

Light Onwords / Light Onwards

LIVING LITERACIES TEXT OF THE  
NOVEMBER 14-16, 2002 CONFERENCE AT YORK UNIVERSITY



# The Rainbow/Holistic Approach to Aboriginal Literacy

by Ningwakwe (Priscilla George)

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**PART TWO: LANGUAGE AND ORALITY**

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## Acknowledgements

It is an honour to be selected to do a presentation at this "international gathering of writers, philosophers, critics, teachers, activists, technologists and performers to discuss the philosophy of literacy."

I commend the organizing team – Frontier College, Stong College, and the Department of English, York University – for their critical questions:

1. What are the many voices of literacy? How do voices articulate? How are they being heard?
2. Must traditional literacy understanding be transformed in the age of the electronic screen?
3. Has the professionalization of literacy studies divorced that study from literacy?
4. How do we connect academia to the literacy community and the electronic media?

Such overarching, visionary questions, along with the very name of this conference have literally opened the doors (of my mind) and brought me to speak to you about the Aboriginal concept of "energy." "Living" means have a life force, "energy." Jonathan Goldman, Director of the Sound Healers Association and President of Spirit Music in Boulder, Colorado, says:

Everything in the universe is in a state of vibration. The chair you may be sitting on is in a state of vibration ... "Resonance" is the frequency at which an object most naturally vibrates. Everything has resonant frequency whether or not we can audibly perceive it. From the orbits of the planets around the sun to movement of the electrons around atoms, everything is vibrating.... It is also important to note that, in alignment with this concept of sound, every organ, bone and tissue in your body has its own separate resonant frequency. Together they make up a composite frequency, a harmonic that is your own personal vibratory rate.

That is, everything is alive, everything is "living." It's just a matter of how we "read" that energy that becomes our "living literacies." But first a bit of background on how what I'm about to present to you came to manifest itself physically.

## Introduction/Background

I have been so truly blessed in the past fifteen years that I've worked with Aboriginal literacy practitioners and Learners. It is through their sharing from their Hearts and Spirits with me that I have been able to make a few observations as to print-based and print-related ways to take a holistic approach to literacy – I say print-based because, to date, that's what the funders expect. It is my sincere desire that I do justice to the words and the hard work of the practitioners and Learners in what I am about to share.

I have come to understand literacy as being more than the written word in the two official languages of this country – English and French. I have been encouraged in this understanding through my frequent interaction with Elders, practitioners, and Learners.

The framework that I am about to present to you is really a story of a number of different literacies coming together.

In 1996, I was asked by Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) to write a second book on Aboriginal literacy. My first one, *Empowering the Spirit*, written in 1991, described what programs in Ontario were doing. MTCU suggested that it was time for an update, and that this second booklet look at programming outside of Ontario.

I found out that Parkland Regional College in Yorkton, Saskatchewan, had put together an advisory committee of Aboriginal literacy practitioners from across Canada. They were overseeing the development of a multimedia kit for Aboriginal literacy. I realized that this group was just about to have a meeting in Saskatoon. I invited myself to their meeting, because I felt these people could give me some good insights into which programs to visit for inclusion in the booklet.

Through a "synchronicity," I went into that meeting with one contract, and came out with two. The group was looking for an author to do the written portion of this multimedia kit. They needed somebody Aboriginal, and somebody who knew literacy. The facilitator asked if I could step out of the room for just a few minutes. I did. When they called me back into the room, they offered me the contract. Things like this have been happening to me since I have consciously and consistently involved Creator in my work.

The best is yet to come. Not only did they offer me the contract, but they wanted me to approach the work in a specific way. This committee had been meeting for a few months, and had agreed that, for Aboriginal Peoples, there were many types of literacy – not just the written word. The committee asked that I use the rainbow as a symbol, that I research each colour of the rainbow, and assign a type of literacy for each colour. They had absolutely no way of knowing that my Anishnawbe Spirit Name translated into English is Rainbow Woman. Synchronicity! This was my sign that I was meant to be there, that I was meant to do this work.

Also in 1996, I was contracted to do some work with the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition (ONLC). The MTCU had just come out with a document entitled "Program Reform." This document basically defined literacy, who was eligible to participate in literacy programs, and who was not, what activities constitute literacy, and what the measurable performance indicators would be. Aboriginal language literacy had a narrow and restrictive definition. In fact, the definition of literacy itself needed expanding. It considered only cognitive outcomes that would result in Learners going on to further education or training, to getting a (better) job, or to independence. In a resounding voice, practitioners told me that the most important outcomes for the Learners with whom they were working were actually non-cognitive. In fact, those qualitative outcomes were actually a necessary foundation for the cognitive outcomes. So, it was really refreshing to see that a national committee of Aboriginal literacy practitioners had said that, for us, there are actually many types of literacies.

