

Dance Lessons

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On a warm night in Washington, DC in late summer 2014, Kendra Koivu and I sat next to each other at a large table inside the never-not-crowded restaurant-bar-café Open City, unwinding from a fiery day at APSA alongside a handful of other old grad school friends. We indulged in carefree chatter and swapped stories over drinks and a wild mushroom pizza about our then-new lives on the tenure track. Kendra was entering her third year at the University of New Mexico (UNM); I was starting my second at the University of California Riverside. Two or three beverages in, we began to wax lyrical about our mutual passion for qualitative and multi-method research. We then reflected on the fact that the two of us happened to get jobs in the Southwestern US, as had friend and fellow Northwestern PhD Jen Cyr, who was beginning her third year at the University of Arizona. The irresistible combination of methods enthusiasm and geographical proximity—along with conversations about a methods network between Kendra and UNM colleague Sari Niedzwiecki—inspired the four of us to co-found the Southwest Workshop on Mixed Methods Research (SWMMR), an annual (and now international) conference devoted to discussing the theory and practice of mixed methods in the social sciences.

Just over a year later, in November 2015, Kendra and I once again found ourselves seated side-by-side at a large table, this time in a packed conference room in Albuquerque, about to kick off the very first SWMMR with co-founders Jen and Sari. We were all assistant professors. We all still had something to prove. Right before our formal introduction, Kendra, as if sensing my tension, leaned over and whispered to me, with a facetious dramatic flourish, “I’m going to open by telling them, ‘On that fateful night, we shared a pizza ... *and a dream!*’” I burst out laughing. I relaxed. Everything was going to be fine.

Kendra was hilarious. She had a way of injecting levity into tense situations with a signature humor that ranged from dark to absurd. She knew how to make fun of something while at the same time taking that exact same something completely seriously. Her approach to much of life struck me as somewhat akin to the advice she once gave me about dancing: “Dance like you’re making

fun of someone else.” I’ve tried it. It works. It turns out, if you let loose and abandon your self-conscious preoccupation with correct form, if you relax and stop taking yourself so damned seriously, you can actually be an excellent dancer—or political science researcher, or teacher, or mentor, or conference organizer, or cancer fighter.

And maybe that is what I liked best in Kendra as a friend. Neither of us was a born dancer. We grew up without the financial advantages that some of our better-off peers seemed to take for granted. We got into graduate school and basically just had to figure it out. Kendra was two years ahead of me in the program when I began my first year at Northwestern in the fall of 2005. We bonded over not coming from privilege, though Kendra had been through so much more than I could begin to understand. I sought her wisdom on nearly everything: how to handle coursework, the job market, grad school social norms, teaching, dissertation writing, and imposter syndrome (long before I had ever heard that phrase). She cheered me on every step of the way, like a big sister who was also a role model who was also my colleague who was also my friend. Kendra selflessly offered others her time and energy—and books. I still have her copy of *Bringing the State Back In*.

Kendra loved co-organizing the SWMMR. She was instrumental in ensuring its success year after year as our growing methods workshop bounced from Tucson to Riverside to Santa Cruz. So many of our lively discussions at the first four SWMMRs about causation and case selection came from Kendra’s careful commentary on others’ papers, combined with her own deep knowledge as a methodologist. She loved the debates, but above all she loved connecting all of these people: past participants with SWMMR first-timers, junior scholars with seasoned seniors, qualitative scholars with their quantitative counterparts. Kendra left us just weeks before the fifth SWMMR in Mexico City, but not before vetting every abstract, reading papers, and helping coordinate the conference logistics with the same force of passion and excitement she had from day one.

The last time I saw Kendra Koivu was on a warm night in Washington, DC in late summer 2019. We sat next to each other at a large table inside a hip ramen restaurant,

unwinding from a long day at APSA, alongside a handful of other old grad school friends. We indulged in carefree chatter and swapped stories over drinks and dumplings. Most of us had meant to attend the QMMR reception, but we came here instead, perhaps instinctively opting for a more intimate and exclusive gathering because we knew it would be the last one like this. That night we

talked about tenure, travel, cancer, children, spouses, and friends. That night we joked and laughed and kept it light but somehow also dug deep into the serious stuff. That night we lived out a shared vision of focusing on what matters most: our loved ones, camaraderie, human connection, and terrible jokes. That night we shared some dumplings...and a dream.

No Causality without Correlation: On Learning from Kendra Koivu

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On the cover of *The Sagas of Icelanders*, there is a quote by the great Seamus Heaney. He writes that the almost-800-page tome is “a testimony to the human spirit’s ability not only to endure what fate may send it but to be renewed by the experience.” When I picked it up for her in September of 2019, I couldn’t help but be struck by how much that sounded just like Kendra Koivu.

I first met Kendra when I came to visit the University of New Mexico, before I knew whether I would attend, but after I knew I had been accepted to the PhD program. She was, without a doubt, one of the brightest lights on the faculty, even as its newest member. I remember being excited by the prospect of working with her and was thrilled when she sent me an email saying she wanted to work with me, too.

The semester she was diagnosed, I was her TA for Comparative Politics. She sent me an email saying that she wasn’t sure what things would look like yet or what kind of treatment options she might have. She wrote: “We’ll take things as they come.” And we did, at least in terms of class. In those early days, I didn’t see anything “behind the scenes,” but I witnessed how she handled the diagnosis with her class and her students—she met it head-on, like a warrior. She announced to the room of 80 or so undergraduates, in a voice that quavered with emotion but was the epitome of strength and grace, that she didn’t know what was going to happen. At first, the room was silent. Then, she cracked a joke about how she might end up bald, so she thought she might dye her hair purple or green first. Everyone laughed—maybe a

little too quickly—relieved that she had provided them an outlet.

After the intensity of that semester, things settled into a pattern. Sometimes she’d need to get a class covered or cancel a meeting. Still, the cancer felt more like something we could incorporate, something that could be handled, rather than a looming threat.

During that time, she heartily supported my wanting to take one of my comprehensive exams in methods, part of which included attending the Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research (IQMR). She came out for an author’s workshop, and we met up for dinner. We waited forever to get into a restaurant she wanted to try. We had taken a shuttle from the hotel to get there, but by the time we had eaten we had missed the window to take it back. We traversed the different neighborhoods on foot, discussing the *why* of inequality as the scenery changed. Kendra loved the *why* and would approach it as an exploration of necessary and sufficient conditions, no matter the topic. “Are these really causal mechanisms,” she would ask, “or are they more like contributing factors?” Over the years, I had a number of similar conversations with her; in the classroom, in a cab, in a fancy wine bar. In those moments, it seemed as though she could conquer anything.

On another summer day, a few years after our rendezvous in Syracuse, Kendra sent me an email inviting me to lunch. At the time, it felt out of the blue. My dissertation had fallen apart after one of my field sites collapsed, and I couldn’t figure out an ethical way to salvage it. I had a one-and-a-half-year-old at home who