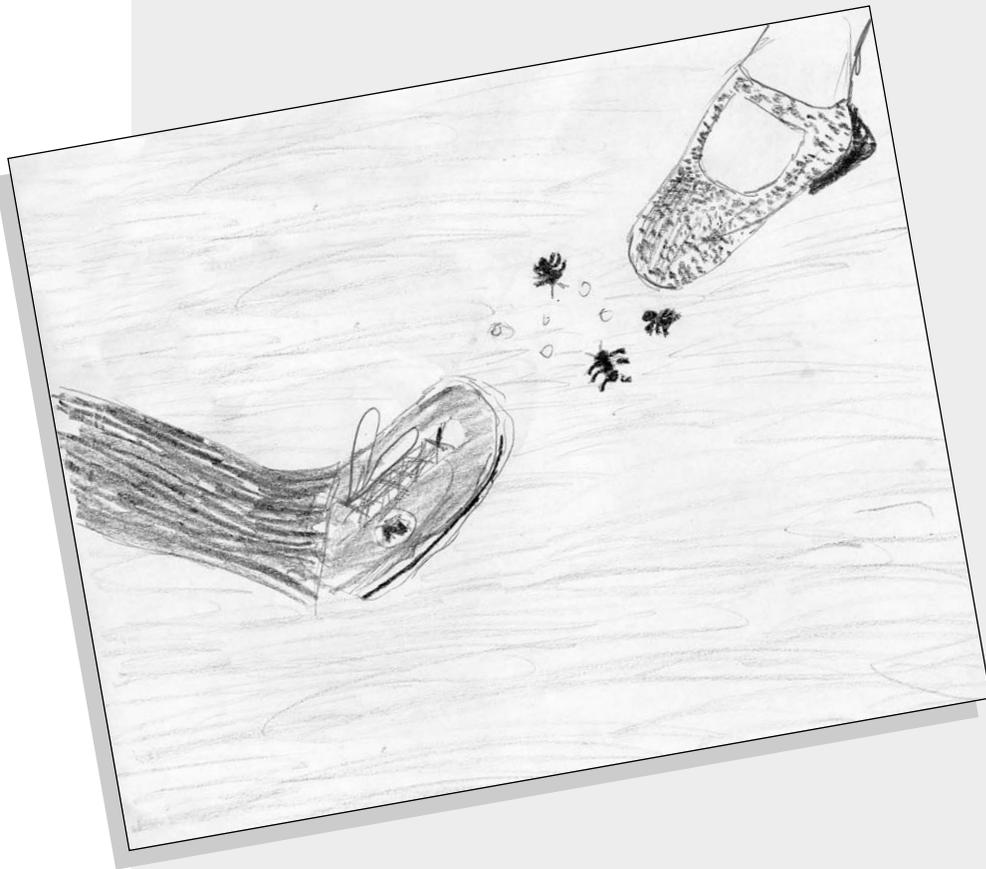




PROLOGUE

black ants and buddhism



It was snacktime, with the normal jostling commotion of hand washing just accomplished. Most of my second graders were settling down to eat their snacks. I was eating an apple while pulling together my math lesson. Suddenly Gloria shrieked, "Black ants! Ugh! There are black ants over here!" I looked up, not surprised that black ants would invade in Gloria's vicinity. She might sooner slide her chair over spilled juice to hide it than wipe it up.

Sadie screamed from across the room, "Agh! They're biting me!" and slapped her back and thigh for dramatic effect. She rushed to Gloria's side and began crushing the ants under the staccato rhythm of her glittery red shoes. Ben, not one to miss the action, quickly joined Sadie in stomping the ants.

Som Jet stood up at his table and said, "They are black ants. Do not kill them!"

Ben, still stomping, looked up and said, "Yeah, we know they're black ants. That's why we're killing them."

Som Jet, normally a soft-spoken boy, opened his hands in a pleading gesture and raised his voice. "No! Do not kill them! They are living things! Black ants do not bite people!"

"Well, they bit *me*!" Sadie said impatiently. She stopped stomping for a moment to pull up her shirt, searching for some spot on her skin that could pass for an ant bite to bolster her argument.

Perhaps sixty seconds had passed since Gloria's first hysterical mention of the ants. "Everyone freeze," I said. Som Jet had a desperate look in his eyes. "Sadie and Ben, sit in your seats. Som Jet is trying to tell us something very important, and I think we all need to listen carefully to his words. Som Jet, would you tell us again?"

