Relationships: A Thematic Text for Middle Grades Students

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Relationships
Purpose of Thesis:

The following is a language arts mini-text focused on the topic of relationships. In the rationale of the project, the advantages of using such a student-centered, thematic approach with middle level students are discussed. The actual contents of the text include a variety of literature: poetry, nonfiction, short stories, and essays. The activities which follow the collection are to enrich the student by providing hands-on ways to better their own relationships.
Rationale:

Adolescence is a time of tremendous social, intellectual, physical, and emotional change. Spend one day in any middle school in the country, and these changes will become abundantly clear. As a student teacher in the eighth grade, I am surrounded by these metamorphosing adolescents. There are days that their exuberance and wonder at life makes me laugh. However, at times it is downright painful to watch how this myriad of changes affects their self-esteem and performance in the classroom, sometimes trapping them in a cycle of self-deprecation. I want to know how I can help these wonderful, hormonal, creative, frustrating kids through this time of integral development. My project operates on the premise that the art of teaching is creating a survival guide for students with some nuggets of knowledge thrown in that will make life after graduation somewhat fulfilling. This collection is one of the survival guides. It is not a book of famous short stories selected by a classics professor at Harvard. Rather, it is a compilation of some different literature that speaks of day to day relationships and how to get along in them. This is a book kids need to read.

Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century is a report written by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. The group has conducted a study on the quality of education at the middle school level and where it needs to be improved to adequately prepare our youth for the real world. The report states, “Middle schools exacerbate the problems of young adolescents. A volatile mismatch exists between the organization and curriculum of middle grade schools and the intellectual and emotional needs of young adolescents” (8). I could not agree more. Middle schoolers are not elementary kids with bad attitudes and raging hormones, nor are they high schoolers with clear-cut goals for the day after their senior year. These kids are in the middle of those two worlds, and therefore, need to be taught differently. The basal reader cannot sufficiently address adolescents’ concerns, but neither can a college-bound classic that speaks of unrequited love or
medieval heroism. So how do I, as a middle school English teacher, catch their attention? How can I motivate the student caught in the crossfire of a hundred different thoughts and feelings? “The basic motivation of the individual is to maintain and enhance the self. If information is seen as enhancing or improving the self, it is taken into the central nervous system and accorded meaning” (Frymier 15). If I can assist middle school students in seeing the connection of what they are reading to what they are experiencing, I have won half the battle!

But once students see the subject’s relevance, how do I give ownership of their learning back to them? Adolescence is the age of decision; they are deciding who to trust among their friends, determining whether or not to accept their parents’ help or do it on their own, debating whether they should engage in sexual relations or not. These are the concerns of the average eighth grader-- some fairly big decisions. Should we, as teachers, pretend that kids don’t have these concerns? If they need to learn how to make decisions, why don’t we allow them choice in the classroom? Instead of handing them a copy of Moby Dick and assigning chapter questions, why don’t we give them a variety of stories about people like them, young people that are making decisions and trying to get along in relationships with friends and family? Linda Rief says in her language arts textbook for preservice teachers, “For learning to be meaningful for each of us, I have to see my students as individuals. I can only hear the diverse voices by offering them choices, giving them time, and responding positively to their reading and writing” (10). Rief has designed and implemented a program where the kids are completely responsible for their learning in her English class. They are to read a specified number of books in a set amount of time, but they can choose what they want to read, and in turn, how they respond to that reading. Some respond by writing a poem; others by sharing the book with a peer. Their only limits are the ones they place on themselves. The choice is theirs--everyday. This type of classroom is working in parts of the country, and those kids are thinking, growing, and making healthy decisions. America needs more of this teaching and learning at the middle school level.
The book I have designed requires thinking, feeling, and making some tough decisions about literature. With some modifications, I have modeled the text after the Heath Middle Level Literature series which is a series of smaller thematic books ranging in interest from “Changes and Choices” to “Fantastic Journeys in Time.” These books have a softcover, contain approximately 140 pages with a glossary, and appeal to students because of their bold, colorful graphics and illustrations (an added feature that I unfortunately could not re-create in this format). Unlike the traditional language arts textbook, students normally spend six to nine weeks with one of the Heath books and feel a sense of closure when they have finished it.

I selected the literature in Relationships from a variety of anthologies, and I was amazed at the amount of material that is available. It was difficult to choose what would be included. I tried to keep in mind through the selection process my three primary goals:

1.) Design a text that kids will feel comfortable with. I did not want a bulky, overwhelming book but one that looks like a book students might pick up and read for enjoyment.

2.) Select stories that help the students answer their questions about relationships while giving them some new things to think about.

3.) Create activities that complement the reading and encourage thinking about real situations, not regurgitation of facts.

The activities (relationshipEXPRESSIONS) which follow the literature are in the back so as not to be a distraction to the reading. The focus here is the literature; that is what I want the students to experience. I have designed a variety of activities to include the four areas of language arts: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The activities could be used in many different ways to complement the literature, but if I were the teacher, I would want to use them as Linda Rief does: the kids would have the choices in front of them, and they could work at their own speed to complete a set number in the six week period. By allowing students to choose which assignments they complete, I, as the teacher, would be putting their education back
into their hands —where it belongs.

Middle level education is changing and growing everyday. Perhaps in six months this approach will be obsolete. I do not know. All I know is that what we’ve tried in the past is not working, and we, as teachers, need to find out where our kids’ interests are and move toward those. Adolescents are in the middle and need a different approach. This is one I would like to try.
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Acknowledgments
“One word cannot strike sparks from itself; it takes at least two for that. It takes words lying side by side to breed wonders.”

-Robert Francis
Introduction to Relationships

HEY! WHO ARE YOU?

Is that a question you can answer? Now look at the person next to you. How do you know them? Do you consider the person a friend, the teacher, your cousin, or just a classmate? How would you define your relationship?

Welcome to the exciting, topsy-turvy, completely unpredictable world of relationships! The book you hold in your hands is all about YOU, your peers, families, and the bonds you share with those people. As you prepare to read these stories, keep an open mind and search for similarities between you and the characters that come to life in these pages. Ask questions; make notes in the margins; and, most importantly, walk in the shoes of Squeaky, Frank, Michael, and many new friends.

