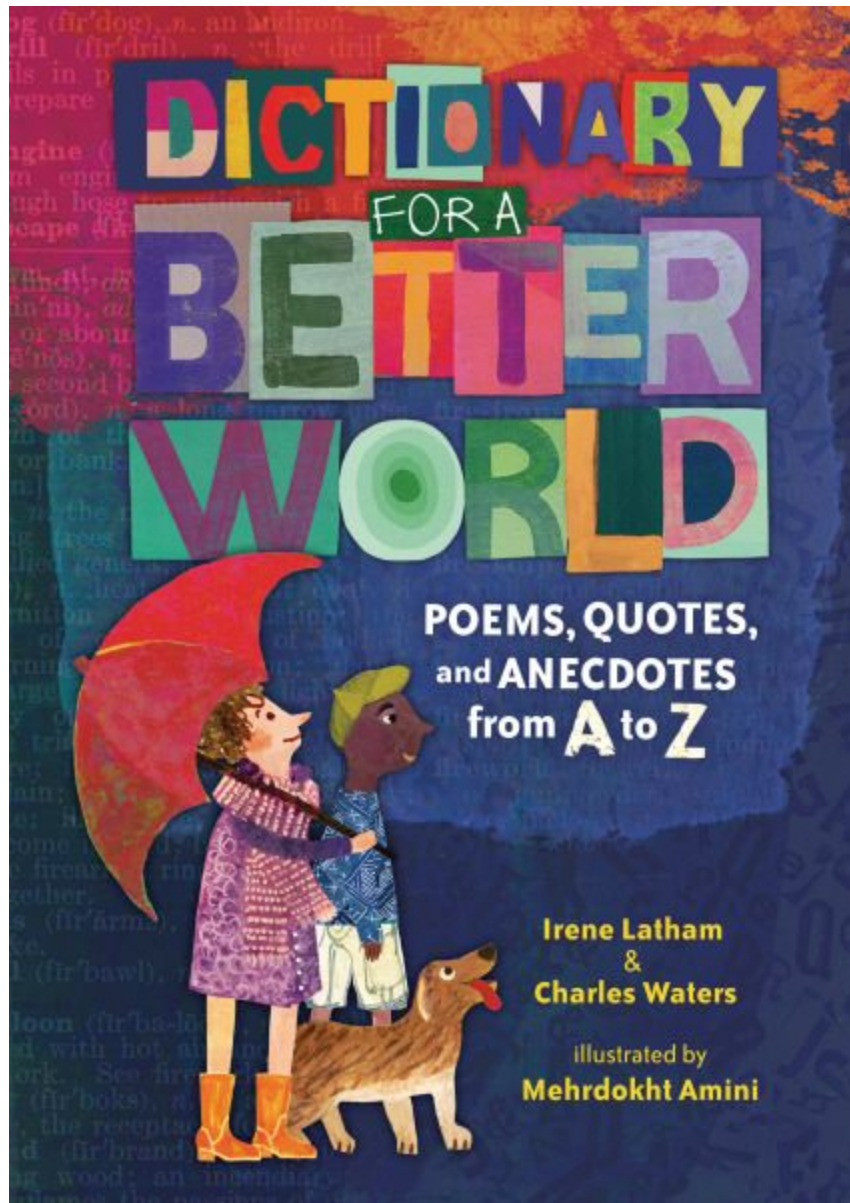


**Dictionary for a Better World Discussion Guide**

**Zestlan Simmons, M.Ed., NBCT**



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**About the Book:** How can we make the world a better place? This inspiring resource for middle-grade readers is organized as a dictionary; each entry presents a word related to creating a better world, such as ally, empathy, or respect. For each word, there is a poem, a quote from an inspiring person, a personal anecdote from the authors, and a "try it" prompt for an activity.

This second poetic collaboration from Irene Latham and Charles Waters builds upon themes of diversity and inclusiveness from their previous book *Can I Touch Your Hair? Poems of Race, Mistakes, and Friendship*. Illustrations from Iranian-British artist Mehrdokht Amini offer readers a rich visual experience.

