

# “How I Spent My Summer Vacation”

## *Letters between Literacy Workers*

*Tannis Atkinson has worked as a literacy worker in a community-based program in Toronto. She has also been instrumental in the formation of an Ontario-based literacy network. She is currently a freelance writer and continues to be involved in the Ontario literacy community.*

*Anne Moore is an active member of Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy (MTML) and a literacy worker at Parkdale Project Read (PPR) in Toronto. She brings to her work a rich experience of working in and visiting developing countries.*

*Tracy Westell has been a literacy worker at PPR for four years. She has contributed a lot of time to the formation of the Ontario Literacy Coalition and to lobbying the provincial and federal governments for literacy funding.*

We are three women who have worked in community based literacy in Toronto over the last several years. We decided to write a piece together about women and literacy but we didn't have time to get together. As we were all off on our summer vacations we realized that we would all be thinking about work anyway, and decided to write letters to each other.

Letters were a natural choice for all of us for different reasons: Tannis had travelled a lot and found through letters a strong connection with friends; Anne felt it was a personal way of communicating her ideas because she knew who she was talking to; for Tracy, letter writing is informal and direct and allows you to have a voice in a way that essay writing doesn't. All three of us are white, middle class, university educated women with a shared experience of the education system. We all feel that the education system discouraged us from writing from a personal perspective. The directness and honesty of the learners we have worked with has inspired us to rediscover the voices we lost through our formal education.

The place we all visited this summer helped us to focus our concerns about education and women. When we met after our holidays we were delighted and surprised by the number of shared themes running through our letters and thoughts.

In September we sat around a kitchen table and read our letters aloud to one another. We realized that these were things that we had all been thinking about for years. We had never before talked about them and felt unsure whether anybody else shared our feelings.

Our letters were affirming for each other but also saddened us. Around us in our work we see the energy and ideals of community literacy workers being worn away; the obstacles standing between women, and education that affirms us; the way the education system unjustly and ineffectively uses its resources.

Particularly we were struck that although women are the majority of literacy workers, volunteer tutors and potential learners, women's issues are virtually ignored, even by ourselves. Like pots simmering on the back burners, we have kept quiet for too long. It's time we take a risk and come to a boil.

BY TANNIS ATKINSON, ANNE MOORE & TRACY WESTELL

DEAR ANNE AND TANNIS:

I am sitting on a hill above the ocean in Nova Scotia. Thinking about work in this context brings up strange images: in the distance lies a tranquil sea that gives off a steady rhythmical sound and that fertile, moist smell that draws me back again and again to this spot: I know that if I walked down the hill to the rocks I would be drawn in to the overpowering intimacy of the sea, alternately frightening and soothing with its crashing waves, untenable/unknowable presence and murky depths. The tide goes in and out. My rhythm changes by the sea; I move languidly in and out of feeling the intensity of my connections to people and understanding the necessity of distance, the distance that gives perspective and occasionally, understanding.

You may wonder what all this has to do with working as a feminist in a community-based literacy program. I am confused by the role I should play as a feminist teaching adult women to read and write. In discussions with Anne, I have realized that my educated, middle class feminist consciousness is being raised and that my teachers are the poor, educationally disadvantaged women in my program. Anne reminded me of a quote from Alice Munro, "Any woman who tells the truth about herself is a feminist." If this is true, and it makes enormous sense to me, then all of the women in our community literacy program are feminists. We encourage, and indeed to some degree, insist that the learners write 'experience stories' about their lives. These stories are often heartrendingly honest and revealing about the struggles that these women have endured in their lives. Not only do we draw these stories out of women, we then publish them for other learners to read and reflect on. The writing is a testament to their honesty, courage and, yes, feminism.

Ironically the women and self-proclaimed feminists who work in literacy programs rarely write with such honesty and openness about their lives or work. Our middle class upbringing and stronger sense of self ensures that we protect ourselves from such open revelations about our personal struggles as women. We struggle with the distance that education, money and class creates between us and the learners. Like being by the sea, we try to keep our distance from the force and power of these women's stories but at the same time are drawn in to emotionally charged, intimate relationships. I think we ideally would like to walk a line somewhere between working as social service type educators and becoming wholly an equal member of a collective of strong women finding their voices. Sometimes you can walk that line, if you are very careful and don't let the waves catch your feet.