Remember, defining what a relationship is can be a difficult task, but for the use of this text a relationship is any family association, friendship, or connection shared by at least two persons. It can be argued that we, just by being in the family of humans on earth, have a real, growing relationship with the teller at the bank, the gas station attendant, and the person who checks the water meter each spring. Everyone has some opinion on the nature of relationships. Now is the time to start thinking about what YOU think and feel concerning relationships.

Continue to ask yourself three questions during the course of your reading:

1. What type of relationship is developing in this selection?
2. Do the characters grow or change?
3. Are there similarities or major differences between the characters in
this story and any relationship in my life?

So let's get started! May the study of relationships in this book cause you to take a good, hard look at your own so that you might get the very most from them. Good luck!
RAYMOND'S RUN
by Toni Cade Bambara

I don't have much work to do around the house like some girls. My mother does that. And I don't have to earn my pocket money by hustling; George runs errands for the big boys and sells Christmas cards. And anything else that's got to be done, my father does. All I have to do in life is mind my brother Raymond, which is enough.

Sometimes I slip and say my little brother Raymond. But as any fool can see he's much bigger and he's older too. But a lot of people call him my little brother cause he needs looking after cause he's not quite right. And a lot of smart mouths got lots to say about that too, especially when George was minding him. But now, if anybody has anything to say to Raymond, anything to say about his big head, they have to come by me. And I don't play the dozens or believe in standing around with somebody in my face doing a lot of talking. I much rather just knock you down and take my chances even if I am a little girl with skinny arms and a squeaky voice, which is how I got the name Squeaky. And if things get too rough, I run. And as anybody can tell you, I'm the fastest thing on two feet.

There is no track meet that I don't win the first place medal. I use to win the twenty-yard dash when I was a little kid in kindergarten. Nowadays it's the fifty-yard dash. And tomorrow I'm subject to run the quarter-meter relay all by myself and come in first, second, and third. The big kids call me Mercury cause I'm the swiftest thing in the neighborhood. Everybody knows that - except two people who know better, my father and me.

He can beat me to Amsterdam Avenue with me having a two fire-hydrant headstart and him running with his hands in his pockets and whistling. But that's private information. Cause can you imagine some thirty-
five-year-old man stuffing himself into PAL shorts to race little kids? So as far as everyone's concerned, I'm the fastest and that goes for Gretchen, too, who has put out the tale that she is going to win the first place medal this year. Ridiculous. In the second place, she's got short legs. In the third place, she's got freckles. In the first place, no one can beat me and that's all there is to it.

I'm standing on the corner admiring the weather and about to take a stroll down Broadway so I can practice my breathing exercises, and I've got Raymond walking on the inside close to the buildings cause he's subject to fits of fantasy and starts thinking he's a circus performer and that the curb is a tightrope strung high in the air. And sometimes after a rain, he likes to step down off his tightrope right into the gutter and slosh around getting his shoes and cuffs wet. Then I get hit when I get home. Or sometimes if you don't watch him, he'll dash across traffic to the island in the middle of Broadway and give the pigeons a fit. Then I have to go behind him apologizing to all the old people sitting around trying to get some sun and getting all upset with the pigeons fluttering around them, scattering their newspapers and upsetting the wax paper lunches in their laps. So I keep Raymond on the inside of me, and he plays like he's driving a stage coach which is O.K. by me so long as he doesn't run me over or interrupt my breathing exercises, which I have to do on account of I'm serious about my running and don't care who knows it.

Now some people like to act like things come easy to them, won't let on that they practice. Not me. I'll high prance down 34th Street like a rodeo pony to keep my knees strong even if it does get my mother uptight so that she walks ahead like she's not with me, don't know me, is all by herself on a shopping trip, and I am somebody else's crazy child.

Now you take Cynthia Procter for instance. She's just the opposite. If there's a test tomorrow, she'll say something like, "Oh I guess I'll play handball this afternoon and watch television tonight," just to let you know she
ain't thinking about the test. Or like last week when she won the spelling bee for the millionth time, “A good thing you got 'receive,' Squeaky, cause I would have got it wrong. I completely forgot about the spelling bee.” And she'll clutch the lace on her blouse like it was a narrow escape. Oh, brother.

But of course when I pass her house on my early morning trots around the block, she is practicing the scales over and over and over. Then in music class, she always lets herself get bumped around so she falls accidental on purpose onto the piano stool and is so surprised to find herself sitting there, and so decides just for fun to try out the ole keys and what do you know - Chopin's waltzes just spring out of her fingertips and she's the most surprised thing in the world. A regular prodigy. I could kill people like that.

I stay up all night studying the words for the spelling bee. And you can see me anytime of day practicing running. I never walk if I can trot and shame on Raymond if he can't keep up. But of course he does, cause if he hangs back someone's liable to walk up to him and get smart, or take his allowance from him, or ask him where he got that great big pumpkin head. People are so stupid sometimes.

So I'm strolling down Broadway breathing out and breathing in on counts of seven, which is my lucky number, and here comes Gretchen and her sidekicks - Mary Louise who used to be a friend of mine when she first moved to Harlem from Baltimore and got beat up by everybody till I took up for her on account of her mother and my mother used to sing in the same choir when they were young girls, but people ain't grateful, so now she hangs out with the new girl and and talks about me like I'm a dog; and Rosie who is as fat as I am skinny and has a big mouth where Raymond is concerned and is too stupid to know that there is not a big deal of difference between herself and Raymond and that she can't afford to throw stones. So they are steady coming up Broadway and I see right away that it's going to be one of those Dodge City
scenes cause the street ain't that big and they're close to the buildings just as we are. First I think I'll step into the candy store and look over the new comics and let them pass. But that's chicken and I've got a reputation to consider. So then I think I'll just walk straight on through them or over them if necessary. But as they get to me, they slow down. I'm ready to fight, cause like I said I don't feature a lot of chitchat, I much prefer to just knock you down right from the jump and save everybody a lotta precious time.

"You signing up for the May Day races?" smiles Mary Louise, only it's not a smile at all.

A dumb question like that doesn't deserve an answer. Besides, there's just me and Gretchen standing there really, so no use wasting my breath talking to shadows.

