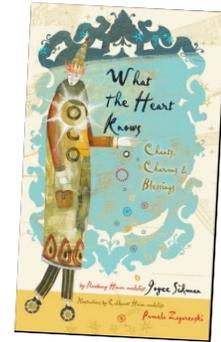


What the Heart Knows: Chants, Charms & Blessings

By Joyce Sidman



Reader's Guide

These teaching suggestions are for grades 6-9

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. After reading the full title to the class, discuss the subtitle. What are chants, charms & blessings? What do they do? Has anyone ever heard of someone uttering a chant or charm—in real life, or in a book or movie?
2. Do we ever try to use “magic” in the world today? How?
3. Think about the main title. Ask students: what does *your* heart know? Are there any things that you absolutely know, in your heart, to be true? Have students scribble a list and put it away for use in future writing.

WRITING ACTIVITIES

These writing exercises are most effective if you, the teacher, also participate and share your writing. Low-key background music helps, too.

Praise Poem

1. Share “Blessing on the Smell of Dog” with your class. What is the mood of this poem? What do you notice about its structure? How does the speaker feel about the dog? What words give you clues? Read “Blessing on the Curl of Cat” as well, and discuss similarities/differences.
2. Brainstorm some things that your students like that other people might not—maybe things that teenagers like to do that people of other ages avoid (loud concerts, sleeping late, making a statement with dress, etc.). Try writing a group poem about one of these ideas: e.g, “Praise for Sleeping In”. You can start each line with “may” if you want. Use lots of sensory details in the poem (“May the muffled noises of the family rumble in the distance”, etc.)
3. Ask each student to choose a subject for his/her own poem, praising something quirky (or not so quirky) that they especially like or identify with.
6. Write individually. Then share (in small groups or as a whole class).

Peace Poem

This is a list poem, one of the most accessible for teens.

1. Turn to the poem “I Find Peace”. Have students read it aloud, each one reading a different sentence.

2. Talk about which lines resonated with them. What images come into their heads with each line?

3. Have them think about places or activities that give them peace; maybe share some of these in a small group discussion.

4. Let students write their own Peace poems, beginning each line with "I find peace in . . ." As always, if they want to use a different structure (or subject—"I Find Happiness . . .") for their poem, that's absolutely fine.

"Ubi Sunt" Poem

Ubi sunt is a Latin phrase that means "Where are . . .?" It's also the name of an ancient style of poem (from the Middle Ages) that is meant to lament the loss of beautiful, heroic things (like warriors, kings, homeland, etc.).

1. Share the poem "Lament for Teddy". What is the mood of this poem? What do you notice about its structure? What are some of the sensory details in this poem that help you picture the object?

2. As a class, brainstorm some objects from childhood that your students miss from their childhood. Chose a subject for a group poem, something that the class has experienced together and now looks back on fondly—like a playground, first bike, Halloween costume, etc. Brainstorm details about this well-loved thing—what do they miss the most? Be as specific and descriptive as possible ("the swings with the creaky chains").

3. Write a group poem framing all those details as questions: "Where are the swings with the creaky chains?" If you want, add a last line beginning with the word "Alas." "Alas, now my long legs drag in the dust."

4. Let students choose their own subject for an ubi sunt—some object they loved that is now in the past. It could be anything from a baseball bat to a favorite blanket: something that symbolizes their childhood to them. Have each student write individually.

5. Share!