Som Jet breathed in. "They are black ants. They are living things. Black ants clean up mess. They do not bite people."

Calvin, an avid reader of nonfiction books and therefore a respected scientific authority in our class, said quietly, "That's true." Sadie narrowed her eyes at him and twisted her face defiantly.

Som Jet continued, "It is not right for us to kill living things." He sat down.

"But we always kill ants," Ben said. "We can kill ants if we want to." Many classmates nodded in eager agreement.

"Well, let's think about this together," I said. "What are our class rules?"

"Be kind. Work hard," Sovan volunteered, adding, "We don't have a rule about ants."



“Maybe our rules cover it. If there is even one person in our class who would feel very sad or upset about us killing even one ant, would it be kind for us to go ahead and kill that ant anyway?” I asked.

“Not really,” Ben shrugged.

“Could a person work hard if he felt very sad or upset?”

“Definitely not!” said Sadie, emphatically slicing an *X* in the air. Sadie usually stomped to the classroom library quiet area at least once a day when too angry or upset to work. “We shouldn’t do things on purpose to upset people.”

“So what should we do about our ants?”

“Well,” Michelle began, “we definitely shouldn’t kill them.”

“We should not kill them,” Krish said. “They are living things.”

Michelle paused thoughtfully, then added, “But I don’t really like the idea of ants crawling around the floor when we’re sitting on the rug and stuff.”

“Why not?” Jack challenged. “We have crickets and milkweed bugs over there, and remember, we had butterflies, and you brought in so many caterpillars. Same thing.”

Michelle pursed her lips. “They are all insects. You’re right about that, but those were all in the habitats we made for them and these ants are *loose*.”

“Maybe we could get an ant farm to put them in,” Samuel suggested.

“Then they wouldn’t be free and these are *wild* ants,” Ann said quietly.

“Why did the ants come here?” Stan asked.

“Black ants clean up mess,” Som Jet said.

“Maybe because we’re not very tidy,” Sadie suggested brightly. “Look at all our crumbs,” she said, surveying her table with a sweeping gesture.

“When juice spill, it’s sticky if you don’t clean it,” Ramadan said, looking under Gloria’s chair.

“How could each of us take personal responsibility to make our room a less attractive habitat for black ants?” I asked.

“The leader could sweep after snack,” Angela suggested.

“That’s a good idea,” I said, walking to the closet. “Here’s where I keep the broom and dustpan. Let me show you all how to use it.” First I gently swept up the ants and let Som Jet take them outside. Then I demonstrated sweeping and asked a few volunteers to model it.

Jasmine suggested that they all wash their tables. Angela said there weren’t enough sponges. They decided that one person from each table



each day should do it, taking turns. Angela said the sponge should not be too wet, so I did a quick demonstration of sponge wringing and crumb catching. Sadie said that she and Gloria often forgot to take home their lunch boxes, and left them in the room, full of food, so they should be more responsible about taking them home every day. We talked about how taking more personal responsibility at school and at home is part of growing up. After an enthusiastic cleanup, we started our math lesson, a little late.

I continued thinking about Som Jet and Ben throughout the day. Ben was right. It was completely acceptable in our American culture to crush ants. Should I have told Som Jet, “Buck up and get used to it. You’re in America now”? I thought of a similar argument in our school around the holidays a few years back. Some more traditional teachers argued that it was fine to continue to sing Christmas carols at a concert and have Christmas parties in classrooms and color pictures of Santa Claus, because everyone in America knows what Christmas is, and if they don’t, they should learn. I thought more about what Ben had said. Not only is it culturally acceptable for Americans to crush ants, but we Americans also slap mosquitoes, bomb fleas, and swat flies. Heck, we land-mine and carpet-bomb countries. We defoliated much of Vietnam. We carry out “shock and awe” bombing campaigns in the cradle of ancient civilizations. Won’t Som Jet have a tough time in America if he can’t get used to a few crushed ants? Surely Som Jet will learn all this without my help, living in America and watching television, but what will *we* learn? I figured Som Jet felt the way he did because he is a Buddhist.

what would mohammed do?

A couple of days later, I attended a community *iftar* at Smith College. (*Iftar* is an evening feast to break the fast during the Muslim holy season of Ramadan.) While speaking to Sister Kalilah Karim-Rushdan, Muslim chaplain for the college who had visited my class earlier in the year, I told her the story about the black ants. She said, “In Islam, we should not kill the ants because all life is created by Allah.” “Hmmm,” I thought. “So much for stereotypes.”