"I don't think you're going to win this time," says Rosie, trying to signify with her hands on her hips all salty, completely forgetting that I have whumped her behind many times for less salt than that.

"I always win cause I'm the best," I say straight at Gretchen who is, as far as I'm concerned, the only one talking in this ventriloquist-dummy routine.

Gretchen smiles but it's not a smile and I'm thinking that girls never really smile at each other because they don't know how and they don't want to know how and there's probably no one to teach us how cause grown-up girls don't know either. Then they all look at Raymond who has just brought his mule team to a standstill. And they're about to see what trouble they can get into through him.

"What grade you in now, Raymond?"

"You got anything to say to my brother, you say it to me, Mary Louise Williams of Ragged Town, Baltimore."

"What are you, his mother?" sasses Rosie.
“That’s right, Fatso. And the next word out of anybody and I’ll be their mother too.” So they just stand there and Gretchen shifts from one leg to the other and so do they. Then Gretchen puts her hands on her hips and is about to say something with her freckle face self but doesn’t. Then she walks around me looking me up and down but keeps walking up Broadway, and her sidekicks follow her. So me and Raymond smile at each other and he says “Gidyap” to his team and I continue with my breathing exercises, strolling down Broadway toward the icy man on 145th with not a care in the world cause I am Miss Quicksilver herself.

I take my time getting to the park on May Day because the track meet is the last thing on the program. The biggest thing on the program is the May Pole dancing which I can do without, thank you, even if my mother thinks it’s a shame I don’t take part and act like a girl for a change. You’d think my mother’d be grateful not to have to make me a white organdy dress with a big satin sash and buy me new white baby-doll shoes that can’t be taken out of the box till the big day. You’d think she’d be glad her daughter ain’t out there prancing around a May Pole getting the new clothes all dirty and sweaty and trying to act like a fairy or a flower or whatever you’re supposed to be when you should be trying to be yourself, whatever that is, which is, as far as I am concerned, a poor black girl who really can’t afford to buy shoes and a new dress you only wear once a lifetime cause it won’t fit next year.

I was once a strawberry in a Hansel and Gretel pageant when I was in nursery school and didn’t have no better sense than to dance on tiptoe with my arms up in a circle over my head doing umbrella steps and being a perfect fool just so my mother and father could come dressed up and clap. You’d think they’d know better than to encourage that kind of nonsense. I am not a strawberry. I do not dance on my toes. I run. That is what I am all about. So I always come late to the May Day program, just in time to get my number
pinned on and lay in the grass till they announce the fifty-yard dash.

I put Raymond in the little swings, which is a tight squeeze this year and will be impossible next year. Then I look around for Mr. Pearson who pins the numbers on. I'm really looking for Gretchen if you want to know the truth, but she's not around. The park is jam-packed. Parents in hats and corsages and breast-pocket handkerchiefs peeping up. Kids in white dresses and light blue suits. The parkees unfolding chairs and chasing rowdy kids from Lenox as if they had no right to be there. The big guys with their caps on backwards, leaning against the fence swirling the basketballs on the tips of their fingers waiting for all these crazy people to clear out the park so they can play. Most of the kids in my class are carrying bass drums and glockenspiels and flutes. You'd think they'd put in a few bongos or something for real like that.

Then here comes Mr. Pearson with his clipboard and his cards and pencils and whistles and safety pins and fifty million other things he's always dropping all over the place with his clumsy self. He sticks out in a crowd cause he's on stilts. We used to call him Jack and the Beanstalk to get him mad. But I'm the only one that can outrun him and get away, and I'm too grown for that silliness now.

"Well, Squeaky," he says checking my name off the list and handing me number seven and two pins. And I'm thinking he's got no right to call me Squeaky if I can't call him Beanstalk.

"Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker," I correct him and tell him to write it down on his board.

"Well, Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker, going to give someone else a break this year?" I squint at him real hard to see if he is seriously thinking I should lose the race on purpose to give someone else a break.

"Only six girls running this time," he continues, shaking his head sadly
like it's my fault all of New York didn't turn out in sneakers. "That new girl should give you a run for your money." He looks around the park for Gretchen like a periscope in a submarine movie. "Wouldn't it be a nice gesture if you were...to ahh..."

I give him such a look that he couldn't finish putting that idea into words. Grownups got a lot of nerve sometimes. I pin number seven to myself and stomp away—I'm so burnt. And I go straight for the track and stretch out on the grass while the band winds up with "Oh the Monkey Wrapped His Tail Around the Flag Pole," which my teacher recalls by some other name. The man on the loudspeaker is calling everyone over to the track and I'm on my back looking at the sky trying to pretend I'm in the country, but I can't, because even the grass in the city feels hard as sidewalk and there's just no pretending you are anywhere but in a "concrete jungle" as my grandfather says.

The twenty-yard dash takes all of two minutes cause most of the little kids don't know no better than to run off the track or run the wrong way or run smack into the fence and fall down and cry. One little kid though has got the good sense to run straight for the white ribbon up ahead so he wins. Then the second graders line up for the thirty-yard dash and I don't even bother to turn my head to watch cause Raphael Perez always wins. He wins before he even begins by psyching the runners, telling them they're going to trip on their shoelaces and fall on their faces or lose their shorts or something, which he doesn't really have to do since he is very fast, almost as fast as I am. After that is the forty-yard dash which I use to run when I was in first grade. Raymond is hollering from the swings cause he knows I'm about to do my thing cause the man on the loudspeaker has just announced the fifty-yard dash, although he might just as well be giving a recipe for Angel Food cake cause you can hardly make out what he's saying for the static. I get up and
slip off my sweatpants and then I see Gretchen standing at the starting line
kicking her legs out like a pro. Then as I get into place I see that ole Raymond
is in line on the other side of the fence, bending down with his fingers on the
ground just like he knew what he was doing. I was going to yell at him but
then I didn’t. It burns up your energy to holler.

