

VOICES
of TEENS
In Their
Own Words

by Michael Galbraith and Robert Vogel

National Middle School Association
Westerville, Ohio

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1. What Is Happening to Me?	1
Chapter 2. I Am From	11
Chapter 3. Teen Challenges	35
Chapter 4. Family Matters	57
Chapter 5. Living Life	79
Chapter 6. Dreams, Aspirations, and the Future	103

What Is Happening to Me?

by Beverly A. Buncher, Arlene Fishbein, and Robert Vogel

If you are reading this chapter, you are probably somewhere between the ages of 11 and 14. These growing years are the busiest times of life—for your body, your brain, and your emotions. How do you know for sure that you have personally crossed the bridge between being a child and being a teenager? After years of rather gradual change, some of you may now feel like this.

Imagine going to sleep one night and waking up the next morning in an alien world. You seemed to have traveled to a weird planet and are experiencing some very unusual things. Things look the same, yet everything has changed. Your whole body feels different. Your legs feel longer and a bit hairier. Your arms seem to have stretched, and even your hands do not look the same. Jumping up, you gaze at yourself in the mirror. Looking back is a face marked with zits and bumps. If you are a boy, “good morning” can sound like a cross between being deep in a cave and singing like a canary. That, my young friend, is your welcome to the new world of adolescence. A simple “It’s time to get up.” from your mother can throw shocks of despair through your veins. Doors slam, and your temper may flare enough to punch a wall. Seconds pass, and like a tidal wave, the anger floats away, leaving tears and sadness in its place.

Such situations are normal; they are just some of the expected craziness you will experience as you pass through puberty. Puberty happens anywhere from 11 to 18, but it usually occurs when you are in middle school, and so the term “middle” is very fitting. You really don’t know where you belong. Certainly you don’t want to spend your life on this alien planet; but the truth is, you have changed. In fact, some moms of young teens have been known to say, “Who are you? Who took away my kid?” And quite honestly, you may feel the same way about yourself. You are in a time of change, and while all change is difficult to handle, these changes are especially hard because they are happening in your body, your mind, and your emotions.

To find out which of the many changes of early adolescence has hit you so far, try taking this survey. Just place a check mark next to any questions you would answer with “yes.”

Survey of Changes Young Adolescents Experience

In the area of **physical changes**, have you ever . . .

- Gone to sleep at one height and awakened the next day feeling somewhat taller?
- Been restless for no reason at all?
- Seen changes in your body that surprised or even upset you?
- Experienced tremendous hunger all of a sudden?
- Felt so much more mature than you did just a week or a month ago?

In the area of **intellectual changes** (this is how you think and feel), have you ever . . .

- Found yourself being extremely curious?
- Needed to be active most of the time, rather than just sitting in class?
- Taken an interest in other people's real-life problems and situations more than ever before?
- Had very strong feelings and opinions about what you see and feel, including the feeling that you are right and others just don't understand?
- Found yourself seeing the world from your own perspective a lot (this is called being egocentric)?
- Found yourself thinking about how you are thinking about things (technically known as metacognition)?

Now let's look at your **emotional and feeling changes** (psychological state). Have you ever found yourself . . .

- Very changeable in your behavior—one day you like one thing or person or want to do things one way and the next day you feel and act completely different?
- Extremely sensitive to criticism?
- Moody, restless, and self-conscious?
- Optimistic and hopeful?
- Searching for identity and acceptance from your friends?
- Wanting to make your own decisions, but at the same time, looking to others for help in the process?

And then there is your **social life**—your relationships with others who are important to you—it's changing too. Have you ever felt . . .

- Rebellious toward your parents, teachers, and other authority figures?
- Confused and frightened by new school or social settings?
- Fiercely loyal to the values your friends have?
- Aggressive and argumentative much of the time?
- The need to know that the adults in your life love you and care about you?

And finally, let's look at what is important to you as a **moral and ethical person**—that means how you judge right from wrong. Do you find yourself . . .

- Very idealistic?
- Having a strong sense of fairness?
- Reflective and introspective in thoughts and feelings—in other words, looking within a lot and thinking and feeling deeply about things you used to just accept at face value?
- Asking tough questions of yourself, your parents, your teachers, and your friends about what is right and wrong?
- Asking what we sometimes call the "mystery questions," those huge, seemingly unanswerable questions about the meaning of life?

Adapted from a list of characteristics of young adolescents found in *The Definitive Middle School Guide* by Imogene Forte and Sandra Schurr (1993).

You may have answered some of these questions with a resounding yes, while there are others you just can't relate to at all. Come back to this page in a few months or even a year and you may find more of them true for you. The fact is, you are in the middle of an avalanche of change, and so are your friends and classmates. This is not something to fear or dislike about yourself—**it just is**—kind of like the caterpillar-to-butterfly scenario, except that you don't go into a cocoon, unless you want to call your middle school years your cocoon. You came into middle school a child and you go out a full-fledged teenager. And while you are in the cocoon, you and all of your middle school friends are changing every day in ways you can see and other ways that are hidden. It's all very natural and very real. And since everybody is going through it, it is nothing you have to hide—**It just is!**

Listen to two comments made by middle school students, to hear what they are thinking:

By writing in my journal, it helped me learn to open up. I have matured and learned to take certain things more seriously. I am mature now and I'm able to face my challenges I'll have to face in life. It is good to get out your feeling by writing.

I'm beginning to realize other kids I know are going through the same things as me. They feel the same way I do and now I just feel like I have more people to talk to.

Now, let's get back to you. Have you noticed, for example, that you like to sleep more? The nap you fought against years ago may become part of your routine, or you may sleep in past noon on the weekends. Many teens do, and even if they don't, the people who study teenagers' sleep patterns say that with all of the changes you are going through, you need more sleep than ever before. Part of the reason sleep is so important during these years is that your hypothalamus, a gland that is found in everyone's brain, is busy working. It's producing GnRH, a special hormone that in turn sends a signal to your pituitary gland. Yes, your brain is also going through many changes as well.

This gland in turn produces a hormone that signals the production of estrogen and progesterone in the ovaries of girls and the production of testosterone in the testes in boys. It takes a while for the body to adapt to all of these hormones, so for a while you are on a roller coaster of emotions, while your body is going through its own development. Sexual changes and development occur with the growth of breasts in girls and testes in boys. During this time, there also may be an increase of two to four inches in height, and a weight gain of eight to ten pounds. Because bodies mature differently, changes occur at different ages and at different rates. Girls grow taller earlier than the guys—really awkward at those school dances. This can be a matter of great concern and may cause you and your friends to become very self-conscious as you see each other growing taller, boys' voices becoming deeper, and girls' bodies becoming curvier. You know what I mean. **Oh, it just is.**

This period can be misery on earth for some teenagers. Middle school in itself is a big step, signifying newfound freedom, new styles, and many unanswered questions. There is so much to deal with. Having a body that does its own thing without your permission may not seem fair to you and may make you feel a bit unsure of who you are.

The boy next to you in class or the girl on your bus does not look the same anymore. They seem to have grown up overnight and may look perfect, while you may feel like the ugly duckling. Meanwhile, they may see you as the swan and themselves as ugly—ever think of that? The comfortable friendships between boys and girls seem to change as well, and all of sudden you become aware of the “opposite sex.” There are new rules for this physical attraction, and you have to learn them quickly so you do not lose the game. The game is important, because **it just is**.

Often, it’s embarrassing talking to parents about these “growing up” issues, and they may feel a bit uncomfortable too. Yet it’s worth it to try to communicate with them as much as you can. They really care, and they do have your best interests at heart. While you want them to love you, you are moving in the direction of asking your friends or even an older sibling for advice. That works sometimes, but people your age and just a bit older may be going through some of the same confusion you are facing and won’t have the answers you are seeking.

You may really care that your friends accept everything about you and your social life is taking center stage. A lot of times this defines how you feel about your whole life. You may also find yourself going in and out of friendships as your tastes in friends change, and you develop different ideas of what is acceptable and what is not. As you form new alliances with different cliques, pressures may arise as your friends start exploring things that you are uncomfortable being a part of. It may seem as though the friends that you knew forever have morphed into creatures from outer space. Somehow you don’t understand where they are coming from, and you aren’t sure if you want to go where they’re going. For instance, you have just made some new friends who are really awesome. They like you, too, and so far you have really been enjoying hanging out together. Then one day it happens.

One of your friends is doing something you always promised yourself (and your parents) you would never do. It might be smoking a cigarette, trying marijuana, or drinking a beer. It might be at someone’s house or at a party. You are invited to participate. Your heart may start racing, or you may start sweating, or maybe you feel really good that you were invited to be a part of this group. Suddenly, you have a decision to make, and there is no adult around to help you make it.

Should you decide to go with your own conscience, or should you just go along? You may have another decision to make: what to do if you turn down the invitation and your friend’s response is less than understanding. After all, if you say no, your friend may feel bad. They may feel you are judging them, and that may make them uncomfortable. So they may try to pressure you to join them, even to the extent of excluding you if you don’t. At that point, you have reached a moment of truth. Peer pressure has arrived at your doorstep during a time in your life when friends may seem almost as important as the air you breathe. So, what are you going to do? Who are you going to turn to? How will you deal with this turning point? These are the kinds of questions you face at this time of life; how you answer them can have long-term consequences.

Decisions are difficult to make at any time. During the teen years there seem to be so many of them to make. At times it may seem like that alien from another planet is taking over your body and sending you all sorts of messages that are getting mixed up in outer space. This is because, in a way, your brain is being

rewired, and not by an alien, but by your body. There is a part of your brain called the amygdala, which has controlled most of your reactions and actions up to this time. As you pass through this stage of puberty, your decision-making capability is moving into the front part of your brain, where the frontal cortex is located. Sometimes the messages may seem very mixed up. You may think about doing something that is wrong and know that you will get into trouble if you do it; yet there is this little something that pushes you to do it anyway.

A teen from a middle school in Philadelphia wrote about this kind of problem.

Have you ever turned your back and started walking away because of some foolishness? Well, I did. I didn't know what would be my answer or I didn't know what to do. "Should I or should I not?"

It was a Friday night and I was with one of my friends that I trusted so much. I thought she was a good friend. It was like 6:00 p.m. and we got to the store to buy a cheese steak because we were hungry. The next thing I know you see her buying two cigarettes. I'm looking at her like what is she doing? Then as we are walking she said, "Take it." "I'm like no! I don't smoke, what's your problem." Still as we kept on walking she kept begging me to smoke it. I said, "No, I don't smoke at all." She was getting so mad at me because I wouldn't do what she wanted me to do. I was so mad because I didn't know my friend smoked or was the type of person that would do that. Still minutes pass and she kept asking me. I said "No" really loud. She said, "Jessica, you're a chicken, loser, and dumb." I know I knew better than to smoke or try something I didn't want to do. Nobody was going to force me to so I turned my back and I walked away from some foolishness because it's dumb to do something I didn't want to do. I felt so sad and angry because I thought she was my friend that was good and that was always there for me. I guess she wasn't. She was just a friend that would be a smoker and be there for fun. As I walked away I knew I made a good decision because I won't smoke if I didn't want to. I don't need to do anything I don't want to do. I now know she wasn't a good friend after all. I thought she was a good friend to hang out with. That's why I turned my back. Now it's been a couple of years and she hasn't even said a word to me but I know she wants to. I know what I did was a perfect decision.

Sometimes it is really hard to stick to the right decision. What feels right at one moment may feel wrong the next. It's as if your thoughts and feelings are battling one another for attention. There are all sorts of strange, extraterrestrial forces invading your body. Your thoughts may get mixed up, and you may wonder who or what is taking over your thinking.

So, it's not only your emotions and hormones that are confusing you, your brain is growing and changing in order to prepare you to make adult decisions. But it's only beginning to do so, since the frontal cortex, the part of your brain that makes rational decisions and judgments, is not fully developed until you reach

your 20s. What is happening is that your thinking is changing from concrete to abstract. That means you don't have to rely on real objects when solving problems. Now you can think more abstractly, forming ideas and solving problems in your head. You are thinking more about the future and seeing more clearly about issues of right and wrong and are concerned with social issues and justice. Now, keep in mind, this doesn't happen overnight; it happens in stages. And don't be surprised if some of your peers think differently from you.

Let's talk about the way your brain develops and how that relates to what you will decide when your friend asks you to try a drink or a smoke. You see, your brain is an incredible computer that is at a point right now of learning how to think for itself in deeper and deeper ways.

Each day that you live, your brain uses the foods you eat and the experiences you have to develop in ways that will help you think clearly, rationally, and successfully for the rest of your life. If you think about it, that's pretty amazing. You only have one brain, and it is yours for life. During your early adolescent years, this brain is developing at an amazing rate. But here is the challenge before you: You can have an influence on whether it keeps on developing and helping you become a successful human being or whether it stops at the teen level. This is a very big responsibility—are you up for the challenge?

Think back to your friend who was trying to tempt you, or to your own curiosity about trying a chemical in the form of alcohol or other drugs—and then think about this:

If you can keep your brain clean (free of chemicals) until the age of 21, your chances of ever having a drug or alcohol problem are extremely low, and your chances of reaching your goals and dreams are good. On the other hand, if you begin using drugs and alcohol now, during your brain-growing years, your brain and emotions basically get stuck at the age when you start using, and they stay there until you stop. That's why so many people who use drugs end up in jail. They've lost the ability to make the sound decisions that would lead to a positive lifestyle. They weren't born that way. It all started with a decision to try something that eventually took away their brain's capacity to choose. But it doesn't have to be that way for you—you have a choice.

I'm not saying it will be easy. It takes more than a Band-Aid or a kiss from mom to solve a teenager's problems. After all, today's world is marked with injustice, war, violence, and fear, and adults themselves often do not have the answers to the questions that are bugging you. In fact, adults are often so busy dealing with their own lives they often have little time for teens' questions. You may find yourself caught in between or confused, forced to deal with issues before you really feel ready. In today's changing society, one that's dominated by entertainment, videos, television, and computers, many teens feel they have no idea where to turn. So, if you sometimes feel unsure of your next move or who to talk to about what you are going through or even if anyone would care to know what is going on inside of you—you're not weird, you are normal—**It just is.**

Speaking of changes, have you been worried that others are looking at you and judging everything you do? They're not, but if you feel that way, you are not alone. Many young teens report being very self-conscious at this time in their lives. This includes being embarrassed at their parents' behavior, checking themselves in the mirror many times, and changing their clothes 40 times before leaving the house for a get-together with friends. All it takes is one glance or word from a friend, teacher, or parent to burst a young teen's bubble. Can you relate?

And then there are other challenges you may face. Some of these include being a latchkey kid, having addicted parents or siblings or a parent in jail, being exposed to abuse, growing up without a father, and dealing with stepfamilies. Facing bullies at school, dealing with violence on the street or on the news, or even moving to a new home or school can cause you to question your identity and your place in your family, your school, and the world. Any of these things can be very unsettling and send a teen into a tailspin.

Confusion and frustration are common emotions among young teens, so if you feel them, there is nothing wrong or weird about you. You're just at a stage in your life when you are trying so hard to find your independence that you will fight against authority or act like you think you know everything to feel more secure. Yet this just adds to the difficulties of this stage of life. It is now your turn to take a more active role in "What's Happening to Me."

On the next page, draw a picture, write a poem, or just write what it is like to be you at your age. Try to capture your feelings and challenges, include objects that are important to you, maybe draw yourself in your favorite environment. Just put yourself in the picture any way you want.

One way to keep track of all that is happening to you is to find a "listening friend" who will always be there for you. Another way is to get in the habit of writing about what you are going through as it occurs, and that's what we will soon be doing.

Let's try an experiment. Take out a notebook or a piece of paper you will be able to find again later and just start writing about what you've read in this chapter so far. Are you going through any of these changes? Have you ever been confronted by peer pressure? What is your relationship with your parents like? Is it the same as always or has it changed?

Write as much as you want—or as little. If you want to, write about other things, such as: Who is your best friend? Who is your role model? What is your favorite subject? Who is your favorite teacher? Why? What do you want to be when you grow up? What is the most difficult issue facing you right now? Add anything else about yourself that you might want others to know—or that you want to remember about your life today.

Finally, if you feel like it, think about all of the things you are curious about and make a list of all of the questions you have about yourself, your world, and life itself. They could be as simple as whether or not you will have a boyfriend or girlfriend during the year, or as complex as if there will ever be peace in this world.

Some people call these the “mystery questions.” They are questions about things that bother you, maybe just for a moment, or maybe every day. You don’t need to have answers to them; just be aware of the fact that they are the mysteries that you face today. Some of the answers to them will become clearer as you grow, and some of the mysteries may stay with you forever. Either way, make note of them, keep track of them, and celebrate them; they are a sign that you are fully human, living in a world full of unknowns.

If possible, have a notebook just for this purpose; call it your journal or diary and write in it regularly. Writing in a journal is one of the best ways to find out the long-term answers to the questions of identity that face you, because the more you write about how you view yourself and your world, the better you will get to know yourself—it’s just that simple. And keeping a journal of your own over time will give you the ability to see the changes taking place in you as you grow. The notebook can be as simple as an 8½ x 11 spiral notebook from the neighborhood store or a bound blank book. It really doesn’t matter, as long as it’s yours and you use it just for writing about things that are important to you. You might even want to personalize the cover—even if you’re not a great artist.

Now, if you are satisfied with what you’ve written, just stop for a moment, take a deep breath, and go back and read what you’ve written, without judgment, just as an interested observer. And as you read what you’ve written, get to know the “you” who wrote all of that. Sit for a moment afterwards, and write some more. What you write at this point could be some answers to some of the questions you posed, more information you forgot to put in, or just some insight you gained from reading about yourself. Then close the journal and come back to this chapter and let’s talk about you and who you are.

Kevin, a seventh grader, wrote:

It has helped me understand that my feelings are important. Writing my feelings down will let other people know you are going through the same things that they are and that you are not alone. It also helped me understand that writing is something that I now, even more than before, love to do. That is how writing has helped me. It has taught me that when I get discouraged or I need to let something out, I can now just write it down on paper. It has made me stronger.

Soon, the alien planet will not look and feel so strange and will be more like home because **it just is.**

Two talented middle school educators co-wrote this chapter with Robert Vogel. Their understanding of the middle school child paved the way for the rest of the chapters in the book. Many thanks to Beverly Buncher and Arlene Fishbein for their contributions to this book.

Beverly A. Buncher has been a teacher and administrator for 22 years, 14 of which were spent at the middle level. Currently the upper school principal of the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Rockville, Maryland, Mrs. Buncher is also a freelance writer and editor.

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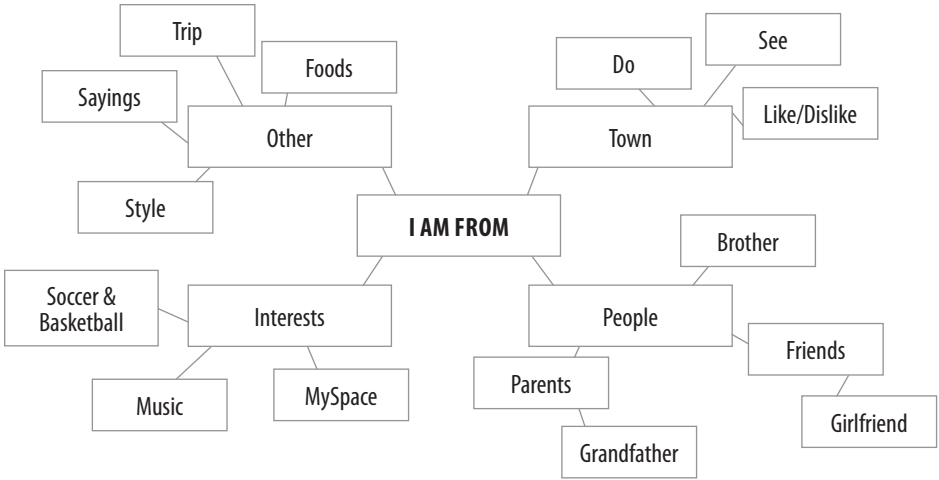
I Am From . . .

Now you are ready to tackle “I Am From . . .” writing, the first personal writing experience of the year. It gives you an opportunity to explain who you are, where you come from, and what your life is like. You will begin by thinking about the many possibilities by reading examples written by students from previous years. This will help you get your mind on how this type of writing might look and sound. Reading the work of others will encourage similar and new ideas to emerge in you, the writer. Hearing student voices that are both similar to and different from your own will get your writing mind locked in. Listening to the song “Where I’m From” by Dignable Planets will help you further understand this writing strategy and encourage new interpretations as you connect to musical artists. You might want to type in the name of the song and the group into a search engine to read the lyrics while you listen to the beats and rhymes.

Start by working in a small group for 10–15 minutes to brainstorm a list of possible topics to include in your “I Am From . . .” piece. You have probably been doing pre-writing activities for years, but if not, here are some basics. One way to get your group brainstorming is to use a strategy called webbing—a term that means to get all your ideas in a visual format. Webbing doesn’t have to be done in sequential order. It allows you to think freely and put information in any order that occurs to you. You create a visual map of how your mind is thinking about something. It’s an easy way to get going on a topic by yourself or with classmates. By the time you finish your web, you will have a strategy that will help you improve your writing. Here are a few easy steps to follow when webbing, followed by an example:

1. Draw or write your main idea in the middle of the page and frame it in a circle or box. You might want to use different colors as you develop the web.
2. Draw a branch off the main idea that is another idea, subtopic, or fact.
3. Keep on developing new branches for new subtopics or facts.
4. As you branch off from the subtopics, continue to add more facts or details.
5. Feel free to use both words and pictures. If you like, you can use colors to highlight different topics.