**About the Discussion Guide:** Created by 2018-19 Alabama Teacher of the Year, Zestlan Simmons, this question guide offers comprehension and discussion questions for each poem to encourage students to progressively delve into the themes of each poem to have a complete understanding of its meaning and social-emotional relevance. The following activities and questions are designed to allow the students to access those deeper critical thinking skills and to evaluate how these various themes relate to their own lives.

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## Pre-Reading Discussion

Personal values determine our priorities and action which in turn for our identities and how we relate to others. From the list of words below, choose ten words that you feel reflect your values or personify who you feel you are. After choosing the ten select three of the characteristics that you consider non- negotiables in your life. Discuss in a small group or with a partner how and why these words define you.

Acceptance	Fuel	Questioning
Ally	Gratitude	Reaching out to others
A sense of belonging	Hope	Respect
Compassion	Humility	(S)hero
Courage	Intention	Service
Creativity	Justice	Teamwork
Open Dialogue	Kindness	Tenacity
Diversity	Laughter	Upstander
Dreams	Listening	Voice
Empathy	Love	Vulnerability
Equality	Mindfulness	Bearing Witness
Exercise	Nature	Wonder
Experimenting	Netiquette	Xeniality
Forgiveness	Being open	Yes
Freedom	Taking a pause	Zest
	Peace	

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## Discussion Questions

### **Acceptance**

1. To what is “acceptance” compared in this poem?
2. What does the speaker mean when he /she says “I am a word with teeth”?
3. How does acceptance of faults as well as strengths help to create a healthy self-image? How does this affect the world around us?

### **Ally**

1. What are the ingredients of being an ally?
2. How does the use of a list create positive, endearing tone for this poem?
3. Why do “fortitude”, “support” and “understanding” have to be stirred and then marinated?

### **Belonging**

1. What is the main hope of the speaker of the poem?
2. How does the arrangement of the quatrain create a sense of anticipation? What is the effect of repeating the phrase “you be you, and I’ll be me”?
3. Stepping out and initiating a relationship can be filled with anxiety, how does overcoming that anxiety help us to develop the relationship?

### **Compassion**

1. What are the sensory details that create a sense of worth in the poem?
2. What is the effect of using the phrase “steep mama in hugs and blankets”?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a compassionate person?

### **Courage**

1. What image defines courage in this poem?
2. What does the author mean by saying “Sometimes”?
3. Complete the statement “I am courageous when \_\_\_\_\_.” Then explain why?

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## **Create**

1. What will be silenced in the face of creation?
2. What is the significance of repeating “who knows what - or who you will become”?
3. How does the ability to create (art, music, stories, businesses, songs, clothing, videos, etc.) empower us?

## **Dialogue**

1. Based on the poem, what are the stages of effective dialogue?
2. To what is effective dialogue being compared?
3. Open and honest conversation can be quite healing and revealing. Why must effective dialogue begin with love?

## **Diversity**

1. What descriptive words create the imagery?
2. How does a quilt symbolize diversity?
3. Diversity can be a symphony of brilliance and beauty. In what ways can diversity be cultivated without diminishing the uniqueness of an individual?

## **Dream**

1. What images symbolize a dream?
2. What is the effect of the speaker’s final three statements?
3. What about adversity causes us to dream?

## **Empathy**

1. What images of the poem create a sense of empathy?
2. Why does empathy require “open ears” and “closed mouths”? What is implied by this gesture?
3. In a time when many social movements begin with a # and ends with the word “matters,” what does it mean for an individual to “matter”?

## **Equality**

1. Based on this poem, what is the message about equality?
2. How does the use of “or” create a sense of equality?
3. Is equality truly equal? What is the difference between equality and equity?

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## **Exercise**

1. What will happen if we ignore our bodies?
2. What is the “inspired” message of the poem?
3. How does exercise inspire your life?

## **Experiment**

1. What are the steps of the scientific method for developing connections?
2. In what way is the scientific method being applied to life?
3. How is life one great experiment?

## **Forgiveness**

1. According to the poem, who receives forgiveness?
2. What does the order of forgiveness tell us about the speaker?
3. Why is it necessary to forgive on various levels?

## **Freedom**

1. Describe the ways that the speaker creates a sense of freedom.
2. What does the speaker mean by the line, “Time to begin!”?
3. How do we keep freedom, whether it is in our government, in relationships or in our own lives, from being abused?

