

by Bonnie Neugebauer

A Manner of Speaking

Laura was having very real and painful problems with a little boy in her class named Josh, or, more accurately, with Josh's parents, Inez and John. The difficulties had been evolving over several weeks. Inez and John had dropped into the classroom frequently; there had been confrontations and, on better days, discussions. Frustrated and hurt, Laura was determined to find a satisfactory resolution. She asked for advice and support from peers and supervisors and insights from friends.

On Friday, she felt hopeful after a long and honest discussion with Inez about what was happening in the classroom. Together they had created a plan for bringing Inez into the classroom as an aide. The plan reflected Laura's desire to help Josh's mother see the situation from a behind-the-lines perspective. She felt that it also demonstrated her real concern for Josh and his family, no matter what their differences might be.

On Monday, without discussion, Inez and John withdrew Josh from Laura's classroom and enrolled him in a nearby center.

Certainly there was a part of Laura that felt incredible relief, but behind the relief was a sense of betrayal and of failure. The problem which had caused her so much stress and emotional upheaval was gone, but a part of her wanted the problem back. In a very real and personal sense, this unwanted problem had come to belong to her.

Throughout the difficult times, Laura had been anticipating the resolution of the problem and the inherent relief and joy. By taking the problem away from her, Josh's parents robbed her of any hope for such satisfaction and left her with feelings and thoughts that would never be resolved — and a niggling sense of failure.

When we see someone struggling — a child, a friend, a colleague — our instinctive reaction is to want to make that struggle go away. We want things to go well, to feel good. But our struggles, which we all acknowledge are part of life, belong to us. And until we figure out what to do, they serve as challenges that cost us sleep and hair and peace of mind and eventually lead us to moments of greater self-awareness.

If we really were able to take problems away, and if we did so with only the best intentions, we would leave those we care about with a sense of incompleteness, of loss, and of failure. So we must bite our tongues, curb our urges, and offer instead of peace, our support, our ear, and infrequently and carefully, our insights.

Shining knights and magic wishes aside, it is the owner of the struggle who must be involved in its resolution. Children must fall down hundreds of times in order to take that victorious first step. Writers must draft and redraft and rewrite before they can write the great American novel. And teachers must have the opportunity to resolve issues with the Joshs and his parents in their lives.

We must let each child and each adult in our lives own their own feelings, their own successes — and their own struggles. If we take away problems, whether large or small, we risk taking away something much more important — their self-respect and their moments of victory.

Bonnie Neugebauer — May 1992