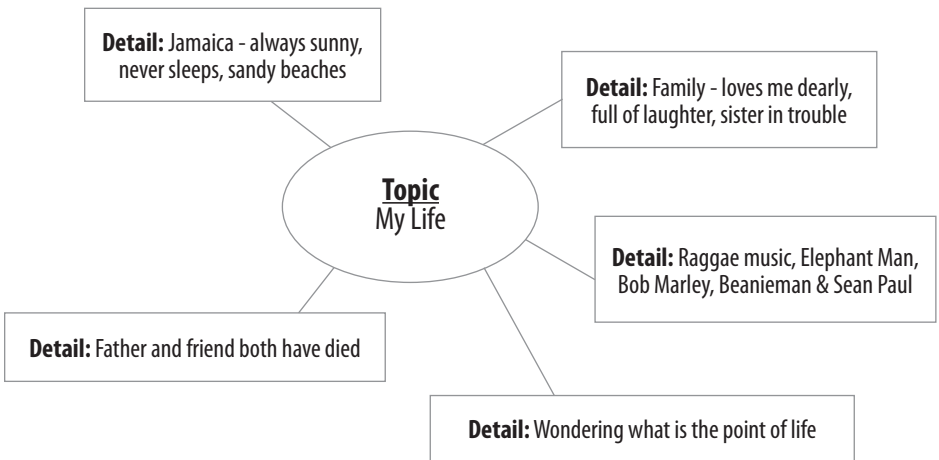
Remember to write quickly without much pausing, judging, or too much editing. Allow your creative mind to just think of ideas. You will organize later. Here is an example of a web:



If webbing doesn't work for you, try a cluster diagram to help you sort out your ideas. You may find they can be useful because

- They help you see how things go together.
- They help you arrange information.
- They make it easier to write your first draft.
- They help you put material in order.

Below is an example that you might want to use to help you organize your thoughts and ideas for the first writing assignment. Use the same steps mentioned above for creating the web.



Afterward, groups will share aloud all the possible topics generated. By having a long list of choices on the board, you'll be able to see the richness of the collective ideas. Some of the subjects that might emerge for your "I Am From . . ." are the following: *family, neighborhoods, states lived in, places, sports, teams, games, hobbies, challenges, difficult circumstances, foods, phrases from home, popular culture, religions, ethnicities, cultural elements, joys, sorrows, pets, friends, peers, peer pressure, dreams, fears, difficult choices, hopes, passions, danger, music, and personal and popular styles*. Every topic is fair game, and you will discover many more in your discussions. So, come up with a starter list—it's a great way to begin the writing process.

Why are we doing this?

What are the goals for this writing activity? Here are a few to think about:

- Begin writing about what you know well—your own life. Having a dozen or so years of experiences to draw from, you should have no shortage of great material to write about.
- All teenagers need their voices to be heard, and others are interested in what you have to say.
- Even if you are shy and quiet and prefer not to be called on in class, you will like this assignment. It gives you an opportunity to say so much without the fear of others criticizing you. After a rewrite or two, you'll become more comfortable with your writing. You may be willing to read your work out loud to the class, proudly telling them who you are, where you're from, and what you are thinking. If reading aloud is not comfortable for you, you might choose a classmate or the teacher to read your work.
- A last major goal, and probably the most important one for the year, is for you to recognize how much you have in common with others. Despite the obvious outward differences among us, this writing assignment, coupled with the read-aloud component, is a perfect way to share a little about yourself and to learn about others. You will find you have much in common with others.

Recognizing the extent of commonality among us will help build a more open and comfortable classroom community—a place where you will enjoy sharing and learning. Those of you who have hardly spoken to others will now see them in a new way. Comfort levels and respect for each other will grow, and you will become a member of a group who care about one another. Your class's level of respect for each other and self-respect will develop through exploring "I Am From . . ." A rare opportunity is waiting for you to help create an environment that includes, not excludes. **It just is.**

You may find that this type of writing sometimes never gets truly finished. You can continuously make additions to your piece as you grow and experience new things. Your "I Am From" drafts, like your life, are works in progress. This first writing assignment provides a real way to reflect on your personal growth and the many changes that occur throughout the year.

Now it is time to read a number of "I Am From . . ." pieces that other teenagers have written. Not that long ago they were sitting in a seat just like you at the start of a new school year. As you read or listen to each of the journal entries, think about how you would respond to the questions below. They will help you focus on some of the important ideas.

How are these stories similar to or different from your life?
Can you describe what makes these writings meaningful or powerful?
What would you like to say to the writer?
What trends do you see in the writings?

You might make a copy of these questions and keep them by your side as you read to help you focus on the essential issues.

Journal 1

I Am From . . .

I am from a place that is always sunny.
I am from an island that never sleeps.
I am from a family that loves me dearly.
I'm from a place where my sister was kicked out of school.
I'm from where my dad died and will always be in my heart.
I'm from seeing my best friend pronounced dead.
I'm from friends asking for my help after being hurt by family.
I am from a Christian church,
From going under that water to save me forever.
I'm from getting forced to speak English by my uncle.
I am also from a family that is full of love and laughter.
I am from a hard and fun life.

I am from walking or taking a taxi from Maypen to Spanishtown.
I'm from babysitting my one cousin, two nephews and three nieces.
I'm from looking out the window, crying to see my mother.
I'm from seeing my 15-year-old friend struggle with her pregnancy.
I am from well-cooked meals,
From friends that care for me.
I'm from getting smacked by my teacher for being late, by my mom
for not picking up my nephews, by my uncle for nothing at all.
I'm from my stepsister telling me I'll never make it in life.
I'm from so much stress and wondering what is the point of my life.
I'm from Elephant Man, Lady Saw, Bob Marley, Bounty Killa,

Beanieman, Sean Paul, Shaggy and every reggae artist.
I am proud to say I am from Jamaica, The West Indies.

Journal 2

I am from the Uptown streets,

A Haines Street spokesman
Where people love drama and
Solve problems with banana clips.
I'm from where hustlers knock weight off
like fat people on a Bowflex
Where you get chicken wings, four for a dollar
I'm from where people get jumped for looking sweet.
Where some people wear hoagie rolls for sneaks.
I am from where everybody wears teflon vests to
Block shots like Yao Ming.
Where kids are exterminated almost every day.
I'm from the bottom of your sneakers,
Where teenagers get killed in their wife beaters.
I am from a family of fallen soldiers.

Journal 3

I am from Philly

The city people called Brotherly Love.
Where brothers have enough hate in them to pick up a 7mm and murder their own,
as if love did not exist.
I am from where the death of many youths is the meal ticket to many news reporters.
I am from where you can't walk from your car to your house,
let alone from your house to the store.
Knowing it could be your last breath,
And knowing that the eyes God gave you may soon shut for good.
I'm from where over debts over money,
Young teens are dying in the streets

I'm coming from the phrases, "Always depend on the family" and
"Never betray the family," don't exist
I'm from where my uncle lives on the other side of the world, have only seen him once,
Where I'll never be able to see him again

I'm from where losing your virginity at the age of 13 is in style,
and where the boy is too stupid to wear a condom.
So the girl gets pregnant,
and there goes another child raising a child.
I'm from where at night the bedtime stories are bullets,
and the sweet sounds are the sirens.

I'm from where I am a Latino rapper and poet,
Who tries to live in a valley where people judge me not on race or my skin,
But by the content of my character, as Dr. King wanted

I'm from having expensive clothes is not enough.
From people making fun of you for the kind of cut you got.
I'm from where the wars never end,
But from a city that might
A city that will be remembered for violence, drugs, assassinations and Crips
I am from where youngbloods are already strapped because
They have no fear to end up in what doesn't exist in this world.

I am from a place that to get your rep
You need a 45 or to own a life
I am from the 1-9-1-2-0
Soon to become part of the ghetto
I'm from Philly
Where the wars never end.

Journal 4

I Am From ...

I come from the Catholic Church,
The house of the Lord
I come from the sirens of police cars
Examining the corpses
I come from a corrupted community
 Where any day can be your last.
I come from mind control
 Despise me and my life
I come from the dead
 The cry of silent spirits
I come from terror
 To never be the prey
I come from the bitter tears
 Of the guilt held within
I come from many dreams
That haven't even started
I come from desperate souls
 Meeting the ends of their paths
I come from hallucinations
 Of the evil ghouls
I come from brand new books
 That were burned to ash
I come from a land of no hostility
 We wish for no perfection
Only to open our voice
 And let it be heard

Journal 5

I am from North Philly,

Moving from Hunting Park to Logan, Logan to Olney Square

Where they play Truth or Dare

I am from a family of eight,

From fighting, arguing, lying, cheating and hate.

From seeing how the world is, inside and out,

Trying to live without any doubts.

I am from a neighborhood of violence,

Where people end up in jail

“Where’s that bail?”

From the shooting, the killing

I am from two cultures, Laotian and Thai,

Knowing English as my second language

I am from where girls jump rope,

Having their mothers wonder and hope.

Where the boys date,

Wondering whether they will have their father’s fate.

I am from seeing all kinds of people,

From Black, White, Asian and Spanish,

Where any day another can vanish

I am from a hood having people,

Being straight, being gay and trying out dyke

I am from a place where what matters is

Nothing but who you are like.

Where I do an experiment that shows me how to live life,

To always share, care and give.

I am from living with family,

Seeing what we do every day, knowing what to say

This is where I am from.

Journal 6

I am from Philly.

I am from a man with a cane.
I am Logan Elementary.
I am Olney.
I am from big cars.
I am from my sister teaching me to ride a bike.
I am father's interest in cars.
I am my mother's looks.
I am from my mother's grave.
I am from my brother teaching me games.
I am people who inspired me.
I am from a violent place, but
I am from Grandma's cooking.
I am the block of loud friends and stupid driving.
I am the book of knowledge.
I am from the back of the class.
I am from apple and orange.
I am rap and Gap.
I am the mall and the street.

Journal 7

I am from people getting shot up.

I am from people getting locked up.
I am from people gathering and putting a teddy and R.I.P signs on their lawn.
I am from people gathering to sing goodbye songs.
I am from bloody t-shirts and fistfights.
I am from nothing in my eyes but doctors in my sight.
I am from blasting music and tents.
I am from no one listen to Kirk Franklin, only 50 cent.
I am from good things gone badly.
I am from happy people turn sad.

I am from, "Why is my life this way?"
Where I'm from I can't complain this way.
I have a good mother and a nice place to stay.
I have a nice dad that lives away.
I am from a big family that all cares.
I am from a room of Care Bears.
I am from a grand mother with nine kids.
My family's from Germantown, and that's where I live.

Journal 8

I am from a family of hatred.

I am from a family where the younger children drive the oldest to complete anger.
I am from Seattle.
I am from a father who I left across the country.
Departed from a silent city and arrived at a city tearing apart with drugs and violence.
At night I hear all kinds of sirens.
I am from rock, rap, video games, and electronics.
I am from a family who came from Vietnam.
I live with my mom, two sisters, four cousins, one aunt, one uncle, and my grand mom.
I am from whatever style of clothing.
My place in life will always be in Seattle.
I am from wet and spicy style foods.
I am from, "Stay in the house at all times."
I am from the Evergreen State.
I now live in the so-called City of Brotherly Love.
And now that I'm here, I need to make the most of it.

Journal 9

We are from loving and annoying mothers who push us to succeed in life,

And try hard at everything we do.
We are from God who created us in his own image,
With our own different personalities.

We come from families who judge a book by its cover,
Because they are not close or they don't know each other.
We are from thirteen-year-old boys posted on the corners trying to find a way out.
We are from young females with no one to tell what happened to them,
So they switch their sexuality to get away from the hell.
We are from homosexuality coming around the world.
We are from different complexions to different ethnic backgrounds.
We are from different religions to different races.
We are from a place with gangs and thugs.
We are from haters to lovers and to giving kisses and hugs.
We are from sorrows to broken hearts to let downs and unaccomplished goals.
We are from mended hearts to forgiving souls.
We are from friendships to relationships.
We are from where rappers are icons and they are teaching kids to kill for respect.
We are from sickness and health to poverty and hidden wealth.
We are from a place where buying guns is as easy as buying candy from a corner store.
We are from a place where one-on-one fights no longer exist,
Only shootouts, jumpings, and pistol-whipping.
We are from a place where you can't walk out your door in safety.
We are from a place where you can't sit in your house,
Without getting a death sentence phone call.
We are from a place where children are victims.
Where a simple opinion cannot make a difference.
We are from a place where it's okay for boys to disrespect girls.
A place where if you are the wrong color you are discriminated against.
We are from a neighborhood where diversity stands,
But a place where same ethnic groups stay together.
You ask where we were from.
We are.

Journal 10

I am from a loving and caring family.

A very nice mom, a pesky dad, and an ecstatic brother.

I am from Olney where lots of horrible things happen everyday.

I am from home-cooked meals of rice and chicken.

I am from parents who say, "Turn off the T.V. Read a book."

They want me to do good.

I am from somewhere where everybody goes outside on the block and chills.

I am from rap and R&B music blasting on the radios.

I am from a crazy neighborhood hearing shots fired every night,

I am from Philly.

Journal 11

I am from barrettes and bows, to weaves and corn rows.

I am from violence to love,

From love to hurt.

From my fifteen year-old cousin already gave birth.

I am from a Christian church were we clap our hands and stomp our feet.

I am from the new people you meet.

Where I'm from, catching a body may be the only way you can get your respect.

I am from family members and friends getting killed in alleyways and back streets,

Just because they look good.

Those being innocent become fresh meat.

I am from a phrase where my family says, "You can do it if you put your mind to it" and "It's okay to be yourself."

I am from a place near you.

Journal 12

I am from a family of five girls where we all look alike

I have been from hotels in Florida to the houses in North Carolina
Born in West Philly to the streets of Mount Airy is where I walk
From Gospel and WJZ to R&B and 100.3 The Beat
I am from ballies and barrettes, to individuals and micros
From Gerber and the formula, to pizza, chicken, and cheese macaroni
Born from Jesus to celebrating his birthday on Christmas morning
From two distinguished parents saying, "Clean your room or you won't go anywhere."
I am from watching TV to partying at West Chester and Cheney Universities
From watching Sponge Bob Square Pants and Laguna Beach
To seeing young boys doing drugs on corners of streets
Seeing snitches snitch and haters hating are the things I see everyday
From drinking a bottle to jumping Double Dutch
To making the grade and becoming your doctor.

Journal 13

I am from a city that never sleeps.

The mean hard streets of Philly
I'm from a place where gunshots sound so peaceful
While you are sleeping.
I'm from Wyoming to Olney Avenues.
I am from people who love me to death
I am from a family that cooks chicken and rice,
And a neighborhood that went from bellbottoms to hiphuggers to gouchos.
I am from a city that went from nappy fros to nappy puffs
To straight ponytails and even micros.
I am from the stressful streets of Philadelphia,
A name so false,
A neighborhood that hurts whomever,
A place where children any age can have a gun in 30 minutes.
This is where I am from.

This is my community, my neighborhood,
My environment and my world.
This is where I am from and where I live, where I breathe.
I am from the restless streets of Philly.

Journal 14

I Am From ...

I come from the place of brotherly love,
But too many seem to prefer to live without love.
Where I was born I see fighting and bullying.
Where people hope for a better day,
But the things they say will only find them a fight
They may have a choice to back down with a frown,
But instead choose the fist.
And with others you may find yourself in a frame,
If the wrong person says your name.
I come from a family that is loving and caring.
They'll always be there, no matter what.
I'm from starting Chinese New Years,
But in the end why were there tears?
I come from rice and avoiding a slice.
From bleeding to tears just dropping.
You may be mopping those tears and blood away,
But you have to not forget every day,
Minor wounds or dying with honor is what it has to be,
This is where I am from and this is me.

Journal 15

I am from fried rice and little Buddha figurines.

I am from intelligence to video games.
From fun to imagination
Where it isn't safe to walk the streets.

From where my dad will scream for me not washing the dishes
To school where teachers put us to the test
Where appearance is everything
Papers, pens . . . you know the rest
Cheese steaks to Chinese food
Playing, fighting, and making friends
I'm from waking up early and staying up late.
A place the adventure will not end.
A place of brotherly love, not really

Journal 16

I am from a place where Creole is famous.

I am from where Carnival is all about celebrations, dancing and reggae.
I am from a place where the water is clear and warm, and the fish can swim.
I am from a place where people argue and kill over things that make no sense.
I am from people coming to our island as immigrants
And hiding from their masters.
I am from teens almost burning down their schools and carrying guns.
I am from people telling you, "Good morning, good afternoon and good night."
I am from people who care and family that loves one another.
I am from going to the beach every Friday with my class.
I am from walking with my parents on the cool sand at the end of the day,
And talking about life.
I am from an uncle that is in jail and an aunt whose husband died of a heart attack.
I am from my grand mother dying from breast cancer.
I am from being a toddler and never forgetting her.
And from seeing my grandfather dying of lung cancer.
I am from people telling me I can never make it in life.
And people telling me that I am stupid
I am from friends that remind me of the positive, not negative things about me.
I am from helping my friends out and sticking up for them.
I am from boys saying nice things about me.
I am from having boys as friends and being able to ask them questions.

I am from leaving my comfortable lifestyle and entering an entirely new world.
I came here from the Virgin Islands
I am from being mad, sad and happy.
I am from a world of confusion.

Journal 17

I am from a busy mom, a lazy dad and a pair of hand-me-down parents.

I am from where being alone doesn't make you the center of attention,
But makes you the center of everyone's jokes.
I am from the street where kids beat you up for being smart,
But will be nice to you the next day.
I am from a street where drug dealers and hustlers are a kid's best friend.
I am from the street where devils-in-training roam,
Attacking innocent people.
I am from a street where everybody knows your name,
Not as your friend, but as their next victim.

I am from the place where nobody is true,
Only a true enemy.
I am from a place where getting a daily beating is part of my lifestyle.
I am from a place where trouble follows me.
A place where being alone is the only way out.
I am from a place where, "Ride or die" applies.
I am from a place where animosity is built up for unknown reasons.
I am from...

Journal 18

I am from a home where everything seems so tight,

So many people crowded around you
I am from a place where violence seems continuous.
It seems to never end.
I am from where young men are killed over the same three things,

Money, drugs, nothing
I am from a family that half cares if you go to school or not,
If I am alive or not
I'm from the place where you get jumped for no reason at all.
I come from the place where the bad are free and the good aren't.
Messed with on my own block just talking to a friend
I'm from, "Mom when are we going to finally move?
I'm so tired of all the gunshots."
I'm from a hole you can't find the end of
Because you can't get what you lost: lives
I'm from just around the corner.

Journal 19

I am from fried chicken to fish,

To my mom telling me to clean my dish.
From hip-hop to R and B
From enemies to friends gangsters, thugs, fighting
I can't take it, but I deal with it,
Because it is a part of me, even if it is bad for me.
But enough of the bad things in life

I'm from white sanded beaches
To cool sea breezes
I'm from riding my bike down the street,
Listening for the smooth beat
My roots come from Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados,
That's where we are from.
I'm from school, which is my life,
They say that's all I have to worry about

I'm from XBOX to radio stations.
I'm from video games,
In hopes of making one some day.

Wealth . . . some say it is a stupid dream, but
It's my dream, so deal with it. It's not going away.
Because I'm going to make it somewhere in life
No matter how long it takes,
It's my future at stake.

Journal 20

I am from a sea of white tees and baggy jeans.

You can't tell who's who, because they all look the same.
Trash is all over the ground and young "ladies" always running around.
I am from little girls with dollar store weaves.
I am from a new mother just starting high school. Have to rush over to daycare.
Where's the daddy? Anywhere but there.
That's where I'm from.
I am from when you can't get down the street without somebody saying,
"Can you get me something to eat?"
Although she may look hungry,
I can tell by the look in her eyes it's not what she craving .
I am from where somebody is always on the corner.
Looking a little scared when they see a cop.
I don't like my neighborhood.
I hate it.
A lot of people getting on other people's nerves.
A hope of better neighborhoods is always a dream.
Then you wake up to see the same old thing.
That's where I'm from.

Journal 21

I am from a place where people weep.

I am from a place where mothers cry over their sons, over situations that are deep.

I am from a place where men and women are going from prison to prison because they decided to make the wrong decisions.

I am from a place that is no longer a city of love,

But a city that kills and steals over situations that are not from the heaven above.

I am from a place where children can no longer go outside and play.

From the looks of it, we're turning to the city of hate.

I am from a place where everyone that turns on the T.V. has to realize

Our mayor is getting criticized every time someone dies.

I am from a place that has the potential to

I am from a city I don't regret living in.

I just want all this crime and hatred to end.

In all reality, where I'm from is very cool.

Where I'm from the adults tell you, "Don't be bad. Just stay in school."

I am from people who try to strive for excellence.

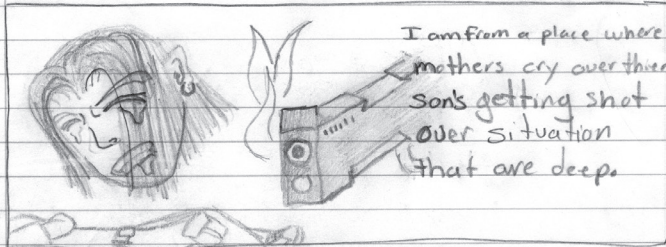
All our city needs is the guidance.

I am from a city that I dream could be a good old Philadelphia.

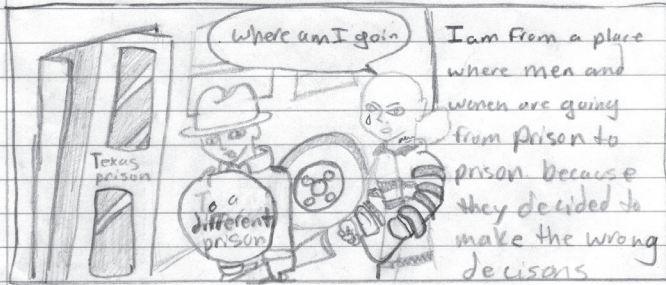
On the following page, a student has drawn a cartoon to describe his image of the journal –



I am from a place
Where people weep.



I am from a place where
mothers cry over their
son's getting shot
over situation
that are deep.



