



FOR BEAUTIFUL BLACK BOYS WHO BELIEVE IN A BETTER WORLD

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DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITY GUIDE



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INTRODUCTION

In *For Beautiful Black Boys Who Believe in a Better World*, author Michael W. Waters takes the reader on a journey with young Jeremiah. Much like Muhammad Ali, Jeremiah must reckon at an early age with the painful truths of racism and violence in the United States. Although he could easily turn to cynicism and despair, Jeremiah comes to believe that he can change the world for the better.

Muhammad Ali said, “Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on Earth.” Muhammad believed that because we have all been gifted our lives, each of us has a responsibility to help our fellow human beings. Every person, regardless of age, race, or socioeconomic status, has the power to stand up for liberation and equality. We may not all have the opportunity to fight for justice on the world stage as Muhammad Ali did, yet each of us holds the power to make a difference in whatever corner of the earth we occupy. Together, our small acts of kindness, compassion, hope, and courage can and *will* change the world.



ROLE OF TEACHERS AND PARENTS

Parents, teachers, and other trusted adults play a critical role in helping children understand the historic, structural, and ongoing implications of race, racism, and racially motivated violence. We must acknowledge that the concept of race is deeply entrenched in the structure and institutions of our country. Thus, starting a conversation on race and racism may be uncomfortable, causing us to come to terms with ugly truths and painful experiences. However, if we are to create positive social change, we must bravely face these difficult issues and the effects they have on us as a society.

Although challenging, speaking about race and racism with young children presents opportunities. Children have not yet endured years of consuming racist imagery and rhetoric. They have much less to “unlearn.” They are also creative, compassionate, and able to think of new and exciting solutions to combat social injustice.

This discussion and activity guide is a tool to help adults engage young people with these issues in the classroom or at home. As you embark on this important journey, remember that these courageous conversations cannot be saved for Black History Month each February. They must be a continuous part of our dialogue and our consciousness as we seek to create a more just, equitable, and peaceful world.

PREPARING YOURSELF FOR THE CONVERSATION

“What you’re thinking is what you’re becoming.” –Muhammad Ali

- Consult some of the many rich resources that can help guide difficult conversations. We recommend exploring “Teaching Tolerance” at www.tolerance.org. Additional resources are outlined at the end of this guide.
- Take ample time to assess your comfort level, historical knowledge, and personal biases before initiating a conversation. Ask yourself: What have been my personal encounters with racism and violence? As you read this book in private, note your feelings and reactions. Take time to process and understand what emotions, experiences, and information you are bringing into your setting.
- Study your history. Understand that racism is systemic and institutionalized in American culture. Take the time to research and learn about the history of racially motivated violence in the United States. Recognize that racism is not a dated collection of unpleasant terminology from a bygone era but a simultaneously overt and covert operation still in place today.
- Honor those mentioned in this book by researching their biographies. Be ready to tell their stories. Introduce your students to each individual: Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, and Jordan Edwards; the nine members of the Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church (Cynthia Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lance, Depayne Middleton-Doctor, Clementa C. Pinckney, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel Simmons, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, Myra Thompson); and five Dallas police officers (Senior Cpl. Lorne Ahrens, Officer Michael Krol, Sgt. Michael Smith, Officer Brent Thompson, Officer Patricio Zamarripa). The book’s dedication adds Botham Shem Jean and Atatiana Jefferson; include them in your research and conversation.
- Ground your discussions in facts and data. Conversations around race, racism, and racial violence can quickly break down into opinion instead of fact. Do your research and have data points prepared and ready around the themes discussed in this book.



ESTABLISHING A SAFE SPACE

Before reading the story in a group setting, assess the climate. What ground rules for behavior are established? Have there been any incidents of bullying or racism in your space? Be prepared to reinforce boundaries and expectations. Here are some guidelines for creating a safe space for all challenging conversations:

- Understand that young people will come to this conversation from many different standpoints.
- Avoid singling out any person or group based on what you believe to be their lived experiences.
- Consider your own experiences with racism, violence, and trauma. What are you bringing into the space?

- Acknowledge that you likely do not know every person’s personal stories of racism and violence.
- Create ground rules for discussion that reinforce respect.
- Emphasize deep listening by encouraging your group to “listen to understand,” especially when others chose to share personal reflections.
- Reinforce core values of empathy and compassion.
- Do not require every person to speak during discussion.
- Create time and space for quiet, individual reflection.
- Center the thoughts and ideas of your group. Remember to not get defensive if their ideas challenge your expectations or experiences.
- Acknowledge the difficulty. Let your group know from the beginning that there may be times when the story and the conversation will become uncomfortable. Affirm their right to feel angry, confused, hurt, and sad. Discuss the best ways to express those feelings.

