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M. Jerry Weiss

To Be or Not to Be

Learning is an attempt to extend one's self. As a child learns new words, has new experiences, he arranges these forms of knowledge in a special order which has meaning for him. He explores new worlds.

The student is a living metaphor, seeing everything in relationship to things, ideas, beliefs already familiar to him. Some of these experiences may make him smile, make him confused, make him angry. But experiences are the basis for communications. His mastery of language allows him to convey what he knows. His mind grapples for the ability to articulate what he wants to say, or even what he wants to know, or to get clarity on what he doesn't understand.

Emotions are just as vital in communication. The words he uses often reveal feelings, convey expressions of sincerity, urgency, hopefulness.

As a teacher, I tried a number of activities to awaken the thoughts and feelings of each student. I want the students to really see and hear the people they meet in life and in books. Some of these encounters may seem far-fetched. But they stimulated learning.

Ask the students to do the following:

1. Make a list of the ten things you really like about yourself. Look into the magic mirror to see the real you, the best parts of you which make you proud, happy, satisfied. Look at yourself as a physical, social, intellectual, moral human being.
2. Look at a person or think about a person you really admire. Make a list of the attributes which you really appreciate in that individual. (The person might be a real person or fictional, living or dead.) How well do you really know this person? How did you observe these features which you appreciate? Why are these so admirable to you?

One may wonder why such a list is significant. To do this will involve a number of skills:

- (a) The ability to note details.
- (b) The ability to articulate one's feelings.
- (c) The ability to observe.
- (d) The ability to deal with personal relationships and to get very much involved.

(e) The ability to recall and to analyze those relationships where these characteristics best manifest themselves.

(f) The ability to make judgments, to reach out with a personal value system and to test it on another individual or on other individuals.

(g) The ability to be free to express one's self openly, honestly, and to grow with insight about human behavior.

3. Concentrate on yourself and answer the following questions:

(a) What color best describes your emotional stability or temperament? Why this color?

(b) Are you a rural, urban, suburban person? Explain your response.

© If someone gave you one hundred dollars and told you that you had to spend it within twenty-four hours, what would you spend it on? Why?

(d) If you had the authority to write five laws and to enforce them what would they be?

(e) If you could meet five famous people, past or present, who would they be? Why have you selected these people?

(f) What does TIME really mean to you? Do you control it or does it control you? Explain your answer.

(g) What are some most memorable moments in your life? Why are these so memorable? How could you best convey the importance of these events to a friend or others? Be specific.

(h) Name seven things, ideas, experiences, people, etc., who have made you laugh or feel happy, not only outwardly but also inwardly.

(i) Here is a list of words. Rank them according to their importance to you, with number one being the most important:

money
fame
family
friendship
freedom
creativity
a good job

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travel
 religion
 health
 being a leader
 sports
 privacy
 security

Try to explain in an essay why you arranged these in the order that you did. What might have influenced your decision?

(j) Under each of the following, list an idea or ideas which these trigger in your mind:

How people communicate
 Holidays
 Fears
 Interesting places
 Interesting people
 Books or magazines enjoyed
 Fantasy
 Things to be avoided
 Powers that I would like to have and could use as I see fit
 Things to be changed
 Sources of personal strength, physical and inspirational
 Jobs that seem fascinating
 As you look over your responses,

to what extent has school been influential or instrumental? What else may have influenced your responses?

4. Reading has sometimes brought people and new ideas and experiences together. While some stories can shake people up, they can also reaffirm one's beliefs. Reading can highlight ideas worthy of thought and discussion. As more than one student has stated, "I didn't know that others have problems or thoughts like mine." Books are brave new worlds for many who are seeking answers. Sometimes one has to look in many places or in several sources to find answers. No guaranteed solutions. But keep reading, discovering, discussing. Keep listening and observing. Here are some suggestions for meeting some interesting people and situations:

Anderson, Laurie Halse. *The Impossible Knife of Memory*. Viking: 2014.

Anderson, T. Neill. *Horrors of History: City of*

the Dead – Galveston Hurricane, 1900. Charlesbrige: 2013.

Charlton-Trujillo, A.E. *Fat Angie*. Candlewick: 2013.

Cariell, Shelley. *Goodbye, Rebel Blue*. Amulet: 2013.

Crossan, Sarah. *The Weight of Water*. Bloomsbury: 2013.

Davis, Tanita S. *Happy Families*. Knopf: 2012.

Gale, Eric Kahn. *The Bully Book*. Harper: 2013.

Galloway, Gregory. *The 39 Deaths of Adam Strand*. Dutton: 2013.

Gansworth, Eric. *If I Ever Get Out of Here*. Scholastic: 2013.

Greitens, Eric. *The Warrior's Heart*. Harper: 2012.

Halls, Kathy Milner, ed. *Girl Meets Boy*. Chronicle: 2012.

Halpern, Julie. *Have a Nice Day*. Feiwel: 2012.

House, Silas, and Neela Vaswani. *Same Sun Here*. Candlewick: 2011.

Knowles, Jo. *See You at Harry's*. Candlewick: 2013.

Korman, Gordon. *The Hypnotists Hypnotize Me*. Scholastic: 2013.

Kwasney, Michelle D. *Blue Plate Special*. Chronicle: 2009.

Leveen, Tom. *manicpixiedreamgirl*. Random House: 2013.

Levithan, David. *Two Boys Kissing*. Knopf: 2013.

Lynch, Chris. *Pieces*. Simon & Schuster: 2013.

Martinez, Jessica. *The Vow*. Simon Pulse: 2013.

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McCormick, Patricia. *Never Fall Down*. Balzer & Bray: 2012.

Molnar, Haya Leah. *Under a Red Sky*. Farrar Straus Giroux: 2010.

Myers, Walter Dean. *The Invasion*. Scholastic: 2013.

Nazario, Sonia. *Enrique's Journey: The True Story of a Boy Determined to Reunite with His Mother*. Delacorte: 2012.

Palacco, R. J. *Wonder*. Knopf: 2012.

Prose, Francine. *Bullyville*. Harper: 2008.

Rhodes, Jewell Parker. *Sugar*. Little: Brown, 2013.

Roskos, Evan. *Dr. Bird's Advice for Sad Poets*. Houghton Mifflin: 2013.

Sloan, Holly Goldberg. *Counting 7S*. Dial: 2013.

Sokolove, Michael. *Drama High*. Riverhead: 2013.

Spinelli, Jerry. *Hokey Pokey*. Knopf: 2013.

Sutcliffe, William. *The Wall*. Walker: 2013.

Takoudes, Greg. *When We Were Famous*. Henry Holt: 2013.

Trueman, Terry. *Life Happens Next*. Harper: 2012.

Wein, Elizabeth. *Rose Under Fire*. Hyperion: 2013.

Whitman, Sylvia. *The Milk of Birds*. Atheneum: 2013.

M. Jerry Weiss is Distinguished Service Professor of Communications Emeritus at New Jersey City. He has taught high school English in Virginia and in New York City. He is the editor of *The Signet Book of Short Plays* and co-editor with his wife, Helen S. Weiss, *The Signet Book of American Essays*. NJCU has established the M. Jerry Weiss Center for Children's and Young Adult Literature in his honor.



Photo by Sarah Liz