

THE BOOK OF QUALITIES

Words and Pictures by

J. RUTH GENDLER

(NY: Harper, 1988)

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

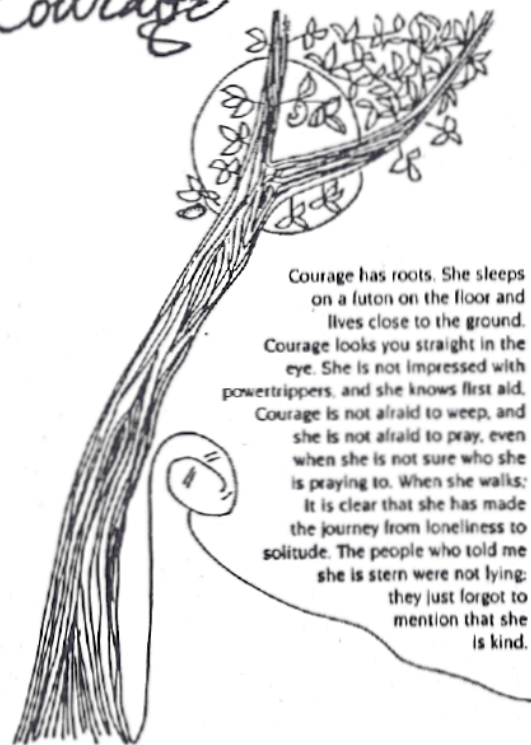
In J. Ruth Gendler's *The Book of Qualities*, 70 abstract qualities come to life, walking and talking, borrowing Grandmother's shawl and telling scary stories late into the night . . . personification at its best! Precise, specific images reveal each abstract quality more vividly than any dictionary definition.

After you read sample profiles in class, choose one to write about. 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!

Group Writing Assignment: Sign up for a quality (from the list or an approved substitute). Every writing group must have a different quality -- so reserve your choice officially!

1. Check the dictionary and the thesaurus, exploring possible meanings and hunting down synonyms. Share all information aloud within your group.
2. Complete a sensory cluster for your quality -- sight, smell, taste, touch, sound.
3. Write a one-to-three paragraph personification of your quality. Revise, proofread, and turn in a final copy.

Courage



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 she 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.

Contentment

Contentment has learned how to find out what she needs to know. Last year she went on a major housecleaning spree. First, she stood on her head until all the extra facts fell out. Then, she discarded about half her house. Now, she knows where every thing comes from — who dyed the yarn dark green and who wove the rug and who built the loom, who made the willow chair, who planted the apricot trees. She made the turquoise mugs herself with clay she found in the hills beyond her house.

When Contentment is sad, she takes a mud bath or goes to the mountains until her lungs are clear. When she walks through an unfamiliar neighborhood, she always makes friends with the local cats.



Anxiety

Anxiety is secretive. He does not trust anyone, not even his friends, Worry, Terror, Doubt, and Panic. He has a way of glooming onto your skin like smog, and then you feel unclean. He likes to visit me late at night when I am alone and exhausted. I have never slept with him, but he kissed me on the forehead once, and I had a headache for two years. He is sure a nuisance to get out of the house. He has no respect for locks or curtains or doors. I speak from experience. It takes cunning to get rid of him, a combination of anger, humor, and self-respect. A bath helps too. He does not like to get wet. As a last resort, if you are not near a bathtub, wet your face with tears.

Honor

Many people would consider Honor a poor man. Of course, there were times when he was fabulously wealthy. For a while he lived in a large house with arches and courtyards and fountains and gardens and olive trees and rare birds. Now he lives in a tiny room with windows on three sides. He still likes to go out for breakfast on special occasions.

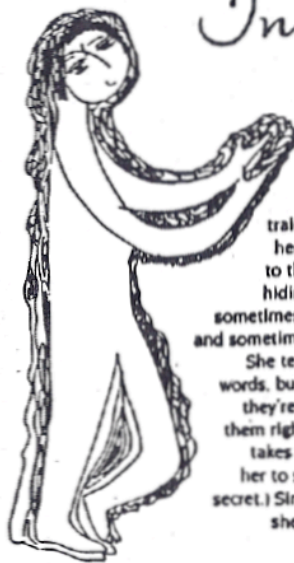
Honor has a different sense of value than most of us. When Honor was famous, all kinds of people came knocking on the door asking for favors. Since he has met with hard times, many of his old friends are afraid to be seen with him, as if hard times would notice and visit them too. This turn of events saddens Honor but he has never tried to change other people.

Honor is an old man now. He is becoming more transparent. He walks softly, and people do not hear him as he walks past them on his way to the park. Honor's children, impatient with his old-fashioned manners, complain about him to their friends. His grandchildren adore him. Only his childhood friend Humility has stayed loyal through the long rainy winter.

Wisdom

Wisdom wears an indigo jacket. She takes long walks in the purple hills at twilight, pausing to meditate at an old temple near the crossroads. She was sick as a young child so she learned to be alone with herself at an early age.

Wisdom has a quiet mind. She likes to think about the edges where things spill into each other and become their opposites. She knows how to look at things inside and out. Sometimes her eyes go out to the thing she is looking at, and sometimes the thing she is looking at enters through her eyes. Questions of time, depth, and balance interest her. She is not looking for answers.



Innocence

Innocence talks to old people on the commuter train. Sometimes she talks to herself, sometimes she talks to the man sitting next to her hiding behind the newspaper, sometimes she talks to the window, and sometimes she sings a little song. She tells secrets in between her words, but most people don't think they're secrets because she says them right out. She told me that it takes a lot of sophistication for her to stay innocent. (That was a secret.) Since her affair with Danger, she is not afraid of anything.

Complacency

Complacency has written lullabies at liturgies, also a lot of ad copy. She has sweet voice and a gracious manner. If governor's wife, the perfect hostess. Complacency is not as apolitical as it seems. She has spent years learning how to apply her make-up and to camouflage the wrinkles on her forehead. Her mask impenetrable now. Inside her breast there are volcanoes smouldering. Do you think we can reach her before it explodes?

7. A Quality Personality

Shame

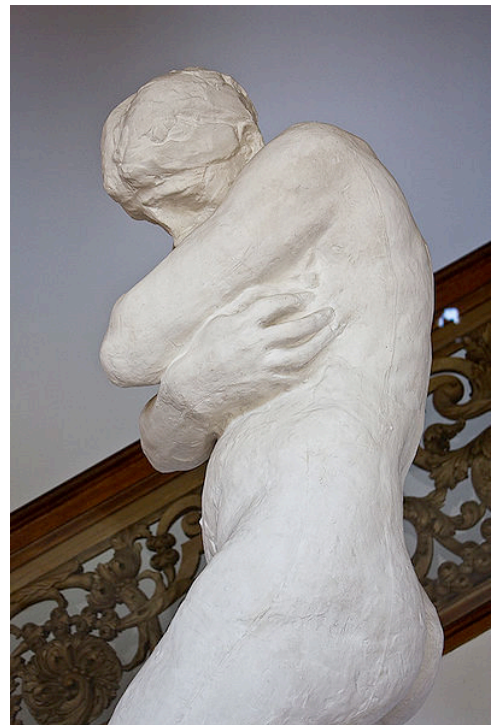
You'd never know that Shame had anything to hide by looking at her. So common that nothing about her appearance strikes you at first glance – average height, average weight. She always wears a plain solid-colored t-shirt, no logos or slogans for her, and blue jeans, broken-in but not worn-out. She bought a pair of those new walking shoes to help improve her posture, but she just won't stand up straight.

Her grey eyes, usually cast downward, are stunning, pale and eerie, when she really looks you in the eye, and she blushes easily. Although she seems so humble, every sentence starts with "I." She favors her sisters Guilt and Embarrassment, and Doubt is her brother.

She hides Snickers in her bedside dresser drawer, lies about her age, and pinches herself when she thinks no one is looking.

In her closet, way in back, is a bright turquoise sundress that she's never worn out but sometimes tries on late at night, listening to the blues and drinking Merlot all alone.

As she gets on the train, she smells someone's perfume and it makes her step quicken. The sound of foreign languages reminds her that the ground under her feet is moving. The crying of someone else's baby makes her sick so she leans forward and bites her knee. Her eyes unfocus, watching the scenery rush by too fast to see. Even though the only thing she can be sure of tonight is sleeping in a bed that isn't hers, she is not afraid.



Eve After the Fall by Auguste Rodin