I am from a place
where men and
women are going
from prison to
prison because
they decided to
make the wrong
decisions

Journal 22

I am from my family, friends, and teachers pushing me to be my best.

I am from neighbors yelling.

Maybe that's just where I'm from, or maybe not.

Coming from where I'm from, drugs are taking over.

Young people are dying because drugs are a way out,

Whether it's selling them or using them.

Where I'm from, young girls are having babies,

Doing whatever they have to do to get their Baby Phat, Nike, or Adidas.

You see, where I'm from, you have to have that look that says, "You don't want to mess with me".

See, that's the only way you can survive where I'm from.

I am from watching women getting slapped up by their husbands or boyfriends.

It doesn't only happen to blacks.

I am from never knowing when will be my last breath.

Where I'm from, people tell young girls things they should never have to hear.

But not me.

I am from Christmas and birthdays being just another day.

Where I'm from music is the way to get away from all the stress.

Do you have to ask where I am from?

Journal 23

I am from a nice house, clean clothes, and family support.

I'm from one parent in my house, my mom.

I grew up to Run D.M.C., Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, eating spaghetti, pizza,

fried chicken and mashed potatoes.

I come from guys wearing baggy jeans and girls wearing bikini tops.

Where the street are home to many

Where bullets fly like balloons

Where people get judged for their skin color or the color they are wearing

I come from men treating women like a piece of paper

When done using it, they throw it away.
Women use men for other reasons.
I come from people getting hurt for chilling on the block,
Where boys wearing Adidas slippers and white socks.
This is where I'm from.

Journal 24

I am from a loving family that is not always understanding.

I am from soul food.
I am from violence.
I am from reality.
I am from turning on the news just to see another person down in the streets.
A place where I know and love every day.
I am from a place where people do more wrong than right.
A place where kids care more about looks and less about education.
I am from a place where you can see kids outside all time of the night.
I am from a place where if someone talks about you, that's a fight.
A place where nobody acts their age.
I am from place where bad things are so common that you would think they sold them at your local store.
I am from happiness.
I am from goodness.
I am from the world around you.
I am from life.

Journal 25

I am from a loving family that is always there.

They make sure I'm safe and secure and keep me in their cave.
I am from two parents with only one child, me.
It makes me spoiled rotten, as rotten as can be.
I am from a city that's full of trouble and hate.
I read and watch the news, praying God will keep me safe.

I am from Christianity.
I love to give God his praise, showing Christian love and peace to everyone I meet.
I am from being a music diva.
I am from singing and dancing.
From Donnie McClurkin to Bow Wow.
With them I party and jam.
I am a future star myself, seeking fortune and fame.
An actress, singer, dancer, or musician,
I am from always doing my thing.
I am of myself.
Sophia is my name.
And I'm planning my life, my future,
Hope it goes with my game.

Journal 26

I am from a family of hate, but from a mother of love.

I am from a church of gossip that praises God above.
I am from a life of music, full of rhythm and violence.
I am from a flock that will never be silenced.
I am from jumping people for claiming, "I have a Tommy."
Hilfiger what I'm talking about.
I am from a kitchen of soul where everyone throws down.
I am from the playgrounds of Smith where those shootings go down.
I am from 18th all the way down to 23rd,
where people battle over land not theirs, only to be found by the curb.
I am from white tees and blue jeans, and Nike's on our feet.
You can't step anyone's feet, because they might strapp'd with the heat.
I am from a place where outsiders don't normally come around.
I am from South Philly.
Come take a walk through my town.

Teen Challenges

Now that you have read through and tried your own “I Am From . . .” it is time to move forward to a more personal and sensitive topic—the challenges you face as a teenager. This will give you, the emerging writer, an opportunity to listen closely to your inner voice, those thoughts that occupy your mind a lot of the time. Here is a way for those thoughts to be articulated, to come out in the open. Writing down these thoughts, sharing them with friends and classmates, and then hearing others’ reactions can be an eye-opening experience for you. With so many challenges facing a teenager, coming up with a topic should not be a problem. To help jump-start your thinking and writing, we’ll give you a few ideas.

You might be asking yourself some questions about this kind of writing. Why would I want to write about the challenges of being a teenager? Who really cares about my challenges? What good will come out of this? You’d be surprised. Your teacher is interested in you, of course, but so are many of your peers. Most importantly, you are interested, and what could be more important than that?

To begin, consider a few basic ideas about writing on the subject of being a teenager. Using your voice through writing can be a powerful way for you to say what is on your mind. Your writing can be a private exercise, or, if you choose, it can become more public. You can write at your own level and in your own style. When you write about what matters to you, your motivation to write descriptively and clearly increases more than you might imagine.

Reading your work to others will help you hear what you write and help you to make revisions. Your peers will make comments that will give you suggestions that could improve your writing. As you learn to write better, you are developing one of the most important skills of communicating. You’ll really need to write well for high school and college. Writing can be like learning to ride a bike. There may be some wobbles and falls early, but once you learn, you have the skill for life.

Writing is a process that will become second nature for you. The process looks something like this:

- Choose or create an idea.
- Brainstorm your ideas. Maybe your favorite way is listing, outlining, webbing, clustering, or using a graphic organizer. You can use any of those ways or any other way you have to get some starting ideas out of your head and onto paper.
- Play back your ideas in your mind and edit your ideas. Now figure out how you may want to put your material in order.
- Write the first draft. Don’t spend time perfecting the spelling and punctuation. At this stage, it’s all about getting your ideas onto paper. The editing comes later, after you are satisfied that you put in all the ideas you wanted to explore in this draft.

- Share with others. Read it aloud in a small group you feel comfortable with or to the whole class. Have your audience write down questions that occur to them as they listen to you.
- Consider what your listeners asked you. Do the comments make sense? Would the details they are asking for help? If so, revise and edit your piece.
- Now it is time to publish your work, just like the students who wrote journals used in this book.

Okay, let's get back to examples of teen challenges. Remember, you're not the only teenager going through crazy times, even though it may feel as though you are all alone. Feeling that others are normal and only you are a little weird is typical for your age. What's normal anyway? There are so many challenges that come your way each day that it can seem overwhelming. The trick is learning how to handle these challenges and taking control. That's right. Take control. You need to feel more comfortable with who you are becoming, recognize your strengths, and learn to overcome your weaknesses. Since you cannot control the behavior of others, you need to control yourself. One way to do that is by writing and writing some more.

Here is an example from a student about your age who learned to write about the feelings she had about her looks.

Did anyone ever criticize the way you look? Sometimes kids make fun of other people because of their appearance. Why can't they quit making fun of people? Do they think that we really care about what they say? They should look at themselves before they judge people. I always hear people complaining about how ugly they look and how they want to change. We have too much to do in life to be worried about haters.

When someone starts in with all of this crap, everyone else starts laughing and pointing at whoever's being made fun of. People who think teasing and mocking is amusing have some real issues they need to deal with. They might say, "Oh crap! You're anorexic. You look like a stick." This sucks so when you're being teased and you have low self-esteem like me. Did it ever occur to them that sometimes a girl can't control how much weight she carries, whether it is "too much" or "too little"?

Sometimes I would like to talk back to them or scream at them, but I know it's inappropriate, and there's no point in doing it. I'm curious about how they view everyone else around them. Do they label them in their minds? Perhaps they take one quick glance and suddenly, WHAM! They've come up with a name or insult for someone. I don't mind if it's a light joke or if they apologize, but if they go overboard I go insane.

It would make me feel a whole lot better if everyone who had ever made me look like an idiot or teased me had to experience how hurt I have been. It's been a while since anyone insulted me. For now that feeling of being self-conscious and not looking good for others is off my list of worries. I have too much to accomplish to get hung up on what others say about me.

Now that you have seen an example, you might want to talk in pairs or small groups about the ideas this writer is exploring. How is she feeling? What does she need? What would you say to her if you had the opportunity? Do you think that writing this journal entry will help her deal with this situation? How will it help her gain control?

As you continue this chapter, you will have the opportunity to read many teen challenges written by students similar to you. Maybe they live in a different city and neighborhood or have different family structures. But you can be certain they have their own personal challenges as teenagers. Reading other students' work can inspire you. The students explored and wrote about some of these subjects:

- Not feeling like you belong
- Friends and expectations
- Pain in your life
- Never being heard
- Does anyone really know or understand you?
- Not feeling wanted
- Having secrets
- Being judged by others
- Not being respected
- Snapping at someone
- Getting adults to listen to you

It is very important to keep using the writing process discussed in the previous chapter. As you begin to write, remember what you know about good writing:

- Choose or create an idea.
- Brainstorm your ideas using webbing, clustering, or another method you prefer.
- Play back your ideas in your mind and edit what you have.
- Write the first draft. Get your ideas onto paper.
- Share with others. Read it aloud to them and ask for comments and questions.
- Listen carefully and use other people's ideas to revise and edit.
- Publish your work.

It is now your turn to read the next set of journal entries called **Teen Challenges**. You might decide to read them in groups or individually, silently or out loud, taking notes or not. Whatever you and your classmates decide, enjoy.

Journal 27

As a child I've always had a feeling of not belonging, as if I was an outsider. You might look at me and think I'm happy, but inside I'm not. The worst of all is school. At school I feel like the biggest outsider. I don't have as many friends as most people think. I don't think the friends I have really understand me. I don't have a social life inside of or outside of school. I never go to any kind of parties or even meet up with friends.

I grew up around people who lowered my self-esteem every chance they got. I was always upset 24/7. Mostly I tried to ignore it, but it didn't really work because they'll keep going and going. My family isn't much help, especially my sister. When I come home I have to hear her mouth complaining about everything, never thinking that I might have some problems, too. Then she takes everything out on me. Then she'll start in with, "I wish I was an only child." Those words really hurt and make me feel like I don't really belong in my family.

Some times I wonder why God put me on this earth. I don't feel as if I have a purpose. I have so little self-confidence. That is why I keep to myself when something is going wrong. I hold it all in, afraid to open up to someone. It's hard, and as much as I try to get through it, I can't.

Thinking about it...

Have you ever had these kinds of feelings?

What do you do to get through it?

Journal 28

It went from our struggle to my struggle.
Take a walk through my life; let me tell you about my hustle.
I went from a momma's boy to walking in daddy's foot steps,
Of eight years in school trying to do my best.
In my house, I think everyone hates me.
Even my mother degrades me,
not physically but emotionally and mentally.
Was me being born meant to be?
I started with a toy phone and I ended up with "I hope you die."
All I can say about my actions is why?

See all that is me,
Arguing with my mom,
What am I doing?
Then I went from “Whatever” to me getting punched and bleeding from the lip.
I can’t put up with this ish.
I don’t know how my mom could hate me.
In school, all I get is A’s and B’s.
Yet again, I’m still going to end up in the streets.
That’s what my mom tells me.
Can someone please tell me what my life is meant to be?
It went from me getting accepted to only two high schools to it being about my attitude.
When will my family show me some gratitude?
What is this fourteen year-old young man supposed to do?
I have a couple of real good friends,
Something I didn’t have back then.
Can my brain cells talk to me and tell me what happened?
The lord is the driver and I am the captain.
When I need to cool off, this journal is my Mac-o.
I’m in the passenger’s seat with no belt and the car is close to crashing.

Thinking about it...

How can your friends help you in a situation like this one?

How does the last statement, “I’m the passenger,” provide some signs of hope?

Journal 29

Pain in My Life

My heart and my life are all a mess. All these people don’t see the real me. They only see the outside layer, the part of me that shows happy feelings. No one knows that I cry. My mom and dad won’t stop arguing over my dumb father, that guy who is in jail in North Carolina. Maybe if I were never born life for everyone would be better. My mom wouldn’t have to worry about me. If I was never born my step-dad would not fight with my mom. No one even knows.

No one knows that my sister almost drown. I love her more than almost anything. I jumped in the pool to save her, but I can't swim. I risked my life, the life I don't care about, to save my sister. I have no love for myself. I know my family says that they love me, but I can't believe them. I don't believe my father loves me. If he did, he would be with me, and not in jail every year. Every time I need him, he's not there.

The pain in my life is not being loved, not believing love. My pain is depression. Ever since my uncle Dennis died, I began to feel this way. He was my life, my world. He was the closest person I had to a real father. He was very sick in the hospital. That's where he left me. I wonder if he fought for his life. Did he know that when he left, my whole world came crashing down?

People think I have a good and nice life, even my mom, but really they don't know me. No one knows me, not even my best friends. No one knows the pain I hide, and this is only the top layer of the pain. I can't tell anyone what hurts me the most. I fear if everyone knew, I would be lost.

Thinking about it...

What is the writer's internal conflict?

Have you ever felt this way?

Journal 30

Do you know me?

Do you really know me,

The life I live, the goals I wish to accomplish, or the things I go through?

Do you really know me,

From the inside out to my entire whereabouts?

Do you really know me,

From the looks or the clothes I wear?

Do you really know me,

From crying almost every night, wishing for God to give me one more sight?

Do you really know me,

From a girl that's had a rough childhood already?

Do you really know me,

From a girl that loves R & B and hip hop?

Do you really know me,

From a girl that's been struggling to get through and just fit in?
Do you really know me,
From waking up every morning and wishing I won't be the next victim?
Do you really know me,
From a girl that's thankful to have a voice, for people to hear me.
Do you really know me,
From not knowing why my father left me?
Do you really know me,
From a girl who used to lie to boys about her age?
Do you really know me,
From a girl who didn't know right from wrong?
Do you really know me,
From the type of choices I make?
Do you really know me,
From the ups and downs?
Do you really know me,
From more people dying in the streets?
Do you really know me,
From cops picking up my family just because they are doing what they do best?
Do you really know me,
From girls my age who get pregnant or have H.I.V.?
Do you really know me,
From doing well and trying to get straight A's?
Do you really know me,
From my family trying to make it out of our neighborhood?
You say you know me, but do you really KNOW?

Thinking about it...

Does the story feel familiar to you? How?

How do people really get to know you?

Journal 31

Every time I like someone, it's always one sided. I know it's not the other person's fault they don't like me, but I don't think anyone would ever like me in this lifetime. Sometimes I dislike myself because I don't look like everyone else. I would like to change my image so that people would like me in a romantic way. Then my mind tells me they should like me for who I am and not for who I am not. I understand all this, but there's always room for change.

There is guy, let's call him Bob, that I have liked for several months now. He always says, "You're my best buddy." Every time he says something like that my mood goes from bored and unhappy to happy and joyful. There are times when he talks to me about the girls he likes and how cool they are. Suddenly my mood grows dark and cold. I can't respond to him much when he starts talking about that. So he asks me what's wrong with me or if I'm feeling okay. He is always considerate, but never realizes he's the one inflicting the pain on me.

A few months ago my friend Annie helped me tell Bob that I liked him because I'm such a wimp. Then I asked her what did Bob said? She copied and pasted the conversation and sent it me. It said, "I never would have thought she would like me. I mean, she's my buddy." Then it hit me. Of course, I'm just your buddy, nothing more.

A bit later Bob and I were talking. He said, "Let's lie on our beds and blast our music, clear our minds." I said, "Uh, yeah, it's been a long day." It was getting extremely awkward, so we changed the subject.

I don't want to like him, but I can't seem to let go of Bob. His looks are one thing, but his friendliness and being caring make it a whole lot harder to forget.

There's one more thing that makes me liking him a big problem. My friend, we'll call her Ann, likes him too. Sucks for me doesn't it? The entire posse of my friends are always saying, "Aw, look at Ann and Bob. Aren't they so cute together?" My mood changes quickly when I hear their names paired, but afterwards I join in with a "Yeah" or "You two should go out." I shut out my feelings and try to hate him, so the pain would go away. Will it ever lead me through the wanting to laugh, talk, or play with him? Will it possibly go away? My friends take pictures of them side by side, and I'd stare at them with anger and hurt. Then I have to change to happiness and congrats to them both.

Yesterday Bob asked me, “Why do you think I like Ann?” I explained to him how he likes touching her and flirting with her, but he denies ever doing so. Then he said, “I don’t like her at all. I like someone else, a sophomore in my school.” My world was soon falling apart, and I couldn’t control it. I noticed I was interrogating him and had to stop it. He didn’t mind. I assume that he forgot that I like him, so why do I still bother? It’s maddening but not surprising. I just endure the hurt and pain, good times and bad every day.

Thinking about it...

What advice could you offer her?

Journal 32

Locking Away the Pain

I think this journal entry was especially hard for me. Ever since the beginning of this writing project I have been avoiding really expressing my true feelings. It’s not like I have had the perfect time to express what has been troubling me for all my life. I’m writing about hiding the fear, anger, and pain.

It all started when I lived in South Philly on a little street called Emily Street. It was nice and quiet with a lot of kids. My mom, sister and I lived there together most of the time. My sister was in and out living with my cousin. It was just my mom and me after she left. I missed having my big sister around because I loved her and she kept me company when my mom was gone.

Other than going to work, my mom occasionally went out. I thought that was cool, because adults need to have fun. But a lot of times I didn’t like it. I was by myself. When my mom went out she would tell me she was going to the store. I’d tell her I was hungry, and she would tell me she was going to get food, but wouldn’t come back for an hour or two. If I asked where the food was when she got back, she would say the store didn’t have whatever I asked for. I tried not to care. I mean she wasn’t gone really long, at least not until later.

She would leave and not come back for hours. I was little, and a lot of times I let my imagination scare me. I would turn on all the lights or watch TV until I went to sleep. One time I cried myself to sleep because I wanted her home. The next morning when she came in I locked the pain away like always. She would always lie and say she would be back in two minutes but stayed out way longer. You may wonder what the big deal was. Being lied to all the time, wondering where your mom was, really got to me.

I used to ask God to bring my mom home or to make her stay at home, but that never seemed to work. By this time she was going out constantly and stayed out days and days at a time. As I got older, I prayed more and more for her to come home at that moment, but she never did. I tried to watch the news to make sure she wasn't on there, robbed or murdered.

I never used to tell her how I felt. If I asked where she went, she would tell me to know a child's place and not speak, or to mind my business? For a while I stopped asking. I pretended like I didn't care. But who in his right mind wouldn't care about his mom leaving when you never know when she's coming back.

Through the years I stopped asking God for help. I stopped asking where she was going. I tried to stop caring, but I couldn't. In the mean time we were moving place-to-place, staying with this cousin and that cousin and that aunt. Everyone we lived with had something bad to say about my mom, everyone. People who I thought were really my family talked bad about her right in front of me. To listen people insult the one you love most makes you angry, upset, and it hurts. It hurts to think no one likes your mom and you really didn't know why. I was mad at her, but why was everyone else?

I put my feelings aside like always. I locked the pain deep down inside and swore not to tell anyone but my dad. The only reason he knew is because when my mom went out, most of the time she didn't make sure I had something to eat. Sometimes she did but most of the time she didn't. So I called my dad to ask him to bring me something. That changed everything. I have been living with him for years now, and things are so much better than before. But I still have to remember all the time I spent wondering and worrying about my mother.

Thinking about it...

How has this writer helped himself?

Journal 33

I don't understand

I don't understand why my life is the way it is.

Why I have the opinions I have?

Why I know what I know?

Why I act the way I act?

Why is it so hard for me to do me?

Why people are so stupid and pig-headed about things they think they know about?
Are they really too dense to grasp the actual meaning?
If you dress a certain way or act a certain way
People think you're crazy or you worship the devil?
They make all kinds of crazy assumptions?
Today my friends were talking about stuff they don't know about.
I felt I didn't belong.
I knew it would happen sooner than later, but I wasn't expecting it to be so soon.
I always end up an outsider because of what's in my head?
I hate talking to people.
No one gets me, absolutely no one.
I know that for a fact.
Why I'm so different?
I want to be normal and sane.
It seems like I never have a quiet moment.
I'm always thinking about stuff.
People think I'm just saying that, but I do.
Caring about things a teen shouldn't have to care about.
Some days I wonder,
Did my mom care that she left me behind in this hellhole of a life?
Does my dad care that he has kids?
I'm not doing so well right now because I'm confused.
I don't know where to go or what to do with myself.
I have all this knowledge but I don't know what to do with it or how to put it to good use.
I just haven't figured anything out yet.
I don't know now.
It's not like anyone is going to come up to me and say,
"Do you need help getting through life?"
There's no one around like that.

Thinking about it...

What do you think the writer is asking?

If the writer were to add three more lines to the story, what do you think would be added?

Journal 34

Having a Secret

Having a secret can be hard and rough. I have a secret that's very disturbing to me. Every time I think about it or do, it hurts me. I ask why I do this. How can I prevent this? Lord, help me! I feel as if I'm being used by the Devil. I want to stop. I feel like I'm going away from God when I do it. I ask for forgiveness, but it doesn't seem to work. The Bible says that he who asks for forgiveness of his sins would be forgiven.

I still feel guilty for what I do, but that's the Devil's fault. I am not like that. The real me is hiding deep inside, and I'm afraid or too shy to show it. I would do anything to stop. Sometimes I hope that life would be better. I'm so messed up inside.

I want to fall and cry, but I can't. I want to ask and tell people about my secret, but I can't. I want to know more about right and wrong, but I can't. I have so many hidden secrets that are way too personal. I just can't deal with it. I ask the Lord to help me because I am not right. I'm wrong, please help me. It seems like he ignores me. I feel so ashamed. I want to stop. Please, Lord, help me, help me, and help me! Lord, just help me stop. Hidden secrets are no joke. Deal with it before it deals with you.

Thinking about it...

Is there a secret that you have that needs to get out?

Journal 35

There are so many reasons why people commit suicide. The simplest reason is probably that life is just too hard for some. I know that every person, no matter how happy or optimistic, has thought of killing himself or herself, even if for just a split second. Believe it or not, almost all problems in one's life can be solved through courtesy, perseverance, self-control and having an indomitable spirit. These tenets of life are also the tenets of tae-kwon do.

