



# UNDERSTANDING INHERENT WORTH: A PATH TOWARDS FORGIVENESS

*“Revenge only engenders violence, not clarity and true peace. I think liberation must come from within.”*

-Sandra Cisneros

## OVERVIEW

As a class, students read a book to begin a discussion on inherent worth, then think critically about how inherent worth and forgiveness are related.

## LEVELS

- Upper Elementary

## PLANNING FOR IT

## WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To set a foundation for forgiveness among students
- To cultivate a kind and connected classroom by helping students see the inherent worth of each of their peers and all human beings
- At the beginning of the school year

## TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 1 hour

## MATERIALS

- Book: *Let's Talk About Race* by Julius Lester (links to a virtual reading of the book are below)
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zoDUJY9u9Jw>
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2wLhTngxO4c> (this version has wonderful commentary by the teacher at the end)
- Paper
- Pencil/pen

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Describe the concept of inherent worth as it relates to people who may have hurt them and how it relates to human beings in general
- Recognize how everyone has the same bones in their face, and evaluate this information in relation to the concept of inherent worth
- Recognize that even people who do bad things are human beings who have hearts with feelings
- Question whether or not someone can be “better” than someone else and what that means to be “better”
- Think more critically about the consequences of considering oneself better than another

## ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

## CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Forgiveness
- Empathy
- Respect

## SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Social Awareness

## MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Open Awareness
- Non-Judgment

## HOW TO DO IT

### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a moment to consider the meaning of inherent worth. Reflect on the following questions:
  - Are there actions that cause someone to lose their inherent worth?
  - How might inherent worth be related to forgiveness?
- Think of a time when you hurt someone else.
  - How did you feel about the situation?
  - What were your feelings towards that person?
  - What led to the situation?

- Now, think of a person who hurt you that you have not forgiven yet.
  - Does reflecting on the concept of inherent worth change your feelings in any way?

## INSTRUCTIONS

### BEFORE YOU BEGIN

- This practice can be used on its own, but is meant to be the third in a series of practices that teach students about forgiveness. An electronic version of the entire curriculum is available through the [International Forgiveness Institute website](#). GGIE readers are able to purchase the electronic version at a discounted price of just \$15 (to order, click the “GGIE Version – Electronic” box). A printed version is available for \$40.
- Before teaching this lesson, we encourage you to read this [short description](#) of what forgiveness is and what it is not.
- Note to educator: This lesson helps begin the process of understanding inherent worth. All people have deep worth because they are human beings and members of the human family. This deep worth cannot be earned or taken away. It is an essential part of each person. Within the context of forgiveness, it is akin to the idea that we are to love the offender, but dislike the offense. As students learn that all people have deep worth (even following injustice), they will be developing an important foundation for forgiving. Recognizing the inherent worth of all individuals helps students see that all people are equal at a fundamental level, because they exist as human beings, despite their behavior or actions.

### LESSON

- Begin this lesson by discussing and defining the concept of inherent worth, which centers on the insight that even if one person is taller, smarter, or richer than another, everyone is equally worthy because they are human beings and part of the human community. What is inside a person provides them dignity and worth as a human being.
  - This idea is illustrated in this lesson’s book, *Let’s Talk About Race*, when the author asks the reader to feel their cheekbones and the cheekbones of someone close by, illustrating that as all people have cheekbones, they all have self-worth.
  - Self-worth does not need to be earned. Students can be helped to understand that even people who do bad or hurtful things have self-worth because they are human, like everyone else.
  - In the context of forgiveness, we rediscover the humanity of the person who hurt us.
  - This helps students realize that even their enemies and people who have hurt them are human beings, as they are, who are doing the best they can to make their way in the world.

### READING:

- Read the book, *Let’s Talk about Race*, out loud to students or have them read it out loud as a class.
- Description of the book: The author, Julius Lester invites you into his book by writing “I am a story. So are you.” He discusses how each individual has many different elements to their story,

from family to name to likes and dislikes and even race. However, he says that race is just a portion of your story, so why do people think it is so important? He explains that sometimes we get too caught up with race and make quick assumptions based on skin color. He shares his own story as he explores what makes each of us special. By addressing the issues of race and equality, this book allows children to question whether or not someone can be “better” than someone else and what that means to be “better.” Children will have the chance to think more critically about the consequences of considering oneself better than another.