SPEAKING ABOUT RACE IN THE CLASSROOM

“Hating people because of their color is wrong. And it doesn’t matter which color does the hating. It’s just plain wrong.” –Muhammad Ali

- Ask students to tell you what they know about the history of race and racism in the United States. Often, students are taught a narrative that characterizes racism as in the past, with a few racist individuals as the exception. Similarly, justice and equity are often taught as the inevitable trajectory of our country, downplaying the importance of continued racial justice work and activism.
- Explain to students that everyone has a racial identity. At times, we may think that only minority groups have a race, creating the false notion that to be white is to be without race. You may illustrate this idea by sharing how we often label some Americans with their racial identity, such as “African Americans,” “Asian Americans,” or “Native Americans.” Yet we often simply refer to White Americans as “Americans,” as if their race does not exist.
- Ask: In this story, how are people treated differently because of the color of their skin? How does racism affect Jeremiah and his family?
- Ask your students if they have heard the word *privilege*. Explain that privilege is an unearned advantage or opportunity that society gives to a group of people based on their identity. In the United States, people with white skin are often granted privilege. Ask: What other identities have privilege? Acknowledge and affirm that there are many forms of prejudice and oppression that intersect with racism, such as classism, sexism, homophobia, and religious discrimination.
- Encourage your students to understand that we cannot control the privileges with which we are born or not born, yet we can all work for a more just and equitable world where no one is treated differently because of identity.

SPEAKING ABOUT VIOLENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

“Always confront the things you fear. We are only brave when we have something to lose and we still try. We can’t be brave without fear.” —Muhammad Ali

In the *Teaching Tolerance* article “When Bad Things Happen: Help Kids Navigate Our Sometimes-Violent World,” Sean McCollum states that schools can play a key role in helping students heal from experiences of community violence by “promoting a positive school climate that helps build or rebuild resilience in students and the school community.” McCollum articulates four ways in which children are exposed to community violence: (1) “a high-profile violent incident within the school or community; (2) a high-profile violent incident elsewhere that receives exhaustive news coverage; (3) chronic violence in the community that directly affects students, whether they are victims, witnesses, or related to someone who was victimized; or (4) a climate of violence in which a sense of threat is constant, even though students may not be directly affected.” McCollum recommends that teachers utilize Psychological First Aid (PFA) frameworks when responding to incidents of community violence, such as the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Listen, Protect, Connect—Model & Teach program. This framework and additional resources can be found at the end of this guide.

Discussion Suggestions

- Throughout the story, the author describes Jeremiah as being upset and confused by the violence he is learning about. Ask your students to reflect on a time when they saw or heard something in the news that was upsetting or confusing. Help your students create a list of trusted adults in their lives to whom they can speak when they hear about or experience violence.
- Note where in the story Jeremiah is frustrated or angry. Ask: Do parts of the story make you feel frustrated or angry? Acknowledge that it is normal to feel angry when we see and experience injustice, because injustice is wrong. Yet we should never use these feelings as a reason to hurt other people.
- Jeremiah’s father affirms his son’s feelings when he agrees that the violence they are encountering “doesn’t make sense.” Ask: Are there parts of the story that don’t make sense to you? Clarify which incidents in the story come from real life and affirm that each act of violence is an injustice.
- Jeremiah’s parents do not force him to speak about the trauma and violence he is experiencing. Yet many times throughout the story, his parents affirm his feelings and offer the opportunity to share when he is ready. When Jeremiah comes to them, they respond with “We’re listening.” Reflect on how you can ensure that your students know that you will be available to listen when they are ready to speak. After reading the story, allow your students the space to feel and process their emotions. Reinforce that it is normal to feel anger, frustration, confusion, and sadness.
- During your discussion, allow for periods of silent reflection. Provide your students the time and space to contemplate and process what they have learned. If you feel it is appropriate to your group, have your students silently write or draw their feelings, questions, or thoughts.

SYMBOLISM IN THE STORY

Ask students where they see symbolism in Jeremiah's story. Possibilities include:

Jeremiah's Locs

- The story begins with Jeremiah asking to grow his hair into locs. As the story progresses, Jeremiah's locs grow past his shoulders. Ask: What do Jeremiah's growing locs represent? Possible discussion points include the passage of time; Jeremiah's growing maturity; Jeremiah's deepening knowledge and understanding of racism and violence; Jeremiah finding his voice and becoming empowered to make a difference in the world.
- At the end of the story, Jeremiah's parents explain that they are hopeful because they believe his generation will change the world. Jeremiah proclaims, "It's like my hair!" Ask: What does Jeremiah mean?
- When Jeremiah first asks to grow locs, his father explains that although it will take a long time, Jeremiah should "just wait and believe. One day, it will happen." Discuss: Just as Jeremiah had to wait patiently for his locs to grow, we may find it difficult to wait for a more just and peaceful world, but we can *believe* that one day the world will be a better place.

