now, Dan and Celia’s children are the ones folding on the couch as the adults keep dumping scoops of coffee into the coffeemaker and talking, talking, talking until morning. Maybe it was the caffeine, but to be a little off like Ken had the same effect of revving our consciousness and spurring our wakefulness while much of the world sleeps.