

## Discussion Paper # 2

### Literacy: Inspiring Hope

Ningwakwe

In Discussion Paper # 1, I spoke about an approach to intake and assessment based on the Medicine Wheel that a program in downtown Toronto uses. The Executive Director of the program told me that the activities that spring from this initiative are about giving **hope** to their clients. As he said the word **hope**, I got a warm feeling around my Heart. I've come to understand that, when something touches my Heart, it is a message from Creator to pay attention. Several thoughts and feelings went through my Being all at the same time. First and foremost was a finding that by the late Dr. C.R. Snyder. He was a University of Kansas psychologist who

*"...discovered that **hope** was a better predictor of [college students']... first-semester grades than were their scores on the SAT, a test supposedly able to predict how students will fare in college (and highly correlated with IQ)."*<sup>1</sup>

The second thought was about Paulo Freire's book, Pedagogy of **Hope**: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed. In this work, he stated that **hope** must be rooted in practice, that our task is "*...to unveil opportunities for **hope**, regardless of the obstacles.*"<sup>2</sup>

My third thought was more of a question. I wondered what the Aboriginal teachings say about **hope**. I thought of what Kenn Richard, Executive Director, Native Child Family Services Toronto said in his talk on National Aboriginal Day 2005 as he reiterated the Anishnawbe prophecy that the seventh prophet, or seventh fire tells us of

*a time when a younger generation would regain the people's pride and greatness after a period of loss, tragedy and alienation. Many believe that this seventh generation has been born.*<sup>3</sup>

As I was thinking about **hope** in our lives and, by extension, the lives of Learners I wrote it in block letters across the top of the page: **H O P E**. Almost immediately I saw the words "Helping Our People Excel". At that moment, I understood that this phrase encapsulates our journey in literacy with Learners, especially with Learners who have experienced violence and trauma.

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<sup>1</sup> Goleman, Daniel (1994). *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. New York: Bantam Books.

<sup>2</sup> Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Retrieved, from <http://www.perfectfit.org/CT/freire5.html> February 22, 2006

<sup>33</sup> Richard, Kenn (2005). *The Seventh Generation: Bringing Hope to Aboriginal Children and Their Families*. National Aboriginal Day 2005. Retrieved from [http://www.voicesforchildren.ca/documents/Voices\\_National-Aboriginal-Day-2005.pdf](http://www.voicesforchildren.ca/documents/Voices_National-Aboriginal-Day-2005.pdf) February 22, 2006

## What is hope?

**Hope**, in my view, is much more than wishful thinking. It denotes a sense of optimism, a sense that we can make the world a better place. As Snyder says, “*Having hope means believing you have both the will and the way to accomplish your goals whatever they may be.*”<sup>4</sup> He suggests that people need three kinds of thoughts in order to have **hope**: thoughts about their goals, thoughts about how they will achieve their goals, and beliefs that they can begin and follow through on actions to achieve their goals.<sup>5</sup> If you are interested in finding out more, you can use the online version of Dr. Snyder’s test of hopefulness at <http://www.psych.ku.edu/faculty/rsnyder/adults.htm#Hope%20Scale>.

I believe that the Learners who come to literacy programs have some semblance of **hope** – even the ones who must come in order to stay on social assistance. They would not come to us if they did not have **hope**. They still see what they want – and what they don’t want. Here are some of the things Learners I’ve met in the past year have told me they want to get out of coming to a literacy program:

- to be able to read to their children or to help with their homework
- to participate more meaningfully on a committee or Board
- to take a more active part in making decisions that impact on their lives
- to take advantage of a volunteer or job opportunity that they believe will help them to give **hope** to others.

One Learner I know had taken care of her husband through his terminal illness. She worked her way through the literacy program, and is now in college preparing to become a Palliative Care Worker. She has **hope**, and wants to pass it on to others.

As I was pondering the role of **hope** in people’s lives, I was drawn to the work of the Dynamics of Hope Consultants, in Phoenix, Arizona. They are involved in Spiritual Counselling and see **hope** as having three activities:

- reaching out – connecting with our family, community, our loved ones, or someone that we believe can help us
- reaching up – turning to the Creator, to our traditions, or a higher power
- reaching in – looking at ourselves, our Spirits, our issues and our lives<sup>6</sup>

I think we do this in adult literacy work. Literacy Learners **reach out** to us when they walk through our doors, and they may already be **reaching up** in ways that we can enhance in the literacy program. In Discussion Paper #3 --Locus of Control I explore how Learners **reach in**, and how we can help them to do so.

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<sup>4</sup> Goleman, Daniel. Hope Emerges as Key to Success in Life. Retrieved from <http://www.npsychotherapy.com/hope.html> February 23, 2006

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from “Teaching Hope” page, a summary of Snyder, C. R. (2000). The past and possible futures of hope. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*. 19,11-28. Positive Psychology Centre, University of Pennsylvania. Retrieved from <http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/teachinghope.htm> March 10, 2006

<sup>6</sup> Retrieved from <http://dynamicsofhope.com>

**Think about how your program responds to the Learners as they reach out, reach up or reach in.**

### **Can we teach hope?**

My experience has been that not many Learners say that they come to a literacy program to deal with the violence or trauma in their lives. Yet, that seems to be the effect. Recently I presented the Rainbow/Holistic Approach to (Aboriginal) Literacy at a workshop for Learners in a program in downtown Toronto. After I explained the approach I asked the Learners to share how the literacy program had made a difference in their lives. Without exception the Learners spoke about the impact of violence or trauma in their lives. Every Learner talked about changing how they dealt with violence and trauma, and how those changes affected how they felt about themselves.