Less than a week later, it was Thanksgiving. During a snacktime discussion about Thanksgiving, Krish told a friend that he didn’t know what his family was doing for Thanksgiving. Krish’s family had come from India in July. I invited Krish’s family to my home for Thanksgiving



dinner. His father politely responded, “We do not know this Thanksgiving tradition. What is it appropriate for us to do?”

“Just come and eat with us,” I said. Remembering only as they were arriving that they were vegetarians, I felt a bit awkward about our chicken and gravy, but we had lots of squash, beans, rice, and corn bread. At dinner, I told the story of the black ants. Ranjit, Krish’s father, said that Hindus should not kill black ants because they are living things. I asked if that was why his family was vegetarian. He said it was because of that, and for health reasons. Ranjit then explained that his father was a poultry farmer and sold live chickens, but did not eat them.

“Hmmm,” I thought. “You could live your whole life, hanging with White Christian Americans, crushing ants and swatting mosquitoes, thinking you were acting like everyone else on the planet, and you’d be wrong.” I talked with my students about it when we returned to school. I explained that so far we had learned that Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus had rules against killing living things and would not crush the ants. Ben leaned forward and whispered loudly across the rug to Michelle, “Do we have that rule in Judaism?”

We decided we should ask our friend Norma Sandowski what her friends in South Africa thought about this. Norma was a friend of Angela’s mothers, and had heard of our class through them. She introduced herself to me the summer before at the community garden, where we both have plots. Norma is a retired chemical engineer and industrial safety consultant who decided, at the age of seventy, to pack up and go to a rural school in South Africa as a volunteer teacher. Norma visited our class before she left. We had been in fairly regular e-mail contact with her and her students. We e-mailed her at Itoseng Center, her school near the South African border with Lesotho. Because of health reasons, Norma was not at the school when she got our e-mail, but she wrote back that on the Indian reservation in Oklahoma where she grew up, she learned it was not right to kill ants. She also learned that sprinkling black pepper would discourage them from coming in, without hurting or killing them. I shared this news with our class, and brought in a can of black pepper.

By this time, our personal responsibility campaign was working wonders. With minimal squabbling, the tables were being wiped and the floor was being swept. Som Jet regularly carried any found ants outside. Gloria still had a hard time remembering to take home her lunch boxes (she always had several in circulation), but we put a sign in her mailbox to remind her. Sadie often spotted ant activity that eluded others (including me) and would not rest until she had thoroughly sprin-



kled black pepper on the area. Gabriella's mother asked me what I had said to the children about personal responsibility, because Gabriella came home, cleaned her bedroom, and sorted all the laundry. When her shocked mother asked what had inspired her, Gabriella said, "I'm just taking personal responsibility."

The children had grown fond of the black ant story, and when a visitor came to the room, they would often say, "Let's tell her about the black ants." It was a loose survey, not seeking numerical data in the form of a vote, but rather a quest for different perspectives on this question.

Honestly, I know little about Buddhism. I know less about Hinduism and only a little more about Islam. I remembered that the previous year Jack, a blond-haired, blue-eyed child with college-educated theater carpenter parents, had said he was a Buddhist. Jack also has a good imagination and tells a lot of stories. Jack's parents hadn't mentioned being Buddhist when I visited the family, and I hadn't noticed any Buddhist artifacts when I visited their home, but I gave Jack the benefit of the doubt. Jack also has a slight lisp, and I have auditory processing disorder. Sometimes when other children talked about going to temple or church, he would say, "I go to *sangha*." When I asked what that was, he said, "You know, *sangha*, where you learn Buddhism." I didn't know. Anyway, I assumed that if Jack was a Buddhist, his parents must be Buddhists too.

I called and reached Jack's mom, Ann, to see if she'd be willing to come in and explain to the class a little more about Buddhism. Jack had already told her the story about the black ants. She said neither she nor Jack's father were Buddhist and that Jack knew more about Buddhism than she did. I was a little surprised and asked where he had learned about it. She said that the previous year he had started going to a Dharma school, taught by Dr. Taietsu Unno, a retired professor from Smith College and the husband of a retired teacher from our school. Ann offered to contact the Unnos to ask them to come visit our class.

