

Raising a Reader: Teachings from the Four Directions

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Abstract

In this two-part life writing script, I narrate and interpret my experiences as a teacher and parent of a “reluctant reader” in the early phases of learning to read. In the first part, I address the myths and panics that often overtake parents of young reluctant readers, who may fear that their children are at risk of falling behind their peers in reading. In the second part, using the Four Directions teachings taught by Elder Bob Cardinal of the Enoch Nation in a graduate holistic curriculum studies course at the University of Alberta, I interpret the process of learning to read as a relational and careful act of ceremony, which literally overflows the dominant interpretation of reading as a technical, fragmented skill of decoding. The lovely, difficult work of learning to read, when treated as a gift between generations, opens up possibilities for “renewing a common world” (Arendt, 2006, p. 196).

Raising a Reader: Re-Memorying Through the Four Directions Teachings

This two-part life writing script interprets the experiences of a teacher/mother of a “reluctant reader” as she is beginning to learn how to read. The first reading, *Terror Memories*, is a narrative of the parent’s memories of learning to read, and her daughter’s beginnings on her own journey to becoming a reader. Overcome by myths of competition, achievement, scarcity and the fear of “falling behind” (O’Leary, 2012, 5:40-6:01), the teacher/mother anxiously succumbs to the pressures to reduce reading to a technical, market-exchange exercise.

The second reading, *Four Directions Re-Memories*, is a holistic re-interpretation through the lens of the Four Directions Teachings of the Medicine Wheel. The Four Directions Teachers are the Thunder Being from the West, who teaches Mental Knowing; Grandmother Mouse from the South, who teaches Spiritual Knowing; the Buffalo from the North, who teaches physical knowing; the Bear from the East, who teaches Emotional Knowing; and the Eagle, who teaches a connected, unified understanding of the world.

These teachings were shared orally by Elder Bob Cardinal of the Enoch Nation, Alberta, in a 2014 graduate course entitled, “Holistic Understandings of Learning,” which he co-taught with Dr. Dwayne Donald, Papaschase Cree curriculum studies scholar, through the University of Alberta. The participants in this curriculum and pedagogy course on Indigenous philosophical approaches to holistic learning were encouraged to inquire into and share our understandings of how “wisdom teachings regarding holistic understandings of life and living [may] provide meaningful curricular and pedagogical guidance in schools today” (Donald, 2014a, p. 2).

Elder Cardinal teaches us that “the longest journey you will ever have to make is from your head to your heart” (B. Cardinal, personal communication, September 2014).

As a non-Indigenous educator having taught children and adults in rural Indigenous communities, in widely diverse urban high school classrooms, and in a teacher education program at the University of Calgary, I found that the Four Directions Teachings informed the second reading in deeply thoughtful, organic, and enlivening ways. Composed of three strands—I: *The Gift of Reading*; II: *Wording the World (In Her Own Time)*; and III: *Reading as Ceremony*—the Four Directions Teachings in the second reading guided my journey from the head to the heart by honouring the intellectual, emotional, spiritual and physical experience of becoming a reader “in the full sense of the word” (Ferreiro, 2003, p. 17).

terror-memory prelude: I Am Reading...

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Kevin O’Leary is an affiliate of The Learning Company, a subsidiary of Houghton Mifflin, which publishes various popular “learn to read” series, such as Carmen Sandiego and Reader Rabbit. During an episode of the CBC series, “Dragon’s Den,” he said:

I’m all for children, but I want to make a buck... I *am* Reader Rabbit, I *am* Carmen San Diego, I *am* Reading. And this is what I do. People as you know, will do anything for their children to help them in math and reading scores. I made a fortune just servicing that market. I love the terror in a mother’s heart when she sees her child fall behind in reading. I profited from that. (O’Leary, 2012, 5:40-6:01)

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David Jardine (2015) reflects:

[T]his market logic does not work properly when one simply takes advantage of such terror and satisfies it. Such terror must be cultivated and maintained in just the right measure. Market economies are premised on the creation of dissatisfaction and the promise and semblance of just enough satisfaction to allow dissatisfaction to re-emerge once the promise is forgotten. (p. 1)

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First Reading: Terror-Memories

Mother: Ok, so, I was raised to believe that reading was very valuable, and I lived under the myth that I was a strong, fast reader from an early age. As the oldest of two daughters, I was an overachiever, perfectionist, ambitious child. I am told that when

I was four years old, I was painstakingly writing stories about Little Red Riding Hood, cats in dolls' clothes, and sisters playing by the lake. I would yell into the kitchen, "Mom, how do you spell 'kitty'?... Mom, how do you make a 'k'?" At age eight, I read *Children: The Challenge* (Dreikurs & Stolz, 1987), a thick, green tome, filled with case studies and in-depth parenting advice and psychological analysis. I then proceeded to critique my parents' parenting skills and offer advice about how they might best deal with their "challenging child."

I love and cherish these old stories, as they are part of my identity as a creative, thoughtful, and intellectual individual. I have come to believe that my strength in reading is deeply interwoven with my success in the academic world and life in general. I have also come to believe, through research and experience, that readers are more physically fit, have greater vocabularies, greater empathy, and reap the benefits of increased success in academic environments and our text-based world. For you see, textual knowledge is a valuable commodity.

So, when I became a mother, and friends and family gushed over my oldest daughter, Marie, telling me that she was so much like me, her mom, my myth started to slowly become her myth. She had no idea, of course. But when she reached the magic age of four, I started to notice....

Marie was a bright, articulate four year old, and she too loved to hear stories, to trace out letters, to practice writing her name. Her vocabulary was expanding intensely, often to the point where strangers would marvel at her command of language.

The myth was intensifying...

So, I started to push.

I pulled out the phonics readers, and started pointing out sight words and 3-letter words as we were reading books together. I even signed out some Level 1 Readers from the library and began pointing to each word, haltingly and awkwardly sounding out every syllable. At first, Marie had no idea what I was up to, and participated willingly, but she must have wondered why her mom had forgotten how to read! Soon, however, she stopped choosing the phonics books at storytime, and when I pulled them out, she would tense up and pull away from me. Finally, I asked her what was wrong. "Mom, I hate those books!" When I asked why, she said, "The stories are so boring!"

So, we just read beautiful books again.

For a while.

A year later, when Marie was in kindergarten, and the weekly alphabet worksheets started coming home, my anxiety once again surfaced. She was now nearly six years old and although she still had a great relationship with words, and she loved to point out signs that she could read, and write the names of all her family members, she still wasn't what I would have called a "reader." So, this time around, I tried to be more subtle, more sneaky. I didn't bring out the phonics books or leveled readers, but as we were reading, I would point out words here and there, or identify simple words and ask

her to sound them out as we were reading. Marie continued to resist, protesting every time I tried to get her to read, turning her head away from the book. I would stop when she asked me to, but after a few days, the pressure would mount, and I would find a way to sneak some reading in, with the same result.

At the beginning of grade one, I renewed my resolve to refrain from pressuring Marie to learn to read. But one day in late September, I caved once again. We had just finished reading a beautiful book, and I noticed as I closed it that the title was a simple, three-word sentence. I turned to Marie and said, “Let’s read this title! Can you sound it out?” I thought she might be ready this time. After all, she was nearly seven years old, which I was told was well in the age range of beginning readers. She looked at me with tears in her eyes, and said, “Mom, I’m just not ready! Don’t you get that? I feel stupid! It’s too hard for me and I don’t want to do it!”

My heart broke.

We talked a little bit about how reading *is* difficult, and wonderful, and that it would happen when she was ready. I told her I would back off completely, agreeing to follow her lead. So far, I have not broken that promise. It hasn’t been easy, I must admit.