Blue Ribbons

- While riding in the car, Jeremiah sees blue ribbons displayed throughout the city. Ask: What do the blue ribbons represent? Discuss: The blue ribbons show support for the five police officers killed in Dallas. Ask: How do you think Jeremiah feels when he sees the "endless blue ribbons passing by?" How can we show support for courageous leaders working to create a safer and more just world for all of us?

EXPLORING CHANGE-MAKING

"Impossible is just a big word thrown around by small men who find it easier to live in the world they've been given than to explore the power they have to change it. Impossible is not a fact. It's an opinion. Impossible is not a declaration. It's a dare. Impossible is potential. Impossible is temporary. Impossible is nothing." –Muhammad Ali

Often, social problems can seem too large for any one person to make a difference. We can become overwhelmed by the magnitude of the issues. The following discussion suggestions and activities demonstrate ways that small actions and working together can create change.

Discussion: Change-Making and Compassion

- Jeremiah observes that he may not be old enough to vote, but there is much he can do to create change. Ask: How many of you believe that you can change the world? Invite volunteers to share how they believe they can make a difference. Explain that each of them has the power to begin making the world a better place right now.
- Ask: What do you need in order to change the world? Allow for several responses. Suggest that your students really need only one thing to make a difference: compassion. Explain that to show compassion means to help alleviate the pain and suffering of others.

Activity: Ways to Make Change

- Ask: When you look around your school, community, or country, what bothers you? What would you change? Allow several students to share their ideas.
- Pass out blank paper or poster board and have students write a sentence at the top that states the problem they would like to see changed in their school, community, or country.
- On the classroom's whiteboard or on poster paper, list the nine methods of social change described in the story: vote, march, pray, organize, speak out, give money, write articles, give interviews, and love others. Define each one and provide examples. Remind the group that although Jeremiah isn't yet old enough to vote, there are many things he can do. Like Jeremiah, each person has the power to make positive change in their community.
- Invite students to imagine how one of these methods could address the problem they have written. Allow each student to creatively demonstrate how they will take action. Depending on the grade level and learning objectives of your class, students may write an essay, compose a song or poem, or draw a picture.
- Allow students to share their work. After each one, encourage positive support by asking how others could help. Reinforce that children do not need to wait until they are adults to make a difference.

Activity: Protest Signs

- Jeremiah sees images of activists in Ferguson, Missouri, walking with their hands in the air to protest the killing of Michael Brown, who was reported to have had his hands raised when he was shot. Ask if anyone can define *protest*. Discuss that a protest is a way to express your belief that something is wrong. Protests can take many different forms, from individual declarations to large-scale demonstrations.
- Show examples of modern protest signs and ask students what they believe each sign communicates. Explain that today they will create their own protest signs.
- Ask each student to think of one social problem that they would like to change. Have several students share their ideas. Alternatively, provide preselected prompts or suggested social issues to your students.
- As a class, brainstorm the qualities of a good protest sign:
 - Clearly states the problem
 - Describes how the community can help or get involved
 - Is powerful and memorable
 - Is thoughtful
 - Can be humorous
 - Features eye-catching art
 - Helps individuals feel connected to one another



- Provide art supplies and paper or poster board so that each student can create a protest sign that addresses the social problem they have identified. Ask volunteers to share their finished work and to describe their choices. Hang the signs in your classroom or stage a march around the school.

Activity: Visualizing Change

- Just like Jeremiah had to believe that his locs would grow one day, we can preserve hope that we can create a better world. One way to maintain hope is to imagine the world we wish to create.
- Tell students that today they each have been given a magic wand. With one wave of this magic wand, they can create a perfect neighborhood where they will live. Ask your students to visualize their perfect neighborhoods and ask for volunteers to share their ideas.
- Write the following questions on the board. Ask your students to visualize how they would answer each question for their neighborhood:
 - Where do people live?
 - Where do people work, shop, exercise, and have fun?
 - What are the schools like and where are they located?
 - What other buildings are there?
 - Are there outdoor or green spaces?
 - How do people get around town?
 - How are all people—adults and children—treated?
 - What are the values and principles of your neighborhood?
- Provide art supplies and paper or poster board. Invite students to draw their perfect neighborhoods in detail. Have them label each building and area. Alternatively, place students in small groups and have them create their neighborhoods collaboratively. At the end of the activity, ask volunteers to describe their neighborhoods to the class. Celebrate each student's creative ideas. Praise ideas that reinforce justice and equity.
- End the reflection period with a reminder that neighborhoods, communities, cities, and nations are built by people with ideas. Students may not be able to change anything by waving a magic wand, but they can each take steps to create a more perfect neighborhood today. Ask: what will you do this week to begin creating your perfect neighborhood? Encourage students to hang their "Perfect Neighborhood" posters somewhere that allows them to see them each day.

