Conference Friends: An Elegy to Michael Pyryt

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We were conference friends.
We would see each other at
NAGC, Wallace, ECHA, the World,
at least two times a year.
He also went to CEC-TAG but I don’t.

We met in 1979.
my husband and I had just split.
NAGC was at that crummy
Holiday Inn in Baltimore.
I met Michael at the motel bar.
I told him my sad story.
It was the beginning of our long
Conference friends friendship.

We never saw each other’s homes;
we seldom communicated between times,
though I did do a profile on him,
and we exchanged Christmas cards.
We had dinner, attended meetings,
sat on committees, and had fun in the way
that conference friends do. In fact,
many professional people count their
conference friends among their most dear;
these are the people who understand,
who know what the work is about.

I would ask him about research strategies over that
delicious breakfast at the University of Iowa.
I would tease him about being too quantitative
over dinners in San Francisco, Louisville, Minneapolis,
Denver, Indianapolis, and the like,
and he would say he doesn’t “get” qualitative.
“How can that be research, Jane?”
“And your postmodern buddies. Who gets them?”

When we didn’t volunteer to run for offices
In the SIG in San Diego,
the three of us—Rose, Michael, and I—
asked ourselves—What have we done?
over dinner at a seafood house nearby.

He and Rose appeared at the Cathedral of Seattle
while I was scrawling lines into my notebook;
“Oh, Jane. We thought you’d be here writing poems.”
The three of us shared a spiritual seeking.
I particularly remember our talks in Rhodes, Greece,
sharing the vodka he’d found in Poland,
talking conference talk, with a little bit
about our kids, their spouses, and work.

At Barcelona we sat in the back, Janneke,
her husband, Michael, and I,
had a banquet at the banquet,
a long, delicious, talkative, funny
dinner that lasted for hours, through all the
speeches and entertainment. We went
on a train to Figueres, to the Dali home
and museum, a long day trip,
sharing love of surrealism.

In Adelaide, Australia, we took another day trip
to a vineyard owned by growers I’d met
at the Kakadu National Park.
Since I had driven so many kilometers
on the left hand side of the road
in a rented Camry
all across the country, he
made me drive to the vineyard,
where we sampled the Shiraz.
Which I only tasted, since, after all,
I had to drive.

A few years later,
he asked me to come to Calgary
to be the external reviewer for Janneke’s Ph.D.
which used qualitative research and Dabrowski
who better than you? He said
He took me to lunch at Lake Louise near Banff.
And to dinner in a small town
Where I bought this scarf I always
seem to choose to wear. See?
It reminds me of him.
Green blending into orange.

Rather than statistics, research design, or God, our last
private conversation was about Shakespeare.
The Stratford version of Richard II last summer.
We spent a whole breakfast debating it at Warwickshire.
I had been bored, and thought it was one of
the worst plays Shakespeare ever wrote.
He had been enthralled; thought it was one of the best plays
Shakespeare ever wrote.

Little did we know it would be the last time we would meet.
That our conferences friendship was over.

This poem was read at the memorial session for Michael Pyryt on
March 22, 2008, at the American Educational Research
Association meeting in New York City