



Tips for Teachers

A Guide for Using *New Youth Connections*
in the Classroom

January/February 2002

Writing Contest— \$175 in Prizes

“If You Could Direct a Music Video, What Would It Be Like?”

Writing Contest, p. 2: Encourage your students to enter this month’s Writing Contest, which offers \$175 in prizes: “If You Could Direct a Music Video, What Would It Be Like? What Would You Put In It and Why?” You may want to devote part of your class to discussing this topic, before turning to the writing. Point out to your students that they’re writing about a video—which primarily stimulates the sense of sight. This is a wonderful opportunity for students to practice descriptive writing, so the reader will be able to visualize the video that the writer envisions.

A Note to Teachers

This issue focuses on religion. It’s a topic that can be difficult to discuss because religious beliefs are often very personal and deeply held. And, of course, public schools are not allowed to promote any particular religion. (One indication of how challenging it can be to explore the subject is the fact that this issue is the first time in 22 years that religion has been the cover story and theme in *New Youth Connections*.)

However, it is possible to talk about religion in your classes without proselytizing. For example, many of the writers in this issue write about religion and its relationship to their quest for understanding and meaning in life. Those are questions that transcend any one religion. One writer describes how she abides by her religion’s prohibition of dating—again a topic that for her is based in religion, but which can easily be discussed in the context of larger values, whether or not they are religious-based.

So, in discussing these stories with teens, do what the teen writers did: tread lightly on the explicitly religious or sectarian themes, and encourage your students to focus on the broader issues that their peers are wrestling with.

THIS ISSUE’S THEME:

Religion In Our Lives

In this issue of *NYC*, several writers examine the role of religion in their lives and how they’ve come to terms with questions of doubt and faith.

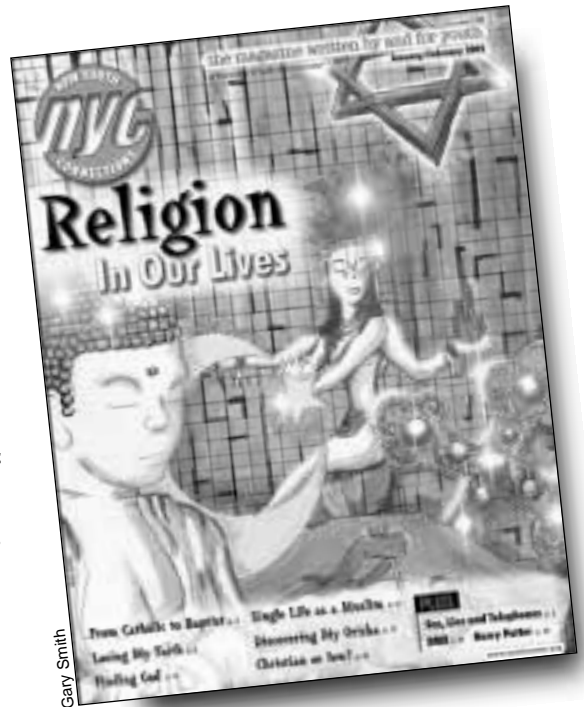
Finding Out For Herself

In “Making Up My Own Mind,” p. 3, Colleen Langone describes how she was raised a Catholic, but begins to question that religion’s practices and beliefs, and eventually becomes a Baptist.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Do you practice a religion? If so, is it the same religion you’ve practiced since you were a child? Do you ever think of changing your religion? Why or why not?

—If you don’t practice a religion, what are your reasons? Do you ever think of practicing a



Gary Smith

religion? Why or why not?

—Have your religious beliefs (or lack of religious beliefs) ever put you in conflict with family or friends? In what ways? How has this conflict affected you?

—Should people practice the religion they were born into, or should they pick and choose when they reach a certain age? Why?