The tide is coming in. With some vision, perhaps we can welcome the tide instead of trying, vainly, to chase it back. Ultimately we do not teach but facilitate learning and critical awareness among the learners in our programs. We must ensure that there is a non-threatening and comfortable learning environment; we must welcome the new feminist voices and join our voices to the cry for decent housing, for food, for a non-abusive home life and for decent childcare and responsive health care. Many of the women trying to learn in programs across this country will leave those programs short of meeting their learning goals because their mother is sick, they cannot find decent, subsidized daycare, their husband is jealous of the time

spent learning, or because they do not have enough money, energy or self-esteem. Facilitating learning therefore, does not simply mean providing books, pens and ill-prepared volunteer tutors (generally women) but also fighting the barriers that often stop women from pursuing their education. I don't believe we will be able to ensure women's access to learning/education until we have told the truth about ourselves. Like the women learners, we will have to be honest in the face of a threatening world, a world that often does not want to face the truth of women's lives today. The threats we may receive will be about funding cutbacks, about how we are too "radical" or "fringe", about being ungrateful. Telling the truth and retelling the truth again and again, is often very uncomfortable. Perhaps it will not hurt to feel a little uncomfortable and exposed, to get our feet wet from those waves, perhaps it will help to narrow the distance between us, the literacy workers, and them, the learners.

I have often wondered if the fact that community based literacy is predominantly staffed by women has affected the learning/teacher methodology we use (learner centered, non-formal). I think it has. We try to affirm the skills already present in the learners (and they are many and varied) and incorporate those skills into learning how to read and write. We do not use a set curriculum but rather encourage people to discover their own patterns of learning. We try to explore learning using different contexts such as social events, drawing, sewing, discussions about health, work, and family. We approach education as a holistic experience that hinges on a whole range of factors not usually present in the classroom, but underlying everyone's ability to take in and process new learning. The circular patterns of our lives, our unconscious worlds, informal, day-to-day communications with one another—all of these things are close to our female consciousness. Our non-traditional, alternative approach to education is informed by thousands of years of living in a patriarchal world but learning at the feet of our mothers and grandmothers.

According to Barbara G. Walker's The Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets, Scotia (as in Nova Scotia) is the Latin form of the "Dark Aphrodite," a death goddess but also thought by some to be identical with Caillech, or Crone, who created the world. In my mind something is restlessly stirring. I look out onto the water, that symbol of birth and rebirth, of regeneration, creation, fertility and transformation. The experience of sitting with learners as they have found their voices, created new stories from old tales and transformed their lives, has opened up ways of learning for me, long ignored. As I make the connection between the water here before me and the learners back home, I have a renewed sense of conviction that our instincts about the informal learning methods we use are right.

We once spotted a whale in this beautiful Nova Scotian bay. The whale provoked a lot of excitement and awe: awe because it seems to be so totally at home in this turbulent, killing sea, its only fear is man. Unlike the whale, I am happy to stay in awe of the sea and to remain enticed by its ability to draw me out, shift my vision and realize my connectedness to the world and people.

For now, I will say good-bye and look forward to sharing our thoughts about women and literacy.

Love Tracy

DEAR ANNE AND TRACY:

I am writing from my grandmother's house in a town of 400 due west of Winnipeg. For the past two days, we have been working on a quilt. The pattern is called "Tree Everlasting." I found it in a book on the history of quilting in Canada. Grandma had never seen this pattern before but she is impressed by the gaiety of the psychedelic materials I brought. Before we cut out the pieces, she showed me three of the quilts she has made over the years.

She pieced them together herself - the first when she was in her twenties - and all were quilted by groups of women in town. Tonight on the news there was coverage of an archaeological dig near Lockport. It has found evidence of Manitoba's first farmers, native people who lived there between 1200 and 1500 A.D. Apparently women brought their knowledge of farming when they married into the tribes from further south. Interesting that instead of this, the common idea of Canadian prairie farmers is the male homesteader who arrived early in the last century to tackle the untilled frontier...