Every time, just before I take off in a race, I always feel like I’m in a
dream, the kind of dream you have when you’re sick with fever and feel all
hot and weightless. I dream I’m flying over a sandy beach in the early
morning sun, kissing the leaves of the trees as I fly by. And there’s always
the smell of apples, just like in the country when I was little and use to think I
was a choo-choo train, running through the fields of corn and chugging up
the hill to the orchard. And all the time I’m dreaming this, I get lighter and
lighter until I’m flying over the beach again getting blown through the sky
like a feather that weighs nothing at all. But once I spread my fingers in the
dirt and crouch over for the Get on Your Mark, the dream goes and I am solid
again and am telling myself, Squeaky you must win, you must win, you are the
fastest thing in the world, you can even beat your father up Amsterdam if you
really try. And then I feel my weight coming back just behind my knees then
down to my feet then into the earth and the pistol shot explodes in my blood
and I am off and weightless again, flying past the other runners, my arms
pumping up and down and the whole world is quiet except for the crunch as I
zoom over the gravel in the track. I glance to my left and there is no one. To
the right a blurred Gretchen who’s got her chin jutting out as if it would win
the race all by itself. And on the other side of the fence is Raymond with his
arms down to his side and the palms tucked up behind him, running, in his
very own style and the first time I ever saw that and I almost stop to watch my
brother Raymond on his first run. But the white ribbon is bouncing toward
me and I tear past it racing into the distance till my feet with a mind of their
own start digging up footfuls of dirt and brake me short. Then all the kids standing on the side pile on me, banging me on the back and slapping my head with their May Day programs, for I have won again and everybody on 151st Street can walk tall for another year.

"And first place..." the man on the loudspeaker is clear as a bell now. But then he pauses and the loudspeaker starts to whine. Then static. And I lean down to catch my breath and here comes Gretchen walking back for she's overshot the finish line too, huffing and puffing with her hands on her hips taking it slow, breathing in steady time like a real pro and I sort of like her a little for the first time. "In first place..." and then three or four voices get all mixed up on the loudspeaker and I dig my sneaker into the grass and stare at Gretchen who's staring back, we both wondering just who did win. I can hear old Beanstalk arguing with the man on the loudspeaker and then a few others running their mouths about what the stop watches say.

Then I hear Raymond yanking at the fence to call me and I wave to shush him, but he keeps rattling the fence like a gorilla in a cage like in them gorilla movies, but then like a dancer or something he starts climbing up nice and easy but very fast. And it occurs to me, watching how smoothly he climbs hand over hand and remembering how he looked running with his arms down to his side and with the wind pulling his mouth back and his teeth showing and all, it occurred to me that Raymond would make a very fine runner. Doesn't he always keep up with me on my trots? And he surely knows how to breathe in counts of seven cause he's always doing it at the dinner table, which drives my brother George up the wall. And I'm smiling to beat the band cause if I've lost this race, or if me and Gretchen tied, or even if I've won, I can always retire as a runner and begin a whole new career as a coach with Raymond as my champion. After all, with a little more study I can beat Cynthia and her phony self at the spelling bee. And if I bugged my
mother, I could get piano lessons and become a star. And I have a big rep as
the baddest thing around and I've got a roomful of ribbons and medals and
awards. But what has Raymond got to call his own?

So I stand there with my new plan, laughing out loud by this time as
Raymond jumps down from the fence and runs over with his teeth showing
and his arms down to his side which no one before him has quite mastered as a
running style. And by the time he comes over I'm jumping up and down so
glad to see him - my brother Raymond, a great runner in the family tradition.
But of course everyone thinks I'm jumping up and down because the men on
the loudspeaker have finally gotten themselves together and compared notes
and are announcing "In first place - Miss Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker."
(Dig that.) "In second place - Miss Gretchen P. Lewis." And I look over at
Gretchen wondering what the P stands for. And I smile. Cause she's good, no
doubt about it. Maybe she'd like to help me coach Raymond; she obviously is
serious about running, as any fool can see. And she nods to congratulate me
and then she smiles. And I smile. We stand there with this big smile of
respect between us. It's about as real a smile as girls can do for each other,
considering we don't practice real smiling every day you know, cause maybe
we too busy being flowers or fairies or strawberries instead of being honest
and worthy of respect...you know...like being people.
TWO FRIENDS
David Ignatow

I have something to tell you.
I'm listening.
I'm dying.
I'm sorry to hear.
I'm growing old.
It's terrible.
It is, I thought you should know.
Of course and I'm sorry. Keep in touch.
I will and you too.
And let me know what's new.
Certainly, though it can't be much.
And stay well.
And you too.
And go slow.
And you too.
CHERISH ME
Joyce Carol Thomas

I sprang up from mother earth
She clothed me in her own colors
I was nourished by father sun
He glazed the pottery of my skin
I am beautiful by design

The pattern of night in my hair
The pattern of music in my rhythm
As you would cherish a thing of beauty

Cherish me
SOMEDAY MY ELDERS WILL BE PROUD
anonymous

I wear a coat. I wear tennis shoes.
I play a game and I am winning.
I go to school. I feel the worth
in the knowledge of my relatives.
I play the game, I do not live it.
Knowledge from all areas...
My thought, my hope:
someday that all my elders will be proud
respectful of the little ones who follow them.
I dream...to make a way for the small ones not yet here.
The younger ones to play the game in a skillful manner.
In a way that I never could.
It is our wish, it is our wish.
BECOMING COMFORTABLE WITH WHO I AM
anonymous

My college roommate refers to my family as a "Brady Bunch" family. I have a little trouble with the analogy since, as my dad said when I told him, "We're not a reconstituted family, and Mommy doesn't have blonde hair and wear short skirts." But I do know why she said it. My family does things together. We sing songs on car trips, and we make baskets on Easter morning to put on the doorsteps in the neighborhood.

We go for walks together, and eat dinner together when everyone is home.

I don't mean to sound as if we are a wonderful, happy, too-good-to-be true family. We aren't, and often the things we did together didn't go the way we planned them. Either my sister or I would be sullen and uncooperative about whatever we were doing, and Mommy and Daddy would end up annoyed and disgusted. Elizabeth and I got along well when we were alone together, but when the whole family was doing something, we vied for attention. We would take on opposite roles. If Elizabeth was complaining and whining, I would be interested and helpful, and if she were having a good day, I would be the one to ruin the mood. It's not something we did consciously. It's just how things worked out.

