

One Teacher's New Year Resolution

by Linda Donan

As the end of the year approaches, it's time to get out my Christmas decorations and just over the calendar page, I look forward to the New Year and remember last year's resolution to make a special teacher's letter to stuff into the children's hand-made cards to their parents. In the letter I want to talk about Peace.

Last year about this time, I recall, I was still emotionally reeling from the terrorist attacks in my homeland and wondering if I dared make a flight home for the holidays, when the topic of the newsletter began to form in my mind. This year I must write it. I share its topics with my colleagues in *Snakes and Ladders* hoping they might inspire your own newsletter or perhaps a Christmas Party speech.

Now in the season when even elevator Muzak is singing of 'peace and good will' I want to emphasize to my students' parents that their *Eikaiwa* is a safe zone. Neither teachers nor students will ever be allowed to hurt their child. In my school there aren't even the softest of bats nor over-size hammers to be used as a "weapon" to pretend to menace (even in humor) their children's bodies. I will not make a motion to strike at

a child with a raised hand much less a stick or a toy. And in a suicide-prone country like Japan, I will not model self-violence by striking myself or having a child strike me.

Our much loved animal puppets Teddy Bear and Kermit will continue to teach kids speaking and actions but will never insult each other nor bat one another over the head like the famous Punch and Judy puppets in England. If a doll or puppet takes an accidental tumble in an English class drama, they will show that the proper response is not laughter but a concerned "Are you OK?" and an offer of assistance in getting back on their footless feet or to a puppet doctor for help.

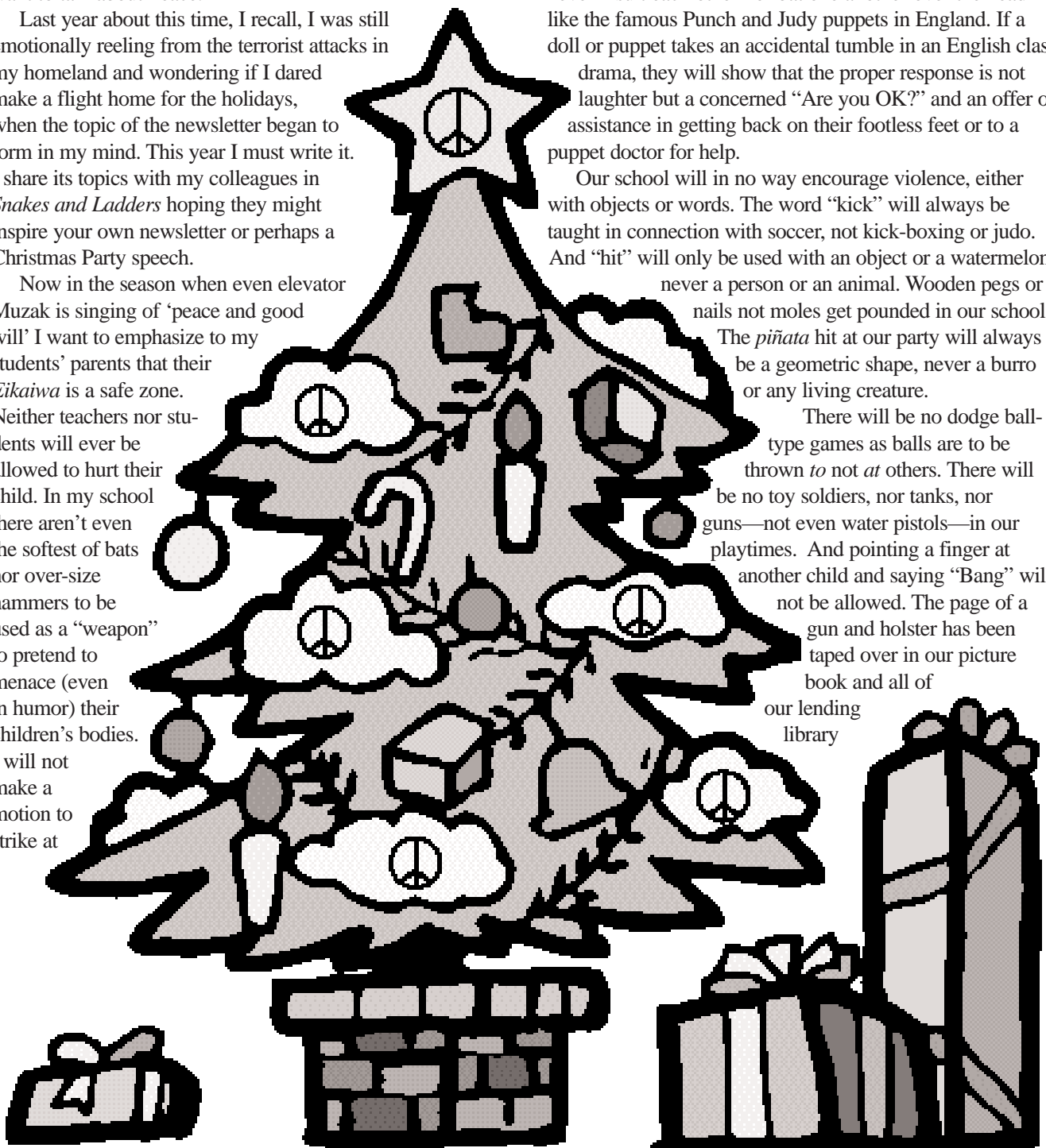
Our school will in no way encourage violence, either with objects or words. The word "kick" will always be taught in connection with soccer, not kick-boxing or judo.