## **Fuel**

1. What causes the speaker to need to refuel along the journey?
2. What is the speaker’s central message?
3. What behavior lets us know when our “tanks” are empty?

## **Gratitude**

1. How is Gratitude personified in the poem?
2. What is implied by the line, “This is how we learn”?
3. How does gratitude open our world to many possibilities?

## **Hate**

1. What lies in Hate’s grave?
2. How will unity “swallow the grave”?
3. Why has hate lived so long or even rises from the grave?

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## **Hope**

1. What image characterizes Hope?
2. How is Hope resilient like a camel?
3. What is it about Hope's promise that inspires people?

## **Humility**

1. What line is repeated about humility? Why?
2. What actions characterize humility?
3. How is the world "busy shouting 'look at me'"?

## **Intention**

1. What images gives the poem a sense of heaviness?
2. What is the moral of the poem?
3. In what ways have thoughts created your world?

## **Justice**

1. What are the images of injustice in the poem? And to what events are they alluding to?
2. How does the chant format represent the idea of justice?
3. In what way does unity support justice?

## **Kindness**

1. How does the poet personify kindness?
2. How does the setting set the stage for the acts of kindness?
3. In a world that uses the "cancel culture" as a form of excommunication, how would being kinder eliminate the need to "cancel someone"?

## **Laughter**

1. Why is the family so upset?
2. How is laughter characterized?
3. Deep laughter can be a healing experience. What was the last deep healing laugh you have had? How did it make you feel better about the situation?

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## **Listen**

1. How does the speaker know that his friend is listening?
2. What is implied about the conversation when the speaker says, “Foggy thoughts open up to clear sky”?
3. Being silent can be both an awkward and honoring experience, what is necessary to ensure that it is not misunderstood for apathy?

## **Love**

1. What words are set as contrasting ideas in this poem? Why?
2. How does the poem convey the author’s perspective about racism?
3. In what way is love the solution to racism? In what ways have you put love into action?

## **Mindfulness**

1. What is the metaphor for “one single moment”?
2. What is the significance of making “jellyfish” a verb in line three?
3. How does “exploding” the moment with mindfulness create gratitude?

## **Nature**

1. What are the water images?
2. How does the line “morning baptism” represent the restorative power of nature?
3. How does the brevity of a haiku convey the beauty of nature?

## **Netiquette**

1. Why does the author use “what if” for each question?
2. What is the effect of rhetorical questions in the poem?
3. How have you created your personal boundaries for your internet and social media use? What beliefs or values motivated you to do so? What lessons have you learned when you had no boundaries with the internet?

## **Open**

1. According to the poem, what is the solution to the “fury of hatred”?
2. What is implied by the line “our hearts stay open”?
3. How can people with different views begin to be open with one another? What can result from the interaction?



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## **Pause**

1. Before what activity is the family taking a pause?
2. What is the rhyme scheme? How does it add to the whimsy of the poem?
3. In this busy world, we often rush from one activity, achievement, or event to the next, how does taking a pause add reverence to these moments?

## **Peace**

1. To what is peace being compared?
2. In the second stanza it states, “I’d take a bite and you’d take a bite,” what is suggested by the order that the bites are taken?
3. How does peace lead to hope?

## **Question**

1. In what ways does asking questions benefit you?
2. What is the effect of the line “Questions are the way to learn anything new?”
3. How does asking questions allow us to have better relationships?

## **Reach**

1. What does the speaker suggest is risked when we reach?
2. What effect does the alliterations “risk rebuke, rebut, reject” and “...falling, failing” have in the poem’s message?
3. What about the vision of possibility motivates people to push past fear to reach for success or connection?

## **Release**

1. What is the time together compared to?
2. Why does the speaker use fire imagery to convey the theme of letting go?
3. How does “releasing” (ideas, relationships, habits, etc.) free you as well?

## **Respect**

1. To whom is this addressed and why?
2. How does the letter pay homage to the subject?
3. What is the difference between tolerance and acceptance?

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## **Service**

1. What images represent the idea of service?
2. What other images could be used to convey service?
3. What about human nature that motivates people to serve others?

## **Shero**

1. How does the shero's comparison convey her character?
2. What is implied by the dual purpose of the shero's simile?
3. How does praising one gender not ignore the strength of the other?