Reconnecting with Heritage

In “Losing My Religion,” p. 4, the anonymous writer is preparing for his bar mitzvah when he is thrown into sudden doubt about God and being Jewish: he wonders if he wouldn’t simply believe in another religion had he been born into a different family. He becomes a hard-core atheist, until a visit to the Anne Frank museum in Amsterdam gives him a new-found connection to his heritage.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Have you ever, like the writer, reconnected with a religious or spiritual belief, after

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www.youthcomm.org



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does religion help you deal with problems? If you don't follow an organized religion, how do you find meaning and belief in your life?

Group activity:

Students can work in pairs or small groups. Have the groups discuss among themselves their views on religion and spirituality. For example, what role does religion play in their lives? If they are not formally religious, do they have other belief systems they turn to for guidance? Have the groups share and compare their ideas in a general discussion with the class.

A Muslim Teen in America

Abanty Farzana, in "Living Single," p. 14, is a Muslim teen who is prohibited by her parents from dating. But by speaking to others in her situation and finding

interest in other activities, she's managed to accept the strict rules.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Have your parents' religious or cultural beliefs ever prohibited you from doing things that other teens do? How do you feel about their rules? Have you, like Abanty, found a way to accept what your parents want? Why or why not?

—If you were Abanty, how would you have handled the conflict with your parents? —Abanty realizes she's not the only one with this problem when she talks to other teens. Was there a time you

thought you were all alone with a problem, and then found out otherwise? How did it change your view of the problem?

Roleplay: two students, playing Abanty and a friend. The friend thinks Abanty should defy her parents and religion and date boys. Abanty thinks it's more important to be true to her parents and religious beliefs.



A Quick Way to Get Everyone Writing—Letters to the Editor:

We welcome letters to the editor and publish most of them. This is an easy way to involve everyone in a short writing assignment (and they will get the satisfaction of seeing their names in print). Writing letters can be an ideal "Do Now" exercise after your students finish reading articles in *NYC*. Use these prompts to get your students started (a few sentences on one or more of these points will be sufficient for a letter):

- "I liked/disliked the article because..."
- "A point I really agree with in the article, based on my experience, is..."
- "A point I really disagree with, based on my experience, is..."
- "A solution to one of the problems in this article might be..."

A New Identity

Melissa Oliver, in "Discovering My Orisha," p. 18, writes about discovering her Yoruban heritage after her father returns to Nigeria.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—At one point, Melissa gives up being a Catholic or a Baptist and develops a personal relationship with God through prayer and meditation. Do you practice spiritual beliefs outside an organized religion? How?

—Melissa begins to question Catholic beliefs and eventually leaves the religion. Did you ever question the beliefs of a religion? What did you question? What spiritual belief, if any, did you end up practicing instead? Why?

—Melissa rediscovers her Yoruban heritage. Have you rediscovered or reconnected with a family religion? If so, what was it and what made you reconnect with it?

—Writing: If you consider yourself religious, write about the role religion plays in your life. If you do not consider yourself religious, write about why you feel that way.

Torn Between Two Faiths

On p. 20, Marianna Rybak, in "Christian or Jew?" writes about how each of her parents' religions have been important to her at different

previously abandoning it? If so, what made you reconnect? How important is the religious or spiritual belief in your life today?

—Have you ever gone from a deep belief in God to no belief (or the other way around)? What influenced your change in belief? How did it affect your life?

—The writer is deeply moved by the story of Anne Frank, to the point where he reconnects with his Jewish heritage. Describe a person who has deeply affected your religious or spiritual beliefs.

Roleplay: two teens. Teen #1 believes a person's religion should come from what your family believes. Teen #2 feels that people, when they reach a certain age, should choose their own religion after shopping around (or choose to have no religion).

Saved by the Lord

In "Finding God and Myself," p. 12, Nurys Benzant describes how God is central to her life, as she finds much-needed comfort in the Pentecostal faith.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—At a low point in her life, Nurys wonders why things aren't getting better for her even though she's praying and following the Ten Commandments. Was there ever a time when you doubted your religion? Did you get over those doubts? Why or why not?