Institutional educational systems have tended to focus on Mind, through cognitive outcomes – and possibly Body, through physical education, and subjects that teach a physical skill, such as woodworking. That is, fifty percent of who we are, that is, our Spirit and Heart, is not being recognized and nurtured in the institutional educational system.

I believe that a lot of this reductionistic, compartmentalized approach stems from the seventeenth century. Rene Descartes, the philosopher sometimes referred to as the

founding father of modern medicine made a turf deal with the Pope. He needed human bodies for dissection, and promised that he wouldn't have anything to do with the soul, the mind, or the emotions. These became the purview of the church. This deal heralded the Cartesian era, or Cartesian thought, which is dominated by reductionistic methodology, which attempts to understand life by examining the tiniest pieces of it, and then extrapolating from these pieces to overarching surmises about the whole (Pert). Native Peoples on this continent did not know about Cartesian thought and still saw the four parts as an inseparable whole.

In compiling the research for the work that I did with the ONLC, I came up with a possible solution to the restrictive definition that MTCU had for literacy. A long-time friend, Diane Hill, Mohawk, Six Nations of the Grand River Territory had been part of a teaching team with the First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI). This teaching team had been using the Medicine Wheel as a model for education. This is sometimes referred to as the Wheel of Life.

Aboriginal traditional teachings tell us that we are Spirit, Heart, Mind, and Body (Hill). To have a life of balance, we must recognize and nurture all four parts of ourselves. That is, I suggest that Aboriginal literacy is about recognizing the symbols that come to us through Spirit, Heart, Mind, and Body, interpreting them and acting upon them for the improvement of the quality of our lives.

Through this research, I have developed an appreciation for some further work that the FNTI teaching team had done – postulating learning outcomes for each of:

- Spirit – an attitude or insight;
- Heart – a feeling about oneself or others;
- Mind – knowledge; and,
- Body – a skill.

I take this to mean that a holistic approach, one that addresses Spirit and Heart, focuses more on process than on product.

Since then, I have felt inspired to superimpose the Medicine Wheel over the Rainbow Approach, and to suggest a learning outcome for Spirit, Heart, Mind, and Body for each of the types of literacy. That work evolves as I hear from Learners and practitioners across the country.

I knew that if funders were to consider the Medicine Wheel model of learning, I would have to educate those with access to authority and decision-making in government (I had worked in the Ontario provincial government for seven years). This meant that I would have to find scientific and educational research that corroborated this Medicine Wheel Approach.

I found the work of The HeartMath Institute, which asserts that the electromagnetic frequencies (EMF) of the heart are five thousand times greater than that of the brain (Childre and Howard with Beech). That is, it's the heart that entrains the brain, not the other way around as we've been socialized to believe.

Aboriginal Peoples have always believed that everything has a "Spirit." In modern scientific terms, this could be called energy or an EMF. Aboriginal Peoples also believe that thoughts, words, intentions, and feelings have energy. I would like to quote Gregg Braden, who has professional careers in earth sciences, aerospace, and in senior computer systems:

The path of internal technology remembers that each cell of our bodies is approximately 1.17 volts of electrical potential. Statistics indicate that the average body is composed of approximately 1 quadrillion cells. One quadrillion cells times 1.17 volts of potential for each cell equals approximately 1.17 quadrillion volts of electrical potential per person.

1.17 quadrillion volts is a lot of energy. What activates this energy is our feelings which often translate into thoughts, words, and intentions. I don't know about you, but if I know that I'm capable of that much energy, I want to make sure that whatever I put out there in the universe is positive. In Aboriginal teachings, we say, "What goes around comes around."

My next question was, "*So what entrains or motivates the heart?*" Aboriginal Peoples believe that it is the Spirit. In *Spiritual Intelligence, The Ultimate Intelligence*, Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall postulate SQ, asserting that it has a neurological basis, and that it integrates all our intelligences. That is, science is just now discovering what Aboriginal Peoples have said all along about the holistic approach, or the teachings of the Medicine Wheel. Further, if Spiritual Intelligence integrates all of our intelligences, then, if we're concentrating on cognitive outcomes only, it's like we're building the third floor of a house when the foundation has not even been solidified yet.

Further, Melvin Morse, M.D., was delighted when:

In 1997, neuroscientists from the University of California at San Diego bravely proclaimed that they had found an area of the human brain that "may be hard-wired to hear the voice of heaven ... the right temporal lobe ... [is] attuned to ideas about the supreme being and mystical experiences." They called this area, "the God Module"

He goes on to say,

In three other books, I had already identified the right temporal lobe as the place where man interfaces with God. It is this area, an area I call "the God Spot" ... where God lives in each of us.