Our family does a lot of laughing and teasing. My father has a quiet, observant sense of humor. He understates the obvious, and mutters funny comments under his breath. My mother's humor is sillier- the kind that sometimes prompted her to answer the phone "Downstairs Maid." My sister and I inherited some from each of them.

Sunday mornings were one of my favorite times, and still are when I am
home. Mommy or Daddy would be cooking breakfast as Elizabeth and I trailed into the kitchen in our pajamas. The newspaper would be scattered around, and the dog and cats would be underfoot asking for food or chasing each other. After we ate, we would sit around the table for awhile talking, and it would usually end up in a bout of silliness as we teased someone. It was a good time to be together. It was unplanned, and everyone was relaxed.

My family provided a good base to come back to. When things weren’t going right at school, I could always tell them. We did have arguments, sometimes big ones like my senior trip. But except for that one time, they weren’t earth-shattering, and didn’t last very long. One of the animals would do something cute, or something funny would happen and we’d end up laughing. Someone would apologize, or we’d just forget what we were mad about. I like and respect my family as well as love them, and I can count on them.
MY FAMILY
William Saroyan

The young heart knows a sickness of family. A man's involvement in a family is not all love and gladness. Every man wonders at one time or another why he is a member of his own family instead of a member of another one. If one's own family is unimportant, insignificant, undistinguished, commonplace, ineffective, or merely unknown, it is understandable that a young member of the family may now and then wish he'd had better luck in the matter of his birth.

I was once astonished by a man who remarked unhappily that he wished he had been born to a poor family because he had always wanted to be a writer. His family was socially prominent in the city of San Francisco and enormously wealthy. He said that it had been impossible for him under those circumstances to become a writer. After a moment I stopped being astonished and began to see the validity of his remarks.

Displeasure with one's family must be very nearly universal. Members of all families must know it in one degree or another. And in the end it is quite unlikely that there has ever lived a man who did not find the human race itself distasteful to him.

But the fact remains that if a man is to go on enduring time, it is in order for him to accept his own family, and to cherish the whole human family. A man cannot live his life effectively hating what he is. Illness and hatred go together and they are involved in death. While a man lives it is better for him to avoid purposeful involvement in death, for the inevitable is always more than enough for him to put up with or to put to use in the style with which he lives and works.

A man longs to belong to a family which is noble, honorable,
intelligent, graceful, handsome, useful, courageous, spiritual, wealthy, kind, loving, healthy, and amusing, but he invariably finds that he belongs to no such family. If he notices nobility in his family, he also notices far greater absence of it. And the same is true of the other things. There is always more of the poor things than of the good things. Somebody in the family is feeble-minded. Somebody else is dishonest. Somebody else is ugly in body, face, and nature. Somebody else is pathetic. Somebody else has no more courage than a mouse. And so on. It is not easy for a man to adjust himself to the truth that the human race is such an inferior order of animal life, or that his own family is not much better than the human race in general. It is natural for newcomers to expect a great deal of the family to which they belong.

In the end I decided I must consider myself my family entirely. I saw that I could not do much about the other members of the family. I decided I must do as much as possible about myself.

When I stopped expecting anything important of anybody excepting myself, I began to find many things of worth in everybody else that I had never before noticed, and I began to look upon the worthless things I saw with amusement and affection.

This is an important achievement in the growth of a soul, for it is true that one is one’s self the human race insofar as the achievement of excellence is concerned. It is not permissible or proper to make demands of anyone but one’s self. Nothing can come of it. One cannot demand of a father or a mother, of a brother or a sister, of a wife or a son or a daughter. One can demand only of one’s own self, and to all others give understanding or love or both.

But the achievement of excellence is forever no more than a matter of essay and trial. Failure is constant and inevitable so that by noticing failure in others with amusement, understanding, and affection, one’s own failure becomes less and less annoying.
Proud woman
My Mamaw
She stood out
Among the poor people
Of Clarksdale
Like a diamond
Among stones
Severe
Straight-backed
She prepared to go
To the post office
As a soldier
Prepared for battle
Black cotton dress
Buttoned at the throat
Her long witch's hair
Carefully pinned up
Before the dresser mirror
She pulled herself tall
Turning this way
That way
Glaring
Daring the mirror to say
One blessed thing
Proud woman
My Mamaw
Stern
No time for foolishness
Rigamarole
She called it
Mamaw never in her life
Said I love you
But she wrote it on every moment
We spent together
In her living room
Dark and cold
Playing cards
Telling ghost stories
Giggling with excitement
Precious thing this
Silly childish love
Between a little boy
And an old woman
This stern old woman
In her black cotton armor
With her old cardboard Bible
And her steadfast distrust
Of all grown men
Mamaw's husband Frank
Was homely
And cross-eyed
But soft inside
Like the sweet potatoes he grew
All the neighbors
Would say
Mr. Swayze
Oh I hate to ask
But this back of mine
So if you would
Could you possibly
See your way clear
To carry me here
Carry me there
Do this
Do that
Do the other
Oh thank you
Mr. Swayze
What would we ever do
Mr. Swayze
Rigamarole
Mamaw would snort
They're just making a big
Fool out of you
Frank Swayze
And he would duck his head
Pained at displeasing her
I loved Frank
Who smelled of tobacco
Which he hand-rolled
Or else spat
Into a peach can
Frank never had two dollars
At the same time
His whole life
But he jingled with pride
At the Chinaman store
And bought me bright red sodas
I thought Frank was rich
Mamaw snorted
And leaned back her in her rocker
And opened her Bible to Revelations
She read about Satan
Coming to Earth every thousand years
Last time it was Hitler
She told me soberly
Now it's Martin Luther King
I said nothing
I knew she was wrong
And it was the worst kind of knowing
Like a place inside me
That couldn't get warm
I was twelve
Past easy reach of childhood
Mamaw looked at me
Over her Revelations
With a look reserved for the neighbors
And grown men
I'm not really older
I wanted to say
I'm just bigger that's all
Frank came home
From the Chinaman store
Drunk as a boar
He vomited on the linoleum
Mamaw rose indignantly
You're killing yourself
She scolded
One more can of beer
And you'll be dead
Frank Swayze
Dead
A drunkard
She followed him
Into the kitchen
Don't put that beer
In my box Frank Swayze
Look at you
How much did you spend
On that slop
He bent beneath her words
Like a hatless man
In a rainstorm
Falling back
Against the sink
Seeing the can there
He tore it open
Reared it like a weapon
I
Flew
Through
The
Air
Grabbed it no I cried no
What are you doing
He said dully
I'm taking it you'll die if you
Drink it you'll die
What do you care he
Said not letting go I
Care because I love you
I cried and the can
As cold as anything
I'd ever touched
Came away
From his hand
I poured it
Down the sink
Mamaw helped me pour
Them all down the sink
And later
I lay awake
In the dark
On the couch
In the living room
Remembering
Card games
And ghost stories
Giggles of excitement
And sodas of bright red
Forever gone
Forever cold
Like the place inside me
Aching dully
I knew it would never
Get warm again
Not really
He was the first boy I met at camp. He had got there before me, and he and a man were taking things out of a suitcase when I walked into the cabin. He came over and started talking right away without even knowing me. He even shook hands. I don’t think I had ever shaken hands with anyone my own age before. Not that I minded. I was just surprised and had to find a place to put my duffel bag before I could give him my hand. His name was Michael, Michael Egerton. He was taller than I was, and although it was only June, he already had the sort of suntan that would leave his hair white all summer. I knew he couldn’t be more than twelve. I wouldn’t be twelve until February. If you were twelve you usually had to go to one of the senior cabins across the hill. But his face was old because of the bones under his eyes that showed through the skin.

