

**Jo-Ann Mayhew: Our Sister Our Friend
October 22, 1998 - Memorial at Halifax**

Gayle Horii

Thank-you, Kelly, Heather, and Denise - for this opportunity. I could stand here for months telling you stories about Jo - about how she was and remains a great inspiration, a model of REAL intellectual and physical Beauty. I feel very privileged to call Jo my Friend and very privileged to share with you just part of my perspective on Jo.

As I have said so many times over the years, when one shares a space like we did: under conditions of severe deprivation and degradation, experiencing the oppression and cruelty of the authorities; and when one also shares a space governed by the repression many of us had locked into the child within us; there are unique moments within which one discovers the TRUE character and the TRUE heart of the person - the depths of which may not be possible to discover except under dire conditions of survival.

And so it is, that the experience of imprisonment for some of us brought us ironically, one of the greatest gifts of all - that of the TRUE friendships and the TRUE SISTERhood of women.

I met Jo in August of 1986 in the Prison for Women (P4W) library. She was the editor of the prison magazine *Tightwire*. We did not hit it off at first - her tact and methods of mediation to achieve change were quite opposite from my more confrontive approach, but it was clear from the start that we both wanted the same things for ourselves and for our SISTers inside. We both gave ground to each other and became a real team in our struggles. Jo, from the Atlantic coast and me from the Pacific coast, both from "middle-class upbringings", born in the same year, both serving life sentences, both having two grown children. One day in the *Tightwire* office, as we looked out at the looming wall in front of us, we turned to each other and at the same time, said, "What the hell are we doing here?"

I eventually went the political route via the Prisoners' Committee and Jo continued to battle it out to keep *Tightwire* printing and to insure that no censorship could obscure our realities - a formidable task - NOT an easy job. But Jo did not care about 'easy'. She always took the high road and rarely looked back. Jo produced more consecutive issues of *Tightwire* than any other editor in the history of the P4W and I can say without any hesitation that she raised the standard of *Tightwire* to a

prison paper with clout and only because of Jo did our readership become international. It is extremely difficult to accomplish anything inside the walls.

That Jo achieved her BA while locked in P4W and in the Mini P4W, with the impoverishment that comes with it, is a *truly* amazing feat. I can still hear the tap-tap-tap of her typewriter as she pushed to finish yet another term paper. Her cage was a few doors down from mine on the top of A range tier and we would take turns bringing up tobacco tins of boiling water for our coffee or tea - a nearly nightly ritual of discussion and strategy.

Jo decided at one point to move down the wing area because it was quieter and she would have more room for her books. But she only lasted a short while and moved back, saying, "Everyone's dying down there. No one even cares about getting out into the yard!" And that was Jo, always negotiating for more yard time and gym time and achieving better success than we would have had if it were not for her. Jo loved the outdoors. She patiently gave me my first tennis lesson. Jo was a great teacher and always also a student, always open to learning new things including Tai Chi.

Jo and others risked their own well-being to support my efforts on more than one occasion during the struggles which resulted in my transfer to B.C. Over the four years I was there we wrote constantly to one another and shared the pain, the misery and the joys we could find inside. Here are some excerpts of letters from Jo, so that you can hear her own words which clearly speak to her Great Character, her Wonderful Heart and Her Truly Enlightening Wit and Charming Sense of Humour. Jo's twinkle in her eye raised my spirits more often than I can tell you.

Jo's great gifts of Love and Compassion and her courage and commitment to the ideal of SISTERHOOD are personified in this poem by her favourite poet, William Blake:

LOVE seeketh
not itself to please
Nor for itself hath any care
BUT for another
gives its ease
And builds a heaven
in
hell's despair.

1989, February 12

“... loneliness sets traps that are painful - if wishes were horses
beggars would ride?”

1989, February 22

On the Brentwood Program that Jo fought successfully to get into
P4W:

“... I have decided to withdraw for now - I really feel I need the
freedom to identify institutional abuse when it hits me and those around
me. In the Gospel according to B, we are not to try and change the
system (sic) but to change ourselves. ... How can I grow/change when
I don't have the right to identify what I like or don't like in the present?
... I find it personally damaging to continue on the path of wilful
blindness.”

