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A Song for Norman

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Abstract

In this short essay I offer a few reflections on how Norman Denzin has influenced my life, friendships, and scholarship. I feel there is little I can say or do that would match the gratitude I feel, so I offer a song.

Keywords

Norman Denzin, inspirational leader, grief

Overture: “There he is”

Scene 1: Department of Exercise, Nutrition and Health Science, January, 2000

“If poetry what you want to include in you research then,” responded my supervisor throwing the draft chapter into the air, “you are on your own.”

But I wasn’t. LONG before I entered the scene came a man whose shoulders blasted open those closed doors, and shook the hinges. I think he anticipating such moments because by the time I entered academia, he’d already assembled a group of scholars, grantie structures, whose shoulders I could stand on, contained within the second edition of the *Handbook of Qualitative Inquiry* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The book became my supervisor; it guided me, chastised me, encouraged me, fed me, gave me a firm foundation, and offered me multiple lenses through which to bring social justice and care to my research.

Thank you Norman.

Scene 2: 2005 From Over the Ocean a Voice Beckoned; “Join Us”

“C’mon David” I said, “we have to go.”

Two students, raw from their doctoral studies, neophytes about to embark on their first post-doc research. We venture to America, tempted over the ocean to stand with others. Of course, we had to work hard to meet travel costs and could only afford an out-of-town motel, one workshop each, and cattle class seats, but we got there. And then.

The opening drinks and cheese reception, he welcomed us all.

I looked across the room, “that’s him” I whispered to David. A flood of gratitude, I wanted him to know just how much *that* book had supported our scholarship, how it mentored us and allowed us to communicate through stories and poems. But how to find the words to express what had happened.

“Thank you” Norman, I said. He seemed to already know.

Scene 3: “I Bless the Day” 20 Years Later

What was planted and tied to a cane to keep it growing has mostly held firm and allowed a tall structure to emerge; now it too brings shade to others.

“Bless the day I attended that first public engagement conference” a friend and colleague writes to me after our tenth International Conference of AutoEthnography, citing when he first met me, at the public engagement conference David and I had instigated. I think, *bless the day David and I attended the first Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, and Norman showed us how to run a conference, how to nourish people, how to include folk in the journey, how to create a space for the novice, how to support the scholarship of others, how to bring people together and how to fix your eyes on the work.*

“I learned this from Norman,” I replied to my friend. We both thanked Norman.

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Scene 4: Bodies Together Again

Nearly two decades after the inaugural ICQI friends gather, *where is he?* We ask so hoping he will turn up, unexpectedly perhaps at the back of the room, or just may be we'll run into him in a corridor, it has happened before.

He is why we are here.

This conference has made it possible to establish connections to people all over the world, to forge friendships I would have never otherwise have made, deep friendships and an opportunity to be nourished by the scholarship of others, and being given opportunities to write and to publish together, spaces have opened for me, because of Norman.

Here we find those whose bodies we have been robbed of, for 4 years by COVID. I hug . . . so many bodies, I feel pulled to their hearts, I fill filled, we yearn to see Norman, and hold our breath in hope. I am envious of his students for whom his presence was a daily occurrence. I am envious of those who had day-to-day random conversations, yet so thankful for what I have read, seen of him and for what it meant to me to have Norman in a session, or suddenly appear at the back of the room as I am about to present, or catch a glimpse of him making ready the conference, serving us all.

And, his guiding me to that first research-based song published in 2012, "Gwithian Sands", which was accepted for publication in *Qualitative Inquiry*, but not before, "can you cut that bit out" he said, of what was superfluous, rendering the text down to the core, the power.

There always seemed to be an urgency in his work, to me. So much to do, so little time.

Scene 5: Have You Heard?

My father died when I was 21. I met Norman 20 years ago when I was 43. My father, in the few years I knew him, gave me many lessons that have guided me through life. And what of Norman's work?

Where do you go to stay grounded?

Whose work do you seek out, to understand?

Who will point a direction for your moral compass?

Who will provoke you to action?

Who might show you the tools?

Who might guide you through the stars?

Through the trouble and tribulation

He never promised our journey would be easy

He never promised

What type of *being* guides a fatherless child, like me?

Norm told me to listen to the other

Listen for the other

Respect the other

Research and work for the other

In his writing, his voice

He reminded me, us, of the troubled times we live in

Of injustice,

Surrounded by so much evil, unfairness, lack of care and compassion

My soul has a chiselled name, it reads: Norman K. Denzin, Director

In his last ICQI newsletter, Norman painted a vision of the world, in all its failings and urged,

"This is the world qualitative inquiry is called to change, and to resist."

Taking up the mantle, in whatever way I can, I must help to change the world and resist, and so his work continues, we become the legacy.

Scene 5: "When I Cannot Speak My Heart Maybe I Can Sing My Soul"

I think David said that once, but, on this occasion, we have woken early to catch the sun rise over Dawns Meyn. This is the Cornish name for the "Merry Maidens," a Neolithic (2500–1500 BC) stone circle, sitting deep in the Cornish countryside. These are 19 granite megaliths standing in a circle, lichen growing deep into their faces, that seem to stand against the passing of time, as if standing guard over something that cannot be spoken, that is sacred, that has existed before time. And we are here, David and I, in the hope that this space, this place, would inspire us to write and perform a keynote we were preparing. And it did.

Standing in middle of the stone circle we were both affected by what we felt, and by what this place provoked in us. We were surrounded by stones, that had stood firm, and marked time, across the centuries. Now they encircled us. Were they guarding us? Guiding us? What truths did they speak?

And now, in a moment of grief, and such sadness, these stones provoke me once again. They speak back to me through a song that rose-up first while David and I stood, surrounded by these granite structures. Like those mightily

rocks brought together by Norman to write the handbook which spoke truths into our world, a thought emerges that I didn't expect. Maybe Norman is the pilgrim envisioned in the song, surrounded by our community, folks who care, unswervingly holding to the task at hand, resisting and standing firm, he, no longer with us in physical form, yet here with us, in so many other ways, still leading and guiding our paths.

Surrounded by Ghosts

(Douglas & Carless, 2021)

Dedicated to Norman Denzin

I'm surrounded by ghosts

Surrounded by Saints

Surrounded by folks who care

Who speak their truths

Chiselled in stone

To leave no one alone

Pilgrim

You've journeyed so far

Your eyes have been opened

And you carry the scars, of those who seek

And unswervingly hold

What's more precious than gold

Peace, hope and love

You are the water flowing

We walk for you

You are the night sky shining

We will dance with you

I'm surrounded by ghosts

Surrounded by Saints

Surrounded by folks who care

Who speak their truths

Chiselled in stone

To leave no one alone

So that none are alone

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Author Biography

Kitrina Douglas is a video ethnographer, director storyteller, musician, and narrative scholar whose research spans the arts, humanities and social sciences. Along with David Carless we have carried out research for a variety of organisations with one foot in the broad area of mental health and the other attempting to find ways to work with communities relationally - this often leads to publishing our research as films, documentaries, and musical theatre, as well as through written peer reviewed publications. We produce the on-line qualitative research series "Qualitative Conversations".