

word “charity” comes from the Latin for “Christian love,” which is one way to understand it; if you’re not a Christian, you might interpret it as “Mohammed-like love,” “Buddha-like love,” or whatever best describes your personal faith. Mother Teresa has often been cited as an example of charity because she not only served people in great need, she also lived with them. She “walked in their moccasins.”

Empathizing with someone is *not* the same as pitying or feeling sorry for him or her. This is an important distinction. When you pity another person, you look down on him or her. You think “How awful” or “What a terrible situation that person is in” or even “Thank goodness I’m not in that situation.” Pity sets you apart; empathy brings you together.

“With compassion, we see benevolently our own human condition and the condition of our fellow beings. We drop prejudice. We withhold judgment.”

*Christina Baldwin*

## Character Dilemmas

*For journaling or writing essays, discussion, debate, role-playing, reflection*

Suppose that . . .

**1** There’s a new student at your school who wears clothes that are different from what everyone else wears. How might you feel if you were 1) the new student, 2) a popular student, 3) an unpopular student, 4) a teacher, 5) the parent of the new student?

**2** Your state legislature has just passed a law requiring all public buildings—including schools, businesses, and houses of worship—to build wheelchair ramps within one year. How might you react if you were 1) a school administrator, 2) a person in a wheelchair, 3) a business owner, 4) a city planner, 5) a church administrator?

**3** Your city demolishes an entire block of low-income housing because it’s in bad repair. How might you feel if you were 1) a person with a low income, 2) a developer who builds new houses, 3) someone who lives across the street from the newly razed block?

**4** Two girls have been best friends for years. One girl starts dating the other girl’s boyfriend. How might you feel if you were 1) the girl who lost her boyfriend, 2) the girl who started dating her best friend’s boyfriend, 3) the boyfriend?

**5** Your government has just announced major cuts in medical insurance for the elderly. How might you feel if you were 1) a government official, 2) a senior citizen, 3) a middle-aged person, 4) a child?

**6** A teenager signs an organ donor card. In the event of his death, his organs will go to other people who need them. How might you feel if you were 1) the person signing the donor card, 2) his parent, 3) a person awaiting an organ transplant, 4) a physician?

## Activities

**LEARN TO EMPATHIZE WITH ELDERLY PEOPLE.** Read stories, read books, or watch videos about elderly people. Then interview elderly people in your family, neighborhood, or senior citizens’ centers in your community. Try to imagine what it might be like to be one of them. (Someday you will be!) Ask them how they feel about health care, food and housing, social security, family relationships, health and sickness, the future, and anything else you’d like to know about. Write about what you learn and share your findings with your family, class, or community.

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### CHECK IT OUT\*



*Driving Miss Daisy* (1989; PG). Jessica Tandy won an Oscar for her portrayal of an elderly Southern woman who can no longer drive. When her son hires a black man (Morgan Freeman) as her chauffeur, the two become faithful companions.

*Harold and Maude* (1971; PG). Bud Cort and Ruth Gordon star in this black comedy (and cult classic) about a friendship between Harold, a depressed 20-year-old, and Maude, a 79-year-old with a zest for life.

*On Golden Pond* (1981; PG). Henry Fonda and Katharine Hepburn won Academy Awards for their poignant portrayals of an 80-year-old man and his devoted wife spending a summer in Maine.

\*Check with your parents to watch these movies

LEARN ABOUT THE NEEDS OF VARIOUS GROUPS in your community including 1) elderly people, 2) families, 3) children, 4) parents, 5) single parents, 6) people with disabilities, 7) people who are ill, 8) minorities, 9) immigrants, 10) homeless people, 11) women, and 12) men. Contact your city council or mayor's office for information; read your local newspaper; ask people who work or volunteer for service and charitable organizations. Compile your findings on a chart showing the differences and similarities among people's needs.

WRITE IN YOUR JOURNAL<sup>2</sup> about how it might feel to have LD (a learning difference or disability). If you have LD, write about how it might feel to have another kind of difference or disability.

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## CHECK IT OUT



*Succeeding with LD* by Jill Lauren (Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1997). Twenty true stories about real people with LD, questions and answers about LD, and resources. Ages 11 & up.

### LDOnline

<http://www.ldonline.org>

An interactive site where parents, teachers, and kids can learn about LD. Includes information about LD and ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder), artwork and writing by young people with LD, recommended resources, and more. Be sure to visit the KidZone:

<http://www.ldonline.org/kidzone/kidzone.html>

### Yahoo's Disabilities Links

[http://www.yahoo.com/Society\\_and\\_Culture/Disabilities/](http://www.yahoo.com/Society_and_Culture/Disabilities/)

Links to sites, information, and databases about all kinds of disabilities.

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TAKE FIELD TRIPS to increase your understanding of people whose lives and needs are different from yours. You might visit a children's hospital, juvenile detention home, halfway house for recovering alcoholics, home for unwed mothers, senior citizens' center or rest home, women's shelter, homeless shelter, food pantry, and any other place you're interested in. Each time you return from a field trip, write a story or a poem about your experience. IMPOR-

TANT: Be sure to get permission from your parents, your school, and the place or agency you want to visit. Go with a chaperon.

