

Now is the time for our most powerful stories, our boldest songs

By Barb Ballenger

On the morning of September 11 Bob and I were driving across town to an elementary school to do our literacy program, "Open the Book." I learned about the plain crashes just moments before Bob arrived at the door. We listened in shock as the horrible details unfolded over the car radio. As we passed Cleveland Hopkins Airport we noticed planes coming in for unscheduled landings.

Getting out of the car dejected and heart-sick, we wondered how to present an upbeat, fun little program on reading in the light of what we had just learned. So early in this news day few school children were aware how their world was changing. We went about our program with as much energy as we could muster, feeling we owed these kids a taste of fun and normal — it might be the last they'd have of that for awhile.

At the end, Bob noticed a banner hanging from the library ceiling that read: "When we COMPROMISE to resolve conflicts, EVERYBODY WINS!" This is going to be important to keep in mind in the coming days and months, he told the kids. You will be learning about events soon that will bring out strong feelings in people. It will be up to you to try to bring spirit of conflict resolution to what you hear. That was the best we could do in a secular program at a public school.

I write this on the second

month anniversary of the attacks. Beacon Street has done several programs since Sept. 11. And just as every one else's lives have changed, so have ours. For me, coming to terms with the original violence and the resulting war has required a soul searching, an exploration of what it means to speak to the violence of our nation and world as a Christian.

We have found ourselves sifting through our stories and songs, even writing a few new ones, that tap into the foundation of peace and nonviolence that is at the core of the gospel which informs our Christian faith tradition. We believe that now more than ever our broken country needs these stories and songs — not as escapes from painful realities but as vehicles for entering the pain and coming out more peaceful, more loving, more sensitive to the ongoing suffering of the rest of the world.

Some stories and activities took on new meaning in light of Sept. 11 as we looked for ways to exhort people to examine their feelings of anger, sadness and vengeance in light of the Jesus' call to forgive. Bob and I learned a new lesson from the peacock feather, for example, during an early October flight to St. Louis where we were to offer a day of Confirmation retreats.

Typically we give people the long, iridescent feathers and invite

them to balance them in their palms or on their noses or finger tips. Then we invite them to try the same trick with their eyes closed, while a partner offers directions. From this we stress the importance of an open eye and of attention and appreciation for each individual's responsibility to balance what God has placed in hand.

But that evening, with the mounting war weighing so heavily in our minds, we noticed something new. To balance a feather you must have an open hand. The graceful dance cannot be done with clenched fists.

Similarly, it suddenly became clear to us, we cannot pray well with clenched fists, or listen well with clenched fists, or think clearly with clenched fists.

But an open hand — aah! There is something so very beautiful and simple and trusting about that gesture, offered humbly to God. It suggests an openness to the grace and will of God, while it speaks of a recent letting go. To allow something as fragile as a feather, or a life, or peace to be placed there, requires a willingness to be moved by the feather, the life, the peace. And that movement is ultimately initiated by the Spirit of God.

By the next day we were gently suggesting that one of the calls of Confirmation might be to walk into the world with an empty, open hand, rather than a clenched one. We invited the kids to sing a chant from the Lutheran