## **Team**

1. How does the team solve the "infighting"?
2. How does the form of the poem convey the message of unity?
3. How does being a part of a team develop individuals?

## **Tenacity**

1. In what ways is the gopher like Tenacity?
2. How do the words "Bursting", "tunneling", "Stuffing" and "Refusing" convey the idea of tenacity?
3. How are commitment and tenacity related?

## **Upstander**

1. Based on the poem, what are the characteristics of an upstander?
2. How does the speaker gain courage from the upstander?
3. What are some current upstanders in society? And what about them gives you courage?

## **Voice**

1. What is the central theme of the poem?
2. What are the similarities and differences of the two speakers?
3. How would you characterize your own voice?

## **Vulnerable**

1. What causes the speaker's "Brave front [to] disintegrate"?
2. How does the artwork convey the central theme of the poem?
3. What about vulnerability makes us strong?

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## **(Bear) Witness**

1. What is on the other side of telling stories that “name your pain”?
2. How does the “faith of a lost kite” bring healing?
3. At one time in churches, time was set aside during services for people to share testimonies. What is in the power of a story?

## **Wonder**

1. With what is the speaker always overwhelmed?
2. What does the list of wonders tell us about the speaker?
3. Why is wonder the key component to self-awareness and self-identity?

## **Xenial**

1. According to the poem, what keeps us “behind our fences”?
2. How do the words, “other”, “different”, and “scary” create fences?
3. What is in the power of saying, ”Welcome”?

## **Yes**

1. According to the poem, what are the conditions for the word “Yes”?
2. Why is “No” described as “friendly competition”?
3. How does giving yourself permission to release make a way for your greatest potential?

## **Zest**

1. What word is synonymous with Zest in this poem and what images capture this feeling?
2. How does the speaker include the sense of taste in the poem? How is it relevant to the poem?
3. How can zest be cultivated in life?

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## **Poetry Portfolio**

Using the various poetic forms in this book, create poems based on the initials of your first and last name. For example, if your initials are KM then you will write a didactic and Tanka poem. You may also extend the portfolio by using all the letters of your name.

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## About the Creators:



(Photo by Andrew Levin Ellis. Troy University)

**Irene Latham and Charles Waters** are the co-authors of *Can I Touch Your Hair? Poems of Race, Mistakes and Friendship*, which was named an NCTE Charlotte Huck Honor Book, a 2018 Kirkus Best Middle Grade Book, and an NCTE Notable Poetry Book.

Their next book *Dictionary for a Better World: Poems, Quotes and Anecdotes from A - Z* has been cited by *Kirkus* Reviews as “a creative and inspirational resource suitable for a broad range of ages and uses.”

They were mere acquaintances before they took the bold leap into writing books together, and it changed their lives — they are now poetic forever friends.

They are also available for author visits! For more information, please visit their websites: [www.irenelatham.com](http://www.irenelatham.com) and [www.charleswaterspoetry.com](http://www.charleswaterspoetry.com)

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**Mehrdokht Amini** has been nominated for a Kate Greenaway Medal and is the acclaimed illustrator of many books for children including *Golden Domes and Silver Lanterns: A Muslim Book of Colors*, *A Moon for Moe and Mo*, *Chicken in the Kitchen* and *Dictionary for a Better World: Poems, Quotes and Anecdotes from A - Z*. Mehrdokht grew up in Iran and now lives in Surrey, England. Visit her website at <https://www.myart2c.com/>



**Zestlan Simmons**, M.Ed., NBCT is a twenty-one year Language Arts and AP English Language and Composition teacher at Booker T. Washington Magnet High School in Montgomery, AL. She was named Alabama's Teacher of the Year for 2018-2019 where she spent a year and a half traveling throughout the state and nation representing Alabama on issues of arts integration, educational equity and advocacy. She earned her National Board Certification in 2010 and renewed it in 2019. In addition, she received her certification for instructional leadership to mentor new teachers, as well as cultivating her passion for culturally responsive instruction, arts integration, and writing instruction. She enjoys travelling, practicing tai chi, cooking and conversation.

## **THE ETYMOLOGY OF PROGRESS**

After gathering these words  
we discover  
our dictionary is endless!  
What makes the world  
a zinger  
is remembering  
we're all in this ...  
together.

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