

Mols Was Not just a Friend

We have known each other for almost twenty years. No, wait ... we *had* known each other for almost twenty years. I will take some time to wrap my head around the fact that she is no more ...

She once said jokingly her epitaph should read, “still no standards”. Of course, she was talking about web standards. They called her the “fairy godmother of the web” for a reason, after all — other standards did neither apply to her nor did she ever try to comply with them.

“Give us an open web and humanity, that’s all I’m asking for”, she used to plea for a better, inclusive world. Sadly, she didn’t make it to even see the dawn of either.

The other day, someone said, “you should honour her life by spreading her wisdom”. It was meant to be both a form of consolation and an expression of hope, and I appreciate the good intention. But then, who am I to pick up her rod and continue her voyage? I’d just be another caller in the desert. I would spend years painting for the blind, singing for the deaf, and yelling at those who refuse to listen. In the end, I would die a lonesome, bitter man — and my epitaph would read, “I’ve told you so!”

She had tried her best to find the proper audience for her wisdom, her brilliance, her generosity, her cheerfulness, and all else her unique personality comprised.

Still, some people used to call her mean — even to her face — for trying to make a point, regardless of personal cost. Yes, it would be fair to describe those as ignorant simpletons, insensible, and insensitive. She nonetheless did take their silly, derogatory remarks to heart — sometimes, they upset her to the point where she threatened to be overwhelmed by the world’s lack of courtesy.

I used to be her “disciple” long before she even knew I existed. One fine day, I mustered the courage to approach her. It hadn’t been difficult to reasearch her contact information, she used to be quite famous — at least in certain circles.

To my utter surprise, her answer arrived within the day. To be honest, I wouldn’t have held it against her, if she had ignored this unexpected, admittedly awkward, approach by a perfect stranger — an amateur, no less. Yet reply she did, and in the sweetest way one could imagine. She not only told me how glad she was that one of her readers had actually contacted her to discuss matters close to her own heart, but also asked for my stance on these issues and ideas how to mend them.

This was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Contrary to Rick and Louis, however, we had our guard down from the word “go”. Even though being strangers to one another at first, we quickly (and quite smoothly) ventured to discuss a vast variety of issues from politics to religion, web development and accessibility (or “a11y” as we nerds preferred to refer to it, for simplicity’s sake),

and all the way back. We knew no restraint, taking no detour, never looking for hide-outs, or running for cover, probing each other's mind with gusto.

One fine day, we happened to learn that we had something else in common: we both loved to work at 2am, convinced that the wee hours were our most productive time of the day. One Friday night (or rather Saturday morning), this accidental discovery led to us unintentionally setting our personal record. We started at "my" 2am (Vienna) and kept chatting, discussing, bantering, arguing, disagreeing, looking for common ground, and reconciling until "her" 2am (Vegas). To say we were exhausted, is to put it mildly. Either of us was completely and utterly knackered. I couldn't account for the rest of that day, if my life depended on it.

Was she my best friend or I hers? No, certainly not by common conventions. I have a feeling we both would have hesitantly denied the notion, for we despised all sorts of arbitrary labels mankind appears to be so fond of. We did have plenty in common, though, and we truly enjoyed each other's company. It was our mutual understanding that respect has to be earned, and that no one is an island, entirely self-sufficient and unattached to everyone else, that drew us towards one another. The unshakable conviction that knowledge and wisdom may be found everywhere and one must be prepared to embrace them (for their own sake), regardless of where they may come from or by whom they may be conveyed. That was the compass that helped us steer our boats toward shore in unison, rather than sitting on the vast ocean, helplessly hoping for a lighthouse to appear on the horizon. The bond that tied us to one another.

(This piece is dedicated to the memory of Molly E. Holzschlag, 1963–2023. May you rest in peace, my dear.)