He introduced me to the man. It was his father but they didn’t look alike. His father was a newspaperman and the suitcase they were unpacking had stickers on it that said Rome and Paris, London and Bombay. His father said he would be going to Europe soon to report about the Army and that Michael would be settled here in camp for a while. I was to keep an eye on Mike, he said, and if he got to France in time, he would try to send us something. He said he could tell that Mike and I were going to be great friends and that I might want to go with Mike to his aunt’s when camp was over. I might like to see where Old Mike would be living from now on. It was a beautiful place, he said. I could tell he was getting ready to leave. He had seen Michael make up his bed and fill the locker with clothes, and he was beginning to talk the way everybody does when they are leaving somewhere loud and with a lot of laughing.
He took Michael over to a corner, and I started unpacking my bag. I could see them though and he gave Michael some money, and they talked about how much Michael was going to enjoy the summer and how much bigger he would be when his father got back and how he was to think of his aunt just like a mother. Then Michael reached up and kissed his father. He didn’t seem at all embarrassed to do it. They walked back towards me and in a voice louder than before, Mr. Egerton told me again to keep an eye on Old Mike - not that he would need it but it wouldn’t hurt. That was a little funny since Michael was so much bigger than I was, but anyway I said I would because that was what I was supposed to say. And then he left. He said there wouldn’t be any need for Mike to walk with him to the car, but Michael wanted to so I watched them walk down the hill together. They stood by the car for a minute, and then Michael kissed him again right in front of all those boys and parents and counselors. Michael stood there until his father’s car had passed through the camp gate. He waved once. Then he came on back up the hill.

All eight of the boys in our cabin went to the dining hall together that night, but afterward at campfire Michael and I sat a little way off from the others and talked softly while they sang. He talked some about his father and how he was one of the best war correspondents in the business. It wasn’t like bragging because he asked me about my father and what my mother was like. I started to ask him about his mother, but I remembered that he hadn’t said anything about her, and I thought that she might be dead. But in a while he said very matter-of-factly that his mother hadn’t lived with them for almost a year. That was all. He hadn’t seen his mother for a year. He didn’t say whether she was sick or what, and I wasn’t going to ask.

For a long time after that we didn’t say anything. We were sitting on a mound at the foot of a tree just high enough to look down on the other boys around the fire. They were all red in the light, and those furthest from the
blaze huddled together and drew their heads down because the nights in the mountains were cold, even in June. They had started singing a song that I didn’t know. It was called “Green Grow the Rushes.” But Michael knew it and sang and I listened to him. It was almost like church with one person singing against a large soft choir. At the end the camp director stood up and made a speech about this was going to be the best season in the history of Redwood which was the finest camp in the land as it was bound to be with as fine a group of boys and counselors as he had sitting right here in front of him. He said it would be a perfect summer if everybody would practice the Golden Rule twenty-four hours a day and treat everybody like we wanted to be treated - - like real men.

When we got back to the cabin, the other boys were already running around in the lantern light naked and slapping each other's behinds with wet towels. But soon the counselor blew the light out, and we got in bed in the dark. Michael was in the bunk over me. We had sentence prayers. Michael asked God to bless his father when he got to France. One boy named Robin Mickle who was Catholic said a Hail Mary. It surprised most of the others. Some of them even laughed as if he was telling a joke. Everything quieted down though and we were half asleep when someone started blowing Taps on a bugle. It woke us all up and we waited in the dark for it to stop so we could sleep.

Michael turned out to be my best friend. Every morning after breakfast everybody was supposed to lie on their bunks quietly for Thought Time and think about the Bible, but Michael and I would sit on my bed and talk. I told Michael a lot of things I had never told anyone else. I don’t know why I told him. I just wanted him to know everything there was to know about me. It was a long time before I realized that I didn’t know much about Michael except what I could see - that he didn't live with his mother and his father was a great
war correspondent who was probably back in France now. He just wasn't the kind to tell you a lot. He would listen to everything you had to say as if he wanted to hear it and was glad you wanted to tell him. But then he would change the subject and start talking about baseball or something. He was a very good baseball player, the best on the junior cabin team. Every boy in our cabin was on the team, and it looked as if with Michael pitching we might take the junior title for the Colossians. That was the name of our junior team. All the athletic teams in the camp were named for one of the letters that St. Paul wrote. We practiced every afternoon after rest period, but first we went to the Mail Lodge for mail. I got a letter almost every day, and Michael two or three from his aunt, but it wasn't until almost three weeks passed that he got the airmail letter from France. There weren't any pictures or souvenirs in it, but I don't suppose Mr. Egerton had too much time for that. He did mention me though I could tell by the way he wrote that he didn't remember my name. Still it was very nice to be thought of by a famous war correspondent. Michael said we could write him a letter together soon and that he would ask his father for a picture.