You see, dying is easy, but staying alive can be extremely difficult. Life is like a chess game. In life, you sometimes have to make sacrifices for the greater good. In chess you may have to let the pawn be taken so that you can capture your opponent's queen. The game may become hard,

and at times you may feel like quitting, but you have to stick it out. Maybe you live in extreme poverty and must stop eating for a couple of days a month so that your children will be able to have some food.

It seems that many people kill themselves because they think they have a horrible life. Well, if they step back and take notice of past and current events, they would realize that things could be much worse. Do you have an idiot for a president? At least you don't live in a third world country living under a dictator. Is your mother a problem? At least she isn't completely neglecting or abusing you. The bottom line is that things could always be worse. If by some incredibly slim chance your life is the worst, the absolute, utter worst, you have to know that things can't get any worse, in which case, things can only get better.

Like I mentioned earlier, dying is easy and living is very, very difficult. Life is like a game. No matter how hard the game gets, you can't just quit. You have to endure, no matter what. Quitting is not a choice. There are no easy ways out of the game.

Thinking about it...

Why do you think life provides so many challenges especially at such a young age?

What are your challenges?

Journal 36

Going to the Wrong Place

There are many youths out there in the wrong place. Some are going in the right direction, but a whole lot have vanished, not having made the important decision to change. I was on the wrong path at one time. While I didn't smoke, drink, kill or hang with gangs, I was almost booked after forgetting the real way. The right path is the Lord's path. I was wrong in his eyes.

I was also wrong in my parents' eyes. I disrespected them most of the time, getting into big arguments and not following their rules. Some days I wanted to die, thinking about suicide. How would it feel, when, where, how, but most importantly why? Thoughts of murder went through my mind every day for those who had ever done me wrong. Even though I wasn't in the thug life, I didn't have to act, talk or live by the thug rules to be in a life where it seems that you're paying a sentence in Hell.

I was a complete mess inside. I didn't trust anyone at all. One day, as always, I was in an argument with my mother. In the middle of the disagreement she said, "Boy, you hope to God that your kids don't come out like you, because everything is rewarded, but not every award is God's." I began to think about that. Because I had been disrespectful to my parents, maybe my children could be worse than me. I began to get scared, not because of what she had said, but because I realized how wrong I was.

A voice came to me to say, "My son, oh won't you come back to me. I have only been faithful to you, and I only want you at peace. You were always in my heart. Come, I await." I got more scared. I was alone. My mom and dad were not in the room, and they can't restore scars. I realized that it was my Lord talking to me. I came to understand that while I was good in Christ's eyes, I had peace, but when I forgot about him, I was in torment.

I did what I knew how to do best, lift up to the sky and let him take control of my life. I was dry, but he anointed me. I was lost, but he guided me. When I didn't know or love him, he knew and loved me first. I don't care about what people say about me following God. I just want them to know God is reality. He is not philosophy. How do I know this for a fact? When nobody helped or bothered to lend a hand, I heard about someone who would. I cried out to him, and within the matter of a month, I changed. I knew it was the Lord who did this because who else would or could? I know I couldn't even help myself. Like I said, God is a reality. He gave me a new life when he helped me to make a decision to change.

Thinking about it...

Why do you think you have a voice or a guide to help you through your journey?

What do you feel you need to change to make yourself a better person?

Journal 37

I have been judged by many over the years.

Ever since the third grade, I have been the outcast of the school.

People ridiculed me every day.

No matter how many times I told the teacher, how many times I ran away,

It always made matters worse.

Every year the same thing would happen.

First, everyone would accept me with open arms.
(Well not exactly, but they were nice to me a little bit.)
Next, they would start plotting on me.
Finally, after a couple of tests, people would say I'm "too smart"
They would start excluding me from group activities.

Then it happened.
I decided to stay away from people all together.
People didn't like me,
If I stayed away, my problems would go away.
Boy, was I wrong.
People thought I was crazy, some people thought it was a cry for attention.
I just wanted all the craziness to stop.
No more harassment, assault, being picked on, or being excluded . . .

For five years, I had to deal with this.
Over and over and over, my spirit has been destroyed by the ignorance.
The unknowable animosity built up inside them.
All I want to do is be their friend or stay out of the way.
I have one question: How many cheeks do I have to turn?

Thinking about it...

If this is not a story about you, you might be the other person the writer is describing. Have you behaved towards another person in this way? Did you think a person would actually feel this way?

Journal 38

It seems like the older I got the more the abuse intensified. My grandma made me feel as if I wasn't going to make it in life. Thoughts of suicide constantly crossed my mind. "You don't belong here, you don't deserve to live" that voice tells me. It still tells me.

It seems like no matter what I do it's not good enough for her. She keeps stuffing me with things I did one, two, or even five years ago! Feeding me like a fat kid who loves cake. Yesterday I couldn't take it anymore. I cried. My eyes were red lava.

What set me off was when she said, “Even your seven year-old cousin is better than you in school.” I lost my mind, but held it in. About ten minutes later my mom came upstairs. She told me “Don’t let your grandma get to you.” That’s when I broke down. My brain shut off, my heart erupted. Everything I held in at that moment exploded. My body felt like it was on fire and my eyes wouldn’t stop leaking.

All my rage came out. My other side reared his ugly face. As I walked down the steps behind my mom to confront my grandma, the steps seemed to ignite in a great inferno. My mom approached the situation carefully. My grandma responded “I wouldn’t have to complain if he did things right the first time.” I could write the neatest paper, but she would make me write it over. The one line she often said that I used to believe is “I’m not trying to fuss at you.”

I’ll never believe it again. I wish she would just respect me. I have to deal with this nonsense sixteen hours a day. I can’t wait until I’m old enough to move out on my own. I won’t have to deal with this anymore.

Thinking about it...

How should this writer deal with his grandma?

Journal 39

Let me start out by saying that I have a bad temper. When things don’t go my way, there’s usually hell to pay. I’m used to getting my way all the time. When I’m having a bad day, it seems that is when everyone and everything bothers me even more. I start to snap at everyone who gets in my way or crosses me. All near me will get my attitude. Sometimes people say I’m mean but that’s not at all the case.

I also hold a grudge. If you said something or did something that I didn’t like, you’re at the top of my list. I will be mad at you for days. I remember when my older sister and I got into an argument. Even though we shared a room, I didn’t speak to her for a month. If you make me really mad, I’ll talk to you, but deep inside I’m still upset. I’m planning to get you back. I never forget anything.

Sometimes at home, I have temper tantrums. I just start screaming at everyone. My sister gets it the worst and I always take it out on her. Most of the time that I am angry is because of my sister. I know I am wrong. I also know that I need help.

The problem is I have way too much on my plate. My parents expect too much from me. I get loads of weekly homework. I get home and I have to clean after a long eight-hour day of school. I have to have time for my friends. It feels like I'm being drained by everyone. My life is so complicated. I rarely get a break. I'm only fourteen and I feel like I need a vacation.

Thinking about it...

How often do you feel like this?

Does your brother or sister make you feel this way as well? Why?

Journal 40

Not so lucky

I don't think I'm lucky. I don't think I'm different. I'm just like everyone else, but some of my friends assume that I am lucky. They assume that I am happy and nothing goes wrong with me. That's because I always laugh and smile. I am always loud and hyper. What my friends assume is wrong. I'm just like every teenager. I am sad, down, and hurt.

A lot of drama goes on at home, and it's specifically with my parents. My parents don't listen to me as well as they listen to my brothers. My parents seem to act like I'm not their daughter. I want to be loved and cared for. I want my parents to listen to what I need and the things I say. I want the same attention as my brothers. It's not fair. We are a family, and I am their one and only daughter. Why don't they listen?

I guess my parents are just over protective since I'm a girl. They probably don't want me to end up like my cousin, dropping out or anything. I just want them to listen to me, hear what I have to say. My parents need to listen to me when I'm explaining something or trying to tell them something about my problems or my good news.

At home I don't like to be who I am at school. That's because when I walk out of the house, I'm a whole new person. I'm still me, but I have a whole new personality. I change and become happy. I don't want to come to school all sad in front of my friends. So I change. I would be happy all the time if my parents listened to what I had to say. Please listen to me and you will know the truth. You won't have to yell at me about anything any more.

Thinking about it...

What are your responsibilities if you want to be "listened to" by others, especially your parents?

Journal 41

The girl in *The Freedom Writers Diary* seemed determined to prove people wrong about her. She said that in everybody else's eyes she was going to be a druggie or get pregnant before she turned 14, and to drop out of school. Her father never ever cared anything about her.

It kind of makes me feel bad, but maybe that's not even the word for it. It really makes me feel horrible inside. It makes me feel like I'm never going to be wanted for the right reasons. I have had this feeling since the sixth grade. Almost two years ago somebody started a rumor that really affected me. It got me, the name nobody wants to be called: Slut or Ho.

I don't know how that rumor was started, but even till this day I want to know who said it first. Who the hell would say something like, "Oh you know that girl in room 210, she . . ." It was that and a bunch of other filthy stuff. Till this day it hurts me inside that somebody would start a rumor like that. It tears me up inside. It feels like somebody burned and stabbed me so many times that I could no longer breathe or feel alive.

When I first came to this school in the 5th grade everybody knew me to be a sweetheart. Some people knew the rumor was untrue, that I wouldn't do anything like that. Those people are what you called friends. There were also people who thought it was true. The "of course she did it" people aren't my friends.

I will tell everybody that I am one of the sweetest, kindest people you will ever meet. I like to have fun and everything that goes with that. You can be around me a little while and can tell I like to laugh and have fun. A little birdie told me, "People will only respect you if you respect your self." That is how I have been proving people wrong about me for a long time. Maybe it works. I haven't been hearing any rumors lately.

Thinking about it...

What is the lesson to be learned from this writer?

Journal 42

Have you ever witnessed the mean streets of Philly?
We have and we do each and every day of our lives witness the mean streets.
There's a lot about Philly that you probably don't know about.
Living in the city of what they called Brotherly Love, we see the total opposite.
For instance you may see brotherly love but we see hatred between brothers,
Where one minute their cool and the next minute their arguing over corners.
Crooked cops controlling the blocks,
Taking your rocks, taking you spots,
Supposed to confiscate your drugs but they reheat the rocks.
They're supposed to prevent and solve crimes but they never come on time.
Instead they make us wait in lines.
That's enough about the cops.
We know they don't get respect.
On the other hand drug dealers are the ones getting the most.
They can take over a whole neighborhood in less than a month,
and still have time to chill, kick back, and roll up a blunt.
Then you got crack heads with no beds,
Willing to give up their own leg,
To search in a dumpster for at least a half of loaf of bread.
Scrappers picking up cans make money off the aluminum.
They get money now that they don't know what to do with themselves.
Now their living in hell
Locks on the corners all seeing themselves.
Body traces with unknown faces,
And these are Philadelphia disgraces.
Babies making babies, like really, what's the basis?
Everybody knows that only Jesus can save us.
We try brightening up and going to church to pray but the kids don't listen.
They just think about playing.
Okay you got a little sample of the reality of Philly.
We do have joyful times.
We do have fun and act silly,
Because that's really,

The key of surviving when you live like us.
You have to keep on striving because people are out here dying.
Alright, the stuff about the guns and violence is starting to get old.
It's time to wake up.
Recognize,
Get some goals.

Thinking about it...

What is the writer's attitude about living in Philly?

What does the writer suggest?

Journal 43

We are all different people with different life styles, but we do have similarities. We are all teenagers growing up in America. Some of us have deceased family members while others have family members that are locked up. We all have seen memorials of other families' loved ones. Around here there are a lot of crimes that pass our way. If our city were an actual animal, it would be classified as an endangered species. Every step or breath we take could be ours or someone else's last.

This was supposed to be the "City of Brotherly Love." Now it's a city of lost love and split blood. In the past, the sky of Philly was filled with the scent of fruit, fresh water, and flowers. Now it has been infected with the foul smell of smoke, lead, blood, and bodies. In the past you could find women working in jobs strengthening themselves with respect. Now too many are weakened by using drugs and degrading themselves in other ways.

It is a war zone out here and everyone is fighting, every man for himself. In the old days growing up in our city was like playing football with no defenders at all. It was safe and easy. Now it has become extremely hard. Defenders are stopping you on every down and once it is the fourth down you have no choice. You can either kneel or you can run for it. This world seems too filled with drama. We don't understand why but growing up in this world has to be dangerous. Are abusers and losers everywhere?

We all choose to live life and play the game. Some of us just don't play hard enough. The ones who lose because of their weaknesses are just forgotten about. They are lost in the game. The ones that make it go on to bigger and better things. While we are here, we just add up on our points

to cash out for material things. Some of us play hard and make it. Some of us just don't play hard enough. The only thing about life, unlike a game, is that you can't put life on pause or press the easy button. When you're gone you can't press restart. It's game over! We live but die in the end.

Thinking about it...

What's the writer's message?

What is the game? Are we all playing the same game?

Journal 44

Man Enough

I hate it.

I hate it all, not having the courage to stand up for myself.

I hate that I have low self-esteem.

I hate to lie.

I hate it all.

Yet, you don't care about mom or me.

You say you're a man.

Yeah.

You're man enough to leave, man enough to never write back or talk to me.

You don't even know my voice.

If I could see you, I'd like to tell you how much of a man you are.

That will never happen.

You have a family.

I'm man enough not to embarrass you in front of your family.

When I become famous and have my own family,

Don't you ever come and say you're a father.

You don't deserve to be called human.

Yet, I will forgive you because I am

MAN ENOUGH!

Thinking about it...

How has this writer taken charge of how he thinks about his father?

Is this something you would like to tell this writer?

Journal 45

My parents are very overprotective. Not so much my mom, but my father. It's not that he doesn't trust me, but I think he worries too much. He wants to know everything: where I'm going, who I'll be with, and all that. That's fine. I expect any parent to do that. I understand his concern, but on several occasions he has gone to the extreme. Sometimes he'll listen in on my phone calls or he'll even go as far as snooping through my room. That makes me really angry. He tells me I have his trust, but if I did, I don't think he would need to go through my stuff. I have absolutely no privacy.

My mother, on the other hand, does not agree with him. She thinks what he's doing to me is wrong. Then my mom gets upset and they argue. The arguments get really bad every once in a while, nothing physical, but they argue. Then they give each other the silent treatment. This makes me feel bad. It makes me feel as if I'm the cause of the argument. If you ask me, I think parents should trust their children until they prove you otherwise. When your children think you don't trust them they act up to get your attention.

Sometimes I can't wait to move out or go to college. Yet, I know that when I do I'll miss them. My parents are the best parents I could have asked for. I mean, they spoil me half to death. I've never wanted for anything. I know they love me, and I understand that everyone isn't perfect.

Thinking about it...

Write your own "Thinking about it" questions and talk them through with your friends.

Family Matters

You just finished exploring other students' challenges as well as your own. It can be sad to read stories of students your own age who were struggling with such tough issues. Some of the stories might have startled you a little, and some may have sounded familiar to you—maybe too close to home. Either way, by experiencing these real-life stories, you had a chance to see that you are not alone during this time of changes in your life. You may have found some comfort in knowing that your challenges are not so different from others. Maybe you were able to find a new way of looking at something in your life that has been bothering you. You are now going to move forward to a topic that is important to everyone: family. This chapter is called “Family Matters” because family does matter to you—**it just does.**

Let's get one thing straight and out in the open before we begin. No matter what you may say, we all need family. We all have a strong need to belong to a group that never goes away. We want to be loved by our parents, brothers and sisters, grandparents, and other family members as well. It is important. **It just is.** As we look around us everywhere, we realize families look different. That's because they are.

The traditional two-parent family living together under the same roof is not that usual or normal anymore. We see many different kinds of families every day. Children like you are living with a single parent, no parent, with a grandmother or grandfather, or one parent who has brought home a new friend. Your family might have experienced a divorce, the death of a parent, a parent who just left home one day, abuse, or possibly a parent in prison. These situations hurt. Young people are supposed to have parents around to help them deal with the many problems associated with growing up. Parents should provide good role models as they raise their children. They need to grow together to solve the many issues and problems that challenge everyday life. Even though you might find yourself arguing with your parents and claiming they do not understand who you are, you still want and need them in your life.

Although many family challenges are real and never seem to end, you still will need to deal with them. So, again, you will be asked to listen closely to your inner voice that speaks to you about family matters. By closely paying attention to this voice, continue to write down your thoughts and feelings. Revise and share them with friends and classmates.

As you did with the last section on teen challenges, you'll want to dig deeper now and explore those family matters that really matter to you. Think of this as a time and place to get rid of some of those feelings that agitate you. Maybe you have been keeping some things inside, but it's possible to get some of them out. You can also write about the positive things you have experienced with your family. Those are important as well. This section will give you another opportunity to find classmates who share parallel situations and are thinking similar things.

It's time to take some more risks and let out your voice and thoughts. That is what being an emerging teenager is all about, taking risks and learning more about yourself. Your family is important to you, and you want to understand its challenges. It is just too important not to. **It just is.**

As you begin to write, remember what you know about the writing process.

- Choose or create an idea.
- Brainstorm your ideas using webbing, clustering, or another method you prefer.
- Play back your ideas in your mind and edit what you have.
- Write the first draft. Get your ideas on paper.
- Share with others. Read your draft aloud and ask for comments and questions.
- Listen carefully and use other people's ideas to revise and edit.
- Publish your work.

If you are thinking about what is meant by "Family Matters," it might be living without a father, missing your mom or dad, problems or relationships with brothers and sisters, parents who are there for you, parents who drink or cause physical or emotional abuse. There are so many different topics and issues to write about. Here is an example from a student who is about your age who writes about growing up without a father.

Journal 46

Growing up without a father is hard. You're constantly wondering why he's not there or coming around to see you. You grow up wondering who he is. Some kids even think it is their own fault that their father is not around. They have nobody to call a Dad or protect them at hard times.

I have gone through all of that. Every time I think of my father, I think of a coward. I call him a coward because he has never been responsible enough to take care of his children. He had been in and out of jail so much that he has missed very important parts of my life. When I was nine, I was graduating from elementary school. I was so happy that day and I really, really, really wanted him to be there. Even though I knew he wasn't there, I still looked for him, just in case. That is when I started to hate him. After that I knew I could not count on him and tried to not care if he was in my life or not.

Even though I don't want him in my life, some times I wonder what my life would be like if he were there for me. I would probably have more happy memories. But I still and always will be mad at the fact that he left my mom to take care of two children all by herself. My sister doesn't even accept him as a father or anything other than a sperm donor. Some times I miss my father, but then I think of all the things he put my mother, my sister and me through. Then the missing him goes away.

After reading this example of an important family matter, you might want to think about some of the questions below.

- What is this writer trying to communicate?
- How is she or he feeling about the importance of family?
- What would you say to this teenager if you could?
- Do you know another student who has had a similar experience?
- Do you think writing about this subject helped the student? How?
- Why do you think fathers leave their children?

You are now ready to begin reading. You or your friends will likely experience many of the same situations written about in this chapter. Read through them and respond to the “Thinking about it” questions. After that, you can write about your own concerns as you continue your personal journey. Remember, it’s up to you to tell the story of your life.

Journal 47

Having to Live Without Your Parents

I have a sad story about my family. My parents came to the United States for a dream. They wanted us to have a better life. My aunt and uncle took care of my sister, brother and me in Mexico when my parents left us to go to America. Sometimes I felt so sad because they didn’t give us what we needed.

My aunt and uncle became rich in our town with my parents’ money. Instead of spending the money my parents sent for us on us, they spent it on themselves. Some times I felt dumb, because there was nothing I could do about it. I couldn’t tell my parents about what was happening. I was too scared. Sometimes I thought that they would not believe me, so I never talked. I remember those moments when I was crying because they would not give us love, education, and beautiful things.

I remember the time my brother finally told my parents. My aunt was so angry after my brother told them the whole situation. My brother only wanted the money to buy some candy, but my aunt insisted that we had to spend it on clothes. So, that is what we did. We had to buy the clothes that she picked for us, not the ones we wanted. This sort of thing made me want to run away.

Later my mother came back to Mexico and we were able to go home again. Now these memories still come into my mind. It was a horrible time, and I still cry about it. Some times I try to forget

the bad memories, knowing it may affect my life if I can't let it go. I would like justice, because they still have money from my family. However, I know that God is for justice. Still, it is terrible to have to live without parents, unable to trust those who are supposed to be caring for you.

Now we are happy and together again. We will go back to Mexico when I graduate from eighth grade. I just want to be with my family forever and make a new life.

Thinking about it...

Why is this situation so unfair?

Do you think there might be another side to the story?

Journal 48

Parents

Parents, Parents, Parents

Why are they so controlling towards us?

They want to us be responsible, but they only let us stay out until a certain time.

We are not kids anymore.

We need space and freedom.

We need to breath and explore the exciting world.

Why do parents get mad at us when we don't do something their way?

We try our best at everything, but they are so picky if we are doing the work?

Why worry how we do it?

They get so emotional about us not talking to them about everything.

Do they expect us to do everything the way they want?

My mom gets mad at the smallest things, like if I forget to do something.

Can you believe if I don't say, "Good night" to her she would get mad at me?

What is the whole point of that?

I know that there are a lot of concerns and problems.

Don't worry. I will answer all your questions.

You make our curfew early so you won't have to worry about us.

As we get older we need to explore and see the world so we won't feel insecure.

We understand that if we don't do something right, you have to correct us.

You can't always yell at us.

How can we learn by you yelling all the time?

We are teenagers.

We can't keep running to you for everything that happens.

Thinking about it...

Why do mothers act this way toward their children?

Journal 49

Growing up without a father

I would say I grew up without a father and I would say I wish he was dead. When I was born he was there, but after a while he just left. He would come in and out of my childhood; he never called or came around. My seventh birthday, he was *supposed* to come. He had promised me weeks before. I was surprised and hurt at the same time. As I got older I learned that it would be better if he wasn't around.

At times I wish that he was a better person. Why would he not want to take care of a cute baby and child? Why leave a powerful, beautiful, and independent woman who does a very good job of caring for my older sister and me? I have grown up into a smart, handsome, and good person without my father. When I become successful and famous, I will not thank him. He knows he wasn't there for me.

