

Phil was an elementary school teacher, and when Jon and I went into teacher training in 1981 we went to Phil for guidance. Phil had been teaching since the early 1950s, had received a B.C.TF award for outstanding teaching and had very strong opinions regarding curriculum and pedagogy. Once again I was the novice visiting the Buddha and once again I was totally out of my depth. As I gained experience I began to understand something of what Phil had tried to communicate, and he eventually became a sort of super-ego. Whenever I had one of those “Sit down, shut up and colour” days at school I could feel Phil breathing down my neck.

Phil didn’t mentor me because he especially liked me—he was compelled to do so. He was compelled to communicate his vision of what he thought teaching and singing should be. Teaching was a calling to Phil, not because he was selfless and philanthropic, but because he looked at the world and shouted, “Look at this! Isn’t this wonderful/amazing/fascinating?” The world was always an infinite source of wonder to him and he never tired of revealing in it. Lying on his belly in the dirt, as he might, watching a centipede negotiate an unstable pile of sand, daily practicalities would be forgotten (often, I’m sure, to the exasperation of those he lived and worked with).

During my second teaching practicum, I taught in the classroom Phil had vacated the year before when he retired. One of his ex-pupils exclaimed to me,

“You should have seen this classroom when Mr. Thomas was here. It was completely full of stuff. There was junk everywhere. It was EXCELLENT!” Phil must have given successive generations of fire marshals heart attacks. His house and three garages were full of “stuff” which he saved for possible artistic or teaching projects. You could never get a ride with Phil because his car was always full to the rafters with more stuff. He used real materials in his teaching, never kits or units developed by someone else. He worked from first principles, always asking himself, “What is this really *about*?” For example, while teaching a unit on birds, when he wanted to communicate “birdness” to his pupils, using rulers clamped between his outstretched fingers as flight feathers, he stood on a table and made the sounds and movements of an eagle about to take flight. When researching the background to a logging song for his book he covered every available surface in his house with books, pamphlets, union newsletters and the like, to find the meaning of one technical word known only to loggers of the 1920s.

Phil never stopped trying to convey his enthusiasms. During one of his long tirades your eyes might begin to glaze over; you would feel a ray of hope when he you finally heard him say, “Well, anyway, the point is...” But those of us who knew and loved him knew those words were simply the prelude to yet another half-hour of talk.

## Remembering Phil

Judith Cohen

In the many years Phil and I were friends and colleagues, my daughter, then a small child, and I stayed several times with him and Hilda, finding our way around and through the books, instruments, recordings, paints, things for children to play and learn with (not simply “toys”), more books, instruments, recordings... and friendship, laughter, and ongoing discussions. Phil would occasionally stay at our place in Toronto, usually prefacing these very welcome visits with, “well, I could stay at a hotel, but your place is much more fun!”. He would arrive with camping plate and cutlery, some culinary treats, and, of course, a banjo.....