We wrote him twice, but four weeks passed and nothing else came, not from France. I had any number of letters myself and the legal limit of boxes (which was one a week) that I wanted to share with just Michael but had to share with everybody, Robin Mickle included. Worse than the sharing, I dreaded my boxes because I kept thinking they would make me homesick, but with Michael and all the things to do, they never bothered me, and before I expected it, there was only a week of camp left and we would go home. That was why we were playing the semifinals that day - so the winners could be recognized at the Farewell Banquet on the last night of camp. The Colossians were going to play the Ephesians after rest period. We were all in the cabin trying to rest, but everybody was too excited, everybody but Michael who was
almost asleep when the camp director walked in and said that Michael Egerton was to go down to the Lodge porch right away as he had visitors. Michael got up and combed his hair, and just before he left he told everyone that he would see them at the game and that we were going to win.

The Lodge wasn't too far from our cabin, and I could see him walking down there. A car was parked by the porch. Michael got pretty close to it. Then he stopped. I thought that he had forgotten something and was coming back to the cabin, but the car doors opened and a man and a woman got out. I knew it was his mother. He couldn't have looked any more like her. She bent over and kissed him. Then she said something and the man stepped up and shook Michael's hand. They started talking. I couldn't hear them and since they weren't doing anything I lay back down and read for a while. Rest period was almost over when I looked again. The car was gone and there was no one in front of the Lodge. It was time for the semifinals, and Michael hadn't shown up. Robin, who was in charge of the Colossians, told me to get Michael wherever he was, and I looked all over camp. He just wasn't there. I didn't have time to go up in the woods behind the cabins, but I yelled and there was no answer. So I had to give up because the game was waiting. Michael never came. A little fat boy named Billy Joe Moffitt took his place and we lost. Everybody wondered what had happened to Michael. I was sure he hadn't left camp with his mother because he would have told somebody first so after the game I ran back ahead of the others. Michael wasn't on his bed. I walked through the hall and opened the bathroom door. He was standing at the window with his back to me. "Mike, why in the world didn't you play?"

He didn't even turn around.

"We lost, Mike."

He just stood there tying little knots in the shade cord. When the others came in from the game, I met them at the door. I told them Michael was sick.
But he went to the campfire with me that night. He didn’t say much and I didn’t know what to ask him. “Was that your mother this afternoon?”

“Yes.”

“What was she doing up here?”

“On a vacation or something.”

I don’t guess I should have asked him but I did. “Who was that with her?”

“Some man. I don’t know. Just some man.”

It was like every other night. We were sitting in our place by the tree. The others were singing and we were listening. Then he started talking very fast.

“My mother said, ‘Michael, this is your new father. How do you feel about having two fathers?’”

Before I could think what to say, he said he was cold and got up and walked back to the cabin. I didn’t even ask him if he was feeling all right. When I got to the cabin, he was in bed pretending to be asleep, but long after Taps I could hear him turning. I tried to stay awake until he went to sleep. Once I sat up and started to reach out and touch him but I didn’t. I was very tired.

All that was a week before the end of camp. The boys in our cabin started talking about him. He had stopped playing ball. He wouldn’t swim in the camp meet. He didn’t even go on the Sunday hike up to Johnson’s Knob. He sat on his bed with his clothes on most of the time. They never did anything nice for him. They were always doing things like tying his shoelaces together. It was no use trying to stop them. All they knew was that Michael Egerton had screwed their chance to be camp baseball champions. They didn’t want to know the reason, not even the counselor. And I wasn’t going to tell them. They even poured water on his mattress one night and
laughed the whole next day about Michael wetting the bed.

The day before we left camp, the counselors voted on a Camp Spirit Cabin. They had kept some sort of record of our activities and athletic events. The cabin with the most Good Camper points usually won. We didn’t win. Robin and the others told Michael that he made us lose because he never did anything. They told everybody that Michael Egerton made our cabin lose.

That night we were bathing and getting dressed for the Farewell Banquet. Nobody had expected Michael to go, but without saying anything he started getting dressed. Someone noticed him and said something about Mr. Michael honoring us with his presence at dinner. He had finished dressing when four of the boys took him and tied him between two bunks with his arms stretched out. He didn’t fight. He let them treat him like some animal, and he looked as if he was crucified. Then they went to the banquet, and left him tied there. I went with them but while they were laughing about hamstringing that damned Michael, I slipped away and went back to untie him. When I got there he had already got loose. I knew he was in the bathroom. I could hear him. I walked to the door and whispered “Mike, it’s me.” I don’t think he heard me. I started to open the door but I didn’t. I walked back out and down the hill to the dining hall. They even had the porch lights on, and they had already started singing.
relationship EXPRESSIONS

*The main idea or message of a piece of literature is the theme. In other words, what is the author saying about life, the big picture? In this book, the main message or theme is about relationships, though the idea is expressed in a variety of ways because the ideas come from several different authors.

a. What type of relationship exists between Squeaky and her brother, Raymond? Is there more there than just a brother and sister? Take some time and think of a family relationship that is more than just a sister-brother, mother-daughter, or grandfather-son relationship. What brings people together into relationship? And what causes one to deepen? Jot down four or five sentences in a journal or on a piece of paper kept in a folder that answer some of these questions and any of your own you might want to explore.

b. Along those same lines, explore the experience of the grandchild in “Mamaw and Frank.” List some of the traits that make Mamaw, Frank, and the young boy who they are. Share lists with peers and compare. Did you see something a peer might have missed?

*What type of relationship is described in the poem “Two Friends”? What might the friend be dying of? Has death affected some of your relationships? How do these two friends handle the news? Grab a partner. Spend some time discussing a specific incident in your life. Create a dialogue poem like this one where each person is sharing a single thought and in the next line responding to that thought. Try expressing how you and your partner might feel about a situation or its effect on a friendship. Perform your poem for another small group or the class.

*“Cherish Me” is written from the first person point of view. In your opinion, do the speaker’s words mean what they actually say? Or do the words represent more than what is printed on the page? Writers often use a device called figurative language to convey a deeper meaning. When a writer uses figurative language, he or she means more than what the words say. The
speaker says that father sun glazed the pottery of her skin. Is his skin truly a piece of pottery? Does the sun literally act as a kiln, glazing our skin to look as it does? The speaker wants us to understand more than what these words mean.

