The Prof Who Never Gave Up on Me
By Eric Sandstrom (BA 1973; MA 1980)

Some of the best things that ever happened to me happened at Miami University. (Which was like winning the lottery at the ripe old age of 18.)

This was a half century ago when I thought Three Dog Night was groovy, Vietnam was wrong, 3.2 beer wasn’t half bad, Dennison Hall was a zoo (but my zoo) and the key to happiness would be a girlfriend willing to put up with me.

Call it serendipity or fate...

Had I, a directionless freshman, not bumped into two people on Miami’s campus, my life would not be the great adventure it’s turned out to be. (Yup, I’m dead sure about that.)

One of those two people was another Miami freshman who became my wife and the mother of our two kids.

After 43 years of marriage, Monica has put up with me and then some. Despite bad advice from that old best-selling novel and movie, “Love Story” – “love means never having to say you’re sorry” – Monica and I never were afraid to apologize to each other. Actually, “I’m sorry,” has helped to keep us together.

The other person who changed my life was an English professor who sported tweed jackets, spoke in a loud whisper, and taught us that writing wasn’t some innate gift, but a lonely, low paying position that required hard work and the patience of Job.

His name was Milton White.

We met in his second floor classroom of old Upham Hall in spring semester of 1970. Over the next few years, I learned that he’d written a novel about his brief experience as a Yale student, graduated from Columbia, published two other small novels, and enjoyed an occasional nightcap of Johnny Walker Red.

More than anything, his cautionary advice about finding a writing career was what stuck with me. The gist of it was: students with aspirations to churn out the Great American Novel would be better off trying to climb Mt. Everest.

“If you think you’re the next John Steinbeck or Virginia Woolf, I’m afraid you’re wasting your time in my class,” he often said.

His reverse psychology worked on me. Being a mediocre pupil with zero interest in mountaineering, I figured my only road to some semblance of success was paved with stories that hadn’t yet been written.
I became a reporter for a weekly newspaper (actually, the only reporter), just the sort of humbling experience on which a young hotshot writer needed to build a career. (My first story described in mind-numbing detail results of the fall sugar beet harvest in western Nebraska.)

Over the years, I moved on to bigger, better newspapers, and never lost the desire to write a good story. I even became a college professor (but that was long after he died.)

In my post-grad years of searching for a meaningful job that would pay the rent, Milton White stuck by me. Here are excerpts from one of his letters, written to me while I was pumping gas and working as a laborer:

“Sorry life is catching up with you. I never promised you a rose garden... Find someone to love who loves you. Play it all by ear. But be happy.”

Reading his words today brings a lump to my throat. But I’m not into sentimentality, something he absolutely despised in story-telling. His own novels operated on heart-breaking plots that steered clear of syrupy emotion.

For those of us students fortunate enough to sit in his classroom during the 1960s and ‘70s (he died in 1996), Milton White demanded convincing characters in our weekly stories and honesty in our critiques of those stories.

He would ask us to tell each other what we liked (“Does it ping for you?”) and what elements needed work. If he said your story pinged, you felt rich. While I can’t recall many of my stories ping-worthy, that didn’t dissuade me from plinking away on my typewriter for another shot at classroom glory. It only incentivized me.

Milton White had a habit of chuckling whenever you said something foolish. It was his kind way of saying, “You must be kidding.”

He chuckled a lot whenever I expounded on the latest fiction in his tiny office.

He would sit there, punching typewriter keys like Elton John on a Steinway, while I began to argue that Erich Segal’s best-selling “Love Story” deserved a gazillion-dollar advance—“It’s pretty good,” I insisted lamely, “despite overt sentimentality.”

Then erupted that famous chuckle from deep in his throat.

“Don’t you know pure schlock when you see it, Sandstrom?” He shook his head in disbelief. “Schlock!”

During sophomore year, I mentioned my interest in transferring to a big school in Chicago “to expand my horizons.”
That devastating chuckle hit me where it counted. My ego.

“You gotta bloom where you’re planted, Sandstrom.”

So I did. By the way, he called everybody by the last name, including young women, which belied his nature. He was a softy at heart, and we all loved him.

However embarrassingly sentimental it may be, the truth is some people never leave us even after they’re gone. Ever.

Whenever I happen to look at my old bookshelf, where his three novels gather dust, my heart breaks.