The next day, I spoke with our childcare provider, Holly, about what had happened. She said that Marie had been reluctant to practice reading with her as well, and that she had expressed no interest in any form of reading, even with attempts to disguise it and to “make learning fun!” through online games and phonics activities. She did, however, mention that when Louise, Marie’s four-year-old sister, played those online early reading games, that Marie’s entire demeanour was transformed, and she would put on a big, fake smile, look over Louise’s shoulder, and say in a sing-song, falsetto voice,

“Oh, my, isn’t this just so much fun, Louise? Isn’t reading *fun*?”

re-memory interlude: lovely, difficult work...

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David Jardine (2015) concludes:

The hidden complicities of those who love and foster terror and then magically appear just in time to alleviate it—this is a story as old as the hills. Reading and understanding that story allows me to begin stepping away from its allure. It allows me to interrupt the panic-manipulation and to return to the lovely, difficult work of learning to read with children. (p. 1)

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Second Reading: Heartful Re-Memories

My Four Directions Teachers¹

Thunder Being from the West

Teaches Mental Knowing: To speak respectfully and honour the life journeys of others.

Key principles: Learning about oneself and caring for others through cognitive, psychological, and spiritual insights.

Asks: “How can this incident help you to understand and strengthen your mental capabilities to achieve balance, self-knowledge, and empathy?”

Grandmother Mouse from the South

Teaches Spiritual Knowing: To be humble, loving, nurturing and giving.

Key principles: Awareness of other wisdom traditions, respect for ceremony and Elders.

Asks: “In what ways are your own spiritual and cultural identity connected to this incident?”

Buffalo from the North

Teaches Physical Knowing: To utilize all and not waste any gifts.

Key principles: Respectful, embodied relationships, communication built on trust.

Asks: “How can the incident be understood as a struggle to embody safety, trust, respect, and walking alongside others to give strength?”

Bear from the East

Teaches Emotional Knowing: To foster patience, compassion and knowledge of the past.

Key principles: Conflict resolution, empathy, understanding emotions.

Asks: “What can you learn from attending to emotions involved in this incident?”

Eagle

Teaches a Connected, Unified Understanding: To have a balanced perspective.

Key principles: Strength, courage, humility and vision.

Asks: “How might this incident be understood in holistic and balanced ways?”

¹ The Four Directions introductory teachings described in this piece were shared orally by Elder Bob Cardinal of the Enoch Nation, supplemented by a course handout compiled by Dr. Dwayne Donald (2014b), entitled, *Four Directions Teachings- Elder Bob Cardinal: Reflection on a Critical Incident*.

MOTHER: As a child, I experienced the implications of the educational myth that reduces literacy to the technical skill of “decoding” (Ferreiro, 2003, p. 18). My early technical abilities in reading and writing were highly and publicly prized, whereas my growing ability to *read the world* (Freire, 2000), to be a reader “in the full sense of the word” (Ferreiro, p. 17), nurtured through diverse learning experiences and careful encouragement by my parents, was undervalued in the school context.

Schools continue to “teach a technique” (p. 14) rather than teaching *reading*, in the sense of fostering an ability to read the world through all of the diverse languages it presents. These technical skills of reading and writing are commodities, in that they produce high marks for students, a valuable “market-exchange item” (Jardine, Clifford & Friesen, 2003, p. 208) in the economy of life.

BUFFALO: Culture is an enactment of a Creation story. Your growing abilities as a reader “in the full sense of the word” (Ferreiro, 2003, p. 17) were actually promoting and strengthening the development of your decoding skills, providing you with an important context within which to learn to read. The decoding didn’t actually come first!

As you came to believe in the value of the commodities of high marks and school achievements, your value as a human being was misplaced within these skills. Do you want your daughter to de-value her growing skills as a reader of the world?

MOTHER: Even with my many years of experience in questioning the logic of fragmentation and the Christian Creation story of individualism, self-reliance, order and control, in moments of insecurity, I would indeed find myself caught up in the myth.