1989, March 21

On heart and loyalty:

“... These are the root and essence of ... being and you must answer
them to live with the honour that is the soul food of your life - but the
cost ... your life ... or your soul?”

1989, March 27

Easter Monday:

“... Seems to me women create their own impotency by refusing !!
to believe they can make a meaningful contribution to their existence ...
let alone contribute to any sort of progressive change. You know how
small / insignificant / invisible I have felt but I guess even identifying /
acknowledging that problem was a *Huge* step in coming to a beginning
of realistic acceptance of both human frailty - being frightening and

tenuous and the incredible web of our existence ... who is to say which strand is more important than another? All contribute but only if the weavers weave ... each according to her ability (Mayhew, Phil 101!!).”

1989, June 4

Jo's birthday:

“... thoughts of dying and the great unknown ... still more adventures??? I hope if that is the case I am given a new energy pack!! We certainly seem to be packing a whole lot of experiences into this one life time!! ... All quiet on the Eastern Front ... trench warfare ... soul erosion by a bureaucracy in full swing.”

1989, July 16

“... How long can hearts remain unmoved? More frightening is a Social Order without heart!!”

“... Had a great visit with oldest daughter, Heather, her husband and New GRAND!!son - what a Celtic beauty - a study in charcoal and honey - so different from the pink/white of my babes ... much love restored. Seeing them makes me want to go home.”

1989, August

A poem by Jo:

Sunlight Dappled Flowers
Swaying gently in the Breeze

Velvet mosses hiding
In the glades of
ancient
trees.

Touching souls,
Touching natures,
Touching hearts,
Holding hands

Bounded by oceans not by bars
Bounding minds
Touching stars.

1989, November 18

“... Politically, I am awake as after a brief lull, always the war for power and control, with the women often blind pawns, and so often, turning against each other rather than against our oppressors !!! I still lament the day I loaned out my magic wand (around 4001 BC to be precise!!). ... Doing work with the Prisoners’ Committee totally confirms all of my past observations ... it is an exhausting, thankless sort of work. This outstanding exercise in civics gives me almost unlimited opportunity to annoy many and only rare opportunities to satisfy more than a few. I was right in avoiding this ‘opportunity’ in the past. Apart from these comments I am having a lovely time writing proposal after proposal after proposal ... wish you were here!!”

1989, December

“Joy to the World! One small step. We have actually WON! On the food issue. AS of Dec. 1 we are allowed to take 1 serving of salad ex tomatoes or cereal or dessert ex fruit from the dining room!”

NOW IN THE MINI P4W

1990, July 21

“... I’m beginning to wonder when our modern technology will come up with a 48-hour day! (to match the time it takes to get everything done that I want to accomplish).”

1990, September 28

“... I find it amazing that the CSC has announced 1 (only) healing lodge and the rest are ‘facilities’ ... since when does ‘healing’ depend upon cultural identity?!!!”

1990, October 23

“... when asked how I was ‘enjoying’ minimum, since I do not get to AA or similar; do not get to Church or similar, and have no place to call my own for writing & no privacy, my sense of ‘enjoyment’ is somewhat limited. With a full sociology degree plus the better part of a certificate for Social Work plus ??? hours of ‘hands on experience’, I am less than satisfied typing, shredding and filing paper for the system (sic)

... obviously something must be wrong with my expectations ... definitely a part of a much larger social issue?"

1990, December 11

"Congratulations to us both, we survived another year!! I am really tired of being asked how I feel about P4W closing ... about the same way I feel about visiting the 7th star to the left!!"

1990

A poem by Jo:

Tonight I sat in my bath
watched my legs
beneath the water -
magnified veins
scars and hairy stumps.

Not fine porcelain as advertised
maybe chipped and cracked kitchen china.

They account miles walked in supermarket aisles
list endless stairs, mopped, cleaned, dusted.
Record marches thru villages, towns and cities
tally pavement, fields and swamps
recall the movement of crossing desert sands
swimming oceans
climbing mountains
threading forests.

No - not porcelain as advertised
Nor possessions of the family kitchen as ordained
just
Private monuments of ordinary valor.

1991, May 17

"... note of interest in the new Burnaby prison in BC ... almost no storage space .. NO DRAWERS!! ... one upright locker-sized hanging space ... one small shelf .. totally impossible for correspondence papers let along study materials. ... 100% short-term .. basically remand/

security with a slight diversion to groom your dog & arrange a few flowers!!!”