So what does this have to do with women and literacy? Both quilting and farming are complex skills, yet they are learned without the aid of a text. They are shared among people regardless of their prior knowledge or their speed. They reminded me that non-formal ways of sharing knowledge have existed for many, many years.

My main experience with non-formal education has been my experiences of community-based literacy programs. I can't begin to describe how much I have learned, and from so many different people! People older, and younger, than me. People with less education and more education. People of various races. People of every class background. People with completely different experiences and outlooks. People who wanted to learn any number of things - and were allowed to!

And always at the center of the literacy community there have been women. Women committed to education which was inclusive, which refused to label people, which validated and built on people's experiences, which encouraged people to work and learn together, which allowed people to talk about what they wanted to learn and what they thought they were learning.

Somehow this has made me think about how different my experience of formal education was. I was privileged within the school system - I could read before I started school - but still, I was always aware that competition was the driving force at school.

In Grade Four in Winnipeg I remember there were different groups in the reading class. Each group was named after a bird. I can't remember what the group I was in was called, maybe it was the swallows. The slowest readers were the ravens. Guess who got the breaks? Swallows were not allowed - in reading class, anyway - to consort with the ravens or even to help them fly. Instead, we had a virtually free period, in which we were sent to the library to read at our own pace and write book reports.

And then there was high school. As a "good student" I was constantly plagued by doubts about how socially acceptable it was to do well at school. And no matter what I did, I STILL got good marks. Talk about being a frustrated rebel!

Let me tell you a story about an adult literacy program in 1988. It is located in a church in a neighbourhood in Toronto which has remarkably few "human services" and an abundance of factories which exceed the city's pollution standards. We have a menu of scents to

delight our respiratory systems: the sharp whistle sweet of the glue factory, the dull thick ache of the animal rendering plant. So far nobody can smell the PCBs or nuclear fuel pellets. Among the riches of these beneficent factories, the adult literacy program I worked in was in a tarnished state.

One afternoon twelve adults huddled around a table trying to read together. Several rubbed their hands, blew on them to warm their fingers. The furnace had gone out as it regularly did. The janitor had showed me how to adjust the thermostat: how was I to know the unlady-like and house-bound procedure of re-lighting the pilot? And then we heard a mad beating of wings. Opening the office door, we discovered a terrified pigeon flying into the walls and ceiling. Our only recourse was to rip the plastic that stapled the cracks in the window shut. We left the window open to the prevailing wind. The pigeon found its own way out. We got colder.

This building, this place for people, this place where people gather, has been searching and searching for money to start. The adult literacy program is one part of this place. Basic education students learn in conditions like this. At the same time they have to acquire their education while working in one, sometimes two, sometimes more, jobs. And for women with children, having 'babysitting money' hardly means it is easy to find a sitter. ("She had them, she should look after them!") And 3/4 of the illiterate adults in the world are women.

In Canada, the majority of continuing education courses available are taken by university-educated adults. And 'training' is all the rage. Yet, in the past thirty years, Canadians have been sending aid to 'developing' countries - strings attached, of course. With this money we say, listen, education is important for your development. And what has been developed at home? A country where books belong to the few. Where reading is still a privilege. And where non-print, non-formal traditions of learning are deliberately ignored. Who can read a wampum belt when it is locked in a scientific, hermetically-sealed glass box?

Much of adult literacy in Canada is taught by women. In several provinces, programs with paid staff are being replaced by volunteer programs. The majority of volunteers are women, too. Women in paid positions have long hours, little job security, low levels of pay, few benefits... but I don't need to rail on about this to you! It has been your experience as much as mine. When I was in the Caribbean this May at the literacy and second language teaching workshop I noticed that most of the participants were women. They face very similar working conditions. A friend who trained as a teacher in Winnipeg has not-fond memories of paying for the privilege of being a student teacher. Her brother, the medical student, was paid for his apprenticeship.

My lover's brother is working at the SkyDome now. He says They don't know yet if the roof will work. Everything he does is ripped out and done three times - They keep changing Their minds about what They want done. Regularly there are tourists there, white men in business suits and white hard hats, seeing how their money is doing.

