Dr. Jan Woodhouse—My Mentor

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Being True to Self: The Lessons Jan Taught Me

Dr. Jan Woodhouse was a dedicated teacher, scholar, mentor, friend and activist—whose wholesome influence on the people around her will always be celebrated. Since this essay is about the lessons Jan taught me, I will first begin by describing the circumstances preceding our initial meeting to illustrate the impact her courage had on me.

In graduate school, I had the privilege of being in a program that gave me the language I needed to be a change agent who worked for a more just society, yet I paradoxically struggled to find the courage to do so. Nevertheless, I made a fiscally risky decision, which affected my three kids and partner: I took an unpaid leave of absence from my full-time teaching job to finish my master’s degree in philosophy of education. I marveled at the possibility of having time to finish my thesis, time to grapple with what “should be” politically and educationally, and better yet, to spend more time with my children. At this point, I also accepted a graduate assistant position in the Department of Leadership, Educational Psychology, and Foundations at NIU, earning a fraction of my previous salary. I thought we could live happily on a daily diet of canned tuna; I justified this decision with the fact that it was only temporary. I never imagined how much my life would change, and how the people I would meet along the way who would help to change it—especially Jan Woodhouse.

Jan was the mother of all the graduate assistants in our department. She introduced herself with a firm, yet comforting handshake. She showed me around our cramped office space where we shared desks. “You could call me the mother hen of this place; they all do,” she smiled. Jan was full of warmth and joy. She was calm, centered, and wise beyond her years. Thanks to her ceaseless acts of kindness and spiritual presence in my life, she gave me something that I still struggle to convey in words. As an eco-feminist, Jan was passionate about taking social responsibility, and inspiring others to do likewise. She always stood up for what she perceived to be “right” and “just,” which was regularly followed by the perfect argument for doing so each time. I remember she debated with another colleague on how to meet the needs of a larger section of 200 students. Jan’s ability to articulate her beliefs with such conviction was tremendously refreshing, particularly given the fact some professors have a tendency to waffle between two divergent points of view without ever committing to one. I never met anyone with the confidence and courage to commit to an action in the world of Academia like Jan, especially when the art of sophistry seemed to be the accepted norm.

I started to question the social filter that I would continually evoke in certain social situations. Yet, I noticed that Jan had the courage to confront others without resorting to this filtering device. I started thinking—maybe I could do this too? So I started turning the filter off during family social events. I found myself getting in heated debates with my brother-in-law about issues of social justice and the economy. While we have never been able to agree on anything, I
thank Jan for teaching me how to be true to myself, which helped me engage in passionate civic dialogue with relatives.

Upon my first encounter with Jan, I honestly thought that eating tuna for a year was not such a bad idea. I could study with philosophers of education, assist in teaching an introductory class in foundations of education, and have Jan as my mentor. Jan had a beloved generosity that met a need I had during difficult times. On those few days I ran out of food at home and was too proud to tell anyone, Jan would insist I eat half her sandwich. Somehow she just knew, and she never hesitated to feed me. “Eat this half of my sandwich,” she insisted. “I am not going to eat it.”

Living on tuna wasn’t the hardest part of my fiscally risky decision to return to graduate school. Living without money to take my children places proved to be the most trying, especially when my youngest begged me to take her to see the Beluga Whales at the Shedd Aquarium. Although I told no one about this particular challenge, Jan Woodhouse somehow sensed my dilemma. One day she brushed my shoulder and smiled while I was working on the computer. I turned around to see her holding an envelope; inside the envelope were five tickets to the Shedd Aquarium. At that moment, I started to cry. I was overcome with joy—because of Jan’s generosity, I could now take my children to the aquarium. Jan’s intuition never seemed to fail just like her generosity and courage. She had somehow figured out my dilemma that I was too proud to admit, and her random acts of kindness always came at the right time. Two weeks after that encounter, I took three giddy children to the Shedd Aquarium for a trip they will never forget—all because of this intuitive and generous person.

Co-teaching with Jan: Learning to be Co-learners

Co-teaching a section of 200 students with Jan and three other colleagues proved to be trying, since we refused to go along with the traditional banking model of education that typically governs our teaching. We taught a section of Education as an Agent for Change—a university-wide core requirement for business and education majors. Instead of lecturing, we broke the students up into small discussion groups, facilitated Q and A sessions from the stage while a couple of us ran around the hall with microphones—encouraging the students’ to engage in Socratic dialogue. My colleagues and I learned from Jan during this time because her wisdom and teaching experience grounded us through her student-centered teaching approach, even in a lecture hall of 200 students.

Jan’s commitment to her students was remarkable to say the least. She would devote hours to responding to their journals and writing in their blue folders, which we gave to them to record their questions, concerns or reactions after every class. Given the sheer volume of students, we struggled to meet their individual needs. So we bounced emails back and forth with fresh ideas on how to tackle the many challenges that arose. Jan’s emails came across with such enthusiasm and respect. She would begin each email with two profound words: “Dear Co-Learners.” Jan, whose teaching experience surely surpassed all of ours put together, still viewed herself as a learner. This spoke volumes about her character. She reminded us how important it is to teach with a learner’s mind—open to new knowledge, open to learning from our students. I will never forget those emails, which contained so much passion for the subject matter, passion for learning, passion for knowing, and passion for being—Jan exuded all of this in both her spoken and written words.
Being in Jan’s Community: Asking the Deeper Questions

One of the best parts about teaching with Jan was being a part of the community that she helped forge in the process. After our Monday night class, Jan would take us out for dinner where we would enjoy authentic adult dialogue, which went beyond superficial niceties and delved deeper into matters of the heart. Many of us were going through difficult times personally with sick kids or troubled relationships; and Jan provided a listening ear and comforting words. She listened; she consoled; she reminded us of the spiritual element of the human condition. For her, this element was rooted in Native American Thought—so wide-awake and aware of our mother earth with a profound belief in the sacredness of everything—from the smallest blade of grass to the largest ocean to the most fragile parts of our humanity. Jan’s kindness was so contagious; as I’ve said, she was the mother figure to our group. For example, one night I started choking on a piece of chicken, so I ran to the restroom. Jan followed me and stayed with me administering the Heimlich maneuver until my wind-pipe was clear—her comforting arms around me—reminding me that it is O.K. to receive help when we are sick or vulnerable—something I still wrestle with to this day. However, it was these acts of kindness that penetrated to the more delicate aspects of our existential struggle to know ourselves. Jan’s spiritual presence inspired us to constantly revisit the deeper questions in life such as “Who am I? Who am I becoming? How do I want to live?”

I still think about the life that Jan led and the lessons she taught me. I am still asking the deeper questions—I really miss her, but I try to apply the lessons she taught me to my daily life. Although I continue to struggle to ask for help when I am in need or vulnerable…I still pause to find the courage to articulate my beliefs…I sometimes doubt my ability to meet the needs of my students as a co-learner, I nonetheless take refuge in the fact that here was a strong woman who went before me and gave me hope in possibility—possibility for a better version of ourselves, our students and our world. Jan Woodhouse was woman who saw the world as it should be—and lived her life accordingly—as a teacher, scholar, activist, mentor, and friend.