It took us a couple of weeks to reach the Unnos, because they had gone to Japan, Thailand, and Bhutan. After some phone tag and e-mail messages, we arranged for them to visit. The children took turns telling parts of the black ant story to the Unnos, who listened carefully. Mrs. Unno then explained why Buddhists would not harm a living thing. Dr. Unno explained the Wheel of Dharma and the Noble Eightfold Path, which consisted of right thoughts, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, meditation, and views. He also told the story of Buddha and led a meditation exercise with the class. Together we all said the following:



*Breathing in, I relax
Breathing out, I smile*

*Breathing in, I feel calm
Breathing out, I feel good*

*Breathing in, no more anger
Breathing out, peace and quiet*

—Adapted from Thich Nhat Hanh

It struck me how this quiet breathing and sitting in their chairs with good posture was different from the children's previous imitations of "meditating," when they would contort themselves into some version of the lotus position, pinch their thumbs and index fingers together (pinkies extended), gaining as much attention as possible in the process. I wondered where they had learned that caricature of meditation, the superficial "look" of it without the substance.

The next day, we wrote a thank-you note to the Unnos and asked a few more questions that we hadn't thought to ask when they visited.

"can you believe the government did that?"

Ben picked up a book from the display in our classroom library, called *Baseball Saved Us*, about children playing baseball in a Japanese American internment camp during World War II. Ben likes baseball and football. I saw him studying the illustrations. Although Ben was the most impulsive and physically aggressive student in my class, he was also intensely spiritual and poetic. Ben looked up and said, "The people in this book look like Mr. and Mrs. Unno, don't they?" I studied the illustration he was pointing to.

"You're right. Mr. and Mrs. Unno are Japanese American, and this story is about Japanese Americans during a sad time in our country's history. In fact, Dr. and Mrs. Unno lived that history. When they were your age, they were sent to live in an internment camp like that." Later, I noticed Ben reading *Baseball Saved Us*. Ben is an average reader and tends to pick books that are on the easy side. I knew this book was above his reading level, so I said it would be all right if he borrowed it to read at home with a parent's help. He was intent on reading it right then and said, "It's okay. I think I can read it. I'll just ask my friends if I get stuck on a word." A few times, during quiet reading time, I looked up from



my reading group and saw Ben out of his seat. Just before speaking to him, I'd realize that he had gone over to Michelle or Seamus to ask them to read a tricky word, and then returned to his seat.

Later I asked him to read some of it to me. Although he was not fluent, he was working very hard at reading it, very hungry for the story. He shook his head and looked at me, asking, "Can you believe the government did that?"

When I asked how he would feel if the government did that to his family, he said he'd feel angry. I said that was how I thought I would feel, but I remembered some years ago, when Mrs. Unno had visited my class and told my students what it was like to be in those camps. I was surprised when she said she forgave the people who did that to her. She was not bitter. Ben's eyes grew wide. I asked Ben how he thought she was able to let go of all that anger. He thought a moment and said, "Probably 'cause she meditates."

I remembered I had another book, *The Bracelet*, about a Japanese American girl sent to an internment camp. She was forced to leave her home and best friend, who gave her a bracelet to remember their friendship. Ben asked if he could read it. I brought it in the next day. Again, the text was difficult for him, but he tackled it vigorously. He noticed in the dedication of the book that the author thanked the Uno family of Northampton (spelled with one *n* and not two), and we wondered if those were "our Unnos." He decided he would have to write them to find out.

I photocopied the meditation that Dr. Unno had given us and told the children I was putting one in each of their mailboxes to take home. Ben raised his hand and said, "I need two copies, one for my family's refrigerator and another one in my bedroom, where I go for time-out. If we feel angry or upset, we could use that to meditate."

"Hang one in our library, Ms. Cowhey," Sadie said. "I'll use it a lot when I go there."

making connections

Every day, I read aloud to my class: lots of picture books, lots of fiction, some nonfiction, as well as letters, news articles, and items from the Internet. We always discuss these readings, both to ensure the understanding of the English language learners and to deepen the comprehension of all the students. In these discussions I model and teach comprehension strategies described by Ellin Keene and Susan Zimmerman



in *Mosaic of Thought*. For example, one approach is to teach children to use schema by making connections between the text and their own lives (text-to-self), other books and stories (text-to-text), and to the world (text-to-world). After some experience, this comprehension habit becomes second nature. In addition to these read-alouds, which focus on enjoyment and comprehension, I do another read-aloud each week for the purpose of philosophical discussion, where the emphasis is on listening skills and oral language development.

