

# Jan's Herstory

Carol Ellerby

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Jan wrote an unpublished, autobiographical book, *Coming to A Pedagogy of Place: Lessons Learned from the Landscape*, in which she reflected on her life. I have drawn from that book in writing this eulogy, which she asked me to do a year ago.<sup>1</sup> Her book begins with this excerpt from *The Dream of the Earth* by Thomas Berry:

Tell me the story of the river and the valley and the streams and woodlands and wetlands, of shellfish and finfish. A story of where we are and how we got here and the characters and roles that we play. Tell me a story, a story that will be my story as well as the story of everyone and everything about me, the story that brings us together in a valley community, a story that brings together the human community with every living being in the valley, a story that brings us together under the arc of the great blue sky in the day and the starry heavens at night...<sup>2</sup>

Jan knew and celebrated the histories and herstories of everyone she knew, and that began with her family. She extracted from her grandparents their memories of growing up and recorded them. She did the same with her parents, and with her friends, colleagues and students. She loved to read, and her favorite books were biographies.

This is Jan's Herstory.

You can take the girl out of the farm, but you can't take the farm out of the girl. As a child she learned to drive every piece of machinery from the old "M" to the new "560" and to handle most of the equipment that hitched on behind. She and her sisters put up hay, ringed hogs, hauled corn and spent many hours cleaning out the barn and the pig house. By the time she was ten she and her sisters had almost complete responsibility for the daily feeding, watering and bedding of the livestock. She developed a strong back and broad shoulders and a lot of problem-solving ability because of those early responsibilities. But she writes that she was not a "Tom" boy. She writes that learned to cook and to sew, and couldn't wait for my first "tight skirt" and my first tube of lipstick.

Beneath the scholar, there was a Midwestern farm girl. She wrote, "I don't know if it comes from being raised in the country close to the cycles of nature or a formal education in the natural sciences. Whatever the reason I have a sensitivity to space, colors and textures—and I need to be able to root in the dirt, walk barefoot in the grass and hug a tree once in a while. These are as necessary to my physical and mental health as diet and a good night's sleep. I'm just made that way."

And then there was Vietnam. Jan wrote sometime after "Que cera cera" and before "Where have all the flowers gone" that this war became part of her life. In 1968 she left college during

her senior year to marry the man of her dreams who she had been engaged to for over a year. They had planned to marry after her graduation, but the war was pretty heated in 1968 and he was a Marine Corps pilot. Overseas duty was inevitable.

She remembered watching the news every evening and scanning the faces of the GI's to see if he was among those caught in action by the cameras. She remembered the daily counts of casualties.

She prepared "care packages": letters, audiotapes, peanut butter—and things for the children of Vietnam. Her husband wrote that there weren't enough medical supplies for the child. And they didn't have school supplies. She collected both and sent them over—wave after wave. She remembered wondering that there could be so much money for bombs and none for books.

She had lived with war and rumors of war all her life. Her father was a veteran of WW II and her grandfather a veteran of WW I. Her uncle served in the Korean War. As her university teacher said, "This is incredible. Your grandfather. Your father. Your uncle. War gets closer and closer and closer until it's in your bed."

In February 1969, she remembered her father's face as he stood there with the Marine Corps officers who had come to inform her that her husband was missing in action. And she remembered following Captain John A. Prombo's flag-draped coffin down the same aisle of the church where they had been married just thirteen months earlier.

She writes, "the fields that grew the corn were also the fields that grew a feminist." She adopted an Afro hairdo, wore an olive-drab army shirt with a yellow ERA armband. She started using the F-word and smoking cigarettes. It was the dawning of the Age of Aquarius and she was ready and waiting for the revolution.

When she first came to Oregon, Illinois, she went to the courthouse and asked if there were any women lawyers in town. She was directed to my office. As she fondly recounted it, I was sitting in my office with my feet on the desk with an Afro hairdo and smoking a cigarette. She knew she had found a soul sister.

