
- I lost my dear friend and colleague, Mary Merrill.
- The field of volunteer program management lost an inspirational leader.
- The world lost a fine, fine woman.

Mary Merrill was one of the most observant, insightful, and curious leaders our field has known. Mary was always looking, ever vigilant for the next sign of an emerging shift, a hint at a possible new future. She could put things together. And link things. And then reflect them back in a new whole; reconstructed in a way that lead people towards new discoveries.

In the process, she was always polite, never needing to push anyone towards her way of seeing the world. Just ever-wanting to push people to look. That’s what was important to Mary.

Our perspectives often diverged. In a recent set of trainings we did together, we started our preparation by each drafting a set of trends we thought might form the core of our presentation. Interestingly, they were exactly the same trends. Completely different spins. Mary never said she thought I was wrong.
She would listen really carefully.

Then she’d get that wrinkled brow look on her face that I came to know so well, and she’d say to me, “I’m not so sure. I’m gonna have to think about that.” Always willing to accept that it could very well be that it was she who might not have it quite right. Even if she really thought it was likely the other way around.

Bright, articulate, thoughtful, analytical.

Smart.
Mary understood that her life would be shorter than most. In the last week of her life I knew she wasn’t feeling well and I am so happy now I took the time to tell her how much I admired her courage to live her life. In spite of her health issues, she always went for it.

When the physicians said she should be cautious, and maybe curtail her travels, and for sure stay where health care was both excellent and quickly accessible, Mary headed off on extended travels to places in the world where care was questionable, at best. I might very well have taken to my bed (the risk management specialist, you know). Mary headed off on another adventure, bound to wring every bit she could from what she was given.

Mary worked long hours to move the field of volunteer program management ahead. Six, seven days a week. Whenever I was working on a weekend, which seems most of the time these days, I’d think of something and fire off an email to Mary. It would almost always generate an immediate reply. She’d be at her desk too. Late at night she’d be up reading, editing the Journal, planning some new presentation, forging new connections among pieces of research.

One night I couldn’t sleep. I was worrying about a deadline. After lying awake for an hour, I finally got out of bed and went up to my office. It was about 2 a.m. I emailed a thought to Mary, expecting to hear back from her the next morning. I got an instant response. It was like she didn’t want to waste any more time on sleeping than was absolutely necessary. And she worked hard and she travelled far because she loved her work. She was passionate about her work.
Generous, exceptionally kind and equally strong – these are also words that describe my friend Mary Merrill. Little notes, wee gifts, thoughtful messages arrived in a continuous stream. Anyone who knew her as a friend will have their own collection from Mary. She left a trail behind her of remembrances that we will all cherish as we think on what we have lost and how lucky we have been to have shared in Mary’s too short time with us.

And fun, did I mention fun? “Let’s go see,” was the standard line: let’s go see who’s arrived (at the conference); let’s go see what’s going on in the next city on the tour; let’s go see what the keynote speaker has to say; let’s go see if they have Irish whiskey in the bar. “It’ll be fun,” she’d say. And it always was.

Sorry, remind me again, did I mention fun?

My lovely, kind, smart, funny, wonderful friend, Mary.
I’m missing you, pal.