For our philosophical discussion, I decided to read *Hey Little Ant!* by Phillip and Hannah Hoose. It is a humorously illustrated story, written in verse, depicting a debate between a boy who is poised to squish an ant on the sidewalk, and the ant, who thinks he shouldn't do it. The story ends by asking what you would do. We began our discussion there. Krish said, "Leave the ant. Imagine how the ant would feel."

Jack added, "In Buddhism, no one would kill another living thing, big or small."

"Under some STOP signs," Stan said slowly, "there's a sticker that says, Eating Animals."

"That's vegetarians," said Jasmine.

I asked who was more powerful in the story, the boy or the ant. At first, children said the boy was more powerful, because he could kill the ant, could run faster than the ant if the ant tried to run away, and so forth. Gabriella said, "The kid, because he's big. He can squish the ant, but I don't think he should. Everything is made by God."

Then Samuel said no, the ant was more powerful. "His voice is powerful, and what he says is true."

"The ant is more powerful because ants can lift ten times their weight," Gloria said. "Humans can't do that."

I asked the children, "What is power?" Krish said it is strength. Jasmine said it could be magical powers.

Ivan said it is "things that you are good at, like reading, not just strength." Gloria mentioned "strength in words, like writing." Ben talked about the power of running machines.

Calvin talked about the power of courage and the power of building. He added, "You might have powers you don't even know, like Hanuman the Monkey King. He didn't know he could fly." Calvin was making a text-to-text connection with the *Ramayana*, the sacred Hindu text. In preparation for Divali, the Hindu festival of lights, Krish's mother, Sonu, had visited our class and told the story of Lord Rama, his wife, Sita, and the critical role played by Hanuman the Monkey King. Ben had recognized the story, and brought in a picture book called *Hanuman* from



home that I read to the class. Hanuman quickly became a class favorite. Here he was back again.

Sovan added “the power of illustrating” (of art). Angela added the power of science. Michelle added the power of love, and Jasmine added the power of friendship. Gloria suggested the power of imagination. I told her I thought Einstein would agree with her because he thought imagination was more important than knowledge. Seamus, an avid football player and fan, added “the power of football” with a giggle, then said more seriously, “Athletes are strong, so athletic power.”

Krish pointed to the picture of Gandhi on the bulletin board and said, “Gandhi had the power of peace and bravery.”

Sadie had been agitated at the start of the discussion because of an incident at recess and had gone to the classroom library to meditate and listen. Now she joined us in the circle and returned to the question of who was more powerful. “I think the ant was more powerful because he was able to get the boy to *stop*.” I said that stopping a situation could in fact be very powerful, that when workers go on strike, they stop making things in the factories to make the factory owners listen to what they say they need.

“It’s easier to be small, you know,” Jack said with a sly smile, being one of the shorter members of class himself. “The ant could lie down in the crack so the boy’s foot couldn’t squish him.” He rolled to lie down on the rug, demonstrating, then continued, “Plus, he could communicate very well.” I commented that that was an interesting observation that illustrated a principle of guerrilla warfare: a relatively poor, small, ill-equipped group fighting the oppression of some powerful invading force might operate like a flea on a horse, biting here and then moving somewhere else, like an ant in a crack, usually too small to see or to catch. I told them the American colonists used that style of warfare early in the American Revolution, fighting against the powerful British Army, and the North Vietnamese used it against the Americans. Those using that style were successful in both cases. I said the current attacks on American troops in “post-war” Iraq reminded me of that kind of fighting.

Stan agreed with Jack. “When you are small, you can hide from your enemy.”

Som Jet walked over to a table and patted it, saying, “A table is big and strong, but it’s not powerful, because it’s not alive and can’t do anything.”

Ramadan agreed. “A chair holds you up, but it can’t do nothing.”

Soon it was International Day for Human Rights, December 10. I read aloud *For Every Child* by Caroline Castle. We brainstormed a list of



human rights. Ramadan, a Muslim Albanian refugee from Kosovo, named rights such as “To not get killed, to not get your house blown up.” They added others to the list: the right to get an education; the right to have clean water, food, shelter, and medical care; and the right to be called your own name. Ben added, “To believe your own religion.” The children made captioned drawings of the human rights they chose.

“his painting . . . it’s kind of like protesting.”

The next day, we had a philosophical discussion of *Matthew’s Dream* by Leo Lionni, in which a mouse dreams that art can change his world. We returned to Sovan’s idea about the power of art.

We looked at Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*. Ramadan noticed, “The people look sad and scared.”

Stan said, “Not all the stuff is in the right place.” They noticed parts of a cow up in the air.

“I think it needs a body,” Ramadan said.

