

A Manner of

Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer

For the past several years I have been heavily involved in global projects on peace and reconciliation (with the International Working Group on Peace Building with Young Children), but I cannot get along with my neighbor. The issue is, of course, property lines and vegetation. It's a small matter, easily resolved with a bit of research and discussion. But Dora doesn't discuss and she doesn't research. She knows and she threatens and she acts.

Through the work of the World Forum and the International Working Group on Peace Building with Children, I have focused a great deal of energy and thought on violence and its impact globally. But I cannot figure out a way to live in harmony with a neighbor of over 25 years.

This weekend I found myself in the throes of a confrontation that challenged all my skills as a peacekeeper and left me questioning who I really am and whether I have the right to participate in the work I am doing.

Unable to find a pathway through the anger and unbending threats, Roger and I found ourselves in the garden, madly pulling trees from the ground and throwing them into a pile. Mind you, it took Roger 5 hours to plant the trees and only 20 minutes for the two of us to devastate the forest. (A side note is that another huge project of the World Forum is the Nature Action Collaborative for Children — so I was violating these principles as well).

Giving in, letting her win, seemed the only way to get around this difficulty. There was no way that we could discover to work our way through it. We knew that if she really chopped down the trees as she was preparing to do right then, the anger would be something we didn't want to feel or face.

So, what can I learn from this experience? What can I teach my imminent grandchild so that he or she will be able to meet the Doras in life and, indeed, be a global peacemaker? How can you equip the children in your programs?

I believe there is much we can do to prepare them:

- We can teach children skills for self expression so that no matter the context, they are ready and able to effectively present their own point of view.
- We can teach them that any conversation or confrontation must be in balance. They must be able to listen to another's point of view and be able to hear the message presented. But first, they must recognize that respecting the other point of view is crucial to the outcome.
- We must help children understand that they can be and feel so right — and, at the same time, the other can feel the same way. And both can be right and righteous.
- We must teach children how and when to compromise so they can see that although winning and losing are much easier, they are also ultimately more destructive than arriving at a new place through negotiation. We can teach them to believe in the conversation, the dialogue.
- We can teach children how to anticipate consequences, how to play out different scenarios to envision the escalation of disagreement, to measure the cost, determine the impact, and protect their own ability to cope.
- We must help children learn that when all else fails and they cannot control others or outcomes, they can control their own behavior — they need skills in order to find the path to their own place of peace.
- And, of course, we must teach them boundaries. No matter how angry and disrespected one may feel, there are behaviors that are never acceptable. We must teach them that revenge, violence, is never an option.

Roger and I have felt so angry, so disrespected. We've been unable to find any strategy for discussion. We've chosen to give in to spare ourselves ongoing controversy. But we're finding ways to get past the anger. To honor the work around nature, we couldn't just abandon those trees; we are keeping them alive for replanting.

And there will be no planting of stink weed, no aggressive pruning; but there will be stories shared and lessons learned. So, that's how I'll live with my neighbor. And perhaps even that can inform our work for peace.