One time when I was seven, he came uninvited to see me. I was so happy he was there, but couldn't really see him as my dad. I think he is like a dead beat who is foolish and scared to take care of his kids. He said he would come again, but I just knew he wouldn't. I thought for a while he was a good man, but I was wrong.

At the age of eight, my mom got engaged to a man. I was so surprised because she dated a lot of men and never had gotten engaged. His name is James and he is a nice guy. As the years went on he was disciplining me like he was my father. It seemed my mom just appointed him my father. He was still okay towards me, but as I got older, resentment built up. He acted as he was my dad, but I didn't ask him to be. My mom would always say, "He is the only one that cares about me". I know that, but I don't want him to be my dad. At one point I was opening up to him, but then he brought his kids around. That's when everything changed. I said, "Forget it." I stayed to myself and barely talked to anyone. The only one I can talk to is my older sister, but

so often she is doing her own thing. I didn't care about anything. I did my own thing. My mom of course was worried about me. This is my life without my father, but thanks to my mom and sister I have hope.

Thinking about it...

Let's say this student wrote this journal and gave it to you to read. How would you respond? What would you say?

Journal 50

In the *Freedom Writers Diary*, entry # 22 talks about someone who was living her life without her father. It also mentioned how special they felt when John gave her seven minutes of his attention. This made her feel like she was in a Cinderella story. She went on to talk about the feelings that she wasn't worthy to talk to him. Since her father left it made her feel shunned and she never had anything important to say.

Some of her feelings I could relate to like when she felt she could never say anything meaningful. I felt like I didn't fit in well since my dad was taken away from me on October 21st. Those and many other feelings have gone through me.

When I found out he got locked up, I was heart broken. When I found out he had a son by another lady I felt mad, happy, betrayed, and that I wouldn't be my dad's favorite anymore. Until this baby, I was the only child. I know when this baby came, his whole entire opinion towards me changed. I expect he will spend more time with him because they will be able to relate more. If his new son is smarter than me, I will constantly be compared to him.

I know him getting locked up wasn't really his fault. He was just trying to get his papers so he could be a citizen. The guy he thought was trying to help him tried to con him. My dad refused to pay some new outrageous fee, so this guy called immigration.

He was locked up. I went to see him every two weeks to do or say something to cheer him up. The first time I did nothing but cry. On January 23rd, my dad was sent back to Jamaica. He had nothing but the clothes he had on when they arrested him. The baby is supposed to be born sometime in April. What will he do without his father? What will I do? The only feeling I have now is anger.

Thinking about it...

How can anger help you through the healing process?

Journal 51

Freedom Writers Diary # 34 talked about a person who was a closet drinker. The writer would come to school drunk, and no one would be able to tell if he were drunk or not. I can relate to dealing with a drunken person.

My step dad is never around. He is always out drinking and doing whatever. He leaves for days on end and sometimes calls just so he and my mom can argue. He doesn't have a job and gets checks once a month. He has three daughters. They are seven, ten, and fourteen years old. He has been leaving so often he doesn't even realize he is being a bad role model for his daughter and my brother. One time he came in so drunk he almost fell down the stairs. After he gets sober he lays around the house for a few days. Then he starts cleaning up and acting like a father. He goes to church and reads his Bible, but this will last for about three months. Then he's back to his old ways.

Many times he and my dad get into arguments about me. One time my dad heard me calling my step dad "Pops." This started them arguing. Another time my dad came to the house and stormed in. My step-dad was yelling then they went outside and started fighting. All I could do was cry. Someone called the police, and the next thing I knew there was a crowd around the house. At that point I wanted to jump out my window and end my life.

After everything calmed down, I took a walk so I could relax, but it didn't work. My mom called me back to the house and she tried to talk to me, but I wasn't listening. All I could do was replay what had happened over and over in my mind. When I called step-mom, she was hysterical wondering if everyone was alright.

I was a mess for days. At school I stopped paying attention in classes or I started fights. After school I would come home and just go straight upstairs to my room. After those days I still did not talk to my step-dad or real dad because I felt they were trying to ruin my life.

Thinking about it...

What makes having a real dad and stepdad at the same time so challenging?

Journal 52

Here is a poem I wrote about my dad. I wish I could have something good to say about my dad, but I don't. It's too bad.

Forgiving My Dad

I forgive you dad for not being there for me when I really need you the most.

For not loving me like you should have.

I forgive you.

I forgive you, dad, for the days you were not there
and the nights I spent crying because of your absence.

I also forgive you for all the hopes and dreams I gave up.

I felt as though I couldn't do it without your support.

I feel that I shouldn't forgive you for that, but I will.

I forgive you for letting me, but more importantly, my little brother down.

I will forgive you, but I don't know if he will.

I forgive you, dad, for breaking my heart.

When I was so young you walked out on me . . .no, walked out on us.

I forgive you, dad, for all the birthdays and Christmases you missed because you were with your other family.

That's right. I know about your other family.

I am no longer under your spell.

I once told myself I would never be able to forgive you for all you put me through and all the bad things you did to me. I am forgiving you now because I know you can't help the fact that you are a liar and a let-down. I know that your father treated you badly. Mom once told me that you said you would never treat us how he treated you. That's BULL!! You treated me like I did something to you. All I did was try to love you and be loved by you. But that's okay. I will never drop another tear for you until the day you die. I do still love you, but I just can't cry for you any more.

Thinking about it...

How has this person handled her situation?

How would you describe the writer's personality? Give a few examples.

Journal 53

Growing up without a father is not an easy task for children or for their mothers. It is very emotional because you feel as if you did something to drive him away. Most of the time, though, it's because they're scared or live their lives carelessly. As a child you need both of your parents to feel whole, and when one is missing, you feel as if half of you is missing. I understand that some times a child might feel down because the parent/guardian puts him or her down saying, "It's your fault he left. If I didn't have you, he and I would still be together." I don't believe that nonsense. You two were probably on the way to braking up before the child came into the picture, and it's not okay to put the child in the middle of your problems.

Sometimes all a child needs to hear is that it was his fault and he starts to feel guilty. He thinks that it's his fault when his father's not there, and everyone knows that dad's not coming back. Of course, not all mothers are that way. Some mothers, most mothers, try and move on with their lives and find a father figure for their child. Most of the time it works. The family becomes a whole, and they have a happy life with each other. When children get older, they have a way of always asking where their father is, and the mothers have to answer their questions whether she wants to or not. Mothers often have to tell their children that their father has his own family. This obviously makes the children feel a certain way. They are left knowing that their father left them and their mother to take care of another family.

I used to feel that way. You feel as if he doesn't care about you or your mother. It hurts to see how he went and started another family instead of staying with his first family. How does someone just go and do that? But, children who have to go through this need to remember something: This is his loss and someone else's gain, because your family gets to see you grow up and succeed in life. You also have to remember that you have other family who loves you.

Thinking about it...

What has the writer done to take charge of his life?

Journal 54

I never really thought about how I grew up without a father. No one really talks to me about it. For the people that tried, they never really succeed. I never really saw my dad when I was young to know anything about him. Sure I knew his face, and where he lives, but nothing personal, like why he never came to see me.

My father was always my soft subject. I think that's because everything I heard about him was bad. I don't look at my father as a bad parent, more like a person that makes bad choices that affect me. When I talk about him at home they say, "Why do you worry about him? He doesn't come see you. He doesn't call." My sister always told me she was my dad. Not literally or anything, but it was true. To think about it, she was my mom and my dad. My mother was a single parent of four kids, and she worked long hours. My dad left when I was about two, and my sister usually took care of me. She would watch me during the week while my mom worked. She would cook and keep me out of trouble. She did everything parents would do.

From what I hear, my dad worked but still never had any money. He was a drunk. He cheated on my mom and hit her. Everyone said they had a terrible relationship. I never heard if my mother did anything to contribute to his bad actions, but I knew she worked to support me. As long as she was there in my life, I never really cared about her part in why they split up.

I have few childhood memories with my dad. I truthfully only remember two. One was when I went to an amusement park with him. I only remember that because he made me get on a roller coaster with him, and I cried. I was young, and his girlfriend had let me put all this makeup on. When I was wiping my tears, I was smearing the makeup all over my face. That made my face break out. My mom had a fit. She was screaming at my dad and everything.

It never really felt like my mom wanted me to have a relationship with my father. Sure, she said I could, but I never felt she meant it. Maybe it was because she did everything for us and he did nothing. I also felt that my father was a soft spot for my mother, too. Maybe she still had feelings for him and her way of covering them up was throwing all her hate toward him.

I think that my relationship with father has a negative impact on my life. For example, I think it affects my relationships with others. I tend not to trust people as well as I could. I also fear that one day I will experience going through the same things he and my mother did. Don't get me wrong. I still feel that my relationship with him has a positive impact on life. All I have to do is look at him and see everything I don't want to be -- broke, abusive, and a drunk. He's part of the reason I strive for more.

Thinking about it...

How has the writer taken a positive approach to his situation?

Journal 55

I feel alone all the time. I have plenty of friends and family, but feeling the way I feel is beyond that. When you're alone you have nobody to talk to, relate to, have fun with, or even just understand you. I want to write about being alone. How does it feel? When did I start feeling that way. What made me feel that way?

Feeling alone started back about a year ago. That was when my mom started working at a new job at a jewelry store. She works from 9am to 8pm. That is a lot of hours without my mom. My mom works so much, that when she goes out after work she stays out late. That worries me because I'm scared for her and what will happen while I'm alone at home. When I was little I used to cry constantly because I was so scared to lose my mom. Over the years I got used to it, but sometimes I'm so worried. When I come home from school I have nobody saying, "How was school?" or "Did you do well on that test?" When my mom is off from work she does say that type of stuff. That's not very often, though.

So when I do come home, I call my mom and tell her I'm home. She likes me to get to our house right on time. I cook and clean when I get home. I have nobody to help me. I have a lot of responsibility, but I'm glad I know how to be independent. I still feel very sad every day about being lonely. I feel scared too. I feel scared about someone robbing my house or some killer coming into my house. I just don't like feeling alone. I guess I just have to live with all of my problems.

Thinking about it...

Is there a difference between being alone and feeling lonely?

Journal 56

Growing up without a father is hard, but growing up with a father that hates you is worse. I grew up with a father, but that didn't really matter. He hated me and didn't do anything for me. I'll be straight with you. My father was the worst father you could ever have. He was a bad husband too. My father was never faithful to any of the women he was with. He cheated on my mom lots of times, but I think she got caught up in love with him. That's probably why I always think love is for suckers.

The only thing I can recall my father giving me is five dollars I found in his pocket and tons of beatings. I think my father really didn't care about any of his children from my mother. My father

has eleven kids, and only three are from my mom. I shouldn't call him dad or a father. He made me, but never did anything else.

Well forget about that and back to me. When my dad left, I really didn't care about how it would affect me. I was more worried about the struggle my mom would have to go through. I would make it without him, but my mom couldn't. That's why my mom had to sell our house on Fairhill Street. As you should know, houses don't always sell easily. I don't remember how long it was until we moved from the house. My mom had to struggle to pay the mortgage and the cell phone bills. My dad had cut the house phone because it was in his name. The water and the electric were cut too.

To see my mom struggle and not being able to do anything about it made me turn into a beast. I disrespected every man I crossed. My mom is not struggling as much anymore. She's trying to get her money right, and my two sisters are helping her. I wish I was old enough to do my part. I thank my father for doing what he did when he left us, because in the long run he made me a better person.

Thinking about it...

Are there points in our lives when hard times make us stronger?

Journal 57

Do you have a really old family member like a grandma or grandpa? Did they get so old or sick that they need help doing certain things?

I have a great grandma who is 100 years old. She is in very good health and is very smart. The only thing wrong is that she can't walk and doesn't remember a lot of things. My great grandma lives in Puerto Rico. That's where she was born and raised. She does not like Philadelphia. Now that she's, old she says that Philly will kill her if she were to move here. I think that she just says that because she has Alzheimer's Disease. That is when you can't remember certain things and you say things that aren't necessarily true.

At the age of 100, my great grandma needs help from someone. She has five children, and out of all of them, only my grandma goes to take care of her. None of my aunts or uncles want to help her, but they would be quick to ask her for money. My aunts all complain about something so that they won't have to go take care of her. That is just wrong. That's their mom, and she took

care of them. So why can't they do the same for her? My great grandma is like a baby again. She can't walk or talk.

She needs help, and it's like nobody cares except for my grandma. My grandma always gets stuck with my great grandma. In 2006 my grandma traveled to Puerto Rico four times. She was over there for two months each time she went. My grandma is happily married to my grandpa, and it's a shame because she leaves him to go over there.

Two of my aunts are not married, have no kids, no boyfriends, and always complain about how they are too busy to take care of their own mom. Just last month, my aunt was taking care of my great grandma and she said that she had had enough and wanted to come home. She said she was going to bring her to Philly and leave her on my grandma's porch. Why would you say that about your own mother? She brought you into this world and did everything for you. Never in my life would I betray my mother. It makes me mad just thinking about it. My mom fed me, gave birth to me, sheltered me, and so much more. I would love for my children to do for me as I did for them. When my grandma leaves for Puerto Rico my grandpa cries. I never see him cry other than when she leaves. He tells me that he is lonely. He's old too and needs his wife with him. Every weekend I try to do my part to help. I go over and help him clean, cook, and anything else he needs to get done. My mom takes him out to get some air, but we know he misses my grandma. We all miss her.

Thinking about it...

What is our responsibility for our parents and grandparents?

Journal 58

My mom coming home with a lot of stress on her chest,
My pops working hard to give our family the very best
My brother, my sister and I going to school, trying to get our education
I mostly waste time, now I'm in here hesitating
Sometimes I wonder why my mom is in pain.
She's diabetic and I'm doing my best to make her happy,
So she won't stress and suffer
My dad is different because he doesn't have enough strength,

Getting pain in his legs is hard for us to watch.
I pray to the Lord to help my family in every way.
My parents are unemployed now and getting money is difficult.
My parents' health problems take a toll every single day.
We have to take care of them and make them happy so they won't feel this way.
The pain inside of me, tears in my eyes,
I hide the stress every day so people won't realize.
If I can, I'll do my very best to make their problems and sickness go away.
She could be dying. It's already starting to go very slowly
People telling you to make your mom happy because she is sick
Now that you understand my pain is really sad,
Even more when people talk about my mom and dad
Now I hope for the very best,
That people could realize the stress in each other's chest
I keep my head up since this world is playing tricks
I pray to god to guide me through this pain
I pray.

Thinking about it...

How do you think it would feel having a sick parent?

Journal 59

Mom,

I miss you.
The day of your funeral I should have kissed you.
I couldn't.
I couldn't even bring myself to touch you, the way you lay there all still and cold.
All I saw was a lost soul.
If only someone would have told me I would be there that day,
And seen you that way.
I would have said, "No way, no, my mom she's a strong women,
Nothing can do her any harm."
Way too strong.
Maybe that made me cry the most,

seeing her down and with no more hope.
At first I thought it was a joke,
No way in hell this could be happening.
I thought just maybe you were trying to teach us a lesson.
Trying to make us appreciate everything you did.
If I could do anything to bring you back, I would.
If only I could.
Now I realize I could never bring you back and it is what it is.
All I can do is better myself and use what you taught me.
I never want to disappoint you, even though I already did.
I miss you so much.
I feel all alone even though I have dad.
But for you, mom, I will try to listen to all he has to say.

Love,
Me

Thinking about it...

Can you think of three words that best describe your feelings about this story?

Journal 60

What it is all about

I just found out it was about more than me.
I just found out that it was more than what goes on in my life.
It was about that little boy who was forced to be a man because of his father,
Who wouldn't be there to provide for his family and teach him what manhood really is.
It was more than that little boy.
It was that little girl who's innocent.
Taken away at such a young age because he thought it was okay.
No one ever told her that it was rape.
It was more than that little boy or that little girl.
It was about my cousins who think someone could have saved her.
It's too late because her mind is filled with so much rage,
So much anger, and so much hate.

Her father wasn't there and her mother ran away.
There was no one there to give her that love she so desperately wanted.
She had to do other things to get their attention,
To let them know that she was still there and to let them know that she still needed them.
It's now too late.
If they would have stayed, if they had tried, she would have graduated from high school.
She could have gone to college and studied to be a doctor.
She could have made something of herself.
Sometimes some things just don't go as planned.
It was more than that little boy and that little girl or my cousin.
It's about those kids in Africa who are starving for no reason.
When there are singers, rappers, and actors buying islands.
Instead, take that money and use it to buy those kids some food,
And buy those people the things they need to build new schools.
Buy those kids the clothes they need to go to school,
and get the education they need.
It was more than that little boy, that little girl, my cousin, or those kids in Africa.
I just found out it was about more than me.

Thinking about it...

Do you feel the same way about this story as the writer?

Journal 61

Locking away the pain is hard. I lost my mother when I was two. I never got to say, "I love you", or "Mom, I'm home from school" to her. I wish she were here. I wish she were here to hold me and never let go. I wish I could see the anger in her eyes when she is mad at me. I wish I knew her as a person. I wish I got to share my birthday cake with her or got a card from her. The most pain I feel is on Christmas. When I go downstairs I don't get a gift from my mother. I try to hold the pain in, but sometimes it's hard. I wish I could have taken care of her, but I was too young. Sometimes when I wake up, I look into the sky and I can see her face. Sometimes I dream about it. When I dream I wake up and cry about it. I feel that I could make her happy, but I'm not doing a lot to make that happen. I just hope that she is still up there to support me all the way. Keep your mother happy, because once she is gone, you can't have her back. She is the best person to have.

The Reveal

A few years ago my birth father called my house and told me he had to talk to me about something. He told me that what he had to tell me would have to be over breakfast. I agreed to it, and we met up at a McDonald's near his house. At the breakfast he told me that he had gotten a phone call. What shocked me was that the phone call was from Brittany. I asked him "Who is Brittany?"

He began to tell me how he had an affair with another woman before meeting my mom back in the 90's. After he and this other woman broke up, she told him that she was pregnant. Now mind you, all this happened just one year before I was born. He took responsibility for the baby, but what made it easier is that they were never married. He revealed to me that my mom knew about this because he had told her a couple of years after having me. After my mom and dad got married, they agreed not to tell me until I was old enough to understand. I began to sulk. I asked him why he couldn't tell me before. He told me that I was too young, and I wouldn't have understood what that meant. I said, "So you mean to tell me that all this time I had an older sister named Brittany that I never knew about?"

I could feel anger and resentment building inside me. I always had this feeling that something was missing. I also used to pray for an older sister. I asked him, "What made her call you?" "How did she get your number?" He said for years she always wondered who her father was. Her mom got tired of her complaining so she had to give her his number.

I began to ask my dad questions about her. How old is she? She is twelve. I then asked him if I will ever be able to see her. He said I could, but he has to call her mom to make sure that would be okay. He started to explain to me that she's half white. Her mom is white, so she is mixed. I thought that was cool and awesome.

He apologized for not telling me sooner, but he didn't know how I would handle it. That afternoon I told my mom that he told me. She said she had been waiting for the day. It seemed to take forever. That's how I found out that I have a sister named Brittany that I never knew.

Thinking about it...

Did this father do the right thing by telling his daughter?

How did you like the writer's response? Would you have felt the same way?

Journal 62

Dad,

Are you happy that you hurt a child, a child that had to walk with pain and a hole in her heart? You called yourself a man, but I call you a fool, a fool who doesn't know how to do his job. You are just a pathetic man who bounced from woman to woman. How can I call you Daddy if this is what you fill my heart with? It's full of hatred, full of dislike. All you can do is complain about paying child support.

You said it was Mom's fault. Do you ever stop to think that it was yours? You have chosen your own path, not me, not Mom. It was all you. When it doesn't work out as you planned, you take all of your guilt and anger and blame it on Mom. Dad, you took the first step, and it's your fault that you're left paying the damn child support. Daddy, I really do love you, but you don't know how much pain you have caused me.

You don't know how it feels to not have a father to grow with by your side. Dad, how would you feel if you were in my position? How would you feel if Granddad were to leave you when you loved him so much? It wouldn't feel good, right? How can I stand strong without you? How can I go on without you? Do you know how hard it is to let you go? Dad if you hear this, I hope you understand what I'm saying.

Thinking about it...

Why do you think the writer wrote this letter to her dad?

Journal 63

I am fourteen years old, but I know I have already lived the worst day of my life. The reason that this day was the worst day of my life is because it changed me forever. Now how can I say this? One morning my two sisters, my grand mom and I were making something to eat. We were waiting for my dad to come home. When he got there, I wished he never came through the door.

When he got there, I did not want to hear what he had to say and could not believe it. The way he looked at me said it all. All I could think was, "I know he is about to say what I think he is going to say." As soon as I thought it, he said it. He told me that my mom was dead. Immediately my body stopped moving and my mind stopped thinking. Everything just stopped. After that, all I remember saying was, "No she did not die. It's not true. It's not true. I knew from that day forward

my life would not be the same. She was gone and there was nothing I or anyone else could do to bring her back.

I felt terrible for my dad. He had to call the family and friends that day to tell them the news. As the day went on, family and friends that could, came down to the house to try to comfort us and show their support. I really could not pay anyone any attention. I couldn't even try. I was in my own world.

All I know is everything happens for a reason. I don't know the reason why my mom had to die but there must be one. Like I said everything, happens for a reason. Some days I feel as though she really isn't gone. She's just somewhere else and will be back. Life goes on. Even though her life is over, that doesn't mean mine is. I am still here, so I must live my life. I must live life even though it is hard at times. She died on November 6, 2004, but yet it still feels like yesterday.

Thinking about it...

Has this ever happened to you or someone you know? What did it feel like?

How would you help a friend who lost a parent?