“That’s part of art,” Ben answered.

“It shows people getting hurt,” Jasmine said.

Ramadan touched one of the faces and said, “He looks scared.”

“He’s getting tortured,” Ben said seriously.

Ramadan asked, “Was he [Picasso] in *my* country? Was he in *my* war?”

I told them the story of the painting, how the fascists had bombed the Spanish city of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. Picasso painted *Guernica* to show the world the horror of that war. Calvin said, “Maybe if someone was for war and saw that, it could make them be against war.” The children were quiet for a minute. Calvin kept looking at *Guernica*, then continued thoughtfully, “His painting . . . it’s kind of like protesting.”

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On Christmas, the restaurant where Som Jet’s family works was closed. They all came to dinner at my home. The conversation eventually got around to the black ants. His mother explained the five precepts of Buddhism, which include avoiding harming living things, not stealing, and not committing adultery. My mother said that sounded like some of the Ten Commandments.

I kept thinking back to Ben’s loudly whispered question, “Do we have that rule in Judaism?” It’s a good question. The basic rules of



Judaism and Christianity are the Ten Commandments. The sixth one is “Thou shalt not kill.” That’s pretty broad, pretty clear. It doesn’t specifically say, “Thou shalt not kill people, but bugs are okay,” or vice versa, or “Thou shalt not kill good people, only evil ones,” or “Thou shalt not kill except during a war,” or “Thou shalt not kill unless the other guy kills first.” It just says, “Thou shalt not kill.” I thought about politicians who so loudly profess their Christianity, and wondered how they reconcile this contradiction. I wondered if Emperor Hirohito was a Buddhist.

My students and I didn’t know the answers to all these questions. Sister Khalilah was leaving for Mecca in a few days to make her *haji* (holy pilgrimage). There would be more than a million pilgrims from all over the world gathered there. She said she would tell some people she met there the story of the black ants. When she came back, she would tell us what she learned. We planned to keep searching and asking. On the way to finding answers, we knew we would find more questions.

reflections on black ants and critical teaching

I chose to begin with this story because it illustrates what critical teaching and learning look like in my classroom. In the fast-paced days of teaching young children, I often need to step back and ask myself, “What is really going on here?” The story of “Black Ants and Buddhism” starts with a conflict. Human nature draws us to conflict. We become curious about the overheard argument at the next table in a restaurant, or a conflict between parent and child in the supermarket. Too often textbooks and other teacher-proof curriculum for young children provide a pat and happy presentation, devoid of conflict. Not surprisingly, these materials and this approach to teaching often bore many children, who are then labeled “inattentive.” The small-scale invasion of black ants into our classroom, met by vigorous stomping and a cry of protest, engaged every member of the class, within seconds. Everyone had an opinion. Everyone cared.

In these days of fast food, instant messaging, music videos, call waiting, and fast cash, our society in general and our media in specific actively and aggressively shorten our attention span. As a teacher of critical thinkers, part of my job is to deliberately nurture sustained interest in questions over time. I want these children to grow into critically thinking citizens, not passive consumers of mass media fed by spin doctors. This kind of sustained attention is a process, not a hit-the-buzzer



or click-the-mouse reflex. The black ant questions have been under investigation for two months now, and the interest continues.

The story of the black ants illustrates students' sense of ownership of the story itself and its central questions: *Doesn't everyone think it is fine to crush ants? If not, why not? Who disagrees? Do they see the world differently from people who think it is fine?* The story belongs to the children. They tell it often and well, to whomever will listen. Their questions are unique. In the tradition of critical pedagogy, it is a problem they have posed for themselves. Much of the learning takes place through dialog: conversations during a snack or meal, questions, comments, visits, philosophical discussions, and book talks.

Critically teaching this conflict and the subsequent investigation changed student behavior at school and at home, to make the world a little better. Gandhi says it is not so important how large the thing you do, but simply that you do it.

Teaching critically listens to and affirms a minority voice that challenges the status quo. Instead of forcing assimilation and acceptance of dominant culture, it reexamines cultural assumptions and values and considers their larger ramifications. Every student's voice was heard in this process, through philosophical discussions, meetings with guests, reflecting on books, listening and talking with visitors, and writing to friends and elders to ask their opinions.

The black ants helped us explore a variety of perspectives and helped us to learn, then compare and contrast, the rules of a variety of spiritual traditions. The ants helped us look at ants and the world and ourselves as Americans through others' eyes. Not bad, for some black ants at snacktime.

