

ALL THE WAY TO THE END

Ziysah von Bieberstein



“You know, I always felt I had a book in me, I just never had the chance to write it,” Jean mused over the phone one day when COVID protocols kept us apart. A fire was instantly lit inside me. When your hundred-year-old friend makes a wish, you’re ready to drop everything to help make it come true.

I met Jean almost twenty years ago when working on a community project supporting people without housing. When I found out about her career of journalism and solidarity with First Peoples, I asked if I could take her out for tea. I had recently graduated from Trent, and I had no idea where to go next in life. The one thing I knew was that I wanted to take my lead from First Peoples. She gave me some great advice at that first visit, and also invited me join the Kawartha Truth and Reconciliation Support Group as their Jewish representative.

Over the years, I got to know Jean through her work at the KTRSG, her steady flow of informative emails, and an occasional visit. As time went on, Jean narrowed down her commitments, reduced her outings, and even slowed down on email. I went to visit shortly after her 100th birthday and found her apartment chock full of flowers, plants, chocolates, and heartfelt greeting cards. By the end of that visit, we had decided to try making our visits more regular. And so, for the last year of Jean's long life, I had the privilege of visiting with her almost every week.

"You and I can talk and we hear each other because we know where we come from. We're kindred spirits. We'll get further thoughts and that will allow you to move forward in some way. If it's meant to be, ways will bubble up. Not only between you and me but between you and the other people you talk to and me and the other people I talk to. It guides us toward how we are to move forward to create for the greater good, whatever that is."

- Jean Koning, 2021

from Ziysah's audio files

As Jean's mobility decreased, we moved from meeting out at a café to meeting at the retirement home. She would make the tea and fret about not having more to offer. At 100, Jean began to finally feel her age. She began greeting me in her pajamas. And soon after that, she would simply leave the door unlocked so I could come right in and join her at her bedside.

Then came hospital visits—a brand new experience for Jean who had somehow avoided being a hospital patient

her entire life. When she spent two nights on a gurney in a hallway at the ER, I sat next to her and held her hand, singing to her over the beeping machines and sirens.

I wanted to support Jean to create the book she had dreamed of. However, Jean deferred to me. I wanted to follow her vision, and she wanted to follow mine. So instead of deciding anything about the book, we came up with a process: every week, I would visit and bring along my voice recorder. Instead of trying to tell her life story from beginning to end, Jean would share whatever was on her mind in that moment.

Sometimes, it was memories of childhood; other times it was her feelings about what was in the news that day. Usually, it was both! We also started a tradition of recording a little video at the end of every visit, where Jean would share the main message she wanted to convey from our visit. She often mused about sharing them on social media, but was rightfully skeptical about TikTok. I'm grateful that they are now up on the Aging Activisms website so that I am not the only one who gets to enjoy these gems.

I was delighted to learn that May had her own desire to share her stories and materials from Jean. It's been a blessing to spend all this bonus time with Jean, pouring over the audio recordings, video, articles, and transcripts. And it's been an unexpected treat to be able to process the complex grief and gifts of this work with May as we considered the art and ethics of visiting, and the wider web of intergenerational relationships surrounding Jean. I remain curious about what book Jean would have written herself, but I know and trust she'd feel proud to see this tribute.

And to see that her message of “We must learn to listen to First Peoples” is continuing to reverberate.

My visits with Jean included so much more than the recordings reveal. I would help to get her dehumidifier working, or accept a mission to shop for a new nightie (no synthetic materials!) Jean would calm my nerves before a big performance by speaking to me of the prophetic voice, or by telling me, “It will be good because you are good. And we all love you.” Jean told me about how hearing my spoken word led her to spontaneously work rhymes into her nighttime prayers. She was deeply committed to learning how to use gender neutral pronouns, often pausing to ensure she got it right. She remained curious and compassionate all the way to the end.

Speaking of the end, the topic of aging and dying was ever-present. Jean was candid about her at times harrowing and at other times hilarious adventures in staying alive past 100. It was an honour to witness Jean’s conscious attempt to let go of the level of discipline and autonomy she had relied upon for so long, and to accept the transition that was coming.

“I’ll just need listening to. Your greatest gift to me is simply being able to listen and feed back to me what I think I’m saying to give it relevance and authority in some way. That I’m not just an old crone who is sounding off. I can say to you every now and then, ‘Am I making any sense?’ And if you say yes, that’s all the affirmation I need.”

- Jean Koning, 2023

from Ziysah’s audio files

In February, 2023, Jean told me about her grandfather: “I can remember him sitting on his bed, telling us stories about being in the army in Crimean War time. He used to sing this old solider song. Old soldiers never die, never die, never die. Old soldiers never die, they only fade away.”

Jean cried as she sang, and then said: “So, that’s what I’m doing. I’m not dying, I’m fading away.”

A few months later, in June, she was flustered trying to keep up with her email, and explained to me: “I tell myself: Jean, the world’s going to continue doing its thing whether you’re here or not. So just relax. If I miss out on something, too bad!”

And then, in July: “Something’s happening in my life and I don’t know what but I don’t really care, frankly. I can just lie here and let it happen.”

Throughout, we would check in. “Do you want to keep doing this?” she’d ask me. “Yes!” I’d answer, “Do you?” “Yes!” Jean would say, “For as long as I last!” And so we did...

The last time I saw Jean was about an hour before she passed. I sang to her, kissed her hand, and then drove up to Trent for the Indigenous Women’s Symposium. Jean’s daughter, Val, was with her to say goodbye, prayers were recited, and the snow began to fall in earnest. As Jean left her body, Innu astrophysicist Dr. Laurie Rousseau-Nepton shared teachings about how stars influence each other over generations. “We come to the stars and we return to the stars,” she told us, as we felt Jean begin her journey skyward.