Thirty years later she wrote:

I'm not there anymore, but I'm glad I lived through that time. I have pretty well worked through my 'rage stage.' I still get really angry when I run into oppression and injustice, whether it comes from men, women, institutions or ideas. When that happens I am ready to put my boots on and do a little shit-kickin' til we get the situation cleaned up and running more fairly for everyone involved.

Liberation requires a place and a process that allows the individual to make decisions and to act so s/he can have a chance at the 'good life.' The decisions my parents made provided an environment that let me express my strength, my creativity, my compassion, my sense of humor—my SELF. 'Maturing' has meant continuing that process on my own, making decisions that will continue to insure an environment where I can continue to be all that I can be. And, to help others do the same.

Jan was a pioneer. She had a print hanging in her kitchen of a pioneer woman. She was grateful the artist, Harrison Fisher, painted "Lady of the Lake." Jan said of the print, "This picture seemed to illustrate a most desirable state of being, to me, of beauty and more conventional woman-ness, as well as confidence and strength. I also loved the subtle colors." As a child she read a lot of biographies, all the "Little House" books, and had dreamed of being a pioneer. She realized later that her dream had come true. Cultivating new ground, opening new fields was al-

ways the most interesting part of the process for her. Years later she was always deriding herself because she was always starting over! Then, in one of those defining moments, she saw that this was true because she was a developer. That was where her strengths lay. She began to feel easier with that reality and more conscious of when her work was done, and it was time to step aside and let the manager-types take over.

She was not interested in making a lot of money. She was more interested in making a difference. She wrote, "I do believe I made a difference. In those ten years (the seventies) I calculate that I worked with over 5,000 people in some kind of educational process. I was more of a reformist than a revolutionary. In 1992 I received the Outstanding Leadership Award from NIU's Department of Outdoor Teacher Education. For me, that was like an academy award."

All of her degrees and awards mattered to her, but mostly because they were tickets to ride—to begin another journey. Being a pioneer meant her journey through life was not easy. As she said, being in on the beginnings of social movements or change processes had advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are that just about anything you do make a difference. The disadvantages are that there are no templates—the work is often long and lonely. You are sometimes crossing boundaries. And there is resistance.

Liberation came to mean to this corn fed feminist, not being defined by the mores and strictures of marriage. She formed a life partnership with Cliff Knapp 31 years ago. While he offered to marry her, she steadfastly refused. There was no template for the role she carved out for herself. She was doing it her way.

I remember a few years ago during one of our country drives we loved to take, we stopped at a tavern in Grand Detour for a beer. The song "MY WAY" started to play on the jukebox and Janny and I belted it out. It's a favorite memory of mine.

She writes,

Making a place in time and space to do my most important work would be a challenge throughout my life. At times I would be criticized for procrastination and lack of focus, but this behavior was really something else that had not been clearly articulated—by me or the feminist culture; it was the persistent conflict over how to balance personal and professional life. This is a place issue. Women have had to be responsible for both places. The tension that results reflects the degree to which the culture holds them accountable for people and processes in each place. It was about taking care of my business without doing the dishes and cleaning the house first, or feeling guilty about what else wasn't happening because my life was.

To accomplish this often required her to seek solitude in different places, to remove herself from the conflicts and the duties at home. She had an apartment in DeKalb. She went to Galena for weeks at a time to work on her dissertation. She went to her good, dear friend Avi's house on a lake in Wisconsin. She visited the cities that were the subject of her dissertation, Racine (WI), Champaign (IL), and Waterloo (IA). She traveled alone and sometimes with her mother, Cliff, and sometimes with me. We had a great trip to Scotland, and she had a wonderful trip to India with her mother.

She had a great wit and sense of humor, which constantly surprised me. In Scotland, we were staying at a language school in a large Victorian house. We were on the very top floor in a tiny room, consumed by a double bed. To demonstrate how tiny the room was, she had her knee on the bed, reached out with her hand to touch the wall and turned off the light switch with her foot.

