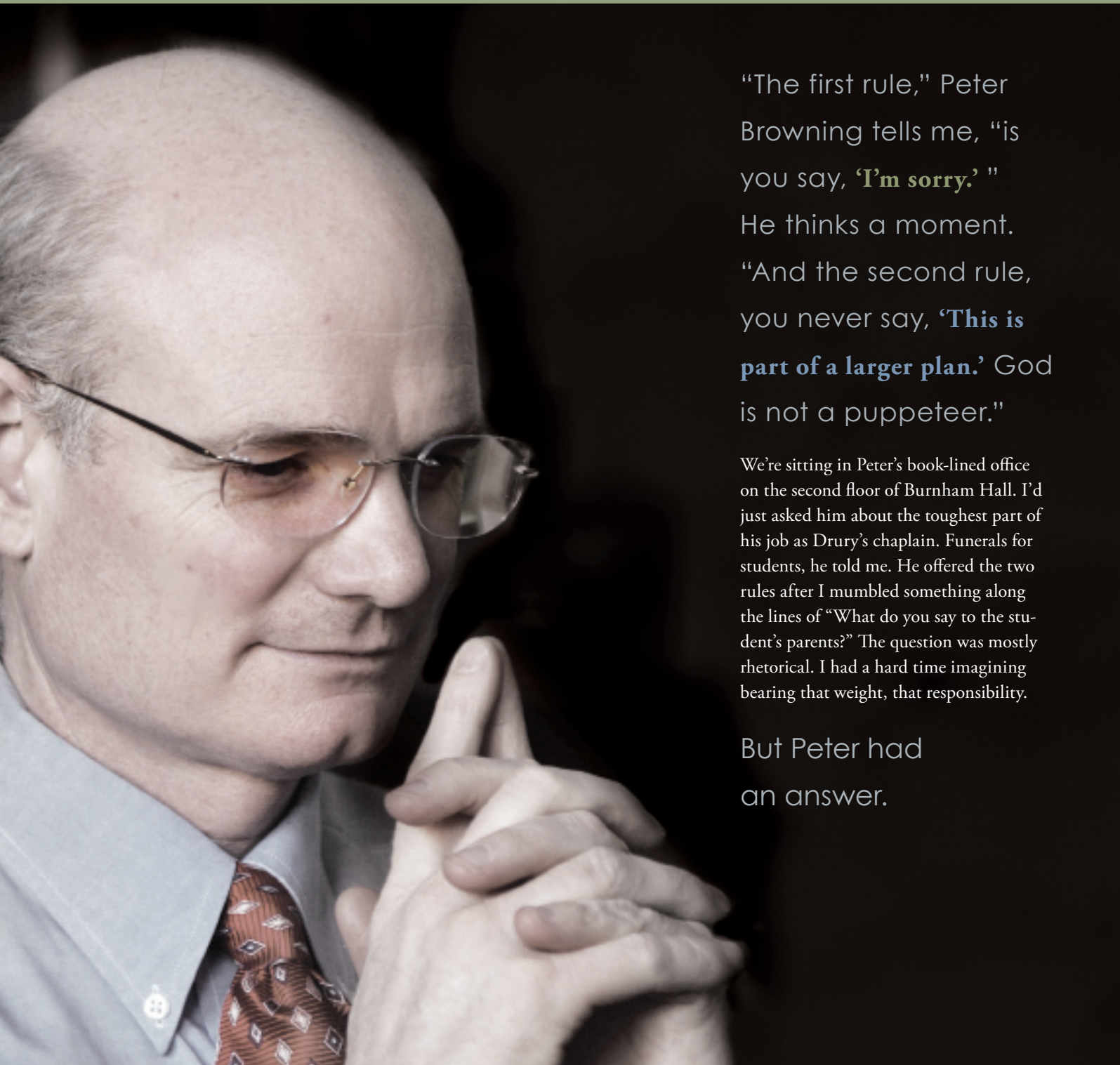


A DISCIPLE

OF REASON



“The first rule,” Peter Browning tells me, “is you say, ‘I’m sorry.’ ” He thinks a moment. “And the second rule, you never say, ‘This is part of a larger plan.’ God is not a puppeteer.”