EAGLE: Thomas King (2003) wondered, “Do the stories we tell reflect the world as it truly is, or did we simply start off with the wrong story” (p. 26)? Dwayne Donald notes that, in regarding culture as a re-enactment of a Creation story (personal communication, October 11, 2014), you may be able to re-story the raising of a reader as “a shared activity, [...] a world that begins in chaos and moves towards harmony, [...] a world determined by co-operation” (King, 2003, p. 25). Like any other form of learning, “learning to read is a relational activity” (Smith, 1999, p. 71); the most powerful way to take care of your daughter’s reading is to take care of your relationship with her.

MOTHER: I found it easy to tell *other* parents that the technical reading would happen in its own time, but when *my* own child’s learning was at stake, I found myself sliding back down into the panic of scarcity, competitiveness and insecurity. When “[t]here is so much to ‘cover,’ there is so little time, students are in constant competition for marks and their value as market-exchange items” (Jardine, Clifford & Friesen, 2003, p. 208), then everything in my power must be done to keep my child from falling behind, from losing that ever-so-important “edge.” In my panic, I clamped down harder on my reluctant reader; I pushed harder, trying to convince my young daughter that she was ready to read, to *keep up*.

BEAR: In your impatience, you have risked your daughter's love of reading. You have tried to guarantee her place in a world storied by competition, scarcity, and chaos. Although there are no guarantees no matter what approach you take, placing an undue emphasis on technical training actually is the more uncertain approach (Ferreiro, 2003, p. 25) to reading "in the full sense." Despite the false promise of the leveled readers, they suppress the truth that the experience of reading is inherently difficult, wonderful, satisfying, complex, and magical.

GRANDMOTHER MOUSE: Your job as a teacher is to "re-teach [your child her own] loveliness" (Kinnell, 2002). Your job is to remind her of her sacred place in the wonders of language, not the language of fragmented, technical leveled readers, but *the languages of the world*.

What you are giving her is not a prize or a form of currency.

It is a gift.

II: Wording the World (in Her Own Time)

MOTHER: I hear anecdotes about how all readers are different. I hear a story told by a father of three children: The first one was actively and confidently reading simple books at age five; the second carefully observed, took notes, copied words, and agonizingly sounded out letters for two years, until she was finally reading competently at age seven; the third child blatantly refused to read the words in a book until age eight, at which time he took off, and by age ten was reading novels cover to cover. I remember my own mythical memories of precocious reading, and wonder: Where does Marie's path to reading lie in the multiplicities of all of these stories?

THUNDER BEING: Marie is none of these children. And Marie is not you. Listen to her more carefully now, as she expresses herself in the world. She loves gymnastics, drama, nature, climbing trees, and thinking mathematically. She has an impressive, expressive vocabulary, and she thinks critically about the world in ways that astound and amaze you. Her sense of humour is clever and highly nuanced. She is curious and full of life. She loves *reading the world*. And someday, you must trust that she will come to love reading words.

MOTHER: But what if... (breathe, now)... *she doesn't*? Will I still be willing to accept her openly and unconditionally... if she never comes to love reading? And what if... (breathe, again)... *she never learns how to read*? I know that I have no evidence or good reason to believe that this is true; however, perhaps like every parent of what I might call a pre-reading child, I secretly harbour that niggling, nagging, nibbling fear.

THUNDER BEING: No need to panic. Love her without knowing what the outcome will be (Osberg and Biesta, 2008, p. 320). If you are going to accept Marie's own personal relationship with reading, you will need to be open to the (however unlikely)

possibility that she might choose to partially or completely refuse the invitation into the world of reading, or take it up in a way that you did not expect or even desire. Listen carefully to your child's voice as she comes into her own preferences, excitements, interests and talents, as she reveals her own weaknesses, limitations, roles and chosen responses to the world. Remember:

*The bud
stands for all things,
even for those things that don't flower,
for everything flowers from within, of self-blessing.*
(Kinnell, 2002).

