

Hit That Refresh Button



By Carol Williams

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I had just finished reading *The Lives and Many Sorrows of Josephine B*, a fictionalized account of the amazing Josephine Bonaparte. This courageous woman who, through the sheer force of her will, managed to change the course of history fascinated me. I decided that further internet exploration would be a most enjoyable supplement to this novel. While reading with rabid intensity, it happened. My computer screen froze at the most fateful point in Josephine's life – her first encounter with Napoleon. I sank back in my chair, pondering the audacity of this infernal machine to interrupt the glory of my Sunday afternoon activity. I tried the all magic *ctrl + alt + del = make everything right combination*, but the screen remained stuck in its own cocoon of cyberspace. Then I remembered the words of one of my grade 11 students, "Just hit the refresh button Miss and everything will be cool." I hit this insignificant looking icon and heavens to merkatroid, I was happily returned to the intriguing narrative about Josephine and Napoleon. Moments later, it occurred to me that it would be wonderful if principals had a refresh button - one that we could hit and make everything new again.

Last May I was struck with an illness that forced me out of work for four months. I attributed this unexpected situation to the stresses of the job. It was a frightening time for me as I nurtured and fought myself through recovery while anxiously wondering how soon I could return to work. Each day was a struggle of self-questioning and agony. I took a long hard look at early retirement. A lengthy phone conversation with one of the wonderful agents at the Ontario Teachers Pension Plan Board led me to understand that early retirement at this point would reduce my salary to such a point that I would have to live in my car – not a very good option! Yet I did not want to return to work: too much stress; too many fires to tame; too many problems to solve; too many challenging parents to placate; and, as Yul Brynner said, "etcetera, etcetera, etcetera". My physical healing was progressing nicely but still I struggled daily, questioning my competence and ability to lead a school. Vacillation is not cool!

After much self-exploration, self-reflection and prayer, I decided to return to school and find my own refresh button. What follows, in no particular order, are the things I did to refresh myself. I hope they prove helpful to you.

Remember what it is that called you to teaching and leadership in the first place. Recall the excitement of your first days in Teachers' College and that phone call from the superintendent telling you that you are now the principal of St. Elsewhere. Experiencing this feeling again should generate a pulsing river of adrenalin through your veins. Sit with this for a while.

Look at your school community with a new set of eyes. Take a walk about. Hear and feel the sounds of energy flowing, while understanding how important our vocation is. Our role may not be easy but it does provide us with the opportunity for fulfillment that is enjoyable and renewable.

Take a five to ten minute break out of your day to pray, meditate and be still. Do this especially during busy, hectic days, when the phones are ringing and parents are threatening to rein everyone in on you from the superintendent right up to the Pope. Trust me the work will still be there at the end of your ten minutes, but you will be more relaxed and alert.

Find the places of joy and laughter in your school - there are many! I particularly enjoy interacting with our special needs students as they exude a gentleness of love and tenderness of spirit without any expectations from me in return. They live and laugh fully in the moment and remind me to do likewise.

Be present with your staff and students. Sit in the middle of the cafeteria and drink in the energy that is the hallmark of adolescents. Watch as they talk, play, eat and laugh. Just be present and allow this dynamic force to fill and transform you.

Banish fear forever. Fear is a problematic operating system. Fears are like vampires for they cannot live in the light. When you feel one coming on, drag it kicking and screaming into the light, look at it and watch it disappear. Fears are like those monsters in the closets of our youth – illusions. For more on this read Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*. Each day choose one thing that you fear doing and walk right into it and do it! My dear friend Frank Kewin, a high school principal with the Simcoe Muskoka CDSB, once told me that if I knew who walked beside me I would never fear. Of course, he was referring to the Holy Spirit who walks beside us all.



Love - big, hard and loud! Use love as your operating system. Love is the exact opposite of fear. It is a powerful force and the *only* one that can change any school, town, village or country. Make love the driving force that moves before you and that accompanies you to any moment. You will be amazed at the answers that come to you when you use love as your operating system. This is Jesus' ultimate message to us.

Have a student teach you something. That is how I learned some great Excel shortcuts and how to load podcasts onto my iPod.

Always keep wonder and whimsy as your lens, for when cynicism creeps in, it clouds your ability to see the small miracles that surround you.

These things have helped to refresh me as a principal and you will be happy to know that I am not living in my car. The stresses are still here – the challenging parents, students, memos, deadlines, phone calls, standardized tests, suspensions, expulsions and insert Yul Brynner's line here, but I have learned to hit my refresh button. Where is our refresh button? It lies within us, as the force of the Holy Spirit. So enjoy and remember: you can hit that refresh button as often as you like. I would love to hear your "refreshing" anecdotes. You can reach me at carol.williams@ycdsb.ca.



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