

A Manner of Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer

Number of handgun murders committed annually:

United Kingdom, 7
Canada, 8
Australia, 13
Sweden, 19
Israel, 25
Switzerland, 53
United States, 8,915

"US Leads in Handgun Murders," USA Today, June 5, 1992.

Though violence erupts around us, we are somehow able to distance ourselves from it. We fold our newspapers with disgust and recycle the stories. We flip the channels searching for something mindless to make our escape. We comfort ourselves that this is not Bosnia, that we do not work in the World Trade Center, that it didn't shouldn't wouldn't couldn't happen to our children. But then sometimes something happens — all escape routes are sealed — violence has broken the barriers. It has become personal.

Jason sat next to my son, Aaron, in the junior high school jazz band. One February morning Jason committed suicide outside the band room with an antique pistol and a homemade bullet. He died at 6:30 AM; at 6:32 Aaron arrived at school with his saxophone.

Jeff, my cousin, was leaving Los Angeles to start a new business in Quilcene, Washington. The night his friends gave him a farewell party, one of those friends followed him back to his room, stole his life savings, and murdered him.

We cannot throw up our hands in despair, giving up on such a violent world. Yet, when you put it all together — the newspapers, the television, the movies, the games, and the most painful personal stories — it feels overwhelming. What can be done? More importantly, what can we do, you and I?

And the answer is before us. We have the perfect, the most important, possibly the only receptive audience; we work with young

children. We must teach them to honor justice and peace, to respect human life and ways of living, and to live with hope. Many of the ways to do this we have to figure out individually, but there are stands we must all take:

We must take a strong and verbal stand against the purchase of war toys. Playing with toy guns in our centers and homes sets the stage for *playing* with real guns when they are available. We must teach children that what people do with real guns is not playful.

We must respond to war play very thoughtfully. It is not enough to forbid such play; we must help children think about what they are doing, and share our feelings about such play.

We must talk to children about what they see and hear. We must make violence something that we can talk about. We can help them see peaceful options for living in a violent world.

We must teach children what to do with their violent feelings. We can accept whatever their feelings are and help them learn to control and direct the results of their feelings. We can teach them how to negotiate a conflict, how to work toward a resolution, how to respect the rights of others, how to be heard, how to listen.

We can object to violence in movies, on television, and in music. We must know what children are seeing and hearing and help them make thoughtful, informed choices.

Most importantly, we can do all the things we know how to do to make each child feel important, valuable, powerful. We can help them see their potential and pump them full of hope. Our mission is to take the smallest people and make them so strong and wise that the work of their lives will be to prevent violence rather than to create it.

In remembrance of Jeff and Jason. We didn't change the world in time for you. The possibility that we could have haunts us.