

Reflection on Mary Ellen Konieczny

As I have walked around campus in a daze this past week, revisiting places that Mary Ellen loved, I keep hearing her laugh. That deep, chortling, connecting, somewhat mischievous laugh that made you feel like she saw you, that she saw others, that she got whatever it was, problematic or hilarious, that was happening with you, or her, or out there in the world.

Also I hear her voice. "I can't go now, I have projects!" She had so many projects. I know that because my sociology colleague Erin McDonnell and I met with her weekly for the past year and half trying to keep each other on track with our projects. At one of our last meetings last fall we were trying to work out how she could queue and prioritize those projects, with the many students and collaborators she was tending and inspiring. Each week we helped each other wade through impasses, struggle with uncertainties, and celebrate breakthroughs.

I'm not sure how many of you knew her as a scholar, but Mary Ellen was brilliant, a deep and challenging thinker. She was as adept in theoretical discussion of Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Simmel as she was with contemporary work on religion, organizations and culture. She was also a committed empiricist, a qualitative researcher who wanted to rigorously map relations and understand diverse worldviews. She spoke to the world and let the world speak back. She was staking out important new ground on religious polarization and pluralism, not only in her comparative study of Catholic congregations, but in her amazing book-in-progress on religious debates and crises in the US Air Force as well as in her new study of the religious dimensions of post-genocide reconciliation in Rwanda.

My heart aches to think that that this book -- and the one or two on deck after that -- will never see the light of day, that she will never hold it in her hands and hand it to all of you. But let me warn you, I've talked with many of her students, and they are fierce in their resolution to take this work forward in some way. In fact, she was hassling one of her RAs a week ago Monday to get IRB certification and security clearance to work on the Air Force data. I'm confident that her students and colleagues will not let those balls drop. So stay tuned! We will still hear her voice in the years to come.

In the days since she has left us, messages have poured into my inbox from colleagues in other universities about how much they appreciated her work, and her person. Unbeknownst to me two of my best friends at my previous university had close ties with her at the University Chicago -- she TA'ed for one of them and served as first year buddy for the other. Both had stories of long walks and talks, of personal and intellectual exchange. As someone who re-invented herself as a sociologist after several previous lives, Mary Ellen's sociological world was big and getting bigger.

Among many things we bonded over was the fact we share the same favorite sociology article, which we learned when our chair, Rory McVeigh, made us post these on the department bulletin board. We both chose an article entitled "Robust Action and the Rise of the Medici," a

study of how Cosimo de Medici rose to power in Renaissance Florence through his ability to speak multi-valently and strategically across multiple intersecting networks. That was Mary Ellen – a master strategist in the art of speaking across networks. A lot has been said about Mary Ellen as a bridgebuilder, but perhaps what hasn't been pointed out was how tactical she was about it. She LOVED to do this – she was a network operative in the best sense of the term. Her goal was always to lift people up across these divides, to call us to live up to our better, more generous selves, never to tear people down.

Some of this bridgework had to do with Catholicism – her generous and yet unflinching ability to name and talk about the divides and the tensions within the Catholic faith that she loved. Within weeks of my arrival at the Notre Dame five years ago she had extracted my entire somewhat unusual, convoluted, yet still extensive Catholic history, validated my spirituality and my struggles, and pointed out five people in the university I NEEDED to talk to (arranging a dinner with several of them the following week). I know that I'm not the only one. And this bridging was not limited to Catholics. She told me one time "I just like to pray with people." She shared a Passover Seder and attended Mosque services with colleagues, and studied protestant and evangelical practice within the Air Force Academy. All of her research focuses on how people communicate across cultural and political divides – this was a burning intellectual question for her as well as a normative passion, indeed mission, or sense of how to do good in the world.

My heart aches once again to think we have lost her voice here in the university. Her voice – and her skill, compassion and intelligence as a strategic bridger – is sorely needed in our community. I predict -- or rather I hope -- that the question "What would Mary Ellen do" will keep informing our conversations at Notre Dame. It will certainly keep informing mine.

Finally, I will miss my friend, the one who saw and drew out a part of me that few see. The one who urged me – and so many others – to find the ways in which I, personally, can do good in this community. The one who helped me navigate this new and tricky terrain that is Notre Dame. The one who was overflowing with joy and connection, and yet somehow awkward, vulnerable and searching at the same time. The one who was always learning, from and with others. The one who laughed and cried and drank wine and peered into possibility with me. Mary Ellen I am grateful to have known you. I will miss you terribly. And I will carry you and your laughter always in my heart.

Ann Mische
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