Journal 64

Something I read in *The Freedom Writers Diary* brought back some memories from my childhood. I remember almost every day I used to go over to my grandmother's house when my mom and dad had to go to work. My grandmother used to make soup Caribbean style that you've never tasted before. Some of my favorites were red pea soup, dumpling soup, and pea soup. Those were some of the most mouth-watering soups that I've ever tasted. My grandmother used to like carrying her own groceries up the hill, even if she was out of breath. That's one thing I liked; she never gave up. She pushed and pushed herself. Another thing I will never forget is the way she called my name. My grandmother said, "Come darling and eat ya soup." The way she said it is stuck in my heart.

I remember when she used to tell her old folk stories. They were so interesting. For some reason, I just liked hearing them over and over. I always seemed to have fun with her, but one thing she told me over and over was, "You will always be my smart and talented little grandchild." I will never forget that. I never told anyone about it before now. I was so attached to my grandmother. I loved her and adored everything she did.

All of this came to an end. One day we were home and we got a call. We rushed to the hospital and my grandmother was all wrapped up in cords and tubes. I couldn't go in to see her. I was told I was too small. My mom told me how she was doing. The doctors diagnosed her with cancer. She was okay for a couple of days, but after that she slid down. It wasn't too long after that we heard the words that she had passed away.

It was devastating. I understood everything that happened. I tried to be tough about it. I had some little tears here and there, but nothing noticeable. I didn't want them to see me cry because I didn't want to make them start. At the viewing everyone was crying. I don't remember if my parents were crying, but my cousins and aunts were. It was very sad, especially for my dad. When it was time for the funeral, the church was packed. Before people came up to talk, we got to see her one last time. When I saw her, she looked a little lighter and pale. It didn't look like the real grandma I used to know. She looked stiff and cold. My mom had tears running down her face, and I smiled and wiped them away. I will never forget that moment.

My grandmother was an old, kind-hearted and giving lady that was full of wonder and the good old days. One thing I am really glad about is God let her live a little while longer just for me to experience her and how wonderful she was. I thank Him for that. She had such an impact on my life. I just wish she were here to experience our lives now that we have moved to America. I miss her.

Thinking about it...

What gift did the grandmother give to the writer? Explain.

Journal 65

I have a dream... a dream that my father will be there for me. I have a dream to have my father by my side. All I want is for him to see me walk across the stage to see me smile, laugh, and giggle with a graduation certificate. I wanted to prove to him that I'll finish middle school, but he seems to have bailed on me. Sometimes I wonder if he loved me at all. Does he love his new wife more than his flesh and blood?

One thing that's strange to me is that my father always seems to avoid me. He has disappointed me a lot, but I don't say anything. Why? Why don't I say anything? I suppose it is because I have had enough of his action and his words. He said he promised he'll come, but he lied. He lied like a dog, and that is what he is, a dog! A fool! I can't believe he's my father, but it seems that there's nothing more I can do.

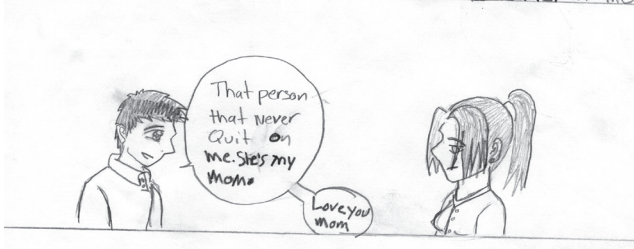
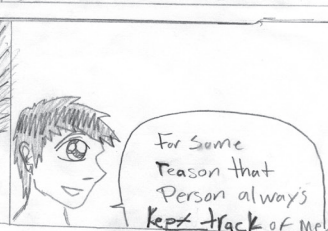
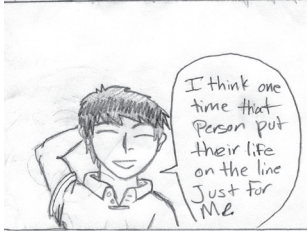
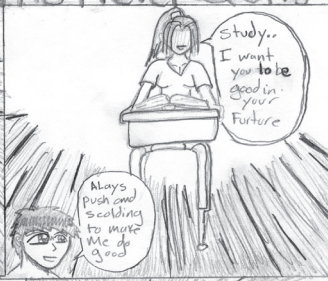
So, I have a dream that one day my father will come and save this little girl's broken heart. I doubt it! Yes, I know this graduation isn't nearly as important as high school and college, but it does matter. Doesn't he see the need to celebrate the accomplishments of my life? Doesn't he see he's tearing my heart into pieces? Doesn't he know that the more he disappoints me, the deeper and wider the hurt in my heart gets? I have a dream that my father will love and cherish me once more. I wonder if it happens? We'll just have to wait and see.

Thinking about it...

Draw a picture, write a poem or a story, or create a song of how this story makes you feel.

When it comes to the family, everything matters. **It just does.** The following cartoon was done by a student about his mom. Maybe this will inspire you to draw images of the words you are thinking.

A Person Who Never Quits



Living Life

It is now time to move to a new and different type of student writing called “Living Life.” This section will help capture a variety of examples that reflect the life you lead. It’s not an easy time of your life as you begin to form a new sense of who you are and develop a new self-image. You are growing up quickly and acceptance by your peers is very important to you. You really want to belong to a group, especially the right group. Not being a child anymore comes with many challenges—**it just does.**

Living life—what can that possibly mean to you? Well, it is exactly what it says. How do you live life, and how do you face up to its many challenges? You have adults—parents, coaches, or teachers—who expect much from you. Whether you admit it or not, deep down inside you want their approval. You also have unbelievable peer pressure from your friends and others who are part of your world. And what about all those relentless responsibilities that seem to have just appeared, like homework, standardized tests, after-school activities, and jobs?

Now, as if this is not enough, you are being bombarded with television and Internet commercials, music that sends conflicting messages, and countless situations that challenge your sense of right and wrong. Let’s not forget the pressures of eating healthy food, exercising, and the need to dress cool. There are also constant messages of drug and alcohol abuse, health problems, and probably the most challenging, personal and sexual relationships. These issues that never used to affect you are now part of your everyday existence—**they just are.**

This next section has a variety of examples of teenagers who took the time to think and write about living life. Below are some of the topics the students wrote about.

- When love doesn’t work.
- Crushes.
- How have I changed?
- What happened to our nation?
- How people get caught up in love.
- How my life changed in a matter of seconds.
- Struggles—what they mean to my life.
- She’s gone now.
- Some say girls fall in love with what they hear and boys fall in love with what they see.
- Never giving up.

When you are ready to begin writing again, remember what you already know about the steps in good writing:

- Choose or create an idea.
- Brainstorm your ideas using webbing, clustering, or another method you prefer.
- Play back your ideas in your mind and edit what you have.
- Write the first draft. Get your ideas on paper.
- Share with others. Read it aloud to them and ask for comments and questions.
- Listen carefully and use other people's ideas to revise and edit.
- Publish your work.

Below, you will find an example from a student your age who writes about living life.

Journal 66

When you love someone

When you love someone so deep inside, it seems like it's so easy to hide.

I loved her for so very long, I thought she would do no wrong.

Every day I would hope and pray that she would always stay that way.

I treated her the way she should be treated.

I thought that our life would be completed.

She thought our love was growing true,

But then one day it was all so shady.

She started putting me down, and it hurt.

She thought all I was to her was dirt.

She started ignoring me, and I wondered why.

All I wanted to do was just die.

I thought our relationship would never end,

But that was all fake and pretend.

One night she was so nice to me,

But then again, I thought it was all untrue.

Two days later she was back the same,

Then I thought I was to blame.

She thought the relationship was getting to serious.

Maybe I became a little too curious.

By this time I thought it wouldn't last.

All the nice things she said were in the past.
I thought that I would marry her someday,
But this time God wanted to get her away.
I wanted things back how they were before.
I knew this couldn't happen anymore.

Now that you have read an example about an issue many teenagers face, you might want to use the “thinking about it” questions that follow. Perhaps begin to answer them in small groups with your classmates or even friends outside of school.

1. What is the writer trying to communicate?
2. Have you ever felt this way? How did you deal with it?
3. How is this person feeling about this relationship?
4. What would you say to this writer?
5. Do you know other people who have had a similar experience?
6. Do you think writing about this relationship helped the student? How?

You are now ready to begin reading. As before, you may be experiencing many of the situations other students wrote about. As you read or listen to the entries, think about the questions that go with them. When you are ready, write your own entry as you continue exploring your personal journey, what Mos Def called “the beautiful struggle.”

Journal 67

Stupid Love

I love you and you loved me.
That's what you said.
I can't stop thinking about the first time we met.
We shared special moments that I could never forget.
I still remember how you're hand felt nice and warm.
I felt like we were alone.
But then you dropped a bomb on me.
And it was over.
I loved your smile, your style.
I kept wondering what I did wrong.
I hate you now,
And will never talk to you again.

You made me open up my heart to you.
I didn't explain to you why it was over.
I really don't want to get rid of the feelings and moments we had.
You broke my heart like others did to me.
Now my heart is almost dead like you are to me!

Thinking about it...

What do we learn about ourselves when relationships end?

Journal 68

As a child growing up in Philly, it was difficult for me to live. It was hard for me going out there on my own. I'm an eighth grader and I'm a writer, kind of like the Freedom Writers. Right here, right now, my class and I are here to meet two of the Freedom Writers and their teacher, Erin Gruwell. Sitting here listening to Maria's and Sue Ellen's stories got me remembering my childhood. I think back to how my uncles kept getting locked up, and how my family never believed in me.

I live in a family that smokes and drinks. Not all of them, but they do put pressure on me. That causes me to stress. Two days ago I had a phone call from my cousin. She had told me her brother got sent to boot camp. She said that he was being a follower, drinking, smoking, and joining a gang. I fear for his life because I know what position he's in right now. I have lived with those fears all my life. I know that I am a follower as well. When I was a little girl I would always get into fights in the street with strangers just to protect myself. My uncles and cousins are a part of a gang. They would always tell me to never give up. They insisted that I stand strong, get right back up on your feet, and show no weakness. I would always think, "I guess this is how life works." As I grew up I was wrong to be a follower. I was wrong to try to be something I really wasn't.

As I'm sitting here right now looking at Maria as she speaks, I now realize that we all only have one life and one dream to fulfill. Maria, Sue Ellen, and Ms. Gruwell are here to change the lives of the students. They are encouraging students to write their lives and to put down their feelings on paper. As I sit here listening, maybe I can be a leader and help those who are in the position I am in. Maybe I can change the way they live their lives.

Thinking about it...

How are role models important to you?

Do they encourage you to think differently? How?

Journal 69

Access Pass

All access pass, this is your history class.

I speak the truth like Sunday mass.

R.I.P, to all my brothas in the grass and all my brothas in the pen.

Don't you remember back then when you were home?

You acted like you were my dad, and I was your kid.

Never knew being angry is a sin.

I feel like my story's coming towards its fin, but I'm only fourteen years old.

It's supposed to be just getting told,

I'm getting the bronze.

No where near getting the gold.

I try so hard to be a nice kid but my life is filled with surprise.

When I go to sleep I sleep with a knife, FLICK!

My heart is beating harder than an 808 on the drum kit.

I'm a dog in the pound, like a cocker spaniel.

My mind is locked up, like my cousin Daniel.

My brain is dead, sitting on the mantle.

I am light years ahead of you and that's what they say.

My words'll have you lying in your deathbed.

You're a bum, still rocking dumb kids.

I'm so fly, can call me a plane.

My thoughts moving so fast.

My mind travels to Africa, Asia, U.S., all the way back to Spain.

I'm going to blow up real big, get the girls and fame.

B.E.A.S.T, remember my name.

Thinking about it...

Do you share some of his feeling? Which ones?

Journal 70

To: My Crush

The first time I saw you, I thought I was going to faint. You were sitting in my teacher's chair after lunch. I was hoping you were a new student in the class. Sadly, you were just visiting. At that same time you visited my heart, and you haven't left yet. You don't know who I am, and I don't know that much about you. I do know one thing, I've never cared for some boy like I care about you. When I saw you sitting there, my heart couldn't stop beating and pounding. It felt like I was in a race, a race to win your heart.

Each day I look into your eyes. Each time your near I feel on top of the world. You are my hope and dream. Even though you're not mine, even though I can't hold you, I look forward to each day at 11:45 when we go down to lunch. I become happy as can be. When I see you or think about you with another love, another girl, someone that's not me, I feel like crying. What is wrong with me? Why don't you love me?

To make myself feel better, I tell myself that one day you're going to see that I am the right person for you, and that you need me in your life. One day you and I will be living the dream I have for us. You and I are truly going to be in love. One day, one day. No matter what people say about you, I will always love you. I think I would die for you. People talk a lot of trash about you, but my love for you goes past that. Sadly I can never tell you I love you because I won't risk you breaking my heart. I guess our love will never be but in my heart. You will be my crush always.

Thinking about it...

Would you do the same thing?

Journal 71

To: My Crush

See I knew you would break my heart. How you ask? You said that he was cute. You, the boy that I love, called a boy cute. You do the math. I was in love with you, but now you also love what I love. You love boys. Why? I don't know and I no longer care. Loving you is way too much to handle. Now each time I am near you, my heart jumps. But then I remember that you and I can never be. Why? You will never love me. You can't love me, even if I love you with my whole heart. Baby, sad to say you and I can only be friends. Even if I want more from you, I know

now that it's all dreams and fairy tales. All that trash they were saying about you was true. All I wanted was our love to be real. Somehow slowly I am learning that true love is not really true. I no longer believe in love, and it's your fault. You are supposed to be with me. You made my insides cry when I hear you. I could feel my heart crack and the tears of pain and anger. I should have known. So many people warned me. No, I was so blinded by love. Why? Why did I have to love you? Just why? Why did you have to break my heart? And you will never even know how badly you hurt me.

Thinking about it...

What would you say to the writer?

Journal 72

What happened?

What happened to our nation?

What happened to having a real occupation?

What happened to all of those people that fought so hard for us?

What happened to the people we trust?

What happened to Rosa Parks fighting for us?

Now all we want to do is sit in the back of the bus.

What happened to dying to go to school?

Now all we want to do is act a fool.

What happened to us moving on to bigger and better things?

Now all I see is the pain that we bring.

What happened to moms and dads raising their children?

Single moms living in broken down buildings just trying to make a way,

Seeing if they can feed their families for the day.

What happened?

Where did we go wrong?

Where can we start to fix the problem to what's going on?

Where are our solutions?

Are we even looking for one?

It all makes me so mad to see what we go through day in and day out.

Is this all that life is truly about?

What happened that we allow the killing of our own communities?

I never would have thought I would have seen the day we'd behave this way.
If that's all we want, we don't want much for our selves.
What happened to the people we used to show pride in?
What happened to fighting for what's right?
What happened to our standards?
What happens, happens, but it really shouldn't be this way.

Thinking about it...

Given the writer's view of the world, how would you continue the journal entry to make it more positive?

Journal 73

This year I have learned a lot. I learned about Hitler, the Holocaust, and about the people that struggled in Long Beach. Today I learned more. My class met Erin Gruwell and two of the Freedom Writers, Sue Ellen and Maria. I've read the book about them, but hearing them talk in person touched me even more. When I heard each of them tell their stories it made me appreciate life. It made me appreciate my friends and family that I have. I learned this year that you should never take life for granted. You should enjoy every moment of it because you'll never know what's going to happen. No one can tell the future.

Sue Ellen's story was about how her brother was very sick. She had nowhere to live after a while because her mom couldn't pay the rent. That made me look around and see all of the people that have name brand clothes and sneakers. They abuse things they have, but some people can't even afford to buy school supplies. Some people live on the street. Maria talked about how she watched her cousin get shot by the police. He didn't even do anything. He was mistaken for somebody else. The police never even came to her house to apologize. It makes me happy that I don't live in a really violent neighborhood. It's bad around here, but not terrible. It doesn't matter where you move, though. There is always going to be somebody who starts violence and ruins the neighborhood for everyone.

I have learned a lot this year and I hope all this violence stops. If the Freedom Writers can change, then I know it's possible. Everyone must contribute. For some reason some people think they have more power than others. Maybe that's why they try to take over or change something in the neighborhood. I think someone needs to talk to the Mayor and get all the bad people off the streets. This is what my eighth grade year made me think about.

Thinking about it...

What could you and your friends do to help stop violence where you live?

Journal 74

During the eighth grade I have changed. In the beginning of the year I was acting up, doing no work and running the halls. Then they transferred me to room 217 and I changed a little bit. In February I got transferred into room 220, and now I don't run the halls and I do all of my work. I was failing, but now I think I'm bringing my grades up. This year I used to follow my friends and do bad things in the streets. We used to fight, gamble, and stay out all night.

Mr. G took my class on a trip to Temple University Hospital. At Temple we learned about a 16 year-old boy named Lamont Adams. He was shot 24 times and killed. That changed me because Lamont was doing the same things I was doing. On the trip they asked me lie on the trauma table Lamont died on. It made me picture that I was on that bed with 24 bullet holes in me.

Those minutes made me change my life around and start doing positive things. Since the trip I am heading in the right direction. Now I think I'm doing better. I finished so many writing assignments that I qualified to go to the trip to Washington D.C. to visit the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. I was also accepted at a good high school. I changed a whole lot since then. I am trying to graduate, go on the class trip to New York, as well as the class dance. I'm happy I changed and I'm happy I have the teachers I have because they care about us and our futures.

Thinking about it...

If you met this writer, what would you want to ask him?

Journal 75

It was a windy November day when I woke up to go to school. There was so much going on in my mind. I had a test that day I had not studied for. I wanted to know why my mom was not picking up her phone, and why my aunt's car was outside my house, but she wasn't in the house. When I woke up I felt out of place, kind of like I was not supposed to be there. I felt like the morning was going in slow motion.

Ring, ring, ring is what I heard from the basement. I ran up the steps so wouldn't miss the call. I was thinking it was my friend Thomas who I go to school with. This day, for some reason, Thomas did not call me. The person on the line was my aunt. She called to see if my mom had come home from the hospital. I asked her why she would be at the hospital. When she did not tell me, she got quiet for a minute. I said, "Hello" and asked my aunt if there was anything wrong with Moski.

She said, "Sweetie, I don't think that it is my place to tell you that."

I looked at my alarm system. It said, "Front Door." I looked up to see my, aunt, and uncle coming through the door. When I saw my mom I hung up the phone. I was looking at her like she was crazy. She asked me what was wrong. After she told me about my grandmother, I felt like the world was going to end. I felt like my heart was split into two, like someone was sucking the life out of me. I ran back downstairs to my room to get away from all of this.

Stomp, stomp, stomp is what I heard and saw. My mom was coming down the stairs crying a river. She said, "Doo Doo, everything is going to be okay. She wanted to go home, to be with the Lord." My mom told me my grandmom said to her she wanted to go home and play outside. Her Father was telling her to come home." On November 13th, Mary E. Anderson died in the arms of her youngest daughter, my mother.

Thinking about it...

How did the writer build your interest in this story?

How did the writer make you feel?

Journal 76

Learning the Lesson

How do you learn to feel?

How can a person you love make you feel ill?

How could the love that brought such pleasure, bring such misery?

How could the person who promised me forever, leave me?

How can a person just tell you they don't love you anymore?

How can a person look at you and know you're sad and torn?

Do you think someone can tell me why, so I can understand?

Why does it seem men are always doing something wrong?

Why is it that women that don't deserve to get treated badly, hold on?
Do you think it's because she doesn't have the strength to leave?
She does it because one day she'll open her eyes and see.
She'll look in the mirror and say I love me.
She'll smile at herself.
He'll come back.
She knows he will.
She won't take him back because of her rage and resentment could make her kill.
Now she's with someone who believes she is valuable.
Someone she loves and doesn't regret meeting.
Why?
It made her stronger.
It made her realize that the old life could go on no longer.
Now she says goodbye to the past and hello to the better.
This is part that helped her grow.
Who was she?
She was me.
Who is she?
She is me.
What will she make of it?
The best she can.
I no longer feel confused.
I have the answers I want.
Every story has a lesson learned.
Just try not to run into it the painful way.

Thinking about it...

What was the lesson the person in this poem learned?

JOURNAL 77

You Lie, I Cry

You lie, I cry - it will never be the same.
You lie, I cry - this pain will remain.
You lie, I cry - with hope and fairness
You lie, I cry - the love I tried to share.
You lie, I cry - with broken bones and broken hearts.
You lie, I cry - I was hurt from the start.
You lie, I cry - with teary eyes and a sweaty face.
You lie, I cry - running tears at a steady pace.
You lie, I cry - with some love and hate.
You lie, I cry - with destiny and fate.
You lie, I cry - with footsteps from the past.
You lie, I cry - from the love I thought I had.
You lie, I cry - from memories and nightmares.
You lie, I cry - from lust and night tears.
You lie, I cry - from hoping and asking.
You lie, I cry - from thinking this relationship was lasting.
Where am I? Why is it so dark?
Where am I? Who have I become?
Where am I? I was lost from the start.
Who am I? A lost girl of hurt.
Where did you go when you said you'd be right back?
Where did you go when I found out you were whack?
Where did you go when I turned you down?
Who have I become? What have I found?
Why did you lie and say she was gone?
Why did you lie?
You had my heart broken and torn.
Why did you lie and say she was free?
Why didn't you tell her that she was me?

Thinking about it...

What does the last line of this poem mean? Who are "her" and "me"?

Journal 78

I have been thinking about some of the things that have been happening in the world. I've been mad about the things that have been going on recently. I'm upset because I don't think it is right that so many people, especially young people, are dying because of senseless violence. It seems as if people can't live their lives peacefully and happily. These bad things keep happening, and the government isn't doing much to correct it.

One of the bad things that happened was the Amish school shooting. A group of girls in one of the most peaceful places in the world gets killed. Just going to school to get an education, shot for nothing but doing what they always do so innocently. Another thing was the Virginia Tech Massacre. It was the worst massacre in the United States history. There, 32 innocent college students were killed just going to school to get a degree so they can be successful and do what they want to do with their lives. They were minding their own business. People shouldn't have to worry about their safety to get an education. All people should have the chance to do what they want with their lives.

