

REmail: December 2, 2009
Subject: Three Lessons On Community

This fall, Wellesley Friends Meeting used William Kreidler's Teaching Conflict Resolution Through Children's Literature with our 5-7 year-old class. (This is a gem and I'll review it in a subsequent REmail. It's out-of-print but well-worth ordering used.) As a prelude to the lessons on practical peacemaking, we began with three lessons on community. I wanted to set the stage by looking at some of the special strengths of our life together before we grappled with how to keep our communities functioning well even as differences of opinion and misunderstandings inevitably arise.

Our first book was Swimmy by Leo Lionni. Jeny Randall, our guest teacher, began by exploring some tasks that can only be accomplished by a group. They brainstormed some things they could do alone and other tasks for which they needed help. Swimmy introduces us to a group of fish who learn to band together to protect themselves by swimming in the shape of a much larger fish. Think up some cooperative games or challenges as concrete illustrations of the power of working together. New Games Book is a good resource but may tend to be a little better-suited to older children. For younger children, try giving each child a piece of a large floor puzzle. Constructing the puzzle piece by piece will nicely illustrate that each one of us is needed to bring forth the potential and effectiveness of our community.

Our second lesson used Somebody Loves You Mr. Hatch by Eileen Spinelli as its beginning point. This is one of my new favorites and would work well for an intergenerational First Day School Lesson. Here we meet the reclusive Mr. Hatch who dresses in bland colors, doesn't smile, and completes the same round of boring tasks each day until a Valentine's Day present is delivered to his house. Mr. Hatch delights in the card that reads, "Somebody Loves You!" He blossoms and reaches out to people at work sharing brownies and assisting his neighbors. On goes the colorful tie! But alas, the Valentine was delivered to the wrong address! Mr. Hatch is deflated and returns to his dull and humorless daily life. His new found friends realize what has happened and in a heart-warming turn of events decide to throw him a party. The festive banner reads, "Everybody Loves You Mr. Hatch." This is a joyous and vivid affirmation of how healing can happen in community. A fun and much appreciated follow-up activity is baking cookies and giving, not selling, them to Friends at the Coffee Hour after Meeting for Worship the way Mr. Hatch shared his brownies.

The final illustration of community used The Best Gift of All by Jonathan Emmett. This lovely story is almost pastoral care for kids. An endearing group of animals go to visit their friend Rabbit who is under the weather and feeling blue. The little mole begins the trip to Rabbit's borrow and along the way collects more of Rabbit's friends. Everyone but Mole happened to bring a tangible gift of some sort. In a moment of tender embarrassment, Mole admits his consternation at having arrived empty-handed. The other animals remind him that they used his tunnels to reach Rabbit's house and Rabbit tells him that he brought the best gift of all, her friends! We made "thinking-of-you" cards for Friends in our meeting who were ill or recovering from surgery as a follow-up activity. You can imagine how pleased both the givers and recipients were!

Any of these books could successfully be used with a Preschool Class.

In the light,
Beth