Melvin Morse, M.D., is a practicing paediatrician in Seattle, and has conducted near-death studies in children for fifteen years. Morse found that, after their NDE, these children are not only better balanced in their physical and mental lives, but they are better balanced spiritually. They eat better food, do better in school, and are more mature than most of their peers. They are aware of a connection with the universe that most other kids don't even know exists. They feel a purpose in living, and they don't fear that death is "the end of it all." They trust their intuitions and feel they can connect again with the divine presence they saw when they nearly died, **without having nearly to die again.**

He documented ten "habits" from the children that he studied that "helped them stay in touch with their inner light." They included (and I encourage you to ponder print-based and print-related ways in which we can accomplish these in literacy programming):

1. Exercise
2. Patterns (be here now) – pay attention to life patterns, thoughts and inner feelings ... silence your inner narrator.
3. Family and relationships – develop the habit of listening to others for at least fifteen minutes a day.
4. Trust your inner vision and intuition.

5. Service – help others, even in simple ways.
6. Financial planning ... easier to find spiritual harmony when you have money in the bank and are not burdened with a lot of debt.
7. Diet – eat more fresh fruits and vegetables.
8. Meditation/prayer.
9. Learn to love – acts of kindness to yourself and others.
10. Spirituality – rediscover your relationship with all parts of the Universe.

On a similar note, Howard Gardner of Harvard University has put forward a theory on Multiple Intelligences, or different ways of exploring a subject. Gardner says that human intelligence consists of three components:

- a. a set of skills that enables one to resolve genuine problems encountered in one's life,
- b. the ability to create an effective product or offer a service that is of value in one's culture, and
- c. the potential for finding or creating problems – thereby laying the groundwork for the acquisition of new knowledge.

Gardner suggests eight intelligences, which must meet stringent criteria to be admitted to the list:

1. Potential isolation by brain damage.
2. Existence of idiots savants, prodigies, and other exceptional individuals.
3. An identifiable core operation or set of operations.
4. A distinctive developmental history, along with a definable set of expert "end-state" performances.
5. An evolutionary history and evolutionary plausibility.
6. Support from experimental psychological tasks.
7. Support from psychometric findings
8. Susceptibility to encoding in a symbol system.

The intelligences are:

- i. linguistic – the ability to read, write, communicate with words
- ii. logical-mathematical – the ability to reason and calculate, to think things through in a logical, systematic manner
- iii. visual-spatial – the ability to think in pictures, visualize a final result – recognizes our creative people, such as artists, as well as our visions
- iv. musical – the ability to make or compose music, to sing well, or understand and appreciate music – recognizes our traditional singers
- v. bodily-kinesthetic – the ability to use your body skillfully to solve problems, create products, or present ideas and emotions – recognizes our traditional dancers
- vi. interpersonal – the ability to work effectively with others, to relate to other people and display empathy and understanding, to notice their motivations and goals – I believe this intelligence comes the closest to recognizing Heart
- vii. intrapersonal – the ability for self-analysis and reflection – to be able to quietly contemplate and assess one's accomplishments, to review one's behaviour and innermost feelings, to make plans and set goals, to know oneself – I believe this one comes the closest to recognizing both Heart and Spirit
- viii. naturalist – the ability to recognize flora and fauna, to make other consequential distinctions in the natural world and to use this ability productively. – recognizes our Medicine People.

To quote one of the Elders on the NADC, Denys Auger, from the Bigstone Cree Education Authority,

In our traditional culture, we “read” nature (the environment). We must read and interpret the information we find there, so that we can survive. We use our eyes and brains just like you. We also use our other senses – smell, hearing, taste, and touch – to read the coming weather, the presence of danger, and the health of the land, waters and air. When we don’t hear the frog’s song, we know the land and waters are polluted and cannot support life.

Gardner’s work goes beyond cognitive skills and outcomes. In fact, only two of the intelligences, linguistic and logical-mathematical, can be considered cognitive in nature. I find his work an affirmation of the Anishnawbe Life Road Teachings that we all have “gifts” that we need to recognize and nurture.

I admire the work of Daniel Goleman who postulates that a person’s academic and technical skills only provide them with a foot in the door – at school and at work. What makes the difference once they are in is their “*emotional intelligence*” – which includes factors such as self-awareness, self-discipline, and empathy.