VOLUNTEER AT ONE OF THE PLACES you visit. Follow these steps:<sup>3</sup>

1. **Decide where you'd like to go and what you'd like to do.**<sup>4</sup> Consider these questions:

- ? What might benefit the most people?
- ? What might make the biggest difference?
- ? What can I afford (in terms of time, effort, etc.)?
- ? What's really possible for me to do?

2. **Talk to the administrator or volunteer coordinator.** Many organizations couldn't exist without strong support from volunteers, so they already have a system in place for accepting and training them. Ask what they need volunteers to do. This might be different from what you originally thought, and it might be different from what you'd like to do, so be prepared to be flexible—or to decide that you'd rather volunteer elsewhere. *Example:* If you want to be a volunteer at a children's hospital, you may have to be 16 to qualify.

3. **Once you find a good match, get any permissions you need to proceed.** Depending on where you want to volunteer, you may need permission from your parent(s), teacher(s), principal, youth leader, etc. You may need an adult chaperon.

4. **Decide how long you'll stay involved and what you want to achieve.** Set a schedule for yourself. When will you start? How much time will you spend volunteering each week or month?

5. **If you don't want to go it alone, invite others to join you.** Choose people who share your interest and can make a commitment.

6. **Firm up the details.** Will you need transportation back and forth? Any special materials, equipment, supplies, clothing, or skills? Are there any limitations or restrictions on what you can do or when and where you can do it?

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from *The Kid's Guide to Service Projects* by Barbara A. Lewis (Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1995), pages 8–11. Used with permission of the publisher.

<sup>4</sup> See "Caring," page 24, for information about national programs that promote youth service.

<sup>2</sup> See "Endurance," pages 88, 89, and 92, for journaling resources.

**7. When your term as a volunteer comes to an end, evaluate the experience.** Discuss it with your team members, family, teachers, and friends. Talk it over with the people you served. Consider these questions:

- ? What did I learn?
- ? What did I accomplish?
- ? What were my feelings, fears, joys?
- ? Would I do it again?
- ? How could I improve on the experience?
- ? Will I repeat the experience? When? How soon?

**PRACTICE SEEING BOTH SIDES** of an environmental issue. Choose an issue that's currently being debated in your community. *Examples:* the use of a stream bed; air quality; dumping; the development of an area (for high-income housing, low-income housing, retail, industry, park, etc.). Invite speakers from both sides to address your class, school, or club and express their views on the issue. Afterward, ask your classmates and friends to vote on which person seemed most persuasive. Did you have an opinion or point of view before you heard the speakers, and did anything they said change your mind? Did you empathize more with one speaker than the other?

**FIND OUT THE AVERAGE ANNUAL INCOME** of a family in your town, city, or state. Then find out the average annual incomes of families in several countries around the world, including third world countries. (You might gather this information from almanacs, encyclopedias, or the Internet.) Calculate the differences and make a chart illustrating them. Could your family live on the amount of money earned by a family in Afghanistan? In Bangladesh? In Cuba? In India? In Zaire? How do you think families in these countries pay for food, clothing, housing, utilities (heat, light, water, telephone), medical expenses, transportation, education, and recreation? You might extend your research to include average life expectancy, infant mortality rates, and other topics. Afterward, think about how this information has affected your feelings about different peoples around the world. Can you begin to empathize with the struggles of families in poor nations?

**PRACTICE EMPATHIZING WITH YOUR PARENTS.** Each day, ask them how they feel about a different issue. *Examples:* family rules, money, working, the easiest/best part about raising children, the hardest/worst part about raising children, current events, their hopes/dreams for your future, etc. Do this for five days. Just listen to what they say—without arguing. Afterward, think about what you learned. Do you know your parents any better now? Can you see their point of view on certain issues? Can you understand where they're coming from and why? Tell them how you feel and practice having a discussion.

*Variation:* Practice empathizing with your siblings. Ask your older or younger brother(s) or sister(s) what frustrates them the most, what makes them happiest, etc. Ask if they have any advice for you.

**WALK IN SOMEONE ELSE'S SHOES.** Literally! Exchange shoes with a sibling, parent, classmate, teacher, or friend for an hour or a day. Talk about what you learned from the experience.

*Variation:* Imagine what it would be like to walk in the cold with *no* shoes. Or be courageous and do it. Ask your parents for permission first. Afterward, collect good used shoes (and money for new shoes) from your school or club and make a donation to a homeless shelter, second-hand store, or kids' shelter.

**LEARN ABOUT IMMIGRATION** in your town, city, or state. Check with organizations that sponsor immigrants to find out where people are coming from. If possible, arrange to meet with and interview recent immigrants. (You might need translators to accompany you.) Ask about the beliefs and customs they have brought with them to their new home. Try to empathize with their feelings and needs. Afterward, present your findings to your class or school. You might want to create a choral reading using different "voices" to tell about the immigrant experience and the beliefs and customs of the people.

**START AN INTERNATIONAL CLUB** at your school.<sup>5</sup> Post flyers announcing the club. Your goal should be to attract as many people as possible, preferably from a wide variety of ethnic groups and backgrounds. Talk about common concerns and problems, special needs, and times when you need support and

<sup>5</sup> See "Leadership," pages 160–161, for tips and a resource on how to start a club.