

Quandaries of a Quaker Teacher

By Brent Bowyer

IT'S EARLY SATURDAY MORNING, the time that seems best to do the creative planning for my Grade Four classroom of our small town's only public school. After 30 years, you would think that most things would become routine, but every year brings fresh challenges, including new versions of old problems.

On the agenda...my class's part for the Remembrance Day program coming up. Beyond that, the script for the narrator for the whole assembly...ideally to bring some kind of coherence to the whole thing. I trip over the words. "Coherence" as the ideal. Not likely! What I really want is to introduce some healthy *dissonance* to what seems to have become a hymn to the god of war in most schools. Last year, I argued in a staff meeting that we should have an **assembly**, educational in format, not a **service**, as the Legion promotes it.

Remembering is still the focus of Remembrance Day in most schools — not imagining, not envisioning alternative possibilities, not a grappling with the moral / ethical issues related to our present war-torn world, not asking questions. No. Only remembering that which is past.

Sometimes I wonder why I volunteer for this assembly in particular. For a Quaker like me, it seems in some ways like a conflict of interest. Yet, I have co-ordinated it for our school for about ten years now. In the past few years, I have tried to bring across the personal loss, the tragedy, of war — with its mass slaughters of soldiers in the trenches in World War I, and so many deaths of innocent civilians in World War II. I have had my class research the soldiers whose names are listed on our local cenotaph, finding out how young they were when they went overseas, the hardships they faced, the too-early deaths of many. Other years, we have focused on positive approaches to peace-building, such as the efforts by the United Nations and other groups to give all people the basic necessities: food, clean water, shelter, health care, etc. And some years ago, we emphasized the present threat to security and peace posed by the arms race and

nuclear stockpiles.

But right now what response is called for, given the current world situation? How can our 45-minute assembly, at least the part for which I am responsible, be a "small light in the darkness"?

I have many questions about Remembrance Day, such as:

- Can we honour at least some of the motives / actions of those who died serving their country, without falling into the mindless war-mongering that seems to be foisted upon us at every turn?
- How do we educate children in school about the economic motives (i.e., greed for oil) of war, when these are obscured at every turn by the mass media and denied / ignored by most people?
- How can we illuminate the process by which *our* victims are turned into heroes, and by which *their* victims are turned into "the enemy" and by which *our* armed forces are praised as "freedom fighters" while *their* armed forces are put down as "terrorists", even though the words and actions of both sides are, at times, almost identical?
- Could Remembrance Day be broadened, at least in the school setting, to consider all who suffer tragic injuries or death: Aboriginal people such as Dudley George, victims of industrial accidents in unsafe working conditions, the massacre at the École Polytechnique de Montréal, and traffic accidents from intoxicated drivers, etc.?
- Can we move beyond just remembering war to *learning* from it, and imagining other ways of dealing with differences?
- How do other Quakers, especially Quakers teachers, deal with this issue?

This is an excerpt from a longer piece written in 2002 by Brent Bowyer, a member of the Lucknow Area Worship Group of Kitchener Area Monthly Meeting.

Editor's note: Active and former teachers are encouraged to respond to these queries, through letters to the editor in *The Canadian Friend*.