—Nurys turns to organized religion—first Catholicism, then Pentecostalism—to deal with problems in her life and to find answers. How

times in her life.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Marianna feels torn between being a Christian and a Jew. Have you ever felt torn between two religions? What made it difficult to choose? Did you finally choose one religion over the other? Or do you take something from each religion? Why?

—Have you ever had a conflict with one or both of your parents over religion? What was the conflict? Have you resolved the conflict? Why or why not?

—Marianna says she'll eventually figure out what religion is best for her. Have you figured out what religion is best for you? How did you make that decision? If not, what do you think will enable you to eventually choose a religion?

—Why is it often so hard to choose a religion or to choose between religions?

My Jewish Heritage

And on p. 28, Jessi Colon in "Camp Heritage" writes about how her Jewishness is not about God, but about her cultural heritage and values, which she reaffirms at a religious summer camp.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Have you ever attended a religious summer camp or retreat? What was the experience like?

—How do your religious beliefs influence

your values in other areas of your life, such as your political beliefs or your views of social justice?

—Have you connected, as Jessi does, with other young people who share your religious beliefs? What kinds of activities do you share? How important is it to have a connection with other young people of the same faith?



OTHER STORIES

A Missing Father

In "Invisible Man," p. 6, Onician Wood describes the impact on his life of being abandoned by his father before his birth. He doesn't know what his father looks like, let alone what his personality is. In high school he meets other kids who don't have fathers, and begins to deal with his anger.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—How is your relationship with your father different than Onician's experience? How is it similar?

—What steps does Onician take to parent himself?

—It isn't until high school that Onician realizes other young people are also missing their fathers. Was there a time in your life when you realized other people had problems similar to your own? What made you realize this, and what impact did it have on you?

—Will you raise your own children the same or differently from the way your father raised you? Why?

—Some good has come out of Onician's experience: he will not father a child he can't care for and he has become a stronger person.

How has a negative experience with a parent led to some positive changes in your life?

Roleplay: two students, playing Onician and a friend. Onician thinks it was best that his father wasn't around, because he probably wouldn't have been a good father. The friend, who also was abandoned by his father, still wishes his father had been around, whether he was a good father or not.

Hot Talk

In "Sex, Lies, and Telephones," p. 8, the anonymous writer describes how she gets involved in a telephone chat line for adults to assert her maturity and independence, and ends up having a sexual relationship with an older boy she hardly knows. She prefers meeting people on the phone rather than in person.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—The writer thinks she's more mature than other young people her age and that's why she joins a chat line. Do you think the writer is mature for her age? Why or why not?

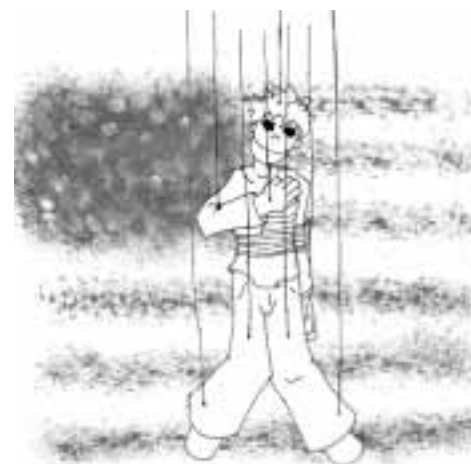
—Do you think the writer made a good decision to go to Tony's home, after she met him on a chat line? Why or why not?

—The writer says she prefers meeting people on the phone rather than in person, because she can go on how they "present themselves" and not their looks. Which method do you prefer? Why?

—Do you think if the writer's mother had talked openly to her about sex, instead of leading the writer to believe it was dirty, she would have joined the chat line? Why or why not?

Patriotic Pressure

In "One Nation, Indivisible?" and its sidebar, p. 10, Allajah Young writes about her refusal to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance in her school, because she feels people should have the freedom to choose how they want to be patriotic.