In fact, *Knowledge Matters*, a federal discussion paper that may shape the way the government works with the field on literacy, suggests in Section 3, Strengthening Accessibility and Excellence in Post- Secondary Education, that, “Teamwork is an essential part of the production process, and **interpersonal skills are becoming key determinants of business success.**”

In addition, the *Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey* will measure Teamwork indirectly. In the first section, “About the Survey,” Teamwork is rationalized as:

the importance of interpersonal skills such as those required by teamwork in both work and everyday life ... [those] who wish to participate fully in community and professional life, **increasingly must possess the skills necessary to work in teams.**

In other words, many people are discovering what Aboriginal Peoples have been saying for a long time. There is more to life than the acquisition of cognitive outcomes.

### **National Buy-In**

Two years later, in 1998, I was offered yet another contract. Beverly Sabourin and Associates asked me to help them compile a directory of Aboriginal literacy programs across Canada. These programs had to be Aboriginal-controlled, so they do not include programs that run out of community colleges or school boards. A team of us interviewed practitioners, mostly on-site. A common denominator in our interviews was the fact that practitioners felt isolated, and that they would like to have a national conference so as to meet and discuss with others of like mind.

In order to organize that conference, we put together a national committee. We started out with a core group of seven. Our key selection criterion was to include people who demonstrated their Hearts and Spirits in their work. We called ourselves the National Aboriginal Design Committee (NADC)

At our second meeting in December 1998, I showed this second national committee the work I had done for Parkland Regional College, which I had now come to call *The Rainbow/Holistic Approach to Aboriginal Literacy*.

Another synchronicity happened! Derek Payne, NADC Treasurer, a man from the Sto:lo Nation in British Columbia gasped. He shared that, on his way to the meeting, he had a window seat over the wing of the airplane. He said that, for about half an hour, he saw a circular rainbow on the wing of the airplane. The committee and I discussed the Rainbow Approach, and they endorsed it.

That night, I had a dream about an owl. I shared this dream with the NADC the next day. As we were from several Aboriginal cultures – Mi'kmaq, Anishnawbe, Sto:lo, Cree – we discussed our various understandings of the owl. Our common understanding was that the owl signified wisdom, which is what the various types of literacy meant to us – the acquisition of wisdom, rather than mere cognitive outcomes. Thus was born the logo of the NADC – an owl inside a circular rainbow.

In the meantime, as a result of the National Aboriginal Literacy Gathering, we had expanded the NADC to eighteen people, including Elders and Learners. When I presented the “blended” Rainbow Approach/Medicine Wheel to this expanded committee last year, they felt it had merit. In response to the presentation, Edwina Wetzal, Conne River First Nation, sent me a three-page letter outlining how their community is committed to nurturing Spirit first in their educational programming. I'll read a part of her letter to me:

In a community of 700 people ... There is 100% employment, either full-time or seasonal. Few people leave the reserve. All our directors are Band members.... We have four nurses, three lawyers, 20 educators.... You name it, we have it. We own hunting lodges, a garage, hardware store, grocery stores, construction co., etc.

We have done all this in 20 years.... I still believe we must heal the Spirit first. If your Spirit is dead, how can you get on with life or care? Heal Spirit first – Build self-confidence, self-esteem.

People's mind can dwell on knowledge and skills once Soul is quiet and they can see connection of education with everything else, especially the benefits.

Once they have calm and sense of identity, direction, they have tools to live in modern world & take advantage of what it has to offer

With education, skills and learning they can improve their health and physical world.

To date, I have done thirty-two presentations on parts or all of the Rainbow/Holistic Approach – to approximately fifteen hundred Learners, Elders and practitioners, in most provinces and territories, as well as in Atlanta, Georgia, Australia, and Brazil. Today's presentation makes it thirty-three. Twenty-five of those have been by invitation because people have heard about the work. Another two speaking engagements are lined up, including one in France at a First Nations Forum in February 2003, and another to educators at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

### **The Rainbow**

Red is the first colour of the rainbow, and the colour understood by some Aboriginal cultures

to mean confidence, which has within it the knowing, the ability to plan, to start a process. Red represents the language of origin of First Nations individuals and/or communities.

Since time immemorial, Aboriginal Peoples have lived on this land. We believe that the Creator put us here. Our ancestors did NOT cross the Bering Strait. We had our own Aboriginal languages. A December 14, 1998, press release from Statistics Canada entitled, The Daily says that, as of 1996, Canada has fifty Aboriginal languages, belonging to eleven major language families. In the past one hundred years or more, nearly ten once flourishing languages have become extinct. At least a dozen are on the brink of extinction.

There are special initiatives in the Aboriginal community to keep our languages alive. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples recommends granting special status to Aboriginal languages, providing formal education in the language, and conducting research (Norris). The First Nations Confederacy of Cultural Education Centres (FNCECC) is in the initial stages of developing protective legislation for the preservation, maintenance, promotion, and use of Aboriginal languages in Canada. We need to pool our energies to help each other save Aboriginal languages.