1991, August

“... writing in the summer doldrums ... BUT I’ve a pass (2 days) to Nova Scotia in mid Sept. Can’t wait.”

1992, March 11

“... won a minor battle getting this cook’s job registered with the Ministry of Skills and Development ... can now do the trade paper route ... it took 1 year to get this done ... credit to the head of the kitchen .. & you-know-who, in charge of the school (a bad joke) .. the reins passed to the least qualified ... GAD!”

1992, August 1

“I decided to try for day parole at 7 years, no UTA’s etc. (of course I was told I was ‘a dreamer’ - (dear John Lennon - I’m not the only one). The month in advance was HORRIBLE ... flashbacks to the terrible time of ‘the crime’, ‘the trial’ - my loneliness and pain would rush upon me whenever I thought about the Hearing ... and on June 4 it was actually far less terrible ... I WON! Day parole to Kingston E. Fry AND my daughter was visiting me from NS so I even had family waiting at the door! (A private fantasy coming true!).”

1993, February 14

“Words do not come close to describing how happy I feel at sending this LAST letter to you inside!! ... also heard on TV the Sol. Gen. is considering requests to have some women’s cases reviewed. Maybe I can get myself an appeal? God I pray this would be possible - parole is NOT optimum living!! I am excited/scared but filled with renewed ‘hope’ at the glimmer of such a prospect!”

1994, November 6

“So good to talk with you ... it takes such energy to try & rebuild our lives - we all can do with loads of support & encouragement.”

From 1994 through the period that Jo came to Vancouver in 1996 and after she left, Jo survived many very difficult times and many, many struggles.

1996, August 19

“... I may know what’s happening for me this week - possibility of the Healing Lodge by August 31.”

1997, August 1

“The east coast is excellent - having the BEST summer in years and years - going well with my daughters and total Delight in grand!kids ...got to attend week long Maritime Writer’s Workshop in New Brunswick ... I was funded by the NS Writers’ Federation! ... also expect to be retrained as a computer engineer - well ... maybe.”

In October, I learned that Jo had been granted a “suspended sentence” following the Inquiry and Recommendations by Justice Lynn Ratushny.

In November, I learned from Jo that she had been diagnosed with ALS.

1997, December 12

“I’m doing O.K. - I ‘think’? I found an apartment with Fabulous Karma - the view is East out of the Halifax Harbour. I’m certainly rich in many ways.”

1998, March 9

The last letter:

“My birth parents - particularly my mom - have never left my spirit - until ALS struck I was not strongly enough motivated to seek out these people - however I know it is important for my kids/grandkids to see if there is any genetic connection (yes MD’s say this is NOT likely but since they appear to know almost -0- I am not satisfied with this opinion). Anyway, I am delighted - surprises - but NOT surprised to

learn both my mom and dad lived in Halifax!! No Wonder I fell in love with the east coast.

... contrary to popular views I think ALS does affect the brain - my spelling is getting worse and I'm hopeless with numbers! - more likely the onset of senility! ... walker is pretty precarious but I do have 2 wheelchairs! ... I can really bomb along streets with lots of help from Denise and plotting downhill strategies reminds me of navigating ski hills - The day was great and fresh air/Sun gorgeous ... I'm taking it one day at a time - Most are very good ... treats. Des' calls, Denise, help from friends. Kim, a new grandchild arrived in April, me going to meet a Medicine Person at the lodge in April too."

From here our correspondence took the form of phone calls - I last spoke with Jo about a week before she died. I miss Jo immensely BUT I DO expect to "see" her again.

Eternity

S(h)e who binds to Her(him)self a joy
Does the winged life destroy
(But) S(h)e who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sun rise.
-William Blake

as quoted by Jo - 1989 March 13.
"I think this is my favourite of all ... for now."

In Loving Memory Always of Jo-Ann Mayhew who served as a founding SIS board member and SIS president in 1996, Our SISter, Our Friend.

With Love in the gentleness of SISterhood - Gayle

Strength in SISterhood (SIS) Society 6038 - 189th Street Surrey,
BC (604) 940-2876 & 576-0450