

The year was 1976. I was a newly certified teacher, and teaching jobs were very hard to come by. I spent the entire summer driving to schools and presenting my resume. Fall came around and I was offered a part time job teaching music at a parochial school. I took the job but continued searching.

In October I received an interview for a preschool position in a federally funded classroom. I loved young children and this seemed like a promising opportunity. The lady who interviewed me, hired me, and became my boss also became my best friend. Jan was the lead teacher and I was her assistant. I immediately resigned from my part-time job and the rest, as they say, is history. Mine and hers.

Jan and I taught two classes a day with children ages three to five who had developmental delays. Our goal was to evaluate, educate, and remediate. At the end of the year half of our children were ready for regular kindergarten classes. This was a huge accomplishment. Jan and I were great partners in the classroom.

As the lead teacher she designed the classroom environment. Our classroom was a model kindergarten, which means 'children's garden' in German. Jan's classroom was a wonderful garden.....a contemporary version of Eden. Beautiful flowers, rainbow colors, warm and cozy spaces to sit and play. I loved entering that room!

Jan and I would sit and chat each day when our students left. We sipped Cokes, talked about our husbands, and crafted things for the classroom. Our classroom. She never made me feel like her assistant. When she was absent I was completely in charge of the classes. No substitute teacher was called; this was a gift of trust and respect she gave to me.

We created learning games, sewed together, and even cooked every week with our students. I learned how to make French toast in her old electric skillet in a preschool classroom. Jan became my teacher. I never told her that I hadn't learned to cook!

We were friends outside of our workplace. Shopping and "hanging out" at her house were our activities. She always served Cokes and Oreo cookies and we always sat at her kitchen table. We couldn't sit anywhere else, as Jan had craft projects on every surface. I don't think I ever saw the top of her formal dining room table. It might have been a golden oak hue.

Although she molded and mentored me into becoming a really good kindergarten teacher, Jan's greatest gift to me was the gift of raising and nurturing children. Collectively, Jan and I became moms to five children. One of us had a baby each year for five years! When we got our kids together we looked like a ragtag preschool posse. We took our kids to theme parks, malls, and local water attractions. People thought we were crazy. Maybe they thought we ran a daycare center.

My favorite memory of Jan was the first night I was alone with my newborn daughter. I'd had very little babysitting experience and I wasn't prepared for a child of my own. My mother was far

away. My mother-in-law was disinterested. My husband had to go out. I was irrationally worried. I was afraid I'd break the baby or fall asleep. I called Jan and she asked, "What do you need me to do?" I asked her to stay on the phone with me. And she did, although she had two children under the age of three and was also home alone that night. We talked for two-and-a-half hours. That night I received the gift of unconditional love.

In 1994 cancer took Jan from us. I knew she was very sick; she knew she was very sick. We ignored her prognosis. She died on Christmas day, after her children had opened their gifts. It was so like Jan to think of doing that for her children before she left them. My life was never the same. Her legacy to me was my long teaching career, most of it with young children. But more than this, she taught me how to nurture my own children. Because of Jan, they received the gift of unconditional love.