Too many teens are dropping out of school, and not enough people are there to make the country a better place to live. Everybody's potential should be brought out. Nobody should be left behind in the dust because the country is in as a bad position as it is. We don't need any more dropouts to make the country worse. Despite that, I also think that the student should be willing to get an education. Whether or not they want an education is still up to them. For all they know, they might discover something they enjoy doing like game designing, nursing, or being a professional basketball player. Although it takes hard work to accomplish these goals, enjoying the profession you take up makes it that much easier to succeed. You should be your own boss and your own leader. Have fun doing what you want to do, because if you drop out, it won't feel like an enjoyable experience. Instead, it will be a struggle to make enough money to survive.

We need more people to work for justice. Our government's leadership needs to be corrected so that things are fair for everyone. I admire Erin Gruwell's decision to become a teacher instead of a lawyer. I believe that it is important to guide young people on the path to success before they get put into the system. I was impressed by Ms. Gruwell's visit to our school. She teaches kids that they are not alone and keeps young people out of trouble. She is just what students need. I believe Mrs. Gruwell's methods are great. I believe that the world should be filled with positive and constructive people in place of all the violence. A life of violence is a life unfulfilled.

Thinking about it...

What would you like to ask this writer?

Journal 79

I have been through plenty this year. I remember when I first started eighth grade, I was very shy and wasn't very social. I'm not going to lie. I was immature in the beginning of this school year. Whatever I did or didn't say, I thought twice about it. Now I realize I've changed and developed into a new person. I've changed physically and emotionally. Before I was shy, quiet, and plain old boring. Now I'm happier, more enthusiastic, meaner, and more mature.

When I realized I changed, I noticed a difference in my friends. You see, if I change, the things that revolve around me I change too. It can be either in a good way or a bad way. For me to see that means I've changed. I am a better person.

I also changed physically. For example I grew taller. I have a different hair color, gained more weight, produced muscles, and my face looks much older. It doesn't matter how you change physically. It matters how you change emotionally and in your mind. I learned from my own mistakes and those of others. I take it all in consciously and use it to change myself.

I have learned that people respect me. They know I know right from wrong. If you give respect, you get respect. I remember I used to discriminate against a particular religion because they are against what I believe in. As soon as I learned about the Holocaust and World War II, I realized I should take my own advice and respect the members of that religion, as well as all others. The way Hitler treated the Jews was wrong. I took that into consideration and I grew up enough to learn from that. See, all people are different in their own way. I better understand now that whatever the situation is, I need to learn to live with it.

Thinking about it...

Would this be a person you would like as a friend? Why?

How have you changed? Give some examples.

Journal 80

Why?

Why do we have presidents?

Why do people vote?

Why did America have segregation?

Why did people judge others by their skin color?

Why do we have governors?

Why do we elect?

Why do kids think everything is a joke?

Why are we different?

Why do we have different religions?

Why do we have violence?

Why do we have weapons?

Why don't we know each other's families?

Why am I asking why?

Why do we have different cultures?

Why are we having a war in Iraq?

Why do we think we are the best and don't need to help others?

Why? Why? Why?

Why are we on this earth?

Why didn't God just leave us in heaven?

Why did he create this place for us?

Why am I here?

Why do we have feelings?

Why did I have to suffer?

Why are people the way they are now?

Why?

Thinking about it...

Can you add five more "why's" of your own?

Journal 81

The Hero of my Life

The hero of my life is a friend.

A friend that can't be seen, but can be heard if you listen very closely.

He's a friend that can be your friend.

You can see him in people, places, and on earth.

You can hear him in the wind talking to you.

I can see him through nature.

My hero is someone you can love and cherish forever, even after you die.

My hero is someone you can talk to if you can't tell anyone else.

My hero is the love of my life.

My hero is my first father.

My hero was my friend when no one else was.

My hero is someone who you can trust.

My hero is someone you can depend on.

My hero made the earth and the universe.

My hero stayed with me when people called me names and made me feel down.

My hero answers my questions when I'm puzzled.

My hero is a spirit, a spirit that can only be seen by believers.

My hero is a man of all men.

My hero

My hero is Jesus my savior and no one else.

Thinking about it . . .

What are the qualities that make a hero to you?

Do people really need a hero?

Who is your hero?

Journal 82

Stabbed in the Heart

Stabbed in the heart, took a life and scared many.

Stabbed in the heart, physically and emotionally.

Stabbed in the heart, blood and pain.

Stabbed in the heart, this scare will remain.
Stabbed in the heart, he dies, I cry.
Stabbed in the heart, no bringing him back, I sigh.
Stabbed in the heart, you and me.
You stabbed my friend in the heart. He was only sixteen.
When you stabbed him and stabbed his family, his friends.
You even stabbed yourself. This will haunt you till your end.
Stabbed in the heart, nothing can put this together.
Stabbed in the heart, I will love him forever.
Stabbed in the heart, it will always be there.
Stabbed in the heart, now weak and easy to tear.
Stabbed in the heart, with a memory I can't bear.
Stabbed in the heart, I know you will always be there.
Rest in peace, Markel.

Thinking about it...

Draw a picture or cartoon in the space below that captures the writer's message. If you can, add a few words to the picture or cartoon.

Journal 83

I worry a lot about being good at schoolwork. Let's get started, shall we? You know it's not easy. Year after year I get labeled as "the smart one." Somehow it becomes my obligation to explain things and give out information to my classmates. This really hurts my status with the ladies. They don't want some skinny, short guy, let alone, a smart, skinny, short guy telling them how to do something.

I really hate it. I try to stop the curse, but nothing works. I try acting not as smart, but I still ace my tests. People see it, and I'm stuck. It really is virtually unstoppable. I want to do well in school for my family. I want to get an excellent education and be able to make video games when I graduate from college. To do that, I'll be stuck being labeled "the smart one" and become a nerd.

If only I had a way out, a way to be a genius and be cool. These days my popularity seems to be getting worse. Some people who were my friends are not any more. I've been in a daze for so

long. I had to choose to be intelligent. It's like those people on the streets you think have mental problems, but really we're the ones with the problems. Anyone reading this probably thinks I'm the one with the problems.

I finally made my decision. I will remain who I am.

Thinking about it...

What would you say to the writer to make him feel better?

Does he have the qualities of a person you would respect?

Would you like him as a friend? Why?

Journal 84

Everybody who reads this, I hope you can feel how I feel. Every day I wonder who I am. Sometimes I try to be other people. I try to be something I'm not. There are so many reasons why I don't want to be me. Being me sucks. Sometimes I cry and ask God Why me? There are so many girls out there with nice faces, and I'm stuck with this one. There's always that boy or girl who has something to say to get you down. I thought about killing myself thousands of times in the past. I have also thought about taking out the ones who tease me. I feel like I don't belong in this world. I don't think I have a purpose. I always wake up feeling depressed and sad, and I have low self-esteem. Many people think that I have a great life, but I don't. Just because I come to school all smiley doesn't mean anything. I don't understand why boys and girls are cruel. I have friends, and everybody likes me. I don't start trouble, but people still talk about me. Even the least cute boys always have something unkind to say to me. So many people tell me I'm cute on the inside *and* on the outside. I don't believe them though.

I try so hard, but there's always that one person to make me feel bad. When people put me down they don't have any idea how it makes me feel. I'm starting to think I need a therapist or something because I don't feel right. I try to get my self-esteem up. Sometimes to get all the pain away I try to hurt myself. I do that when people start to care. One of these days I just won't be able to take it. I ask God for answers every day. Sometimes I just want somebody to hurt myself just so I can be with Him. At least I'll be in a better place. It makes me wonder sometimes.

I've liked plenty of boys. Right now I like a boy in the class I am sitting in. He's so fine, and I'd do anything to get with him. It's crazy. Most of them are stuck up, but maybe not him. I will probably just get rejected like other boys do me. Most boys like me because I got the body and a

nice personality, but mostly they get hung-up on my face. Some boys tell me I would look better if my face was clearer. It's getting there, but I'm so tired of this. When my face clears up, then what? It's not even that bad compared to other boys and girls.

I try to remind myself that life is too short for this stuff and how so many boys are immature. It's just so annoying. I hope all the people who made me feel the way I feel about myself and made me lose the good side of me, go to hell. God says I should forgive them. Forgiving is a hard thing to do. So many people don't know what I go through, but that's the way of life. There's nothing I can do to change the way people think.

Thinking about it. . .

Can you imagine what the writer is going through personally?

Have you ever felt this way?

What can you do as an individual to prevent this from happening?

Journal 85

Sometimes I feel my world is going crazy. Sometimes being in eighth grade drives me crazy. There are so many things you have to think of. There are so many pressures. My head feels like the world is spinning. I'm growing more and there will be more problems. I deal with so many things that make me feel like everything is put on me. I can't deal with two problems at one time. There is so much trouble that you even have to think of your own safety and survival in this cold-blooded city. The world spins faster and problems won't get solved. Sometimes I feel like I want to explode!

I just want to clear my mind and let time fly, let my world be as when I was little. Let the world be as it used to so it would be easy on me and everybody else. I can't do that now since I'm older. The one thing I will always remember even if the world goes crazy in my head, I will think of enjoying the time and the life I have now.

Thinking about it. . .

Why does the writer want to go back to the time when she or he was younger?

Journal 86

My world goes crazy every time I go home. Every day my dad and I always argue. He's always yelling at me about what I do wrong. I yell back about why he's always on my case. I need him to just back off. Sometimes when I yell at him I just feel bad about it, but that's just how I feel. When my world goes crazy, I feel like running away. I feel alone and that nobody understands me.

My whole life has been this way. My parents are always fighting. I did a lot of things I regret. My parents are divorced, and I can't see my mother, brother or sister anymore. My dad just kept on telling me just be patient. I always wonder why it takes so long. I mean, it's been four years since I've seen my mom. I guess my father doesn't understand me, and I need my mother. With all of these problems in my life, sometimes I just want to cry all my pain and stress out. Sometimes I feel like I'm stuck in the middle of nothing but drama.

People don't understand me or how I feel. They just don't know what I've been through or how much pressure I have. When I go home after a hard day at school, everything is always on me. I get blamed for this or that. Can't they for once understand me and see what I've been through. Have they ever asked me, "How your day" is or try to cheer me up? I try not to express how I feel about this. Can't they see my facial expression or remember when they were teenagers?

Life can't be a fairy tale, but does it have to be like hell? Why can't my family and friends understand me? I have been through all of these ups and downs. Why can't people understand? Why are they are yelling at me? What have I done wrong? I obey the rules. Do I deserve not being understood? I try my best to be a good friend, a good daughter, and a good student. I just want people to try to understand what is going on in my life.

Even when my world goes crazy, I will finish my education. It's important to me as well as my future. I won't follow others. I will be myself and do what is right for my family and me.

Thinking about it...

What would you say to the father if you had a chance to meet him?

Is there anything you would want to say to the writer?

Journal 87

My name is Kisha Bivines, and I am 34 years old. I once lived a picture perfect life. Who knew that in a matter of seconds my whole life would change?

It was March 10, 1989 at the Hospital of University of Pennsylvania when I had my second child, Ivan Simmons. He weighed eight pounds and six ounces. Ivan was a big baby. Ivan was my baby. He looked just like me. As Ivan got older our bond got stronger. I remember when Ivan was younger and I just had had his young brother. I asked Ivan to go get the baby's chair from upstairs and he brought me the whole bassinet. It was so funny seeing him bounce it slowly down the stairs. Ivan and I had so many special moments. One thing I remember is when I took Ivan to Disneyland in California. It was his first plane ride.

Ivan was quiet around people he didn't know, but he was very silly around family. Ivan was like many of the young kids. He liked music, but his favorite was that gangster rap crap. I don't really care too much for that type of music. Ivan also loved to play on the computer. In his spare time Ivan liked to cook and clean. His favorite food was fried chicken. I always hated cleaning the chicken, so Ivan learned how to clean it for me. He did a real good job. Ivan was very tall, and his older brother was tall also. They used to call Ivan Little 6-9 because of his height. We also called him I've and Phonebooth. He was always on the phone. Some times I would call him Twin. He looked just like me. His Mom-mom and I were his role models. Ivan was the very opposite of his younger brother. I think that's why Ivan's brother looked up to him so much.

Ivan rarely got in trouble. I used to think of him as my good child. He used to do whatever I told him to do. One thing I can say is that Ivan did well in school. He attended quite a few schools. He went to Simon Gratz and Northeast High schools. Ivan didn't start to get into trouble until 11th grade. He didn't go to his junior prom. I think he was just waiting for his 12th grade year. Ivan had a job at Burger King and was often frustrated when I went to pick him up because they wouldn't give him enough hours. They were paying him, like everybody else, next to nothing. I would talk to him and calm him down. One day I asked Ivan what he wanted to be when he grew up and he told me he wanted to be a mortician. He could never tell me why.

Ivan started making bad choices when it came to picking his friends. He was involved with the wrong group of friends and they were all heading down the wrong path. I think Ivan was determined to be what his friends weren't. He wanted to get his high school diploma. At one time we talked about him getting into with Job Corps. That would only earn him a GED, so he said he

was going to finish school. I was so proud of him that he wasn't going to take the easy way out.

My whole life was turned upside down on November 30, 2006. It was the warmest November day I have ever seen. Ivan was on his way home from school when a car pulled up and started shooting. My son started running, but they got him. The day before the shooting, my sister had seen him and pointed out that he didn't seem like himself. That makes me think that Ivan knew something was going to happen.

When I went to the place where my boy got shot, he was already on his way to the hospital. Somehow I was really calm. I guess I knew in my heart he wasn't going to die that day. I know that Ivan was the target. I found out what happened because I saw one of his friends running down the hill toward our home. All he kept saying was, "Ivan got shot!" When I asked how he knew it was Ives, he didn't tell me how he knew. He was by himself, and there was no one else around him. I think that a person he considered a friend set him up. The only way that young man could have known it was Ivan who had been shot would be if he were actually there. There is no other way he could have seen what happened. There is a hill in between my block and the place that Ivan was shot.

You know something, the ambulances never came. A cop picked him up and took him to the hospital. When I got to the Temple University Hospital they said that Ivan was dead on arrival. Then they told me Ivan was a miracle. He lived for twelve long days after the shooting. He was trying to tell me who killed him, but he couldn't get the words out. He tried to write it, but his fingers were too swollen. All I could make out was that it was two people. He was able to tell me that he loved me before he slipped away from me. On December 12, 2006 I lost my son.

Ivan was only 17 when he died. I always sit and think "Wow, seventeen years!" I was so hurt when Ivan died. I miss every thing about him, but I miss his spirit the most. I miss his smile and I miss his phone calls. Ivan always used to call and ask where I was. He always had to protect me. The police have not yet found the killer, and the investigators seem to keep trying to forget about what happened to my son. Little do they know, this is one case that will not go cold. I will call every day just so they don't forget.

Word on the street is that the person who paid the shooter to kill my son was recently killed himself. Still, so many people ask me, "Do you want revenge?" No, I don't want revenge, because seeking revenge is stooping down to the killer's insane level. All I want is justice. The day of the sentencing, I want the shooter to turn to his mother and apologize to her for what she is about to go through.

The healing process will be long and hard, not only for me but for my family. It has affected us all. My three-year-old nephew told one of my sisters that he missed Ivan and that he cries sometimes. He said not to tell me because he heard me say that we all have to be strong. I don't want him to feel like he can't cry. It's hard. Everyone is always watching me. They all watch to see if I am going to break. If there is a day I want to cry and every one else is having a good day, I just feel like I have to hold it in.

I have only one regret. If only we had moved out of Nicetown. Then again, I don't want to live in fear. I don't want to keep running or living in fear. Some nights I can't sleep, but I don't know why. I know it's not because I am afraid of seeing Ivan. If seeing him in my dreams is the only place I can see him, then I would sleep every chance I got. I still have all his belongings. I didn't throw anything away.

The worst part is the emptiness I feel now that Ivan is gone. I try to tell his story to as many people as will listen. I want people to think about what they are doing before they make a decision that can't be undone. I want you all to ask yourself if what you are living for is worth dying for. We have to change. Let's start with me and you.

Thinking about it...

What qualities did Ivan bring to his family and friends that are so missed by them?

What does the writer of this story want people reading her story to do? Explain.

Journal 87 was written by a student after interviewing Kisha Bivines as part of a service learning project where students tried to discover what it would be like to lose a child. It is written in the first person to personalize and understand such a loss.

Dreams, Aspirations, and the Future

You now are ready to begin a hopeful but somewhat scary kind of writing called “Dreams, Aspirations, and the Future.” As you explore other students’ writing, you will experience a new type of inner voice—one that looks to the future. Thinking about a future that is full of so many unknowns can be intimidating. Trying to protect yourself from uncertainty can cause you to act unpredictably. You are trying to figure out so many things at the same time. Making decisions about who you are, what you want to be, and how you are going to get there is hard work. On the flip side, not making these decisions and getting stuck on pause will cause you stress, too. You are being pushed, pulled, and challenged every day—**you just are.**

As you struggle to discover your true identity and find meaning in your life, you will be expected to take some risks. These risks are likely to cause tension and pressures that can increase your stress levels. These emotional conflicts sometimes get in the way of your achieving. These risk-taking behaviors and new challenges sometimes get you into trouble with your parents, teachers, and friends. Just realize that you are not alone in this situation.

You may find yourself daydreaming often about the future. These daydreams may include hopes you have for yourself. Many days, things might seem unclear or even unattainable. You just have to realize that you are trying to make many major decisions with limited life experiences. You’re still kind of new at being a teenager. You might feel limited in your ability to think far into the future. That’s normal. Sometimes you are unable to predict the shortcomings of what you imagine, and you may possibly neglect important consequences of your actions. We all make mistakes.

But you must move forward and give it all you’ve got. Since you can’t predict the future, you can at least try to give it some direction. So, it’s time to listen to your inner voice and write. Share your ideas with friends you trust. Or find a classmate whose writing you respect and share it with that person. You’re going to find how much you have to think and write about when you consider the future that is awaiting you. **You just are.**

Here is one writer’s view of the future. Once you have completed the reading, look over the “Thinking about it” questions and consider your answers.

Journal 88

As I got older, my future started to become clearer.
I wanted to be a doctor or a preacher.
I would be able to use the gift God gave me for good.
I want to graduate high school with the highest honors.
I want to go to the best college and have my parents see me walk down the aisle.
I want to find a woman who is right for me.
I want to find a godly woman that loves me for what I am, not what I got.
I want my friends and family to look up to me,
Not look down on me for what I did wrong.
I want to be successful,
Not one of those people being dead for being at the wrong place at the wrong time.
I want to pay back my parents for all they have done for me,
All the sacrifices, all the tears, all the good times and bad.
I want to lead people to Christ.
The people I don't help, their blood is on my hands.
I want to make an impact on our future generations.
I want to show them that the way to succeed is through education, not violence.
See, I don't need violence.
My writing is my sword, and I don't need anything else.
I want to see my friends make it somewhere.
I want to share my talents with others, my writing, my voice.
I want to be able to do things without being scared.
When it's my time to go, I want to go saying, "I did it,"
Not "Damn, I should have never done this."
When I've stuck my sword in the golden sands of time,
I want to know I've done well.
Because, I have to get myself together.
I have someplace to go.

Thinking about it...

How has this writer committed to his future?

What part of this writing best relates to your life and your future?

You are now ready to begin writing again using the same writing process practiced in the earlier chapters. Make sure to follow the steps below for best results.

- Choose or create an idea.
- Brainstorm your ideas using webbing, clustering, or another method you prefer.
- Play back your ideas in your mind and edit what you have.
- Write the first draft. Get your ideas onto paper.
- Share with others. Read it aloud to them and ask for comments and questions.
- Listen carefully and use other people's ideas to revise and edit.
- Publish your work.

Journal 89

My grandmother, Sarah Shirley Young, was a very intelligent and well-respected person. I know of many people who looked up to her as a role model, myself included. She was a combination of many things, with a personality that was without match. My grandmother was deeply admired. In her life, she set many goals and accomplished them, including traveling all around the world. I have so much respect for my grandmother. That is why it was so hard for me to see her die. She lived a wonderful life, but it all ended on April 14, 2006.

Over the past few years she had been in and out of the hospital to treat her ovarian cancer. It is one of the most deadly cancers out there, and there wasn't a cure for the kind she had. It starts out as a small tumor and then it grows. The symptoms include loss of appetite, constant pain in the pelvic area, nausea, vomiting, tiredness and weakness. These are all of the things my mother, step-dad, sister and I had to watch my grandmother go through. Although she was sick, she remained strong. She fought for years and never gave up.

It was so hard to watch her slowly leaving this world. She spent most of her last days at the hospital, including Valentines Day and her 63rd birthday. We brought her flowers, balloons, cards and other gifts to make her happy. But during her very last days, she didn't want any visitors. She said it would be too hard for her to see us look at her.

Though she is gone, my grandmother left behind so many memories. I remember when I was much younger and she would seat me on her bed and play with my toes, singing *This Little Piggy*. When I was seven, she would take my sister and me horseback riding almost every weekend. We had so much fun with her. Other memories I have are all of the Christmases we shared. The tradition was for all of our relatives, whether from Philly or from far away, to come to

my grandmother's house. A lot of them came for her food. She was an excellent cook. I think the most delicious thing she made was her stuffing.

Although my grandmother is not here anymore, she still and always will inspire me. Throughout my life I have always looked up to her as a role model and I still do. She inspires me to be a better person, to live my life the right way, and help others in their times of need. She was a good example of all that and more. She taught me to be independent and to rely on myself.

I remember a situation when I was younger that shows the type of person my grandmother was. The police had stopped a lady. We didn't know her, but she had her children in the car with her. The lady had been there for an hour sorting out the problem, so my grandmom offered to take her children home. The lady agreed to accept the offer. Her kids were so miserable sitting and waiting for the police to finish their business. The lady was very appreciative for what my grandmother had done. At first I had thought my grandmom was crazy for doing this, but later I realized that she was just being nice and helping somebody who needed it. Not many people are willing to do something so nice for a stranger. It is days like that one that inspired me to be a better person.