The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) did a study a few years ago, and grouped each of our languages into one of these categories:

Flourishing;  
Enduring;  
Declining;  
Endangered; and,  
Extinct.

Of the fifty or so Aboriginal languages still alive in Canada, only three are flourishing – Ojibway, Cree, and Inuktitut. In 1992, the AFN summarized the importance of Aboriginal languages as follows:

The Aboriginal Languages were given by the Creator as an integral part of life. Embodied in Aboriginal languages is our unique relationship to the Creator, our attitudes, beliefs, values, and the fundamental notion of what is truth. Aboriginal language is an asset to one's own education, formal and informal. Aboriginal language contributes to greater pride in the history and culture of the community; greater involvement and interest of parents in the education of their children, and greater respect for Elders. Language is the principal means by which culture is accumulated, shared and transmitted from generation to generation. The key to identity and retention of culture is one's ancestral language (Ignace).

Only two languages have the status of being official in Canada. They are NOT the languages of the first peoples of this land. A policy or structure that does not recognize and affirm our language serves only to erode our culture, our worldview of interconnectedness.

Ruth Norton and Mark Fettes have this to say about revitalization of Aboriginal languages:

Conversely, a linguistic renaissance must be an integral part of the evolution towards local self-government and the restoration of spiritual and physical health to Aboriginal communities (Castellano, Dabis and Lahache)

Aboriginal literacy programs are part of this linguistic renaissance through the holistic approach that they take to Aboriginal language literacy. Joanne Boyer, Mississauga # 8 First Nation, recently had Learners involved in making medicine pouches. One of the Learners knew how to tan deer-hides and offered to teach that skill to the rest of the class. Learners received the relevant teachings, then went through the various steps of making their own medicine pouches – from tanning the deerhide to cutting and assembling the pouch. Learners had to calculate the costs of materials, as well as the time spent in making the pouch to arrive at a price that would honour their time and energy, yet be attractive to their potential buyers. Initially, they flipcharted the words they would need in English and Anishnawbemowin. They practised the words, then made a decision as to when they would no longer speak English as they continued the project. On one of my visits to their program shortly thereafter, on the walls, I saw flipcharts of their experience written up by the Learners in the language. Other exciting projects that this program has done include making cradleboards and quilts. Learners in this program use their literacy skills in Anishnawbemowin to recognize written words in English.

Aboriginal languages are very descriptive. The words themselves evoke images. In addition, each language has its own sound structure – some more guttural than others. Each has its own rhythm. It can be very comforting and healing to hear somebody speak your own Aboriginal language. We feel an “energy,” a sense of connectedness with this person and the language.

**Orange** – the second colour of the rainbow. It is understood by some Aboriginal cultures to mean balance, the place of choice where we are taught to exercise self-confidence, self-assuredness, self-control, and self-esteem, in order to keep emotions, such as fear, in balance. Orange is often used to denote fire. The first source of fire is the Sun, which is the centre of the universe. People are like the universe in that they also have a centre, a fire within. For Aboriginal Peoples, that centre is the teachings. Aboriginal teachings have been passed from generation to generation orally. Orange symbolizes **the skills required for oral literacy (speaking, listening ...)**

Since time immemorial, our culture has been an oral one. Many of our people have been known for their oratory skills – in their own language of origin and in English. Many of our teachings have been passed down orally – either in ceremony, through songs, or through story-telling.

As I understand it, many skills are required for oral literacy – outstanding listening skills, sometimes referred to as “wholly” listening, critical and reflective thinking, excellent memory and the ability to get one’s point across in a way that can be understood. In Talking Circle as Pedagogy, Fyre Jean Graveline describes this as a commitment “to sit and attentively listen, allowing the wisdom of the teacher/speaker to really be heard.” She says that, “Through respectful listening we are better able to enter into another’s experience through their words.”

In a sense, Aboriginal stories and teachings are like learning spirals – we can hear the same story or teaching a number of times and each time get a different “lesson” out of it, depending on where we are on our own “journeys.”

Words have an energy of their own. Think of the sentence, “I am so glad to see you.” How does it affect you when somebody says that? Is it just the words, or is it the sound of the voice as it carries the words? Jonathan Goldman says: “The human voice seems to be the

most potent creator of sound frequencies that can be coupled with intention ... the voice may be used to heal and transform."

Aboriginal literacy practitioners understand this very well, and they take the time to speak with Learners, ensuring that their words are encouraging – healing. They also teach Learners to find their voice.