On the plane out here, I had settled into my seat when a man sat beside me and said not a word, not hello, nothing. He wore short

grey hair and a red and white striped shirt and he looked straight ahead. As we sat there a woman a few rows behind, who spoke only halting English, discovered someone in her seat and helped them find their own. Along came a man in a business suit with a lime green airport security card pinned to his pocket. He looked at my neighbour and said, "You have 29F, too. I'll have to get to get the girl to straighten this out." Without further interaction he headed up the aisle to find the 'girl.' My neighbour turned to me and pulled out his boarding card. "I don't have my glasses with me," he said, "Which seat does it say I have?" I pointed out 26F, three rows up. But before he had a chance to begin to move the executive was back, following the flight attendant. She, for the business man, asked to see my neighbour's boarding card and repeated what I had just said to him. Well, it is her job...

In June I was camping in a provincial park in eastern Ontario. One day we hiked along the trail which leads to a pond and Beaver dam. The pond was huge, covering what once may have been meadows. We stopped to listen to the frogs croak, to hear the splash of their return to water. We watched dragonflies dart among the bulrushes on invisible wings and wings that buzzed when they touched each other. We delighted to see the blanket of lily pads, the blooms of the Fragrant Water-Lily and the American Lotus. We saw a snake sunning in the branches of a bush. Then the path led beyond the dam and we were on the other side of this haphazard pile of sticks that rose several feet over our heads and kept back all the water. It struck me as an irony that the beaver (Castor Canadensis) is Canada's national animal. These animals created this environment in which so many different beings thrive. This was my first glimpse of their power. Why are we so unfamiliar with it? Instead, we are familiar with having 'beaver' thrown at us as a word we should shrink from.

What pattern is this? Has it been seen before? Maybe we just need to keep putting the pieces together in their haphazard way, binding the layers together, creating our own patterns with careful threads. We can sit around the frame wearing our protective thimbles, stitching and talking. Whoever said crazy quilts weren't beautiful.

See you in September,

Tannis

DEAR TRACY AND TANNIS:

How are you? Nicaragua sends its warmest revolutionary greetings. I hope the program is holding together relatively well through the inevitable summer slump. (Why am I always concerned that things are going to fall apart while I am gone?) And I hope that you are surviving it all in good spirits.

We agreed to go off on our various trips and think about women and literacy. Well this is a natural place to do it. Women, literacy and the struggle for justice are about all you can think about in a place like this. I find myself wondering around in a daze thinking of the contrasts between Ontario and Nicaragua. Its enough to make you head reel and the similarities are enough to keep you permanently cynical about the struggle for justice in this world. I want to tell you what I did today so that you can get an idea of how inspiring our tour has been.

I have just left a meeting with a literacy group in a small town outside the capital called Ciudad Sandino. This program was given honourable mention by UNESCO last year, for their accomplishments in the field of literacy, which included the creation of some new materials. All this from a program completely reliant on volunteers with meager resources and absolutely no budget for paper or staff (Don't tell our funders.) Most of the volunteers were women from the neighbourhood. During our visit they explained their methodology which was a direct application of Freirian philosophy. I couldn't help but notice with envy how easily Nicaragua fit this model with their language and political climate. (Especially when I think of how we stumble around trying to make Freire fit into downtown Toronto.) They explained that the goal of all education in Nicaragua is participation, and that a high number of community leaders come out of the literacy classes.

They showed us the standard workbook which they use for the majority of learners who have just started classes and who have never written before. The first page I opened said, (and I translate), "Women have always been exploited, the revolution creates the possibility of liberation." While the director of the center was calmly explaining how this statement is used to initiate conversation with the learners about their lives and how the revolution has affected them, I was going through a revolution of my own. I was suddenly struck with the huge difference between this reality and my own back in Toronto. In Canada we dare not speak in such direct political language although we are frequently dealing with the same exploitation. I must admit by this point I was feeling completely overcome with envy and was thinking of arranging a leave of absence from my work in Canada for the next ten years.

Before we left the literacy program that morning, the volunteers started asking us about our program in Canada. We told them about our struggles with funding and our waiting lists. We started to compare their shortage of paper and pencils to our shortage of government commitment. Ironically enough we all came to the solemn conclusion that our situation was worse because without ideals they insisted, education is meaningless. I will probably never forget that brief conversation. It left me with so many questions about our own program, about literacy programs in the developed world and most importantly about the messages we send to women learners in our own program. What messages do we give to women in our own programs?

