

September 21, 2018

## **Remembering my friend, Rita Koontz (1947-2018)**

By

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Rita retains a presence in my life and work despite her passing. I think of her now as still being present, but just not being within range of my emails. If she were to see what I just wrote in that last sentence, I know she would laugh and immediately write back about how good it was for me to think of her in that way. She was one of the most positive people I have ever known in all ways at all times.

From April to July 25th of this year, as she was coming to terms with the cancer that took her from us, we had frequent emails back and forth. When I reread them this morning I was smiling at how upbeat they were and how many people she was thanking for the good things that had happened to her over the course of four decades at Washington State University, and the many years we have known each other. Thanking others in meaningful ways was a part of her personality.

Rita was a person who didn't have time or inclination to dwell on the negative, especially if it were about herself. She let me know the reality of what she was dealing with as the cancer advanced, but, most of our emails were about good things that had happened to other people, and how fortunate she had been in life.

Rita's approach to life left no room for self-pity, and that approach set an expectation for those of us who knew her well. After experiencing for many years the ups and downs of running a research center dependent almost entirely on outside funding, Rita's positive interactions with all of us was a much appreciated constant, and it encouraged, even demanded, us to be successful. To me, she was the "heart and soul" of the SESRC. She would do whatever was needed to help whoever was having a difficult time, and also make the SESRC successful.

Rita and I spoke on a nearly daily basis since the mid 1980's until the day she retired. Sometimes it was about work, but often it was on life in general. I also give her credit, to which she would undoubtedly object, for hiring me as Director of the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center. At that time, in 1985, and having previously served eight years as Department Chair of Rural Sociology, I was getting used to not having to worry much about other people's work each day. And, I was not seeking a new administrative position. But, after getting several nudges from people who knew me well I agreed to consider the possibility.

Rita was not the one who had the authority to hire me, but when I met with her during the interviews she explained to me how excited she was about helping me be successful as Director. She talked to me as if I were already hired thanking me repeatedly for what I would need to do as director. I felt that I could not say no. She was the one who convinced me that serving as Director of the SESRC

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was something I should, do and would provide me the opportunity to continue to grow. I accepted the position, partly because I really wanted to work with her.

Rita, had a specific influence on me that few people knew about. Often, when presenting short courses on improving survey methods, I found it difficult to explain to people how important it was to develop respondent-sensitive communications. That's when I would pause and tell them about "The Rita test."

One of the times I used that test was on a general public survey about people using seat belts that we did sometime in the late 1980's. A graphic artist had created a mail questionnaire cover with people's faces where the eyes, nose and mouth of each face was replaced with a huge question mark. It fit the theme of the survey. But, I thought it was kind of creepy. However, I did not want to say no to the graphic artist. I laid the cover design on Rita's desk, and a few minutes later heard her footsteps coming down the hallway followed by a pleasant but direct, "You aren't going to use that cover are you?" She confirmed my suspicion that doing so would be a bad idea. And, that was all I needed in order to go back, and say thanks to the artist, and explain that we needed to go a different direction. Rita had a natural sense of how ordinary people would react to how we approached them, and I seldom ignored her advice on letters and other communications with respondents.

Rita's positive nature could get things done that others might not be able to do. Once, she insisted to me that a young staff member who was going to take a questionnaire mailing of several hundred letters to the Post Office not be allowed to do it, and said she would do it instead. I didn't think it was her job to do that, and finally asked why she was being so insistent. She had been watching the clock and knew it was getting close to their 5:00 closing time. Her quiet response was, "If I have to knock on the door, I know they'll open it for me." One of the more apt descriptions I heard about Rita at WSU was simply, "She knows everyone, and when she calls people talk with her." She could be very persuasive. But, she is also the person who everyone wanted to help, because she was, well, Rita!

Rita's conversations with me, and with most people, were not just about work. A sad realization that came with her passing is that I'll no longer be able to loan her a copy of the latest John Grisham novel after I've read it. Knowing that makes me not look forward to Grisham's next novel getting published.

As I came to know Rita, I learned that there were some things that she was not good at (my words) or terrible (her words). One of them was bowling. Having heard her talk about that part of her life and being on a mixed-doubles team with her husband, I finally saw her life partner, Ken, bowl. My only comment to Rita was to observe that he must not get much exercise from bowling, because of all of those consecutive strikes. We had a good laugh about that. Then, in typical Rita style, she turned a negative situation into a positive, when she told me her assigned handicap score was so low that if she had a good night, she could really help the team!

I miss Rita's presence, but the memories she has left with me, many of which had nothing to do with survey data collection, are deeply embedded and cherished. I smile when I now think of her. That's the kind of effect she had on me and a lot of other people.

For that as well as her constantly positive and supportive presence in life, I thank her.