Literacy programs are inviting Elders in to share the teachings, and to conduct Talking Circles, either on specific topics, or on something that is important to the Learner that day. In this way, the Learners can use Circle, as Graveline says, as "the building block of community." Certainly, I know that Leanne McLeod of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, through her work in correctional institutions found that these sessions with the Elders gave the Learners a solid foundation for sharing with others in the Circle, and for writing their stories. To further quote Graveline, such a process provides a space so that, "Those previously silenced are encouraged to find their voice and speak up."

Yellow – the third colour of the rainbow, is the colour often used in reference to the moon, and the gathering of food. In Aboriginal tradition, crops are planted and harvested according to the phases of the moon. Some Aboriginal cultures understand yellow to mean creativity. Yellow refers to the creative means by which Aboriginal Peoples had to learn to communicate with others who spoke another language or through other than the written word, by using symbols (pictographs, and in contemporary times, artwork, music) and/or sign language.

Since time immemorial, because of our different languages and linguistic groups, Aboriginal Peoples have had to be creative in the ways in which we communicated – about how to interact/trade with each other, about events that have transpired, and about prophecies. We developed a kind of sign language. We used various art forms for our clothing, lodgings, and surroundings. Pictures or images and colours convey ideas or meaning without the use of words or sounds, but in a much more powerful way. In fact, today we can often tell from a person's regalia what nation they're from.

One of our longest-standing and best-known art forms is the petroglyph, which dates back thousands of years. Petroglyphs record events, visions, and storytelling. The following comes from an article in Discovery Magazine in 1998 by Grant Keddie, Curator of Archaeology, Royal British Columbia Museum:



For up to thousands of years, figures have been carved in stone along the beaches and in forests stretching around the Pacific Rim from California to China. Some of the human face and animal design elements found in British Columbia show interesting parallels with those found along the coast of Siberia.

One of the most common questions I am asked in regard to these rock carvings or petroglyphs is what are they, and what do they mean? Were these designs pecked into the rock by a shaman for a special purpose?

We cannot understand these images by trying to analyze them from the perspective of our modern culture. We need to look to traditional aboriginal cultures that experienced a different reality than that of Euro-Americans.

Reality is not just what we see, but what we have learned to see. In traditional hunter-gather societies, the human and "natural" worlds are interwoven by threads of spiritual power. The natural and supernatural worlds are inseparable; each is intrinsically a part of the other. It is generally understood that natural events that affect people's lives were caused or influenced by human actions.

The first weekend in April, I participated in an invitational conference in Montreal entitled, Literacy, Museums, and the Arts. This was held in conjunction with the Blue Metropolis Literary Festival. Other participants included artists, authors, a singer, and a dancer. It was an affirming experience to hear people talking about the different ways in which we communicate ideas, other than the written word.

In fact, I will share a personal experience. The dancer Lynn Snelling from Montreal did an interpretive dance for us. We were invited to speak into the microphones and share what words came to us, in whatever language they came. I could not find words to describe the welling up of emotion inside me as I picked up on the energy that she conveyed with her hands, eyes, and body movements. There are times when words are inadequate. Karla McLaren, an empath and healer who specializes in the field of physical and emotional trauma, refers to this as the "straightjacket of language." Lynn shared later that she believes that the body has a literacy all its own. If we pay attention, it will let us know what feelings are being blocked and need to be moved.

Literacy programs are using crafts as a way of helping Learners to get in touch with their creativity. Helen McPhaden of the Stardale Women's Association is getting the Learners to do weaving. Previous projects include pottery, quilts, and artwork. One of the Elders with whom Helen consulted on this project said that crafts are away of helping Learners to tap into ancestral memories, our "Spirit." Certainly, Helen finds that the images Learners choose indicate what issues are presenting themselves for healing, or what progress they've made.

Colours have their own frequencies. What colours do you gravitate toward when you are feeling different emotions? What colours do you surround yourself with when you need a certain energy or emotion? Learners in literacy programs are beginning to recognize their emotions by the colours they use or choose.

Green – the fourth colour of the rainbow, is often interpreted to mean growth, going beyond what is familiar, yet remaining true to the teachings. This allows us to live with respect and humbleness. It is used to represent grass and growing things on Mother Earth. Treaties and understandings with the newcomers often included the phrase, "as long as the grasses grow and the rivers flow." Green refers to **literacy in the languages of the European newcomers to this land a little over five hundred years ago, English and/or French, and which have also been given the status of official languages.**

The English and French languages came to this continent only a little over 500 hundred years ago. Yet today, they enjoy the status of official languages. This status means that they are considered to be the language of instruction, except in the territories where some of the Aboriginal languages are considered official in that particular territory.

