

# Standing in the moment

by Sarah Dermer

■ I teach a lower-level spelling group on Friday afternoons. We shout out sounds and words together. We sing together, play games together. We joke a little bit. Bad jokes, mostly.

A couple of months ago, when I suggested we call it quits for the day, one of my learners yelled out, in anger. When I asked him to leave, he swore at me. I wheeled him out of there. Fast.

It probably didn't feel good for him, bursting out in anger, the swearing. It didn't feel good for the rest of the learners. And it sure didn't feel good for me. It hung over me all weekend.

I'd been auditing Guy Ewing's course, "Introduction to New Literacy Studies," at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). That week, one of our readings was Chapter 6, "Bringing the Whole Person to Learning," from Jenny

Horsman's *Too Scared to Learn*. She writes that, as literacy workers, it is our job to teach not just to the mind, but to the body, to the heart and to the spirit. I read: "It is crucial to recognize the spirit when teaching literacy."

The spirit suddenly seemed important, seemed to be the piece that was missing for me. The piece that could help me problem solve around what had happened with my learner on Friday, for his sake and for mine. I started asking literacy workers to tell me about their relationship with the spirit.

## Asking colleagues about spirit

Jan Sherman, my colleague at Action Read in Guelph, Ont., applies traditional Aboriginal teachings, beliefs and values to her literacy and



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**At Action Read we help learners find their true selves, their true passions. We provide a space for acceptance, for community.**

storytelling work. She told me that the “spirit is everything.” The spirit is the essence of who we are. “You are in a state of imbalance without the spirit.” If the spirit is happy, then the mind is clear, we feel happy, we make good choices for the physical body. For Winnipeg-based educator and artist Sandi Howell it is that we are on a “mission to assist respectfully...the best outcome we get is when someone’s spirit is engaged.” Ningwakwe, who has been involved in Aboriginal literacy for over 20 years, said that, as literacy workers, we can help to unblock learners by “nourishing the learning spirit. We can’t talk about learning without the spirit.”

“Oh,” I answered. As if I had known all along.

I had no idea how to “nourish the learning spirit.”

Janice Brant, an adult educator in Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory, said it is very natural for her to talk about the spirit with learners. Through drumming and singing, through sharing circles and offering thanksgiving, she helps learners build a spiritual toolbox. This toolbox is something that her learners can open anytime and pull out the spiritual tools they need.

“Oh,” I said. As if I, too, could help my learners build a spiritual toolbox. Except that I couldn’t envision what spiritual tools I would give my learners to put in their toolboxes.

In her women’s group at Action Read, Jan Sherman talks about the spirit in terms of what gets the women really excited. “What makes your hearts feel really happy?” she asks them. “The spirit has to do with learning to love ourselves, accepting ourselves as we are today, taking opportunities to make changes.” Jan wants every woman in the group to “love herself, to feel good about herself, however that needs to be.” Working with the spirit means helping learners “walk and honour their truth.” For Jan, it means giving learners the tools “to love and accept themselves for who they are,” to know the beauty of themselves inside.

Nancy Pinnell has taught learners of all ages, all across Canada. She told me that it is our job to “help people find what they’re passionate about,” to help them find what touches them in deep ways. When she sees a spark in learners, when they’re accessing an energy for learning and change, that’s when she knows she has touched the spirit.

Anne Moore, a “fellow literacy worker in spirit, if not always in practice,” says, “to connect with people of all backgrounds and to hear their stories and share your own life energy in an open and honest way—which is what the work demands—is by nature a spiritual act.” She talks about how her life has been “shifted” and “transformed” through hearing people’s stories. Bonnie Soroke, who is writing curriculum in Belfast, says she connects with spirit through humour and laughter. Tannis Atkinson, the founding editor of *Literacies*, says that when we talk about literacy and the spirit, we are talking about community building.

## Spirit in practice

Helping learners find their true selves, their true passions, that’s familiar to me. Providing a space for acceptance, for community, I try to do that with my colleagues at Action Read every day. I know my learners and I are doing good work when we are hilarious, when we’re laughing together, when we all walk away thanking each other for the good work we’ve done that day. When I am listening to what my learners are saying and what they are wanting to say, those are good days. My spiritual toolbox is full of all kinds of tools, I realize. In fact, sometimes it’s the learners who provide me with the tools to restock my toolbox. Those are the best days of all.

But what happens when my spiritual toolbox is getting empty? When I have used all those tools already? When I am trying hard to laugh, listen, engage with learners the best I can? And then one of my learners swears at me? How do I nourish the spirit then?

I spoke with Michele Kuhlman, a literacy worker at the Davenport Perth Neighbourhood Centre. She talked with me about those days in literacy that are particularly stressful, those days when things are feeling spiritless. Michele says that all she can do is “stand there in the moment,” something she learned from her meditation practice. She has learned that all she can focus on is today. That she can only work with people where they are in that moment. Just “standing there in the moment” allows her to see what is important.

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## Returning to the spelling group

I decided to take Michele's "focus on today" approach with the learner from my Spelling Group. I called him at his group home and we talked about what had happened. I asked him what had made him so angry, but he said he didn't know. I shared with him how it had felt to be on the receiving end of his anger. He apologized. We decided he would take a week off from the group. And when he came back, we returned to our regular routine of shouting

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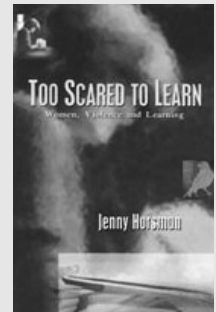
sounds and joking around. We had heard one another the best we could and we had quietly agreed not to colour our future time together with that one bad afternoon. We had decided to just focus on today, perhaps.

I heard Jenny Horsman's words again: "Recognize the spirit when teaching literacy." I suppose the spirit is something that I am accessing every day, even if I have not been calling it "the spirit." When I am helping my learners "walk their truth," I am connecting with the spirit. When I am giving learners space and time to tell their stories, I am connecting with the spirit. When my learners and I are laughing together, I am connecting with the spirit. When I am helping them find what makes them happy, when I am connecting with my learners in a deep way, I am nourishing my learners' learning spirit and my own. And, on those days when my spiritual toolbox is empty, when my teaching and learning is feeling spiritless, I can try to "stand in the moment," to just "focus on today." To know that this moment will pass too, that this moment does not have to be every moment. And perhaps, in that moment, I can connect to the spirit then, too. ■

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## Food for thought from *Too Scared to Learn*

"I think Edna Manatawabi said when we're talking about literacy we're talking about expressing the spirit within, birth, you know trying to find that spirit to let it out" (Interview, First Nation Instructors, Toronto, January, 1997)... "The suggestion is not simply that rekindling spirit is crucial to literacy learning, but that literacy may be part of the self-expression and meaning making which supports rekindling spirit" (p. 171).



"Building some sense of being a whole person, and feeding the spirit so that feeling worthless is not the strongest sense a woman has when trying to learn, can open up the possibility of bringing emotions, body and mind actively into the literacy learning process. Although embracing the concept of spirit may challenge literacy workers who have not previously recognized this aspect of the learner, the enhanced potential for learning may offer startling results" (p. 184).

Horsman, Jenny (1999/2000). *Too Scared to Learn: Women, Violence and Education*. Toronto: McGilligan Books/Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

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