#### DISCUSSION:

- *Note to educator before discussion:* Be prepared for students’ questions about race relations and issues of prejudice/discrimination. Please read the special note below for more guidance.\*\*
- Discuss how underneath our skin, everyone has the same bones. Have students do the actions in the book, i.e., feel their cheekbones and those of a partner. Students can be asked to think about how if we take off our skin, we all have the same bones underneath or how we all have red blood, implying we are all human beings who have worth and dignity. No particular group is better than another because of their skin color, ethnicity, religion, parents’ job, etc. Questions that students can respond to in their notebooks or discuss in small groups include:
  - What happens when we take off our skin? Do we all look the same?
  - Does being better at a sport or a better musician or actor make someone a better person than someone else? Why or why not?
  - What does it mean to say everyone is equal and everyone has worth, no matter what their skin color is or how good or bad they are?
  - Does having one skin color over another make someone a better person?
  - Even though race doesn’t make one group better than another, why is it important that we acknowledge a person’s race?
  - What makes up your story?
  - Are you better at something than others? How does that make you feel?
  - What might happen if we believe someone is better than others?
  - If someone makes a poor decision that ends up hurting someone else, does the person who made the poor decision lose their worth as a human?
  - As a class, discuss why even people who do bad things or make mistakes have self-worth. Ask students to share their ideas for how forgiveness and inherent worth are related. Explain that when we forgive, we rediscover the humanity of the person who hurt us.
- Have students share some reasons why people hurt others. Remind students that even their enemies and people who have hurt them are human beings who are doing the best they can to make their way in the world.

#### ACTIVITY:

- Finish by having students write about the physical and personal characteristics that make up their story and make them unique, or similar to their classmates and others. They can draw a picture to go along with their story or just draw a picture of themselves. They can use the format illustrated in the book, *Let’s Talk About Race*, to tell their story if they prefer.

- Summarize the lesson by sharing and highlighting the different stories of the students (with students' permission,) but conclude that all students are equally worthy because they are human beings.

---

## CLOSURE

- Bring the lesson back to the topic of forgiveness by asking students to reflect on whether there is someone who they may want to work towards forgiving. Then, have them respond to the following questions:
  - Did the discussion/book change how they felt about that person? If so, how?

### \*\* *Special Note about the book:*

- Discussions about race often include controversy, misunderstandings, and strong feelings. Children know this is a topic in the media, and some of them may experience racism within schools and/or their communities. Thus it is important to discuss the topic of race and discrimination with students, especially as they may be confused and have questions. For example, in a past teaching of this curriculum, when this book was introduced to students, one of the students raised her hand and asked, "Isn't it racist to talk about race?" This example illustrates the importance of addressing this topic with students.
- Because this is a current topic in society that is receiving much attention, students may have strong reactions to this book. Be ready to openly discuss their reactions. At the end of *Let's Talk About Race*, the author writes, "I'll take off my skin. Will you take off yours?" While some may [view](#) this as "colorblindness"—a [harmful belief](#) that racial group membership should not be taken into account or even noticed—author Julius Lester emphasizes the equality and worth of every human being, no matter their race or other characteristics. Highlighting the unique individual characteristics of all human beings such as race, religion, where one lives, etc., the book explains that regardless of these characteristics, we are all worthy and equal as human beings. Race is viewed as one unique characteristic of an individual that, while important, is not the only component that forms an individual's identity. Ultimately, the book encourages us to consider race along with all the other components that make up a person's story. However, it is worth acknowledging that in today's racial climate, ignoring a person's skin color entirely—or colorblindness—can also be a way to deny that racism still exists. According to *Embrace Race*, "we need to see and appreciate our racial differences, not remove them."

## SOURCE

[The Courage to Forgive: Educating Elementary School Children About Forgiveness](#)

A Social Emotional Learning/Character Education Teaching Guide for Children Ages 9-12, [International Forgiveness Institute](#)

[Suzanne Freedman, Ph.D.](#), University of Northern Iowa

[Robert D. Enright, Ph.D.](#), University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education

## REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- How did students respond to the concept of inherent worth?

- Have you noticed a difference in how students respond to one another?

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND IT

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

A [study](#) found that adolescents who were taught a forgiveness curriculum increased their hope and willingness to forgive, and decreased their anxiety and depression. Part of the curriculum focused on recognizing the inherent worth of all individuals, including offenders, along with the various reasons that may lead someone to commit an offense.

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The increase in school shootings, bullying, violence, and discrimination experienced by children and adolescents underlines the need for education that helps students cope with trauma and deep hurt, both of which can result in anger, anxiety, and depression.

Education on forgiveness is particularly important given that angry and hurt children who cannot understand their feelings often inflict anger upon others, or deny it until it erupts. Teaching [children](#) what forgiveness is and is not as well as how to forgive can help create more positive and safe learning environments.

## TERMS OF USE

Thank you for downloading this resource! Please feel free to share it with friends, teachers, colleagues, and anyone else who might benefit from it.

Greater Good in Education is a free online resource produced by UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center. Visit our website at [ggie.berkeley.edu](http://ggie.berkeley.edu) to choose from more than 300 practices that can be incorporated into all aspects of a school community, from academic instruction to staff meetings to engagement with parents.

Please email us at [ggsceducation@berkeley.edu](mailto:ggsceducation@berkeley.edu) with any questions about our programs and resources for educators.

With gratitude,  
Greater Good in Education