Can you imagine your child turning out in ways that you never could have imagined, in ways that you would not desire for her? You will be a true teacher if you treat her, not as a projection of your own desires and fears, but with an open heart, "as a subject of mystery- producing wonder and awe" (Huebner, 2008, p. 8) in you. What can *you* learn about *yourself* from raising a reader?

III: Reading as Ceremony

MOTHER: It is possible for adults to treat the process of learning to read as a form of ceremony. We may naturally conduct ourselves in ways that show our love of the worded world, fulfilling our shared responsibility in an orientation towards its renewal (Arendt, 2006, p. 193). As adults, we start by pointing out objects, actions and people to our youngest ones, identifying them through their appearances, relations and patterns. These namings then evolve into conversations about the world, in which the concepts become even more abundant.

As I look at beautiful picture books with my young children, they ask questions about the characters, the words, the stories' connections to their own learning. We stop, come back, ponder, and ruminate over things that we dearly love, and for which we are jointly responsible (Arendt, 2006, p. 193). We each become more in the face of their loveliness. In the study of things, like literature, "[w]e love them and we love what we become in our dedication to them" (Jardine, Clifford & Friesen, 2003, p. 208). My children, too, come to love themselves in the face of literature. They write things down, draw pictures, do dramatic re-enactments; they *live the words* through play. And through this play, the words become bigger, more evocative, more exciting, more than they could ever be in isolation from the world.

So... why did I feel the need to "make reading fun"?

GRANDMOTHER MOUSE: In your haste, you have lost touch with the abundance, joy and great responsibility that are embedded in the ritual of learning to read. In stripping the technical act of decoding of its much deeper *ceremony of reading*, you have been forced to re-layer it with the false promises of "fun" and rewards.

If “[c]reativity should always be a form of prayer” (Okri, 1997, p. 27), how might you prayerfully and gently invite your children into the contemplative work of reading, to nurture them with its abundance? In giving this gift of literacy to your children, how might you properly lead your children into the ceremony of reading; how might you become someone that you yourself may once again love in your dedication to it? How might you demonstrate to your daughter the possibilities of who she is, and who she might become in her own love of reading?

MOTHER: As my daughter explores the world of literature, I notice that “[t]he play soon becomes its own sustenance” (Okri, 1997, p. 23). It seems almost ridiculous to now come face to face with my underlying belief that I needed to *instill* a love of reading in Marie, simply because she was not yet sounding out the words on the page. When I tried to separate the act of reading from its world of meanings, and reduced it to nothing more than sounding out the letters, I was in essence selfishly withholding my own deep love of reading from her. I was sapping her of her own strength to become an active agent of her own learning. She recognized this; her refusal to take up reading in this way was not mere stubbornness; she was *demanding more* of me as a teacher. She was holding me accountable.

EAGLE: “No child needs to be motivated to learn. To learn is their trade. They can’t stop learning because they can’t stop growing. All objects (material or conceptual) to which adults give importance capture the attention of children” (Ferreiro, 2003, p. 23). Having successfully isolated the decoding from its abundant, deeper relationship to literacy, you left her with nothing that would nourish her. *Of course* you would feel the need to lie to her by disguising this technical, gaunt, isolated notion of reading as “fun.” And, *of course* your child would see through the farce: she is already a good *reader*!

MOTHER: Oh my...

She read me like a book (*ahem*), as the saying goes.

My child.

My reader.

re-memory postlude: for you see, in fact, I am Reading...

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David G. Smith (1999) remembers:

Technically and pedagogically, teaching young children to read is not a particularly difficult task. Put children and their natural curiosity together with a

competent reader (parent, teacher, peer) with the time and inclination to watch over the children as they come into contact with books, magazines, stories, comics, signs and so on, and almost unawares youngsters will confidently declare: “I can read.” (p. 71)

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