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"On the Path of Healing": Interview with Julie Woit

Julie Woit, PhD, RSW, is a private practitioner in Thunder Bay. She was interviewed about her work with First Nations peoples by OASW Newsmagazine Editor, Gillian McCloskey, on March 9, 2009. Dr. Woit has been OASW's Vice-President of Branch Affairs since 2005, and has also been very active in addressing the restriction on the use of the title "Doctor" for those social workers holding doctorates and who are working in the health care field.



Julie Woit

Q: Would you describe briefly your work with First Nations peoples over the years?

A: I have been very fortunate for a number of years to serve the communities of Pic River, Heron Bay and Pic Mobert. These communities are approximately 300 kilometres east of Thunder Bay. Presently, I travel east once a month. I am very grateful to be housed in the beautiful Biidaaban Healing Lodge in Pic River. There, I see individuals from the communities and address such issues as grief, trauma, depression and anxiety. I also work with residential school survivors. I have presented workshops on these themes in the communities as well.

For several years, I provided therapy services to a residential treatment program for adolescent Aboriginal males who have been charged with committing sexual offences. The facility was located on the Couchiching First Nations, and this community is 400 kilometres west of Thunder Bay. I would explore early trauma experiences as they may be related to their offences.

Q: What are the social work values and skills that you have drawn from?

A: The primary social work value I draw on is the honouring of the inherent dignity and worth of persons. I convey a sense of hope, and maintain empathy as I hear people's stories. I "stay present" as I bear witness to the individual's recollections of extreme violence such as homicide, suicide and domestic violence, numerous losses and oppression. My responses draw on formal theoretical frameworks (I am a clinical traumatologist) balanced by a spiritual overview -- spirituality as defined and understood by the individual. Many of my clients talk of being disconnected from their spirituality and the desire to reconnect. I remain completely open and honouring of this.

Q: What do you see as having been the challenges, opportunities and barriers, and what did you do to overcome them?

A: The challenges faced in providing this service are mainly logistic! Distance, road hazards, and temperamental weather systems all contribute to creating obstacles. The summer brings wildlife hazards such as the occasional moose crossing the highway. At the same time, wonderful moments have also been experienced, including a one-on-one encounter with a wolf and a young bear running alongside of my vehicle. I have been invited to traditional ceremonies to which I remain honoured and humbled.

There are practical challenges for my clients including restrictions on number of visits and travel expenses. Due to long distances and limited financial resources, the costs can be prohibitive. One person actually hitchhiked to his session, and he was from a reserve 300 kilometres away!

Another challenge has been that if an individual feels better after seeing me, he or she may resist or sabotage the healing process. Some are fearful of unfamiliar experiences. Symptom reduction and wellness can be threatening. I assist clients in creating balance in their lives. In light of the multiplicity of violations and indignities as well as the major losses suffered by the First Nations population, establishing trust with each of my clients is a critical therapeutic construct I emphasize.

Self-care such as healthy eating and attending to medical concerns are efforts I also encourage and support.

Q: What do you see as the primary achievements of your work with First Nations peoples, and what has surprised and/or excited you?

A: I see as my greatest achievement the inclusion, acceptance and valuing of my service to the communities. The most memorable moments include receiving my traditional name, "North Wind Woman" and in Ojibway "Giwaydin Noodin Kwai"; being "doctored" by the Medicine Man;

Some ads, graphics and other visuals provide further detail by clicking on them.

EMDR:

an "evidence-based therapy"
Training offered by Fraser Training

and being given an Elder's stunning gift of a mask made from a clay mould of my face, complete with my traditional colours and animal spirit. I have been given moccasins made especially for me with owls beaded on, which they say is to honour my wisdom. My greatest excitement for those with whom I've had the good fortune to work is in observing individual steps towards healing.

Q: You have demonstrated a passion for the social work profession, which has been clearly manifested in the work you have accomplished. How have you maintained this sense of passion? And from where did you draw your inspiration?

A: My passion is fed by individual and community efforts to confront historical wounds and to promote strength, faith and optimism. It is gratifying to infuse a sense of hope amidst the most adverse circumstances, and to play an integral part in self-care and to hear people say: "I can see light." One client, who was in an extremely abusive relationship, is journaling her day-to-day experiences and thoughts as part of her self-honouring. It is such meaningful work, and an excellent fit for me. We speak a similar language of healing. I feel well-received, and to hear my clients' stories nourishes me. My wish is for the ongoing opportunity to provide my small contributions toward this path.

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