When I think of the Learners who come to literacy programs, I often see people who have been through a revolving door syndrome – they don't meet the criteria here or a program moved along too quickly there. Many realize that the mainstream programs do not consider or accommodate the circumstances that affect their ability to be “present” – physically and otherwise. Most certainly, Learners who have experienced violence or trauma may only be able to be minimally “present” for literacy-related activities, particularly if something in the environment reminds them of the original event. That is, they dissociate. Here is what psychologists know about dissociation:

*When people dissociate, by definition, a lot of their capacity becomes impaired, at least temporarily. Their ability to focus, pay attention, think clearly, solve problems, see escape routes, stay grounded to the details of external reality, and remain emotionally connected to events on the ground – all are substantially diminished. This is because of the constriction, withdrawal, and detachment that are the essence of this altered mind state – the price we pay for the reduction of pain, fear, and emotional distress during the trauma.<sup>7</sup>*

Learners who have experienced violence or trauma have had their **hope** somewhat eroded, yet a glimmer is still there. They continue to reach out. They continue to come to the program.

**Think about the ways in which the Learners demonstrate hope when they first come to your program.**

**How does your program recognize and nurture that hope?**

**What difference has that made in Learners' lives?**

**What difference has it made in your work?**

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<sup>7</sup> Naparstek, Belleruth (2004). *Invisible Heroes: Survivors of Trauma and How They Heal*. New York: Bantam Books.

## Helping Learners have hope

Dr. Snyder has suggested tips for helping children and adults raise their **hope** levels. He suggests using stories to help people think hopefully. He says,

*If you think about it, a typical children's story or fairy-tale involves a protagonist who's trying to go after a goal, who may run into some kind of impediment or blockage, and then may have to come up with a way to work around that blockage. Finally, the protagonist will have to raise the mental energy to go after the goal.<sup>8</sup>*

In my experience, this works with adults, including me. I've even gotten a sense of hope from many Aboriginal legends and Creation stories. Here's an example from The Mishomis Book, The Voice of the Ojibway:

*As the Midewiwin developed so did the people develop both physically and spiritually. The music of the people grew. The teachings grew. This "Beauty Way" of speaking and walking reinforced all the teachings of generosity, love, respect, honor, humility, obedience, and **hope**.<sup>9</sup>*

I believe that practitioners in literacy and education programs already do many things to raise hope.

**Think about how you use story in your program.  
Do you use stories in ways that promote hope?**

## What we can do to build hope

For your convenience, I am including a list of ways to help adults set goals, to decide what they need to do to reach their goals, and to become ready to act. Snyder says people do not have to follow all of the tips, but

*... adding a few to one's life can help enhance hopeful thinking...Although there is no one recipe for impacting **hope**, realizing that one can learn to think this way is crucial for becoming more hopeful...[remember] that the lessons in hopeful thinking begin at birth and continue throughout all the subsequent days of one's life.<sup>10</sup>*

### Tips for setting goals

- Become more aware of the decisions you make about important goals
- Set a goal because it is something you really want, not what someone else wants for you

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<sup>8</sup> Community Profiles. Retrieved from [http://www.eclg.com/community\\_snyder.php](http://www.eclg.com/community_snyder.php) February 22, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Benton-Banai, Edward (1988). *The Mishomis Book, The Voice of the Ojibway*. Saint Paul, MN: Red School House (p. 72).

<sup>10</sup> Snyder, C.R.. Approaching Hope. *SGI Quarterly*. Retrieved from <http://www.sgi.org/english/Features/quarterly/0601/feature1.htm> February 22, 2006.

- Make goals that stretch you – try to do things that are harder than what you’ve done in the past
- Come up with goals for different parts of your life (relationships, friendships, work, home)
- Decide which goals are most important and which are least important
- Work on a few goals at a time. Focus on your most important goals
- Come up with ways to recognize whether you have reached each goal
- Be sure you give yourself enough time for the important goals
- Do not let yourself be interrupted as you work on these important goals

#### Tips for finding pathways to your goals

- Think of several ways to reach each of your goals
- Choose the best path for each goal
- For long-range goals, break them down into steps.
- Work on one step at a time. Start with the first step
- Mentally go over what you would do if you face an obstacle
- When what you are doing does not help you reach your goal, do not blame yourself. Remember, this will help you find another way to reach your goal
- If you need to learn a new skill to reach one of your goals, give yourself time to learn the skill
- Ask other people to help you plan how to reach your goals

#### Tips for becoming motivated

- Learn how to talk to yourself in positive ways (e.g. “I can do this!”)
- Look ahead. Think about any obstacles you might face and what you can do about them
- Think of problems as challenges
- Remember things you have done well, especially when you are facing a problem or obstacle
- Learn to laugh at yourself, and enjoy a good laugh with your friends
- If you have problems reaching your goal, redefine it or think of a substitute
- Enjoy working on your goals as much as reaching them
- Take care of your body. This means
  - Get enough sleep
  - Eat several small meals instead of a few big ones
  - Eat most of your food early in the day instead of close to bedtime
  - Cut back on cigarettes and alcohol
  - Cut back on coffee, tea and anything else full of caffeine
  - Get physically active doing something you enjoy
  - Spend time in the sunshine each day, or sit under bright lights<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Adapted from “Approaching Hope” by C.R. Snyder. Retrieved from <http://www.sgi.org/english/Features/quarterly/0601/feature1.htm> February 22, 2006.

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