

Sustaining a Spirit: Notes on Jan's Legacy

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Regardless of our spiritual beliefs, we are driven to find our life purpose & place. We may swim in religious teachings or walk up on the path of biology & evolution. But most folks believe that we are driven by forces beyond us. Personally, my spiritual faith rejects deities, but I have grown to believe in Angels. This is a story of educational inspirations from the mysterious here after.

I never had the opportunity to get to know Jan Woodhouse, but I feel as though we have a relationship as colleagues. Her spirit was strong in life, and carries on to guide me in my teaching career.

The circle of prominent Environmental Educators in Illinois is not particularly broad, particularly for those of the same era. How, then, could I not have known Jan Woodhouse? I received my M.S.Ed from NIU back in the Lorado Taft heyday, as did Jan. From that point, I was involved in most of the state's environmental education initiatives. And so was Jan. I may not always be name conscious, but a name like Woodhouse should have teased my antennae.

In 2002, my spouse at the time, Molly Swick, began teaching in the Department of Leadership, Educational Psychology at NIU. She repeatedly told me that I must meet her colleague, Jan Woodhouse. "You two are so much alike," she would say. We shared environmental heroes, were drawn to Native American teachings and, as Aldo Leopold puts it, "There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot. I cannot."¹ We were both impacted by the cultural revolutions of the 60's and feel strongly about being life-long learners. How could two kindred spirits like us never have crossed paths?

When I retired from my career as a High School teacher, I did not have a clear professional or personal plan. I instead was trusting fate to point me in the appropriate direction. At that point, Jan, too, was uncertain about her future, as she was struggling with her health. In too short of a period of time, Jan had passed away. Jan's colleagues grieved, and for a final time I heard from Molly, "You two are so much alike." Seemingly, I had missed the opportunity to get to know such a wonderful person & exemplary Environmental Educator. Little did I know that we would indeed soon meet.

Within a month, Molly inquired if I would be interested in joining the NIU Foundations staff and pick up a few sections of the course she & Jan shared, EPFE 201 Education as an Agent of Change. Being your ex-wife's colleague may sound awkward, but sharing children is far more challenging than faculty meetings and fraternizing in room #424 Graham Hall. I ventured into what would be a wonderful experience.

I have been in public education my entire adult life, and I am experienced with the NIU typical General Education demographic. Actually, it felt as if I was being drawn there. When I arrived, I found everyone to be warmly welcoming. I felt like I was in a position where a path had been laid for me. When I was offered work space, the location that I gravitated to was unknowingly, Jan's nest. When I opened up the filing drawers, there were Jan's materials. Although, most of Jan's things had been collected and removed, remnants of her presence were all around.

I could feel her presence. It was a warm and maternal feeling. As I started to navigate the office space, I felt somewhat like a moving piece on some kind of Ouija Board. Jan was directing me with a light touch.

With the fall term quickly approaching, it was now time to get intellectually geared up. I was given the syllabuses of all the other EPFE 201 Instructors. I reviewed them all, but one levitated to the top. It was Jan's. Jan's game plan looked somehow familiar. Most of the 201 Instructors deal with the social justice side of things. After reviewing her materials, it was clear that we indeed shared many things. Among those pertaining to educational philosophy that stood out, were: an emphasis on life-long learning, on forming communities of learners, and on the need for developing a broad-based environmental literacy. And it appears that we both developed a professional reputation for pioneering program development and risk-taking in the name of authentic teaching & learning. Beginning at NIU seemed easier now that I had Jan's tacit validation.

We are indeed so much alike. It was clear that she was much more maternal in her approach, but we shared an emotional connection and humanitarian approach to our students as people. We value the raw natural world, and desire to protect it through connecting our students (and anybody who will listen) to it. We do this by offering experiences that provide an ecological awareness, generate understanding, facilitate appreciation, and promote action. We both pedagogically travel through the nation's social history of environmental abuse, but use examples of stewardship to favor hope. We encourage analysis of our spiritual connection to the land. Both being fond of Native American culture, we see it is a kinship with the land that we are losing. With its loss goes respect for all things living and life-sustaining components of our ecosystem. This formerly was known as Conservation Education, Outdoor Education, Environmental Education, and now, Sustainability Education. EPFE 201 Education as an Agent of Change is our platform for Sustainability Education. A central theme is that nature's systems operate in balance, and they rely on abundance & diversity. Jan & I believe that it is this balance & diversity that we must restore. Education is our agent for change.

My first lessons in University instruction were in the law of the syllabus, and hub of the textbook. This was new terrain for me. But Jan was there for me. I was following Jan's leads, but looking for my own personal path. We both also believe in the power of storytelling in instruction, and the value of personal experiences. My first inclination for a text, was Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac*.² It is a standard classic for teaching the "land Ethic." I previously had limited success with it on the high school level, but was hopeful that it would work at NIU. I obtained a copy of Jan's course text, David Orr's, *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and Human Prospect*.³ I had seen David Orr several times as a featured "expert" in various environmental documentaries. I immediately loved the book, and smiled at the references to Aldo Leopold. I imagined Jan was amused & smiling in her new place. It was a gift to me, and I received it gratefully. The first 3 chapters remain as my term opener. I know that both my students & Jan's have been challenged & impacted by both Orr & Leopold.

In my rookie NIU season, I was eagerly wandering around my new turf in search of instructional opportunities. Although I had been cleared from thinking that I had to serve any obligation to my predecessor, Jan Woodhouse, I still felt indebted. I felt as though I was filling a void. Her departure was a loss to the NIU community. Those who knew her felt it. I did not know her, but I was getting to know her in an intimately spiritual way.

During my years of teaching high school, I relied on school-wide presentations from guests to further drive home my messages. The best presentation that I had seen anywhere was by a new organization, ACE, the Alliance for Climate Education. I wanted to sponsor an event that would

serve as a tribute Jan, my new colleague & mentor. It was my gift to her. It was an opportunity for me to demonstrate to her that I was capable of carrying the torch of sustainability torch into her former home in Graham Hall.

Administrating the event, afforded me the opportunity to meet new people at NIU, and learn more about protocols & procedures. It fueled me with excitement. Having Jan as my partner gave me confidence. It was odd for someone who had never met the woman, to be preparing words of tribute to her. But it came naturally, which is how I think Jan operated. When the day came, we had two presentations that went fabulously. Afterwards, I reflected on the experiences. I had a sense of accomplishment & closure. Emotionally, I felt like Jan patted me on the back with a smile of approval. It was time for me to cut the umbilical cord and walk out from underneath her legacy. It was a sort of rite of passage for me.

Jan Woodhouse and I are alike in many ways. But it would be disrespectful not to acknowledge that in many ways she is my superior. We both have a list of achievements for which we are proud. We share a Sense of Place, geographically, philosophically, as well as culturally. I am enjoying success at NIU, partially because of her guidance. I found the following passage in Jan's materials: "When you come to the edge of all the light you know, and are about to step off into the darkness of the unknown, faith is knowing one of two things will happen: There will be something solid to stand on or you will be taught how to fly."

I think when Jan went to the other side of life, she learned to fly and became an Angel.

NOTES

1. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1968), vii.
2. Ibid.
3. David W. Orr, *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and Human Prospect Second Edition* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2004).