A note on the lessons

The following lessons are designed to promote reflection on issues raised by the stories in *NYC*. Each story is summarized briefly, followed by prompts that can be used to initiate discussion and/or brief writing assignments. In addition, role plays and group exercises are sometimes suggested for more active learning experiences.

A note on the roleplays

You will need two or three teens to act out the suggested roleplays in front of class. Make sure the young people understand their roles by briefly reviewing the characters in the stories. Each participant has to try to convince the other of her point of view as described in the roleplay. Let the roleplay go on for about five minutes. Then have the class discuss what they've seen and relate it back to the themes in the story.

A note on the group exercises

A note on the group exercises: These activities are designed to have students work together in pairs or small groups. They can then share their work with the larger group in a general discussion.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Allajah doesn't stand for the Pledge of Allegiance in her school because she feels people have the right to choose their own ways of being patriotic, rather than being "shepherded along." Do you agree or disagree with her viewpoint?

—Do you stand for the Pledge of Allegiance in your school? Why or why not?

—What is your reaction to the way Allajah's art teacher responded to her refusal to stand for the Pledge?

—Are there better ways, in your views, for students to show patriotism, instead of reciting the Pledge? What are they?

Roleplay: two teens, playing Allajah and a friend. The friend thinks Allajah should stand for the Pledge, especially after Sept. 11th. Allajah disagrees and explains why.

Group activity:

Students can work in pairs or small groups. Tell the groups they should come up with as many definitions of the words "patriot" and "patriotism" as they can think of. Go around the room, have groups share their definitions, and discuss.

Boycott Hollywood

Jessi Colon, in "Harry Potter: Forget the Film, Read the Book," p. 25, describes how she won't go to see the film, which she fears will be a poor version of the book and ruin her experience of it.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Will you go to see the Harry Potter film? Why or why not? Are you worried, like Jessi, that the movie won't be as good as the book? Why or why not?

—Would you prefer to read a good book or see a good movie? Why?

—Think of a book you love and a movie that was made about it. Was the movie better or worse than the book? Why?

—Why is it often so hard to make a good movie from a good book?

Group activity:

Students can work in pairs or small groups. Tell the groups they are to come up with a screenplay based on a favorite book. The screenplay should include a cast of actors to play the main characters and a basic plot outline. The groups should also explain how the movie plot differs from the book's plot. Go around the room, have groups share their creations, and discuss.

Test Your Vocabulary Skills: Match the word in Jessi's story with the correct definition.

imagery _____
rendition _____
vicariously _____

tarnish _____

hoopla _____

values _____
riveting _____
sacrilege _____

defile _____

sabotage _____

intrusive _____

- a. great excitement
- b. to make dirty; to corrupt
- c. pictures formed by the imagination
- d. to destroy something on purpose
- e. to hold your attention; absorbing
- f. a performance
- g. uninvited or not welcome
- h. imagined participation in another person's experience
- i. disrespect for something sacred
- j. principles, goals, or standards
- k. to lose luster; to make dull

Remembering Jackie

Tiffany Price, in "Losing Jackie," p. 26, describes the death of her 23-year-old cousin, Jackie Sanchez, in the attack on the World Trade Center. Tiffany looked up to Jackie as a



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role model, and she and her family have struggled to make sense of the loss.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—What images, stories, or memories stand out for you from the Sept. 11th attacks? Why do they stand out for you?

—How has New York changed for you since Sept. 11th? Do you have a different view of the city than before? How?

—Writing: Four months have passed since the attacks. How do you feel now, looking back at what happened? How have your feelings changed over the last few months?

Group activity:

Students can work in pairs or small groups. Tell the groups they are in charge of designing buildings and a memorial to be built at the site of the World Trade Center. Go around the room, have groups share their creations, and discuss.

Tips for Teachers is written for the bulk subscribers to *New Youth Connections* to help them use the magazine more effectively with teens in their classes and programs.

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