And "hit" will only be used with an object or a watermelon, never a person or an animal. Wooden pegs or nails not moles get pounded in our school.

The *piñata* hit at our party will always be a geometric shape, never a burro or any living creature.

There will be no dodge ball-type games as balls are to be thrown *to* not *at* others. There will be no toy soldiers, nor tanks, nor guns—not even water pistols—in our playtimes. And pointing a finger at another child and saying "Bang" will not be allowed. The page of a gun and holster has been taped over in our picture book and all of

our lending library



books, and flashcards have likewise been edited. The picture of a boxer has been crossed out in our textbooks and its flashcard has been replaced by a “speaker” (a pretty fair likeness to Martin Luther King thanks to the talents of another teacher much more artistic than I am!).

Our school’s teaching philosophy emphasizes non-violence not only to a child’s body but also to their spirit of curiosity. Our pedagogical choices for teaching methods and learning tasks are constantly under the closest of scrutiny to see if they allow our kids to improve their second language with no damage to their self-esteem. The dangers of an emphasis on winners and losers in competitive games have been discussed not just among the teachers but also with our students’ parents at enrollment and open house and needs to be repeated in my newsletter yet again.

When a teacher sees a child start to bully or attack another child, the victim will be immediately made safe and never ever encouraged to “be brave and fight back”. The attacker will be gently separated from the class games for a cool down period in the office or *genkan*, and the teacher explains that hitting or kicking or bad words are not good behaviors. The point must be made that the teacher’s unhappiness is not directed at the attacker but at his or her behavior. The child is invited to return to class a short time later, followed by the ritual “I’m sorry” to the victim and to the rest of the class. Later, perhaps during writing time, the teacher is encouraged to take the attacker aside, and some time will be spent snuggling them and encouraging them to see the error of their earlier behavior. Yes, that’s right. The attacker not the victim gets the teacher’s special quality time attention. We believe that children model what they experience, so a child that hits, I figure, is not a “bad child” but a child that is troubled. The child who attacks may be reacting to stress or re-enacting what they have witnessed on TV or, worse still, have experienced themselves at home or elsewhere. These troubled kids need love and encouragement and loads of praise for their good behaviors and a gentle explanation of why hitting or making fun of others verbally is not kind and not allowed.

I also want to encourage the children’s parents to help their kids hold on to their English over the month-long absence from classes at this time of the year by reminding them of the class library of books, textbook tapes, song tapes, and our own dubbed storybook tapes. I encourage them to sign out these tapes, books or comic books from our school library (none of which make heroes out of robbers like Lupan or killer robots). I hope, by extension, parents will think about what books their kids are reading in Japanese. For example, could they be reading a biographical manga about Dr. Noguchi instead of about the naughty little

brat in *Dragon ball*?

I hope by my listing what toys are NOT allowed in my school, the parents might reconsider what Christmas toys or *otoshidama* purchases they will allow their kids at home. By making a point of mentioning that our books are specially chosen or edited, I hope to make the parents aware that many books are not ideal for raising children in a mind-set of nonviolence.

And facing the modern reality that in the next few cold months when children will be playing outside less, many of them will probably be turning their eyes to the TV screen a lot more than to anything they borrow from a library, I want to add some little suggestions in my year-end letter concerning the TV options for learning English. I want to include a schedule of English programs from local TV stations. Certainly I want to emphasize that it might be better for their kids to sing “What do you like to do?” every morning with Eric on *JB and the Raptones* than to watch Pikachu and his cohorts smashing each other, and better for them to

spend their afternoons with the Eigorians. Far better for them to spell and count and solve social problems with Niki and Big Bird than to watch super-heroes solve their problems by smashing or blasting their enemies. I will of course include the channels and times and also the videotaping codes, because most parents know their young

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children’s love of repetition—the way they ask to have the same bedtime story read again and again or to watch the same video over and over. Because of the influence of such repetition on the forming of values, my own child’s video collection was high on *Sesame Street* and lacking in cowboy and Indian shoot-em-ups.

Years ago an adult student brought a plastic machine gun to my four-year-old son. It was a popular gift of the year 1980, and I remember with a smile how he tore open its wrappings, listened to all of its various “sounds of gunfire” and then politely handed it back, saying, “We don’t play with guns in our house”. I was equally proud a few years later during the height of the video-games boom, when I overheard my son telling the neighborhood kids in Japanese, “We’d better stick to Super Mario or Tetris. My mom doesn’t allow fighting games in this house. Well, yes, it just bombs towns but, you know, there are people in towns. I don’t really want to play that I’m killing people”. In my English classes we don’t really want to play that we are killing or hurting people or animals.

In the choices we make with our children, we are hoping for a future of peace for the world. Like the Beatles used to sing, let’s all give peace a chance. ■

Ms. Donan has taught 20 years in Japan, most of those with small children.