We’re sitting in Peter’s book-lined office on the second floor of Burnham Hall. I’d just asked him about the toughest part of his job as Drury’s chaplain. Funerals for students, he told me. He offered the two rules after I mumbled something along the lines of “What do you say to the student’s parents?” The question was mostly rhetorical. I had a hard time imagining bearing that weight, that responsibility.

But Peter had an answer.

PROFESSOR

There’s something comforting about his voice, a quiet tone that makes me lean forward to block out a student conversation in the hallway and listen carefully. He moves to his computer and clicks open files, reads names of those whose memorial services he’s performed. “I keep these,” he says. His voice trails off as he stares at the screen, reading words that evoke memories of students, colleagues, friends. I don’t get the feeling he keeps those old files like I keep mine, because I don’t know what else to do with them. “I’m given the opportunity to walk on holy ground when I do a memorial,” he says. “To celebrate a person’s life.”

He prints a copy of the service for Mark J. Hall, an art instructor at Drury who died suddenly in July 2005, and we read over passages together. We reminisce about Terry Hudson, who came to Drury the same year I did, in 1998, to the School of Education and Child Development. And former Dean Steve Good. “It’s often difficult,” he says, “to comfort people in grief when I’m grieving myself.” He offers a quick smile, a reflex gesture that’s part of his good-natured personality, part also perhaps of the role he’s grown into for the past 16 years as someone whose job it is essentially to put other people’s needs before his own.

I’m trying to get under that smile. I want a glimpse of the man beneath the blessings and invocations that have become a part of almost every ceremony I’ve attended at Drury, from opening

convocations in Clara Thompson Hall to graduation ceremonies in Weiser Gym. He’s as much a part of our landscape as fall colors, as prominent to our identity as Stone Chapel. (Peter wouldn’t say that, so let me say it for him.) He is the embodiment of faith at Drury, and it takes work to cut through the aura of university chaplain and find out what earthly pleasures motivate him.

You wouldn’t think it’d be so tough. The chaplain’s office is only a quarter of his load. His other nine hours every semester (give or take), he is Dr. Peter Browning, a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago with a specialization in ethics and a passion for social justice. “His gift,” says Ryan Owen ’02, Peter’s former student and currently director of the annual fund at Rainbow Network, a nonprofit organization that works with the poor in Nicaragua, “is his ability to balance faith and reason in the classroom.” He brings together students from sharply divergent religious backgrounds, Ryan explains—most of them also different from Peter’s own—and he gives them a richer understanding of their spiritual identities by allowing them to examine and engage with their beliefs.

Ryan has dropped by my office in Pearsons Hall to offer a firsthand account of this process. “Peter’s course on Christian ethics changed my life,” he tells me. “We worked back from ethical questions, and he allowed me to see the direct link between my faith and the

choices I made every day.” After graduating from Drury in 2002, Ryan went on to earn a master’s of divinity at Vanderbilt. That same year, Peter was honored with the Governor’s Award for Excellence in Teaching; one year earlier, Drury awarded him its Distinguished Faculty Award.

I look at Ryan and think about any teacher’s true gauge of success—the positive impact his students (in Peter’s case) are making on the world. I ask him what he means by Peter’s gift of “balancing” faith and reason. Is there a visible tipping-point, as on a scale, when reason takes over, when the professor asks the chaplain to take a seat?

What I gather from Ryan’s answer is that—in the classroom—Peter is an academic. He develops ethical arguments with students through a careful process of reasoning and questioning. When he’s delivering a sermon—outside the classroom—he speaks rather from a position of faith and love. And yet, Ryan intimates, the two aren’t really separate.

Ryan makes his point well. I had imagined a clear distinction of faith and reason within Peter, but what emerges is a potent mixture of the two, their weight combining and adjusting within him as he moves through his many responsibilities as professor and chaplain. From what I know of Peter and his students, the mixture forms a powerful catalyst for learning at a church-related, liberal arts university.

The more knowledge they have, the deeper their faith.

OF FAITH

By Patrick Moser
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