When a writer exclaims, “My hands are like ice!” she is not literally saying her hands are blocks of ice. She may simply be saying that her hands are very cold, but by describing them “like ice” she adds a descriptive detail that helps us imagine. This is an example of figurative language.

a. Find others in Joyce Carol Thomas’s poem, “Cherish Me.” After writing down some of these deeper meanings, compose a poem of your own. Use figurative language to describe the relationship you have with yourself. Is it a positive one?

b. Fill in the blanks using figurative language

1. Kayla danced like a _________________.
2. My Uncle Eddie’s jokes are as old as__________________.
3. “O, my love is like a ________________ that’s freshly sprung in June.”
4. I am ________________, able to climb tall mountains in a single bound!
5. Freedom is as strong and pure as _________________.

Try to think of five sentences on your own.

*Compare “Cherish Me” with “Someday My Elders Will Be Proud.” Hold the poems side by side and starting with the first line of “Someday...” read one line of each poem alternating. You will have to repeat the last line of “Cherish Me” several times. How does this combination of the two change what is being said? Present your findings to the class. Find two poems you like and experiment with some alternate readings/interpretations.

*Make a list of all the roles you play on a daily basis. You should be able to come up with at least ten. Some examples: daughter, stockperson, Catholic, uncle, student, etc. Which role or “job” do you take the most seriously? Why? Compare roles with a peer. How are you similar?

*Collect a few pages of classified advertisements from a local newspaper. Spend some time familiarizing yourself with the style and wording of the ads. Now create a classified ad for a friend. What model year do you desire? What important features must he or she have for consideration? Display your ad on a piece of posterboard.
Now switch sides. Write an ad "selling" you. Example:

1982 Fiery Temper Model
Trustworthy, Spirited, Likes to fight for the underdog
Good deal, Will bargain

Compare with peers.

*Essays are said to have three purposes:
1. to explain a subject
2. discuss a topic
3. persuade an audience/ reader

Frequently, essays present the writer's personal views.
 a. Analyze William Saroyan's "My Family." Do you agree with his view of families? Go through his essay and list the major ideas or arguments he uses to prove his point.
 b. Hold a family debate. Come up with some arguments for and against the existence of families. Split into teams and debate your points.

*None of the reading selections focused on romantic relationships, but this may be a concern at this point in life. Spend fifteen minutes listening to music on the radio at home. Every three minutes or so turn to a different station. Take down a few notes on what you are hearing. How many of the songs speak of some type of romantic relationship? A majority?
 a. Now select three songs about a relationship of any kind. Listen carefully. What emotion is the performer or songwriter trying to convey?
 b. Create your own song lyrics. Provide music and record your song.

*Select two articles from a popular periodical. Parents, Reader's Digest, Life, and Psychology Today are some good ones to try. Find some articles on families and their influence. Are we truly destined to be just like Mom and Dad? Read the articles and take some notes on their content. Prepare a three to five paragraph summary to present to the class on what you learned from the "experts."

*In "Becoming Comfortable with Who I Am," the writer is reflecting back on her family and the effect they have had on her life as an individual now in college. How do you think you'll describe your family when you are
older? How much do our families really influence us? Are we ever truly free from their influence? Imagine your life without a family. Create a skit depicting a typical day in your life without the influence of any family members. No Mom picking you up from football practice; no babysitting younger siblings. Act out major parts of your day without that family member influencing you. Do you think this will be a difficult activity? Try it and discuss your feelings in a small group.

*You are a psychologist and must work out the conflict in one of the stories you have read. A conflict, as you know from personal experience, is some type of struggle. This struggle can take place within a person, like the young boy in “Mamaw and Frank” or between people, as demonstrated by Squeaky and Gretchen in “Raymond’s Run.”

   a. Write up your diagnosis (what you think the problem is) and your prescription (how you would remedy the situation).
   b. Represent a conflict visually through artwork or a skit.

**”He most lives who lives for others.”

What does this statement tell us about the nature of relationships? Do you agree with the statement? Brainstorm a list of traits that you admire in people you know. Take a survey, asking your peers to rank the traits. How does selflessness or “living for others” rank on the scale? Graph the results.

**”Michael Egerton” describes several different relationships. The best friendship at camp is interrupted by Michael’s way of dealing with a new father. How do we handle our relationships in the face of new information or conflict?

   a. Reread the story and select elements that would be appropriate for pantomime. Perform your interpretation of “Michael Egerton” for the class or videotape.
   b. Perform a pantomime for the local elementary school showing some different ways to handle divorce or remarriage situations. First, interview the guidance counselors at both your school and the elementary or talk to a family/marriage therapist from your community. Carefully investigate and research some drama options which might address issues that elementary students face daily.
*Almost anything you want to know about anybody has been discussed on a talk show. In your opinion, why are talk shows so popular? Acting as Oprah or Donahue, host a talk show on a relationship issue. Some possible topics might include: “Sibling Rivalry: Mom Likes My Brother More,” “Why Is My Best Friend Flirting With My Guy?”, or “My Dad Is Smothering Me!” Do some research on your topic before asking your guests/peers to appear for a class performance. In the spirit of the talk show, make arrangements for an expert to offer a perspective. Possible experts could be knowledgeable members of the community. Using the expert’s advice and your problem-solving techniques, help guests work through their problem. Get the entire class involved with audience questions.

*Read the book *Randall’s Wall* by Carol Fenner. The main character is surrounded by unhealthy relationships and so chooses to live in his own world.

a. Read the story (it is approximately eighty-five pages) and think about someone you may know who is like Randall. How can you reach a person who puts up walls?

b. Have you ever expressed yourself through artwork, like Randall? Sketch, paint, draft, or sculpt a piece of artwork that expresses your feelings about the experience of loneliness and isolation.

*Select at least two weekly television programs that center around relationships. There are currently several programs about groups of friends, families trying to make it, or couples and their funny day-to-day experiences. Choose two and make a commitment to watch the shows for three consecutive weeks. Watch how the characters treat each other. Are the relationships realistic? Can you observe any conflict-managing ideas that might help you in your own relationships? Keep a brief account of each episode and your observations.
Acknowledgments


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