Literacy practitioners are using literacy in the official languages as a way of reclaiming voice. Larry Loyie and Constance Brissenden have done workshops across Canada to accomplish just that. Larry, a former Learner with the Carnegie Centre in Vancouver, noticed that a lot of books on Aboriginal Peoples were written by non-Aboriginal peoples. He then vowed to be a vehicle for getting Aboriginal Learners to write their own stories. I have here a book entitled *Acimowina* that is an anthology of the writings of Learners in a workshop that Larry and Constance did in Wabasca-Desmerais, Alberta.

Larry has also written a play, *Ora Pro Nobis*, about his experiences in residential school. This play was featured in some First Nations communities and organizations across Canada. His newest book, just released, is *As Long as the Rivers Flow*.

A question that has entered my mind from time to time since I came back from Australia is this whole notion of being able to hear and replicate certain sounds. Western Australia has a policy of recognizing Aboriginal English. It is considered a language, not broken English, something to be fixed. They teach Aboriginal English in the first three years of school, then they move toward Standard Australian English, which is introduced as another way of speaking, rather than the correct way.

If you grow up hearing and using certain sounds, I believe that your voice apparatus is either built for this or adapts to this. What happens when you encounter another language with different sounds than the ones to which you're accustomed? Do you have trouble replicating them? How soothing/healing is that when you have to labour to first remember the word, then make the sounds that constitute the word? I don't have an answer for this yet. Perhaps someday I can discover why this question keeps coming back to me. That's an Aboriginal type of literacy – to recognize that there's a reason why something keeps coming back to you.

Blue – the fifth colour of the rainbow, which some Aboriginal cultures understand to mean truth. Knowing the truth means staying true to your vision, where commitment is most important. Blue is also used to symbolize the colour of the sky. With the coming of the Europeans, the skyline changed, and now contains the tools of technology, such as towers and satellite dishes, that send and receive signals. Blue refers to the skills required to communicate using technology.

For the purposes of literacy programming, I will keep this discussion to computers and on-line learning. I recognize that there are many other types of technology, and, in fact, Laara Fitznor, Doctor of Education at OISE, recently reminded me that our medicines and tools for communicating with the Creator can be considered "technology."

I shared with Charles Ramsey, Executive Director of the National Adult Literacy Database (NALD), that I had been invited to speak at a First Nations forum in Paris in October on *Maintaining a Cultural Identity in a Digital Era*. The program will focus on "Aboriginal New Identity," for which forum organizer, Fulvio Caccia, says "Literacy is a key." I needed a sounding board for how to shape my participation in this event that I see as an opportunity for getting Aboriginal literacy international recognition. Charles shared with me an incident in which he had a request from Pat Paul, Maliseet from the Tobique First Nation, New Brunswick. Pat asked Charles to write to some of the Aboriginal listservs to ask for the mailing addresses of publishers who might publish Aboriginal stories. Among the many responses was one from a woman in Australia who said that she had a web-site, and wondered if Pat would be interested in posting one of his stories. Charles and Pat sent,

"Geow-lud-mo-sis-eg: Little People." That posting resulted in a flood of events that fall into several categories:

1. People writing to say that they wanted to Pat's story on their Web sites as well – Minnesota, Hawaii;
2. People who are teachers in elementary schools who have an Aboriginal piece in their curriculum;
3. People who had heard other "little people" or "creation" stories and wanted to share them – Maine, New Mexico;
4. People who were doing genealogy research and wanted Pat to help them make links to their ancestors;
5. Europeans who are deeply interested in the North American Native cultures;
6. People who were either from Tobique, or their families were from Tobique, wanting to say hello to Pat and some of their relatives;
7. Students wanting Pat's help with their research;
8. Three different people who shared the same story of having been through a very serious illness and who, during the initial recovery period, were visited by the Little People. These Little People were instrumental in helping them through a successful and speedy recovery;
9. People offering interpretation of Native stories;
10. Aboriginal People in other countries wanting to communicate with Aboriginal People in Canada;
11. Requests for permission to translate the story into a foreign language and add it to the public school curriculum of that country.

To date, Pat Paul's story is shown on thirty Web sites. What a celebration and cross-fertilization of culture.

I would like to begin to build on Dr. Fitznor's reminder to me of Aboriginal "technology." From our perspective, the items that make up our medicine bundles have a purpose. They help us to perform a ceremony, to focus on and communicate with the Creator, to transmit and receive messages.

Through many of the faith systems that I've had the good fortune to study over the past few years, I've come to understand that our modern inventions are really just a prototype of what we're capable of if we remember who we are, that we are Spirit, that we are each Creator individualized. Many of us have grandparents who did not need a telephone or an e-mail to know that we were coming to visit. They just knew – a twitch over the eye, meaning that they were going to "see" someone.

