
My Walks for 21 Years with Sally Engle Merry

Nan Stein

I knew the outside Sally. We walked together for over 21 years, mostly around Lake Waban at Wellesley College; we could turn a 40-minute walk on the path around the lake into an extended 75-minute excursion by going off the path, then bush whacking our way back. In the winters, we walked on the nearby golf course and into the woods; and when we were pressed for time, we walked in a small neighborhood park near her home in Wellesley. As her breathing became more labored and she was no longer able to walk easily during these past few months, we sat in her backyard in our COVID masks, talking and taking in the sunshine.

Sally loved dogs, the epitome of outside enthusiasts. She missed having a dog once she went to New York University and continued to live in Wellesley but knew she couldn't care for a dog while commuting. She went from owning an English Lab, Maddie, who joined us for many years on our walks, to a cat owner/lover. In turn, she was very fond of my mini golden doodle Kami (named in honor of King Kamehameha because I too, like Sally, have a professional bond to Hawaii); she called him her "nephew" and he was joyous when he saw her and she responded in kind, bending over to hug him as he jumped up on her.

I never regarded her as a traitor going from a "dog person" to a "cat person" because I knew that the outside Sally preferred dogs. I have many photos of her with Kami-Sally beaming, Kami wiggling with an orange ball in his mouth.

Our talks while we walked covered a wide variety of subjects. Foremost was the direction of the wind, and the various waterfowl that we would see: geese, ducks, swans, great blue herons, and cormorants. I learned a lot about these creatures from Sally because her knowledge was vast and mine was limited. Sally would always quiz me at a particular location about the direction

Please direct all correspondence to Nan Stein, 127 Chestnut Street, Cambridge, MA 02139; e-mail: nstein@wellesley.edu.

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of the wind, and I thank her every time I come to that particularly windy spot.

Beyond talking about the weather and nature, the next most popular subject was probably frequent flyer points and our various strategies to achieve high status on United Airlines. I protested against her international travels when she was provided only an economy (a/k/a “steerage”) ticket on overnight flights, yet was still expected to perform in meetings or give a lecture the next day. I found this schedule to be inhumane given the effort that she was going through to get there especially once she started lung cancer treatments 8 years ago. I tried for years to get her to insist that anyone who wanted to hire her needed to buy her a business class ticket or at least pay her a sizeable honorarium so she could purchase her own business class ticket.

I wanted to be her agent—her gate keeper—to protect her because Sally the Quaker had a hard time asking for money or personal comforts. That’s why acquiring frequent flyer points was such a vital quest because it meant an upgrade to business class without having to pay for it. In fact, when we visited Gaza together in November 1999 to attend a Women’s Rights Conference, we both managed to get enough frequent flyer points to fly business class, rendezvousing at the United Club at the Frankfurt Airport. Our trip to Gaza was not luxurious, but it was challenging and illuminating. We tried to walk from our hotel on the sea to the conference site and upset our hosts in the process. While in Jerusalem, we stayed at the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) in East Jerusalem, which was more to Sally’s liking, and where walking was less complicated.

And yes, of course we talked about academic matters, our seminar’s readings, our newest papers (mostly hers) and colleagues, our current and former students, families and friends, dramas, uncertainties, politics, and her health. One conversation sticks in my mind: about 3 or 4 years ago when she revealed to me that her cancer had returned after a period of remission—that the medicine that she had been taking was no longer working to keep the lung cancer from growing. Her long-time oncologist at Sloan Kettering Hospital in New York had given her names of Boston area oncologists and told Sally that she needed to get one in Boston, closer to her home. I asked her if she had called them yet, and she admitted that she had not – that she found it hard to make those calls. I followed her back to her house and while she sat nearby in her study, I made those calls to the hospitals, which it turns out, don’t put you through to the doctors, but rather to staff who screen all incoming calls from new potential patients. Eventually, she got on the phone and took charge.

One thing I could never talk with Sally about was television because she never watched it as far as I could tell—not even news shows. While we both subscribed to the *New York Times*, Sally always read it more thoroughly and sooner than I did so she shared with me the stories that had made an impact on her. Better than that, she turned me on to an electronic daily news site called, WTF (<https://whatthefuckjusthappenedtoday.com/>); I have become a devoted fan, reading it daily and contributing to its support; I urge all readers to check it out. How she found that site remains a mystery to me; it seemed rather un-Sally-like, but she was surprising like that.

We did more than walk together. There was the “inside” Sally who was my colleague. We co-taught a seminar, “Gendered Violations” in the Anthropology Department at Wellesley College four times between 1999 and 2005 (Sally, the pro at getting sabbaticals, had two during that 6-year period). We each gave the other person credit for having thought of the title of the seminar—leave it to Sally never to take credit. I’m sure it was her idea but she would vehemently insist it was my idea.

Another rewarding collaboration was our work with two of my colleagues from the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College as the conference organizers for an international violence against women research conference in 2004. Each of us independently read all 450 abstracts that were submitted from all over the world, and selected 140 presentations from activists and scholars from 46 countries. Happily, I have many photos taken by a professional photographer of us, along with our students and the other attendees/presenters from that conference.

Sally and I had a special way of celebrating our birthdays, hers in December, mine in June. We would offer to take the other person out to Figs, our favorite (now closed) restaurant in Wellesley. Inevitably, we would decide that we preferred to walk at lunch time so those birthday lunches instead became an extra special long walk. We saved ourselves money and calories, and merely exchanged gifts. I can thank Sally for wonderful earrings and scarves; she was very fashionable in her professional life—a little less so in her outdoor life. But she knew exactly what gear was needed for any outside activity, no matter the season. Even in the last weeks of her life, she sent me online links to purchase the Merrell hiking boots she felt I needed. I wear them now and think of her and thank her.

Now when I walk in Wellesley, I face the paths without her, along with my dog Kami, missing Sally terribly, wearing outdoor gear that she recommended, and often some bit of clothing she gave me. I’ll tell Kami “to go find Sally” and together we will look for Sally in the wind.

***Dr. Nan Stein** is a senior research scientist at Wellesley College Center for Research on Women/Wellesley Centers for Women since 1992. Her research focuses on gender violence in schools, including sexual harassment and teen dating violence. She often serves as an expert in Title IX/sex discrimination-sexual harassment lawsuits. She and Professor Sally Merry co-taught a seminar, *Gendered Violations* from 1999-2005.*