DISCUSSING THIS BOOK AT HOME

"You don't really lose when you fight for what you believe in. You lose when you fail to fight for what you care about." –Muhammad Ali

Before reading this book with your child, have a talk about racism. Explain that some people choose to hate others because of their skin color, which can lead to unjust treatment or violence. Highlight that people being hurt or killed by another person is always sad and always wrong. Invite your child to ask questions anytime during your conversation and as you read together.

Read or co-read the book, looking at the illustrations and talking about what is happening in the story. Check in often to discern how your child is feeling. Let your knowledge and experience of racial violence, gun violence, and racism, as well as your child's ideas and questions, guide the conversation.

Discussion Suggestions

- Ask: Have you ever seen anything on television, on the internet, or in a newspaper that was confusing or frightening? Encourage your child to always speak to you when they see or hear about a news story that is puzzling or scary.
- Ask whether your child has heard of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Jordan Edwards, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, the Charleston Nine, or the five Dallas police officers. Assess what your child knows and how they came to this knowledge. Gently correct any false information your child may have heard. Point out that Jeremiah and his parents feel confused, frustrated, and sad when they learn about these individuals. Ask: How do these incidents make you feel? Be willing to share your own feelings and thoughts with your child.
- Explain that Jeremiah shows compassion when he expresses concern about the suffering of other people. Point out times when your child has shown compassion. Brainstorm ways that your family can show compassion for others in your community.
- After you finish reading, ask for your child's thoughts, questions, and reflections. Point out that it took Jeremiah a long time before he was ready to speak to his parents about his feelings. Encourage your child to take as much time as needed to think and reflect on the story. Reassure them that you will always be ready to listen.
- Although Jeremiah is frustrated and tired by the violence he experiences, he still believes and is hopeful that he can change the world for the better. Discuss how the two of you will help each other stay hopeful.
- Tell your child that you believe that they will help change the world. Point out that although Jeremiah is still young, there are actions he can take right away to help make change. Reread the examples Jeremiah gives: he can march, pray, give, and speak up. Ask your child what they would like to do to help make the world a better place. Make sure your child knows that you are willing to help implement their ideas.



DEFINITIONS

Compassion: concern for the suffering of others

Equity: freedom from bias or favoritism

Injustice: the violation of the rights of others; unfair action or treatment

Organizing: bringing people together to work toward a specific objective or cause

Police Violence: Not isolated incidents or individual actors, but the systemic and historic use of excessive force by police when dealing with civilians

Privilege: an advantage or opportunity that society gives to groups of people based on identity

Protest: to express a belief that something is wrong

Racism: the belief that differences in human races determine individual and cultural achievement, often reinforcing the idea of the superiority of the white race

Social Change: the creation of positive differences in our schools, communities, nations, and world that promote justice and equity for all people

Symbolism: when an object is used to represent another object, idea, concept, or person in a story

Vigil: an event or a period of time when a person or group stays in a place and quietly prays, honors, or mourns the death of a person

ABOUT THE MUHAMMAD ALI CENTER

The Muhammad Ali Center in Louisville, Kentucky, is a multicultural center with an award-winning museum dedicated to the life and legacy of Muhammad Ali. The Center's museum captures the inspiration derived from the story of Muhammad Ali's incredible life and the Six Core Principles that fueled his journey. The mission of the Muhammad Ali Center is to preserve and share the legacy and ideals of Muhammad Ali; to promote respect, hope, and understanding; and to inspire adults and children everywhere to be as great as they can be. The Center has created programs that exemplify the principles of Muhammad Ali and the mission of the Center, with impactful programming serving children and adults of all cultures, nationalities, ages, and geographic areas. Inspiration is Ali's gift, and his Six Core Principles mark his true legacy—a legacy that has the power to live on beyond the man and beyond the walls of the Center. Muhammad Ali passed away on June 3, 2016, at the age of 74.

Six Core Principles of Muhammad Ali

Confidence: belief in oneself, one's abilities, and one's future

Conviction: a firm belief that gives one the courage to stand behind that belief, despite pressure to do otherwise

Dedication: the act of devoting all of one's energy, effort, and abilities to a certain task

Giving: to present voluntarily without expecting something in return

Respect: esteem for, or a sense of the worth or excellence of, oneself and others

Spirituality: a sense of awe, reverence, and inner peace inspired by a connection to all of creation and/or that which is greater than oneself

MORE RESOURCES

Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Disasters and Other Traumatic Events: What Parents, Rescue Workers, and the Community Can Do, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, NIH Publication No. 19-MH-8066, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/helping-children-and-adolescents-cope-with-disasters-and-other-traumatic-events/index.shtml>.

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