Why are we still struggling with even the most basic political notions - especially when it comes to women? And why are we so frightened to assume any political ideas on behalf of the people who come to our programs? Remember what we went through trying to create a group for women to get together and how nervous we were about actually calling it a women's group since that assumed a certain type of commitment? And why in this affluent land we call home are we still stumbling around trying to find sufficient funds for babysitting subsidies and bus tickets? In this context all of those struggles seem almost ludicrous given that our re-

sources are nowhere near as depleted as in Nicaragua.

In the afternoon of the same day we visited a ceramics factory, owned and operated by a women's collective just outside of Estelli in the north of Nicaragua near the Honduran border. The factory itself was surprisingly beautiful with high ceilings, white plaster walls, lots of natural light coming through an inner courtyard and a steady cool breeze wafting in through large spaces left between the wall and the roof. A woman from the collective explained that most of the women had been either labourers in a nearby tobacco factory or prostitutes before the revolution. After working in oppressive environments for most of their lives the women had made a conscious effort to create a work place that was pleasant to be in, and believe me they were successful.

It saddened me to hear that one of the major obstacles in getting the factory started was the attitude of the women's partners. Many women were finding themselves working full days at the factory, going home to the normal load of housework only to be beaten by their partners, who were probably jealous of their success. The women's collective realized it had to take action because many of their members were suffering to such an extent that they could no longer do their work. With the help of the local women's organization (a branch of AMNLAE), they got organized, and told the men to stop. In many cases the violence didn't stop after the first warning. The women responded by beating the men in turn. As you might guess most of these relationships quickly dissolved (the men are probably still in shock).

Its funny our reaction to that story at the time was basically, right on and then we laughed at the simplicity of it all. Whenever I tell the same story here people respond with shock or surprise and quickly change the subject. I'm wondering, is their reaction due to a dislike of violence, or are they suddenly struck by our own passivity in the face of the same situation here?

I was convinced before I went to Nicaragua that we in the literacy movement are doing our best in a difficult situation. Now I believe our resources are being wasted and our government is not committed to educating everybody. They hover over the middle of the road when it comes to women's issues and literacy and we never quite get to the point where programs have enough secure funding. What a dream it would be to be able to plan and run a program that could afford to support the special needs of learners - especially of women. We could then ensure that this time their encounter with learning will actually be a positive experience.

When it was time to leave Nicaragua I felt a quiet respect and sadness for this tiny nation that dares to stand up to a world power. After seeing all this in Nicaragua, I return to Canada a little deflated and depressed. I recognize that they are a nation ripe with difficulties but they still have a great deal to teach us. I was impressed with the fact that it is a country with ideals, that it is using meager resources to their fullest advantage and most importantly that it is taking education seriously. There is something very humane about this. Something that is lacking when I go back to my program in Toronto and greet yet another homeless single mother who can't read. At this rate she probably never will.

It's time to turn in for the night. What a way to spend a summer holiday. Next year I swear I will take a real vacation where I won't end up thinking about literacy at all. Maybe I'll go play miniature golf in Florida or something.

Until we meet again.

Love and hugs, Anne



## A NOTE ON OUR COVER ARTIST

Buseje Baily is a Black artist and activist who lives in Toronto. Born in Jamaica, she received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from York University, where she majored in sculpture and printmaking. Her way of being active in the community is through her paintings. She is developing her curatorial skills, co-curating a show due to open in February 1989 for Black Women, "When and Where We Enter," at A-Space Gallery. She is also starting a collective and organizing space for the Centre for Black Artists.

The painting [untitled] on our front cover is a portrait of her daughter Cherrel, and resulted from the artist's need to incorporate childrearing into her work as an artist. "Third World Madonnas," which appears on the back cover, is a response to the art-school notion of classic European madonnas; represented are Black mothers who are struggling to raise their kids — and, in the artist's words — "through the ages we've done a pretty good job, in spite of the European intruders' assumption that they know better."



  
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