



## The Book of Qualities by J. Ruth Gendler

In J. Ruth Gendler's *The Book of Qualities* (NY: Harper, 1988), 75 abstract qualities come to life, walking and talking, borrowing Grandmother's shawl and telling scary stories late into the night . . . personification at its best! Precise, specific images reveal each abstract quality more vividly than any dictionary definition.

After you read sample profiles in class, choose one quality from the list below. Check the dictionary and the thesaurus, exploring possible meanings and hunting down synonyms. Gendler writes of these qualities as if they were real people, with weird relatives, bad friends, unique clothing styles, and strange stories to tell. Make your chosen quality a real personality, too. Complete a sensory cluster for your quality -- sight, smell, taste, touch, sound. Then write and carefully polish a one-to-three-paragraph personification of your quality. Make every word count on this one! Be prepared to share aloud.

Alienation	Devotion	Longing
Ambivalence	Discipline	Pain
Anger	Doubt	Panic
Anxiety	Ecstasy	Patience
Beauty	Excitement	Perfection
Blame	Faith	Perseverance
Boredom	Fear	Pleasure
Certainty	Forgiveness	Power
Change	Greed	Protection
Charm	Grief	Resignation
Clarity	Guilt	Sensuality
Commitment	Harmony	Service
Compassion	Honesty	Shock
Competition	Honor	Stillness
Complacency	Imagination	Suffering
Confidence	Innocence	Terror
Confusion	Inspiration	Trust
Contentment	Intelligence	Truth
Courage	Intensity	Ugliness
Creativity	Intuition	Uncertainty
Criticism	Jealousy	Unhappiness
Defeat	Joy	Urgency
Depression	Judgment	Whimsy
Despair	Liberation	Wisdom
Detachment	Loneliness	Worry

**Fear** has a large shadow, but he himself is quite small. He has a vivid imagination. He composes horror music in the middle of the night. He is not very social and he keeps to himself at political meetings. His past is a mystery. He warned us not to talk to each other about him, adding that there is nowhere any of us could go where he wouldn't hear us. We were quiet. When we began to talk to each other, he changed. His manners started to seem pompous, and his snarling voice sounded rehearsed.

Two dragons guard Fear's mansion. One is ceramic and Chinese. The other is real. If you make it past the dragons and speak to him close up, it is amazing to see how fragile he is. He will try to tell you stories. Be aware. He is a master of disguises and illusions. Fear almost convinced me that he was a puppet master and I was a marionette.

Speak out boldly, look him in the eye, startle him. Don't give up. Win his respect, and he will never bother you with small matters.

**Courage** has roots. She sleeps on a futon on the floor and lives close to the ground. Courage looks you straight in the eye. She is not impressed with powertrippers and she knows first aid. Courage is not afraid to weep and she is not afraid to pray, even when she is not sure who she is praying to. When Courage walks, it is clear that she has made the journey from loneliness to solitude. The people who told me she is stern were not lying, they just forgot to mention that she is kind.

**Beauty** is startling. She wears a gold shawl in the summer and sells seven kinds of honey at the flea market. She is young and old at once, my daughter and my grandmother. In school she excelled in mathematics and poetry. Beauty doesn't anger easily, but she was annoyed with the journalist who kept asking her about her favorites – as if she could have one favorite color or one favorite flower. She does not mind questions though, and she is fond of riddles. Beauty will dance with anyone who is brave enough to ask her.

**Change** wears my sister's moccasins. He stays up late and wakes up early. He likes to come up quietly and kiss me on the back of the neck when I am at my drawing table. He wants to amuse people, and it hurts him when they yell at him. Change is very musical, but sometimes you must listen for a long time before you hear the pattern in his music.

**Patience** wears my grandmother's filigree earrings. She bakes marvelous dark bread. She has beautiful hands. She carries great sacks of peace and purses filled with small treasures. You don't notice Patience right away in a crowd, but suddenly you see her all at once, and then she is so beautiful you wonder why you never saw her before.

**Pleasure** is wild and sweet. She likes purple flowers. She loves the sun and the wind and the night sky. She carries a silver bowl full of liquid moonlight. She has a cat named Midnight with stars on his paws.

Many people mistrust Pleasure and even more misunderstand her. For a long time I could hardly stand to be in the same room with her. I went to sleep early to avoid her. I thought she was a gossip and a flirt and she drank too much. In school we learned she was dangerous and I was sure that she would distract me from my work. I didn't realize she could nurture me.

As I have changed, Pleasure has changed. I have learned to value her friendship.

Thank you for introducing me to **Detachment**. Did you know ahead of time we would like each other so much? He is almost as elusive as you are, but he is more reliable. He rarely calls before he comes over. Usually, I am so pleased to see him that I don't object, and I know there is no way to telephone him when he is on the road. He has clear eyes and a sapphire voice. When he sighs, I can see his heart.

Well, your children told me **Unhappiness** has volunteered to cook for you. I understand you do not enjoy fixing meals for your hungry household. Still, I must warn you to consider this offer carefully. Unhappiness was the cook in my dormitory food service years ago. Her favorite meal is burnt lentils with stale toast. Her taste in vegetables runs toward the rotten. Even when she makes foods that taste good, you leave the table vague and unsatisfied, you find yourself eating flat bread in the corner of the pantry an hour later. Complaining to her about the food does not help. Mean comments please her. Just because Unhappiness thrives on misfortune and blackened bread doesn't mean they will nourish you.

**Worry** has written the definitive work on nervous habits. She etches lines on people's foreheads when they are not paying attention. She makes lists of everything that could go wrong while she is waiting for the train. She is sure she left the stove on, and the house is going to explode in her absence. When she makes love, her mind is on the failure rates and health hazards of birth control. The drug companies want Worry to test their new tranquilizers but they don't understand what she knows too well: there is no drug that can ease her pain. She is terrified of the unknown.

**Guilt** is the prosecutor who knows how to make every victim feel like the criminal. She follows the scent of doubt and self-hatred to its sources. She will not tell you what you have done wrong. Her silence is brutal. Her disapproval surrounds you in an envelope of cold nameless terror.

Guilt thinks I am hopelessly lazy because I won't work the way she does. Her court cases are scheduled years in advance. She says horrible things about me to the neighbors. In self-defense sometimes I tell people what she says about me before she has the chance. I don't care as much as I did, but I can't pretend I don't care at all.

You may recognize Guilt's footsteps before you

see her coming. She limps like a crippled bird. Even though her broken ankle is healing, the wound in her heart has become infected.

**Perfection** is careful but not cautious. She burned her hands many times before she learned to pay attention. She says that hers is the most difficult job in the world. The post was vacant for nearly three years. Most people do not even make it past the first interview and retirement is mandatory after nine years. About halfway through the fifth year Perfection started feeling like she was falling apart and dissolving into space. This recent episode humbled her. She had never realized how strongly we resist being broken open. She discovered that her greatest strengths grew out of her strongest weaknesses.

Perfection needs to keep moving. Otherwise she becomes swollen with her obsessions. She has learned to dance into the very center of her fears. She is not impressed by false modesty and the false fronts we develop to hide our beauty. She is grieved by how fiercely we hate ourselves and yet refuse to change. She honors our flaws.

**Jealousy** stands by the blue flame of the gas stove stirring obsession stew. In his mind he is tearing people limb from limb. He wears a shirt that is almost in style with its odd angular shapes and bright edges. He can be quite charming when he wants to be. He certainly has a flair for drama. After a while, though, the roles Jealousy takes begin to seem shallow, dishonest, repetitive. The more upset he feels, the more loudly he denies it. For a time I stopped giving parties because he wouldn't come if I invited certain people. At that point I couldn't give a party without inviting him, and I was unwilling to censor my guest list for his sake. He is quite capable of showing up anywhere, unexpected, uninvited, unwelcome.