I caught this contortionist feat with a photo. How we have laughed about that moment.

While her failing health prevented her from polishing her dissertation, she was so close that her chair and the Dean at NIU waived the oral defense and granted her the doctorate just days before she died.

For the past 31 years, she managed to fulfill the role of life partner, mother to her stepchildren, Dawn, Jenny, Eve and Ryan; and to other children and her students. She was a great support and friend to Rob and David Wiener and to my son Justin, who she guided through graduate school at NIU. While she never gave birth to any, she mothered many, many children.

She was a wonderful daughter, and took time to celebrate the lives of her mother and father. She was a loving sister to Linda and Judi, and to their children Karrie and Kreg and Jeremiah and Joshua. One of her greatest joys in life was to sing with her sisters, which they had done since they were little girls, performing at county fairs and for many celebrations. As she lay dying in the hospital in Rockford, her family and friends surrounded her singing her favorite songs. I know she liked that.

She loved and supported her cousin, Dr. David Moore and his partner Dr. David Blatt. When they were fighting through the decades of discrimination and alienation from other members of the family, Jan was there. And Cousin Davie was there as she was dying, acting as her health care agent.

She sent "care packages" of support and suggestions to people she knew had been diagnosed with cancer. Her advice: "Believe the diagnosis but not the prognosis." The last page of her letter is reproduced on the funeral card. A suggestion she made in that letter was to watch "Mama Mia" with Meryl Streep. She loved that musical, which Justin and I saw with her in Chicago.

She loved and supported her friends, Avi Folk, Regina Curry, and Buddy and Pat Wiener. Of course, she loved and supported her students, going back to when she was a teacher at Orland Park. Her former fifth grade student, Janet Aldrich Micheletto, visited her at the hospital and is here today, all these years later.

She loved and guided me at a time when no one else on the planet understood or had the fortitude to support me. When I left Oregon, my hometown, my family, my friends and my practice to go to Washington State, she made the journey to Seattle with me, and I cried all the way through Iowa.

She was there when my father was dying, to help my mother and I midwife his death. And I was there for her. I can't recall ever having an argument with her. She did all this throughout the tragedies that befell her.

In 1999, she wrote: "I had just come through five years of incredible, unbearable loss. That journey began with the loss of my left breast to cancer and ended with the loss of my job and the death of a child (Ryan) I had helped raise as a son. This last year, making a place at NIU, I found sanctuary. I found teachers who cared about me like I cared about my students. And that felt so good."

Jan became the teacher/healer for others that she also needed for herself. She became a feminist and then an eco-feminist. She became a researcher, philosopher, and a master teacher. She told me last fall that she believed she was at the top of her form as a teacher.

She writes: "The forces of nature are a wonder to me. They go on, season after season with predictable and enduring consistency, despite wars, despite recession, despite any of the awful things that happen to us that make us feel overwhelmed and verging on the neurotic. The weather gets cold; the snow falls. The weather gets warm; the plants grow. The sun sets; the sun rises on another day, another season, another opportunity to try to make sense of it all-- or to let go, to do

what we can do and then just step back and enjoy it.” A time to live, and a time to die.

Jan made a difference. To her family, to her children, to her friends, to her students, to this planet...to me. It's tempting to see only darkness now, when you think of Jan. But that is not how she would want it. To me, this is how Jan's herstory would end:

“In one of the stars I shall be living.  
In one of them I shall be laughing.  
And so it will be as if all the stars were laughing,  
when you look at the sky at night . . .”<sup>3</sup>

## NOTES

1. Jan Woodhouse, “Coming to A Pedagogy of Place: Lessons Learned from the Landscape” (Unpublished book manuscript).
2. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), 171.
3. Antoine de Saint Exupery, *The Little Prince* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 104.