Another thing about my grandmother that inspires me is how smart she was. My grandmom used to help me with my homework. Most of the time, I didn't even have to explain it to her. She understood it right away. With other people, you might have to explain what you are doing just so they can help. She gave me hope for a much better and safer world. I am very glad to call her my grandmom.

I am certain that she didn't inspire just me, but everyone she knew. I will miss my grandmother so much. Every little thing she did to make me happy will stay with me forever. I know that she is still here in spirit and is watching over me. My grandmother, Sarah Shirley Young, was the best grandmother a person could ask for. I will always remember her.

Thinking about it...

What were the personal qualities of the grandmom that inspired the writer?

Are there people in your life who inspire you? Who are they and how do they inspire you?

Journal 90

There are so many goals I want to accomplish in my life. There are so many things that I want to do and be. I want to be known for my intelligence, abilities, successes, and for being trustworthy. I want to do something with my life that will help me be remembered.

For my future, one of the things I plan on doing is becoming a veterinarian. One reason why is because I like to help and protect. I have had a special love for animals ever since I was little. Another thing I would like to become is a model. I think I could be good at this because I like to take pictures and I am confident in myself. I think I can be both of these things. I plan on pursuing my dreams and doing whatever I put my mind to.

To be sure that I fulfill my dreams I will stay determined throughout high school. I'll stay positive and make sure that I don't do anything to sabotage my chances of being successful. Then, when I go off to college, I'll take as many courses as I can. I'll get a part-time job to help get myself through school.

I want a big family and a husband that I can grow old with. I want to look back on my life having no regrets. I also want my children to be able to look up to me as their role model. I want to be the greatest mom. I want to be a positive person who will be remembered.

Thinking about it...

Could this writer influence you to make better choices in life? Why?

Journal 91

To: Weapons

From: Us

Subject: Please Respect

Date: Forever

Respect – that means so many things, but this is written to something that does not respect at all. What are you doing? I know that even though I talk to you about this, you aren't going to listen. The ones who will listen are not being spoken to here. Don't you see that you are taking lives? Don't you see how much innocent blood is shed because of your style? Your brothers, all of you are different but still have a job. Until you don't get your pay, you are not leaving, are you?

Please tell me why. Don't you see that over just the last week you've been paid more than any rich man? You are always working.

I am here to say, "Please respect." Just because you are working, we don't want you to go into overtime. You are a wealthy family, so just stop and leave us alone. I know you don't want money from us, but something more. We take you in because we are lonely, but once we don't need you, you become our owner.

Your brothers are sharp. They come in every single shape, size and color. Some of you have to smash. Others have to cock back. I know you have enemies, but am I one of them? I know I could strap you on, but would that protect me from your brothers? You don't respect race or color. You just come to do your job. You are never going to quit, and over the past few years you have been paid. It is time for you to just respect. Are you satisfied when you hear the sobs, when you hear another preacher say a couple more words? Respect. Obviously, you don't know. You'll never know. We take you as a game, but you take us as a check. All I am telling you is please, please respect.

For me, there is one thing that inspires me more than anything else in the world. That thing is life. Life is a vibrant pallet of opportunities, potential happiness, despair, and emotion. In life, there is always something to live for. Anyone can have a purpose. My purpose is to accomplish things on Earth so that everyone will remember me. Some people are always finding things to gripe about. There are always more things in life to celebrate. Sadness is a product of your existence. To be able to feel emotion is to be able to feel truly alive.

There will always be hope. Hope for a better future. There will always be a purpose. There will always be a reason to live. My purpose as a human being is leaving my mark on the world. Leaving something so unforgettable, I'd be immortalized until the end of the human existence. I believe that no matter what happens, in a sense, there will always be no end to the grand journey of life.

Thinking about it...

What is the writer talking about here?

How important is it to you to be remembered by others for your contributions?

Journal 92

A serious movie that made an impression was a movie starring Morgan Freeman called “Lean on Me.” It was based on a true story about a high school that was very bad and Morgan Freeman stepped in to become principal of the school. Freeman played the role of Joe Clark, the real man who worked at Eastside High School in Paterson, New Jersey. He started making changes. The kids were used to school filled with hate and violence. The violence was based on guns, gangs, drugs, relationships, and teenage pregnancy.

Although Morgan Freeman had many twists and turns, he still didn’t give up on the students. Instead he fought for the students. He didn’t just fight for their respect, but the pride and courage to believe in themselves. After a long struggle, they did. I don’t think those kids would have made it through all those trials and tribulations without him.

It doesn’t only happen in movies, it happens in real life too. Teenagers in society today face peer pressure, sex, violence, rape, teenage pregnancy, and death. The society today is full of all these things. I don’t think teens sell drugs, have sex, and promote violence because of the stuff they hear or see on television. I think it all starts at home. I think that a child’s whole demeanor changes when they don’t have a parent to go home and just talk to. Boys and girls both need a stable male figure in their life. It’s not about the influence of media, but the environment they live in, and some just want to fit in.

“Lean on Me” had everything teens today face. But in this story kids had someone’s shoulder to cry on. I think that everyone, not just kids, wants to know they are loved by someone. This man, Morgan Freeman / Joe Clark, cared about these kids. Not because he didn’t want to see them dead or living a no good life, but because he loved them. I think that is the reason why they succeeded. Someone who hardly knew these children cared about them. That’s all kids want is to know they are loved and cared for. My advice to people who are going through something is to talk to someone that they know cares about them. Just talk to them about your problems.

Thinking about it...

What values are important to the writer?

Journal 93

Wanting Change

I want to change so much.

I want to change my weight, the way I look, and the way I am with other people.

If I change, maybe I would be happier.

The reason why I say I want to change my weight is because I don't like to be heavy.

The reason for me wanting to change the way I look is because I don't like what I see.

When I look in the mirror, sometime I get angry.

I don't like the way my stomach and my back look.

When I look at other people that look better than me, I get jealous.

I get jealous because of how they look better and different.

I wish I could change the way I am with others.

Maybe I won't have as many issues as I do now.

That is why I want to change.

Thinking about it...

If you wrote a piece about change, how would yours be similar to or different from this one?

Journal 94

Before I had written a diary saying that I want to change. Well, I changed my mind again, and I don't want to change. I'm proud of who I am and what I look like. It doesn't matter anymore about what people say. I'm so used to being called names. I have been hurt so many times. I can't hurt anymore. It stays in the back of my head; it never leaves.

One of my older friends said something that got to me. She said "You don't like the way you look, why? You're beautiful! You are trying to say God made a mistake?" I had to think about that for a while.

What she said made me realize that God made us all beautiful in our own way, inside and outside. That wasn't the first time I've been told I'm wrong for wanting to change. My step-mom and stepsister have been telling me for three years that I'm beautiful. Many of my friends and family members have been trying to tell me the same thing. So I made a decision to be proud of myself and never stop.

Thinking about it...

What makes it so difficult to be proud of yourself?

Has the writer reached a good place in her life? How do you think she got there?

Journal 95

Love between two brothers is not just having a sibling around the house. It's not just playing games together and nothing else. It is more than that. It's spending time with him when he has nothing to do, but you have plans. It's talking to him about the stuff he won't talk to anyone else about. Sharing more than just a bag of chips or splitting a dollar. It's having someone you can depend on when you have, or think you have, no one else.

No matter how hard you fight, you still laugh it out in the end. It's letting no one break the powerful bond you have, not even your mom or dad. Even though it's not necessary, it's taking the blame for him when he's about to have his favorite game taken away. It's telling you where the Halloween candy is, and when you leave the wrapper on the table, he takes the blame. It's practicing football or basketball with him because you may see something he needs to improve on. It's letting him ride your bike to school because your mom said if he's late again, he'll be punished.

It's taking him to the mall with you even though you have girls with you. It's hooking him up with the little sister of the girls you went to the mall with. It's letting him spend the night in your room because he's scared. It's buying him a gift even though he can't afford to get you one. You just have to be brothers, just be there for him and that is all the love you can give.

Thinking about it...

Why are personal bonds so important, especially family bonds?

What's special about the relationship between brothers and sisters?

Journal 96

Have you ever traveled through life and made a few mistakes? Well, I have, one too many times. Have you ever done something to yourself or somebody else and felt bad about it? I have. Sometimes when you do bad things, you feel you will have no more chances and your life is in a deep hole.

Have you ever hurt yourself or put your life at risk because of someone else? I have. When you do wrong you always wonder why. What's the purpose of me doing this? It's like something overpowers you. In the end there are people who will never quit on me no matter what I have done.

My mom and dad never quit on me. They are always by my side, good or bad. Sometimes I go overboard. Sometimes I do things I thought I never ever would do, and still my parents are by my side. Then there's God. I know he's by my side all the time. I know I might have said or done some things, but nobody ever quits on me.

It's crazy how many chances I get in life. I heard that you aren't supposed to get so many chances. It feels good to know that you'll never get quit on, especially when you have so much inspiration surrounding you. It always shows that you are loved by so many. From all this support it gives you a long life lesson. Never give up on anyone, and don't quit anything in life. Just succeed.

Thinking about it...

What does the writer's message say to you?

Do you believe that we get many chances in life? What is meant by chances?

Journal 97

I can't stand people who are so judgmental of others. It seems like some people spend their whole life doing nothing more than judging people. Some people judge others before they even try to get to know them. They just judge on their appearance instead of trying to get to know them. The worst thing about it is that they don't know what they might have gone through in their life or what problems they might have.

People who judge people all the time must think that everyone should be the same. Just because someone might look different, they want to make fun of them. That's why I think there are a lot of followers in this world. People are afraid of being their own person because they don't want to be judged or made fun of.

People really don't know the personality of people. They just look at how they act. They don't really know how a person is when they go home or how they are with their family. They might worry what you think about them. What some fail to realize is that nobody likes fake people. Personally I can't take fake people. They are a waste of my time.

Maybe if people were to be themselves, it would make others accept you for who you are. If you're really confident in yourself, you shouldn't care what someone says about you. You should just be who you are because you can't change the true you. You shouldn't change your personality for anyone. I would rather you be yourself than act like someone you aren't. I really don't care how you act as long as you are acting yourself. Most people will respect you. Even more will if they see you don't act something you aren't and you are true in everything you say and do.

Thinking about it...

Do you think people judge others all the time? Why?

How do you handle being judged by others?

Do you listen to judgments others make of you?

Journal 98

I'm a Shine

I'm a shine

I'm a make it

I'm a climb

I'm a face it

The world before me

I got my eyes fixed

Can't anybody hold me

I'm on a roll,

I can't miss

My j flows like water

My poems flow like juice

The devil can't get any shorter

Cause he's already under my shoe

My rhymes make you talk

My philosophy makes you think

My dreams keep reality intact

My flow makes a heart sing

Demons surrounding me

Angels protecting me

Devil hating on me

God guiding me

My head is up
I look at your eyes
My voice speaks up
Let the truth be my guide
My life was spinning
Mind running wild
I ran to God
Held me like a child
I have an uncontrollable passion
My heart is on fire
Soaring, you know, higher
I'm a shine
I'm a make it
I'm a climb
I'm a face it
Give me a challenge
Show you a miracle
Give me a talent
Show you the pinnacle
They say that I can't?
Tell me I failed?
I know that I can
And I will prevail
Time and again
I find myself defeated
Time and again
I see that the devil cheated
I, resilient
I will overcome
I will live it
We will be one
So don't come my way
Cause I'll go right through
Don't see my face
Or I might just have to pray for you

I'm a shine
No matter what!

Thinking about it...

What would be the first thing you would say to the writer if you had an opportunity to meet? Explain.
Choose some examples of what the writer means by "shine."
How do you shine?

Journal 99

I Have a Dream

Today I thought about what would happen if I weren't alive.
Today I thought about how I could make a difference in this world.
Today I had a dream.
In my dream, I was in control of my life.
I wasn't influenced by others.
In my dream, I was walking down the right path to victory.
In my dream, the real me was shown and the people around me knew how I roll.
They knew what made me happy and what made me sad.
I had a dream about the world being at peace, a place where everything is fair.
I had a dream that I was actually loved,
That I actually had a chance to hold my number one true.
I dreamt that I had no worries in the world.
I didn't care if I was dead.
In my dream, sorrow, pain, and tears are no more.
I dreamed of paradise.
I dreamed that my loved ones were there,
My uncle, sister, mom, dad, friends, and my family.
I dreamed that it was the end, and then I dreamed of a new beginning.

Thinking about it...

How would the writer like to change his or her life?

Journal 100

I now know that good things can come out of bad situations. I know that first hand. It all started two months ago. My life got all twisted upside down. I did not expect it at all. I did not think that good things came out of bad situations. I thought that what was good was good, and what was bad was bad. When it was my turn I did not expect it at all.

I couldn't take it when my mom was a drunk. I was so stressed out. It made me sick at times. So every day my mom and I would argue. We would argue all day and all night. We did have our good times, but I could not take the back and forth. So when I threatened to move, she wasn't surprised. I asked to move many times before.

I never wanted to move away from my friends. With them I could have fun, but then I would have to come home and hate it all. The only thing I wanted to do was rip and run the streets. I had no structure in my life, nobody to show me the right way to go about living.

One night my mom and I were fighting, I just left and moved to my dad's house. I liked living at my dad's house. Even though I had less freedom, I at least have my dad. He gives me the structure I need. It has been working out for us, and I am still living with him. I think this is what people mean when they talk about being happy. So there were some changes I had to make to fit my life in with my father's, but I have less stress on my shoulders. I have more structure and someone who can teach me the right way to live my life. I love my life again, finally.

Thinking about it...

How and why is the writer happy with his or her life?

Journal 101

Look at me

Look at me. Tell me what you see.

A chocolate girl wanting to accomplish her dreams and goals

Look at me and tell me, what do you see?

A girl who covers the pain that she feels each day

Look at me. What do you see?

A girl who loves God and doesn't know what she would do without him

Look at me. Do you see?

A girl whose father is deceased and her heart shattered
What do you see if you look at me?
A girl whose grandmother can care less about her
Look at me. What do you see?
A girl who has a outgoing personality and isn't afraid to be different
Look at me and tell me what you see.
A girl who is determined and won't let anyone put her down or tell her she won't succeed
Look at me. Do you see?
A girl who loves her friends and family so dearly
This girl is me.

Thinking about it...

What has this writer wrestled with in her life that makes her so strong?

How has she turned challenges in her life into opportunities?

Journal 102

I sometimes wonder if I have enough pride in who I am to make it. These days I have a lot of pride in myself, but for a while I didn't. After my dad died I began to feel like nobody understood me. Then I began to just lose all confidence in myself. I felt insecure about my complexion and the way I looked. Maybe there are so many suicides and homicides in this world because people are so quick to judge. They don't know what you've been through.

It seems like the more people hear something negative about themselves, the sooner they begin to feed into the negative remarks people say about them. I think it's so sad when my friends talk to me about how they feel. They think they're not pretty or they don't deserve the things they get. They tell me how they deserve all the bad things that happen in their lives. When they tell me these things I feel their pain and where they are coming from. Sometimes they tell me about some of the things they went through themselves.

I went through them too, but sometimes I wonder how a person can doubt herself to the point where she can commit suicide. I wonder how it got that deep that they can't tell anyone. I wonder how long they felt so insecure about themselves. What makes them so insecure? I feel like all people are beautiful in their own sense. I believe no matter how ugly you may be or how ugly you may feel, you're still beautiful in your own unique way.

Thinking about it...

How do you feel when you lose confidence in yourself? What can you do to help yourself?

Can talking to others about your problems and pain help?

Journal 103

I have pride in who I am and what I stand for. I am proud of the people and things I represent. I take satisfaction in the things I do. I also take pride in the things I say.

Pride is self-respect or a sense of your own importance or value. It is a feeling of satisfaction in something that you or someone else has achieved. This word defines me. People tell me I am conceited, but in all honesty I just have pride in myself. Conceited people walk around with their noses in the air. They think they are superior to others and others are less than they are. But me, I think we are all equal.

I have pride in who I am because I know I can achieve things. I think about how far I have come and how far I am going to go. I know I can make a change in not only my life but many others' as well. I know I can achieve goals that I set for my self and make new goals so I can continue to prosper. I know that if I try hard enough I can be anything I want to be. I can do anything I put my mind to. I have pride in the people and things I stand for because I know if I am doing something good or bad, it reflects on them. It reflects on my family, friends, teachers, and many other people who I just don't want to let down.

When I feel like my self-esteem is low, I think about all of the obstacles I have faced. I have come so far. Just the thought of where I came from and how strong I am helps me feel so much better. I think that if I keep the attitude I have now, I will really go far in life.

I will work at things that will motivate many young females to make something of themselves. To inspire them to not fall victim to the statistics would be a huge accomplishment for my life. I know so many people who have low self-esteem and have no pride in themselves. If I could teach them how to believe in themselves, I would. That strength has to come from within, and I can't give them that strength. They have to give it to themselves. Your life might be one of the saddest stories ever written. But it is up to you to take your not-so-satisfactory life back to the sadness factory. It needs to be reworked and reconfigured so you can live right.

Thinking about it...

What are some examples of things teenagers do that can lead to pride?

What opportunities do you have at home, at school, and in the community to help you with pride?

Journal 104

Did you ever feel like you wanted to meet your goal or feel like you know you can't be what ever you want to be? Have you ever been told you can't do something you love? I have. It seems like forever I thought that nothing was possible. My grades have never been that high and neither was my self-esteem. I have always been determined to reach my goal, despite this.

I always remind myself to never give up. Giving up is for losers who are scared to face the truth. I am not a loser. I'm a teenage girl trying to be a leader and trying to grow stronger. Nobody would get anywhere in life if they didn't try or have faith. I want to do something with my life and I want to get somewhere. Things might not be good now, but nobody gets anywhere without hard work.

I once heard a phrase "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger." To me that means that everyone goes through a struggle and a storm. Some get in deep storms and some don't. If you really want something you have to work hard towards and struggle through it.

Me? I want to do so much. To accomplish this, I will need a positive attitude. I want to set a good example for my sisters, and I want my mom to know that things I dream are possible. I want to make a better tomorrow so I can be remembered for doing well. My main goal is to make a better, safer city.

I want everyone to believe that things are possible when you work hard at them. If you don't go for what you love or want, you'll have nobody to blame but yourself. So, the question is, what is your goal? Do you have time for foolishness when your future is at stake?

Thinking about it...

What does "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger" mean to you?

What did the writer say you to evoke these feelings in you?

Journal 105

Imitation

Imitation is nothing real
It's a dilution of what you feel
It's an illusion of what you see
It's something not meant to be
I still can't find you, and until this day I tried
Every look I take
It isn't you, and I cry
The love is there and always will
I wonder when you'll start seeking me
Imitation is the person, fake
Is it a character?
I guess not finding you is telling me to start a new chapter
I can't now and never can
With you it feels like my all is filled
But once again imitation, dilution, delusion, and illusion
My mind is blurred
Calm down, relax it's only a mind feud
Now I'm chill, lay back and reminisce
The ways things used to be, you and me
Here I am standing in front of your face
I try to grab you but again too late
You were looking for me when I was looking for you
I was too busy chasing the imitation of you
I wanted you but didn't want it to show
Now I want that back
But you want to let me go
I took advantage of what I wanted the most
I still have faith, still so close
I love you and I know you love me too
Next time I want to imitate a character of you

Thinking about it...

What is the writer saying about imitation?

Journal 106

I have pride in who I am because what I do is what I choose to do. I'm not forced to do it. The pride that I have is positive, not arrogant. At times, I feel that life is getting harder each day. When I feel like things are falling through I get back onto my feet and do what I have to do.

My life isn't as hard as my parents'. Since their life was nothing but a struggle, they tell me I need to set and accomplish my goals. They remind me to do everything in life I feel that's true and good. My mom and dad have always been there to observe what I go through. I always try to make my parents proud of me.

My grades are not exactly how I want them to be. If I compare my grades to other people's, and I know I have to try harder to get where I need to be. I will get them where I want them. I stay and get extra help from my math teacher. I work harder than ever on my reading and writing. I know I am making progress.

My life is going to be fine, but I worry about some of my peers. Some kids don't seem to be proud of who they are. Their parents sometimes aren't there for them, as my parents have been there to pick me up when I hit the ground. I am up to meet the challenges I go through, because this is life. Each of us should always have pride in who we are. Never give up something you want. This is life.

Thinking about it...

What has this writer learned from her parents that is important to you?

Journal 107

My life has been going through ups and downs. Life isn't easy, but we all you know that. People suffer from the past, present, and maybe even the future. I try to treasure my life as long as it lasts. Still, I see unfortunate people out there trying to find their way. I take in what I feel and see to use as a confidence boost. I tell myself I can do it.

People can discourage me or bring me down easily, so I take all the remarks in and use it as fuel for my special abilities. I have my own weaknesses and strengths that make me better. Without my weaknesses, I would never have any of my strengths. When I seem to not find my way out of bad situations I tell myself that I can. I push myself to do it. Nobody's perfect and I live to learn it. When I feel like everything is falling through, a part of me is telling me to not give up, move on.

I am always up for a new challenge. I always tell myself it is better to learn the hard way than taking the easy way out. No more complaining or giving up. When I make mistakes, it's like a paper cut and I need a band aid. Without a band aid how would I ever heal? I try not to stress because it makes it worse. I try to keep on moving.

There is always somebody out there that will put you down. They have no life, so they look for someone who is accomplishing something. I think they're only doing it because they want to mess with somebody, or they feel bad about themselves. No matter what they say, it doesn't matter at all because it comes down to one thing. You can never give up.

You feel really good about yourself knowing you can do it. In the end, you realize that you finally made it. You made it through rough times without breaking down. I wouldn't say life is a piece of cake, but if you put your mind to it, you can get through. When you feel like you can't make it, but you can. I will never give up, no matter what.

Thinking about it...

Why is it so important not to give up?

