



## The Man Who Walked Between the Towers

### Introduction

In 1974, French high-wire artist Philippe Petit gained fame when he walked on a high wire he had installed between the Twin Towers in New York City. His unauthorized feat was watched by thousands of people on the ground as he performed above the sky for 45 minutes, making eight passes along the wire. When he finished his performance, he was arrested by police, but ultimately the charges against him were dropped in exchange for a performance for children in the heart of Central Park.

Many of the themes that can be explored from this story are relevant to building drug literacy competencies. It is not necessary that explicit discussion focus on the issue of drugs. But it is helpful to sprinkle into the conversation how drug use is one of many risky behaviours that needs to be considered in thinking about these issues.

### Instructional strategies

1. As a class, read the children's book *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers*, by Mordicai Gerstein (alternatively you could show the 'read aloud' [video version](#) of the book) and facilitate a discussion with the class using questions like:
  - a. What are your thoughts on what Phillippe Petit did? If you could pick one adjective to describe his actions, what would it be?
  - b. Since his performance was not authorized and technically illegal, some people may argue that what he did was wrong. Do you agree? Why or why not?
  - c. While Philippe Petit was a skilled artist, his actions still involved a high level of risk. How do you think that affected the perception of his performance? Discuss your answer.
2. The following exercises involve exploring different themes that relate to the story of Philippe Petit. Have students form small groups and engage with the activities/questions below. After they discuss these themes in their groups, you may have each group share their ideas with the class.

#### Risk

- a. Brainstorm a list of activities that involve different levels of risk (including activities that you perceive as 'safe'/non-risky):
  - i. Work together to arrange the items on the list in order from least risky to most risky. Was it easy to reach agreement about the ordering?
  - ii. Why do different people perceive risk differently? What do you think affects how people rate the risk involved in activities such as walking on a wire, riding in a car, skiing, engaging in 'extreme' sports, diving off rocks, speeding on the highway, or using alcohol or other drugs?
- b. Many activities that we engage in involve some risk of getting hurt or hurting others. Nevertheless, most of us still choose to engage in some risky activities. What makes it so?
  - i. What makes you do risky things?
  - ii. What risky activities would you not do? Why?
- c. Discuss the potential positive as well as the potential negative aspects of some of the activities mentioned. What plays a role in which activities/behaviors we consider "worth the risk"?
- d. If you are engaging in a risky behaviour, what can you do to reduce the risk? Give some examples.

### **Identity**

Reflect on the following quote from the book:

*“He looked not at the towers but at the space between them and thought, what a wonderful place to stretch a rope; a wire on which to walk. Once the idea came to him he knew he had to do it! If he saw three balls, he had to juggle. If he saw two towers, he had to walk! **That’s how he was.**”*

- a. How do you interpret the last sentence?
- b. Do you think that some people are destined to engage in risk-taking activities or behaviours more than others? Why or why not?
- c. What do you think drives people to take risks? Is it just one thing, or many things?
- d. What do you think makes us who we are? How much choice do you think we have in who we are or become? What other factors might affect who we become?
- e. How do you relate courage to “who you are”? Do you think we should push ourselves in order to see who we are?
- f. Is it hard to be who you are? What if other people want you to be different?

### **Legality/Authority**

The performance put on by Phillippe Petit was unauthorized and technically illegal.

- a. Why would it be illegal?
- b. Do you think the government or anyone else should be able to decide whether or not you can engage in risky activities or behaviours? If so, who and under what conditions? If not, why not?
- c. If something is illegal, do you think it is wrong? If not, what’s the difference between illegal and wrong?
- d. Do you think that if something is authorized by the government or some authority, it is OK to do it? Think of some examples and discuss them.
- e. Why do you think some illegal activities (such as Phillippe Petit’s performance) are admired by people while others are looked down on? Think of some examples for both sides and discuss them.

### **Bravery**

In the story, when Phillippe was on the wire

*“He could feel the towers breathing.  
He was not afraid.  
He felt alone and happy and absolutely free.”*

*“Everyone stopped and looked up.  
They gasped and stared.  
It was astounding.  
It was terrifying and beautiful.”*

- a. Was Phillippe Petit brave to do what he did?
  - b. What does bravery mean? How would you describe bravery?
  - c. Do you think we have to do something frightening or risky to be brave? Why or why not?
  - d. Do you think that someone can be scared and brave at the same time? Why or why not?
  - e. Is it ever brave to run away from something dangerous? What about refusing to do something that other people are doing? Why or why not? Give examples?
3. Have the students reflect on what bravery/courage means to them and express it through a medium they are comfortable with. Give them the choice to draw/paint/write (a short story, a poem, etc.) about what it means to them. If they feel comfortable with it, allow them to share their story/drawing/painting with the class.



## Drug Literacy

### Big ideas

- Drugs can be tremendously helpful and also very harmful
- As humans, both individually and as communities, we need to learn how to manage the drugs in our lives

### Competencies

- Recognize binary constructs (e.g., good vs bad) and assess their limitation in addressing complex social issues like drug use
- Recognize how official responses to drugs may have less to do with the drug than with other factors
- Develop social and communication skills in addressing discourse and behaviour related to drugs
- Develop personal and social strategies to manage the risks and harms related to drugs

For a complete look at the drug literacy competencies, as defined by the Centre for Addictions Research of BC, see: [www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cisur/assets/docs/iminds/hs-pp-drug-curriculum.pdf](http://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cisur/assets/docs/iminds/hs-pp-drug-curriculum.pdf)

## Links to Curriculum

### First Peoples' principles of learning

- Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors
- Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place)
- Learning is embedded in memory, history and story

### English Language Arts 6/7

Big Ideas: Recognize binary constructs (e.g., good vs bad) and assess their limitation in addressing complex social issues like drug use

- Language and text can be a source of creativity and joy
- Exploring stories and other texts helps us understand ourselves and make connections to others and to the world
- Exploring and sharing multiple perspectives extends our thinking

### Competencies

- Recognize binary constructs (e.g., good vs bad) and assess their limitation in addressing complex social issues like drug use
- Recognize how official responses to drugs may have less to do with the drug than with other factors
- Develop social and communication skills in addressing discourse and behaviour related to drugs
- Develop personal and social strategies to manage the risks and harms related to drugs

This resource was developed by the Centre for Addictions Research of BC with funding provided by the Government of Canada. Any views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Government of Canada or the Centre for Addictions Research of BC.