

How we sit with them

by Sally Gaikezheyongai

■ I know in our program I'm always saying we have to be flexible to the learner's needs, you know, every moment they walk through the door. And we have to stress that with the tutors who come in too, they've got to be pretty flexible, to not have it set in their mind, "This is what a tutoring session will be, we'll sit down and then we'll do X and Y and Z." I said, "Have it in your mind that this is possible, to do X, Y and Z in the next couple of hours, but you've also got to be open to anything changing at any time."

I remember it's one of the things I learned when I was a parent with all these five kids around. People used to always comment on when we were out and about, they'd say "Oh, they behave so well!" You know? And I'm thinking, like, "Yeah" (laughter). And then I said, "Wow, they're assuming I have complete control over them, and I don't!" (laughter). But I also remember other elders' teachings that said that it's not about having control, it's about knowing what your responsibility is, and taking that responsibility seriously...

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And I think there's an element of that even in the sharing circles. Because even the elder, or whoever the facilitator is, they don't know what's gonna come out of people's mouths, you know? And we don't know what might be triggered by what people have said. We have no idea. So there is an element there of not being in control but also kind of like a faith, a trust, that it's gonna be okay and it's gonna be good. And that we're going to get through it.

But part of me understands. I know, I've been there and I do understand people getting worried and nervous about that sort of thing too. But I think that has to do with...when you're in that space when you're the most wide open, I think that's when you're the most vulnerable. I remember the drawing I did, and I spoke about "You're the seed, you're the seed, the seed's got to crack open for the moisture to come in and the nourishment, and so the growing can happen." So people are afraid of cracking up basically, and what am I gonna do? Because I've lost all control in that moment and I'm at my most vulnerable. But that's also that moment when people, they sit with it a while. And I think it's how we sit with them, in that moment, that's important. And they'll feel supported and, "Okay, just keep breathing and I can get through this."

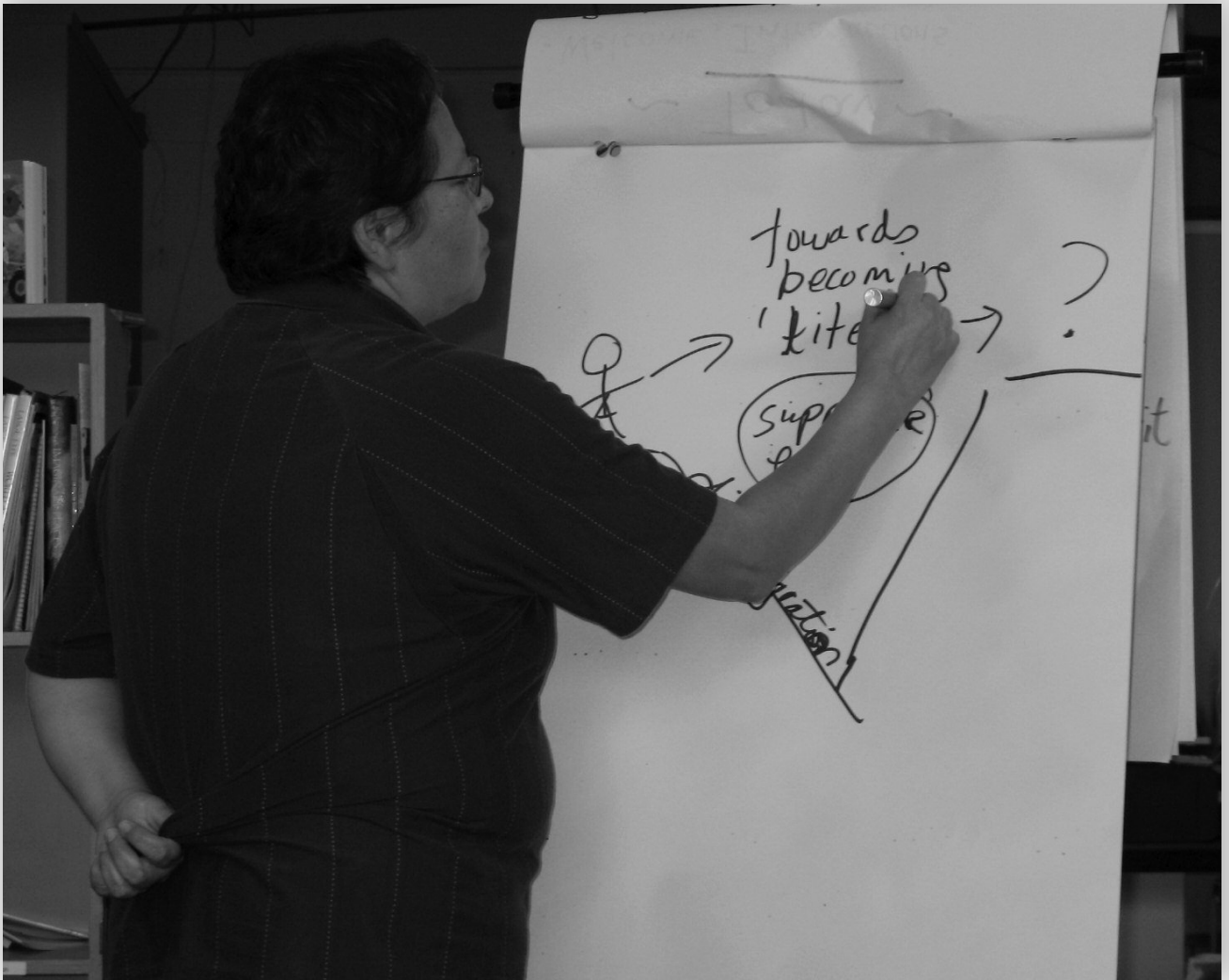
I think—I know—for some learners just coming back in the literacy program is that moment. Because of their prior experiences with education. Their experience of sitting down and trying to say to somebody, "I don't know how to do this; can you help me?" And getting

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treated badly for disclosing they can't read or write as well as everybody. I know one guy recently came and he talked about the shame and the humiliation of not doing as much as he could out in the community. Because as much as he wanted to help the community, he always felt like "Well, any moment they're going to ask me to write this, or to read that!" But he wants to be there, you know? He wants to contribute to the life of the community and he was wrestling with how shameful that is and he broke down and cried over it. And I couldn't do anything except sit there and let him do that. Because, you know, I did understand—I've never been there in the same way that he has, but I could understand how awful that feels.

So I think there is that, I think he needed to tell that story even though it opened him up to all the flood of bad feeling he has about learning and being in learning situations. So I think part of the [power of] storytelling is something to do with the environment and having the space we provide and sitting there with people in that space. ■

SALLY GAIKEZHEYONGAI has worked in the adult literacy field for thirteen years serving mainly Aboriginal adult learners. For five years now she has been the Program Coordinator for an Anglophone program in west end Toronto which serves a more diverse community. The Story and Diversity project was a chance to work with other practitioners to explore the use of narratives in similar programs. Sally is also an author, storyteller, and an avid reader.



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Sally explaining the process of change at an early meeting of the Beyond Active Listening project. The project report is available online at www.literaciesoise.ca/story.htm.