Indigo – the sixth colour of the rainbow, is often referred to as the colour of the night-time sky, the dream time, when Aboriginal Peoples are more open to receiving messages from the Spirit World. This colour also refers to the "third-eye chakra," which means "spiritual seeing." Indigo refers to **the skills required for spiritual or cultural literacy – the ability to interpret dreams, visions, or natural events, which are seen to be messages from the Spirit World – the sighting of an animal, the shape of a cloud, seeing a certain person at a particular point in time, and so forth.**

Since time immemorial, Aboriginal Peoples have believed in a Spirit World, what we often refer to as our "unseen helpers" – unseen with the naked eye that is, but most certainly seen with the Spirit Eye.

We believe that Spirit speaks to us in imagery, thoughts, sounds, and feelings. Some cultures call this clairvoyance (images and visions), claircognizance (just a knowing, without even knowing how you know), clairaudience (hearing sounds, such as an inner voice or an actual voice, or even a certain song at a certain point in time so that it has a message for you), and clairsentience (feelings in or on the body – tingles, tiny tears at the corner of your eyes when you don't even feel sad). My experience has been that we need to learn to recognize these, and to interpret what they mean. The effects of the Cartesian Era and a system that focuses only on that which can be validated by science has socialized this way of knowing out of a lot of people, not just Aboriginal Peoples.

At the Niagara Regional Native Centre, Jacquie Labonte gave Learners the option of participating in a sweat lodge. Approximately forty percent chose to do so. As they related experiences in the lodge to each other, they began to interpret the images they had seen. They began to understand that, for Aboriginal Peoples, many events in life are to be interpreted symbolically and archetypally. At one point, this group was considering doing a "dictionary" of the images.

Violet – the seventh colour of the rainbow, is often thought to be a healing colour. Some Aboriginal cultures understand violet to mean wisdom, the ability to understand things, to have true power (inner and spiritual), to respect, and to know in a holistic way. Violet refers to **the holistic base to Aboriginal literacy, the way in which we integrate all of the above – facilitating spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical learning outcomes – striving for balance.**

Since time immemorial, Native Peoples have recognized the importance of nurturing Spirit, Heart, Mind, and Body. We have long looked to the teachings of the Universe to help us. In fact, in my Anishnawbe language, the word for teach, "ahkinomagai" means "The earth is our teacher." Through its cyclical changes, through the animals, through every aspect of Mother Earth, we learn about embodying kindness, sharing, respect, honesty.

When Learners come to literacy programs, this is often the very first time that somebody has treated them as a whole person. This is an energy they are not used to, and are hungry for. When Learners are "fed" with kindness, sharing, respect, and honesty, their Spirit is nourished, their foundation is strengthened.

I have an empirical hypothesis. When Learners' Spirits and Hearts are nurtured, they can learn at rates they never before thought possible. They go on to become role models for other Learners.

Literacy practitioners are teaching Learners to take care of themselves spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically. When their lives are out of balance, they learn to ask the most important question of themselves, "In what ways am I nurturing myself in each of those areas?"

In the words of Rita Buffalo, a Learner from Thunder Bay on the NADC,

It was important for me to know that I was always welcome in the program. There was no such thing as failure. When I did badly in some of the work, I was sat down and patiently taught the right way to do the work. I was encouraged and praised to go on, and not forced to complete in a certain amount of time what needed to be done.

Research shows that students rate the quality of their relationship with their instructor as the number one factor in whether or not they enjoy learning.

### **Conclusion**

My Heart and Spirit go out to Aboriginal literacy practitioners. They see beyond cognitive outcomes. They help Learners to recognize their “gifts,” only one of which is the ability to read and write in English. They go that extra mile to provide an atmosphere that makes space for the Learners to grow as a whole person. Each and every day, they make a difference in someone’s life.

On October 24th, the NADC and I presented a Position Paper on Aboriginal Literacy to Senator Thelma Chalifoux, Chair of the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples. I invite you to share with me your most effective interaction with the Learners, to consider what made it effective. I’m positive that, in the process, you engaged Heart and Spirit – both yours and that of the Learner.

I started out my talk acknowledging many people. I would now like to acknowledge the Spirit World. Life took on a different tone for me when I learned to put my trust in Creator to guide and direct my work, my life. It’s a privilege to walk with Creator and with all of you on this sacred journey.

Gichi Miigwech!

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### **Ningwakwe - Priscilla George**

Priscilla George is Anishnawbe from the Chippewas of Saugeen First Nation in Southern Ontario. She firmly believes in the holistic approach to literacy and to life: balancing the Spirit, Heart, Mind, and Body. An educator for over thirty-five years, George developed the literacy program at the Native Women’s Resource Centre in Toronto in 1987. She has also authored books on Native Literacy for national projects with Parkland Regional College and with the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition.