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## Inner voices - learning about human qualities through writing

J. Ruth Gendler

### Inner Voices

Loneliness lives in a large house in the middle of a large forest....She rarely speaks, and when she does no one listens or cares.... There are no telephones in her house, and her doors and windows are always locked. ...No animal lives in her forest, not a one. Many people venture into her forest, but they never see each other. Some do not leave because they are lost and don't know the way out. Others stay because if they leave, they will have to deal with life.

In *The Book of Qualities*, I personified 76 emotional and abstract human qualities ranging from Grief and Loneliness to Beauty, Harmony, and Wisdom. In December 1984, at the request of a junior high school English teacher, I talked to a class of 35 eighth graders about the qualities I had discussed in my book and about my approach to personifying human emotions. As part of the presentation, I asked the students to select a quality of their own and briefly personify it in writing.

One boy described Arrogance as "a big shot in school who dominates the football game at PE. He pushes smaller kids around and tries to impress the big kids. He does badly in school, saying he doesn't care about his grades, but he's really afraid that if he tries he may fail." Another boy described Short Temper: "When he is victorious,/he appears as red fire,/in the victim's eyes!"

The qualities came to life in the classroom, and exploring their own qualities in writing was an immediate hit with the junior high set. As a result, I developed a series of writing workshops based on qualities, which I presented in junior high schools as well as some high schools and elementary schools in California, Washington, Colorado, and Nebraska.

Writing about human qualities is a powerful way to investigate personal emotions and attitudes. In adolescence, when teenagers are struggling to become themselves and also belong, this exercise acts as a "container" that holds feelings, thoughts, and observations having no outlet in daily life. Personifying the intense feelings that lay beneath masks of indifference, conformity, and rebellion brings these feelings to the surface in a safe way.

One student who was in trouble in school and with the law chose to give his feelings of vulnerability, pain, and isolation a female character: Desperate will do most anything for anyone at any time just to belong. Desperate is a lonely person who sits in the corner of the room a (sic) cries because she has no friends. She thought she had a friend once. Her friend's name was advantage (sic). Like his name advantage (sic) took

advantage of Desperate. She was sad and cried for weeks and week (sic) just wishing to have a friend.

### Starting Out

While discussing qualities in the classroom, the idea is to encourage students to take an inner feeling that is confused and tangled up with other feelings and put it outside themselves, where it can be observed with more clarity and detachment. This way, the quality becomes less personal. It is not just my loneliness, but the loneliness of being human. It is not simply my grief, but the grief of ancestors and friends and strangers. Discovering and rediscovering that we all experience these emotions in different ways is an invaluable experience.

To begin, I might say, "I bet everyone in this room has been lonely. If Loneliness were a person, what do you think he or she would be like? How old is Loneliness? Where does he or she live?" Or, we might begin by picturing Anger: "What does Anger sound like? What

kind of voice does Anger have? What does Anger eat? Does he cut his food carefully in tiny pieces or tear it from the bone?" Or, perhaps we talk about Ugliness. "I read somewhere that 80 percent of eighth grade girls believe they are the ugliest girl in the class. Do you think this could be true? What makes Ugliness ugly? What hurts her?"

Our classroom work sometimes begins by having the students name and identify qualities they would like to focus on; either individually or as a group. After generating a list of seven or eight qualities, everyone is usually able to select one to explore. To help arrive at some ideas, I often ask the students to jot down their responses to the following questions: \* What quality describes you? \* What quality describes someone

you know well? \* What quality motivates you?

Inspires you? \* What quality do you want? Do you

need? \* What quality do you fear or dislike in

yourself or others? \* What pair of qualities interests you? After selecting a quality, the students make up a life story about it, assigning a personality to their chosen word.

Classes also enjoy working together to develop a group quality. To begin this exercise, I might offer a line or two, such as "Impatience eats his rice before it is fully cooked," and encourage the students to create a group picture of Impatience. If they come to an impasse, I ask questions: "What makes him impatient?" or "What does he do when he is restless?"

The following group description emerged from a high school creative writing class: Impatience never waits until the rice is

fully cooked. He hates it when the phone line is busy. He hates to wait for buses, relationships

to grow, to get what he wants. When Impatience was a child, he wanted

to be older. Now that he is grown, he wishes to be a

child again. When Impatience met Patience, they just

couldn't get along. Sometimes no one pays attention to her

until she gets angry. Patience gets taken for granted. That is why she doesn't like Impatience. He gets all the attention. Passing beyond the immediate perception of Impatience as a "good or bad" trait led to the experience of it.

Revising material on their own emotional states gives students an opportunity to move away from the "right or wrong" thinking that characterizes so much of our education and to become their own authority. Asking questions about earlier drafts encourages the students to ask their own questions, and this questioning process generates an appreciation for the numerous changing responses that arise.

In some sessions, we address the subtle differences between similar qualities: Intelligence and Wisdom, Anxiety and Fear, Wisdom and Clarity, or perhaps Criticism and Judgment. This juxtaposition leads to interesting metaphors and unexpected relationships...and always more questions. "Intelligence is Power's first cousin," declared a teenager in Boulder, Colorado. Thinking about this family dynamic raises questions that can lead to further development. What are their holiday dinners like? Are Intelligence and Power close in age? Do they get along? Who else is in the family? Or, as a ninth grader in Concord, California, wrote, "Wisdom is the grandfather of Innocence." What does Wisdom bring when he visits Innocence?

Image: A Tool for Growth

Images speak on several levels at once, forming a bridge between the conscious and the unconscious. This bridge is traversed in the writing experience, as students describe how they perceive themselves and the world. When adolescents articulate their images, they reveal their hopes and fears, their strengths and vulnerabilities.

An eighth grade boy, who was pegged by his teacher as a "jock," surprised her with a sensitive rendering of Beauty: "Beauty does not drink Perrier water. She has never touched a silk evening dress or lacy nightie. Beauty doesn't blow dry her hair. She doesn't eat finger sandwiches with her afternoon tea. For Beauty is too busy tending the rice fields in China."

#### Interaction: A Tool for Change

Interactions between the qualities often express inner conflicts, exchanges, and resolutions. One student paired the images of Anger and Madness, Creativity and Imagination, and Loneliness and Desire in a selection she entitled "Sidewalk of Life": Anger finds Madness and they have a fight. Creativity kisses Imagination and makes the most beautiful sound. Loneliness meets Desire and they talk about dreams. And this happens only on the sidewalk of life.

The qualities also interact in dialogues. Students enjoy reading their dialogues aloud with a partner and then reversing roles. This becomes an intriguing way to exaggerate, express contradictions, and play with polarities. For example, what happens when Courage encounters Fear? What do they talk about? What does it feel like to be at the next table, eavesdropping on their conversation?

In working with these dialogues, students discover that contradictory voices and attitudes coexist simultaneously. One student may see that part of her is quite frightened and another part is highly courageous. Another student may uncover a voice of laziness that wants to sleep and a voice of enthusiasm that is urging him to study.

Children of many ages--and adults too--appreciate writing about human qualities in a safe and creative context that allows them to express inner thoughts and feelings. Sometimes they like to illustrate their writing with drawings or watercolors, or bring it to life in movement. Whatever the final touches may be, the personification of qualities is a direct exploration--and celebration--of the self. Movement occurs and perspectives shift.

J. Ruth Gendler (34), at the age of nine, began imagining a store that sold qualities. Over the years her interest led to a book, *The Book of Qualities* (Turquoise Mountain Publications, 1984, and Harper & Row, 1988); a play, which opened in the Midwest in the fall of 1987; and her work with teenagers. Ruth currently lives in Berkeley, California, where she consults in the schools, writes, draws, makes masks, and lead workshops in creativity.

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