

Title of Lesson Plan: Empathic Literacies: A Letter from a Concentration Camp

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Grade Level: Grades 3-8

Synopsis/Summary of Lesson:

Students will read Yoshiko Uchida's "Letter from a Concentration Camp," a fictional letter written from the perspective of a young Japanese American in 1942. In a letter to a friend, Jimbo Kurasaki describes the conditions of living in Tanforan Racetrack, which was used as an early detention center for Japanese Americans during World War II. Discussion questions and a short letter-writing activity follow the reading.

Background Introduction:

In 1942, shortly after the outbreak of war with Japan, the United States government uprooted and imprisoned, without trial or hearing, 120,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry. They were sent first to "assembly centers" located in abandoned racetracks and fairgrounds. From there they were sent to ten bleak concentration camps located in remote areas of the country.

Tanforan Racetrack, located just south of San Francisco, opened on April 28, 1942. The racetrack served as a temporary "assembly" center to imprison Japanese Americans from the San Francisco Bay Area until more permanent facilities could be built. Prisoners inhabited horse stalls and were subject to difficult living conditions, such as limited bathroom facilities and infestations inside of the stalls. The center closed on October 13, 1942. Most prisoners were transferred to Topaz, a concentration camp in Utah.

Possible Units to Use With:

- Personal narrative
- Reading and writing historical fiction
- Introduction to the Japanese American incarceration period
- Understanding adolescent perspectives in literature

Focus/Essential Question(s):

- How do young people respond to the conditions of incarceration?

- What is the role of writing letters or messages to others? What do we gain from communicating with others, especially those who might be unfamiliar with our circumstances?

Objectives:

1. To help students become aware of the Japanese American World War II incarceration camp experience by reading and writing about what happened to Japanese American children.

C3 Framework Standards:

- **D2.Geo.4.K-2.** Explain how weather, climate, and other environmental characteristics affect people's lives in a place or region.
- **D2.Soc.2.9-12.** Define social context in terms of the external forces that shape human behavior.

Required Materials and Preparation:

Preparation:

- Large sheet of paper with discussion questions (see below).

Materials:

- Copies of Yoshiko Uchida, "Letter from a Concentration Camp" in Alexander, Lloyd, and Jon Agee. *The Big Book for Peace*. Edited by Ann Durell, and Marilyn Sachs. EP Dutton Children's Books, 1990.

Procedure:

1. Introduce the day's reading to students. Tell students that they are going to read a short letter written by a young person named Jimbo Kurasaki, one of many Japanese Americans put into prison camps during World War II.
2. If students need some historical context on this period of American history, teachers can play a short video from Densho called "Looking Like the Enemy":
 - <https://densho.org/looking-like-the-enemy/>
3. Pass out copies of "Letter from a Concentration Camp." Allow students sufficient time for reading. Teachers may wish to read the text aloud or have students read aloud to each other in pairs.
4. Post six large pieces of paper around the classroom with the following questions written on them, one question per paper. Teachers can duplicate questions and create more posters, depending on the size of their classes.

<i>1. Where is Jimbo Kurasaki? Why is he there?</i>	<i>Describe the living conditions (the horse stall, mess halls, mud, dust, wind, barbed wire) or draw a picture of what is described in the letter.</i>	<i>Do you think Jimbo Kurasaki understands why he is there? Why or why not?</i>
<i>How does Jimbo Kurasaki feel about being in the camp?</i>	<i>How would you feel about living in this place?</i>	<i>Do you think it is right to order people into concentration camps like Jimbo's without a hearing, because they look like the enemy? Why or why not?</i>

5. Tell students to choose one poster to stand next to. With a marker in hand, they should spend a couple of minutes jotting down a response to the question.
6. Next, ask students to wander the room freely and respond to the other questions posted around the room. They should read what other students have written and add comments and questions.
7. After students have had an opportunity to circulate and write their responses, gather the class together. Ask for volunteers to review their responses to each of the questions.
8. Next, have students take out some paper or journals to do some writing. Post these two writing prompts at the front of the classroom:
 - Write a letter as Hermie to Jimbo. Talk about how you feel about his situation; what you can do for him; how you feel being on the "outside," while he is stuck behind barbed wire. What can you say to him to make him feel better?
 - Write a letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt on behalf of Jimbo. Make sure to

explain the reasons why he and the rest of his people should go free.

9. Give students time to write a draft of their letter.

10. Offer an opportunity for students to share their letters with small groups or in pairs.

Differentiated Engagement Strategies for Accessibility of All Students:

- Students compose their letters in an audio/video recording or a visual format (such as photographs, drawings, or a painting app).
- Students write their responses or letters in whatever language is most comfortable for them.

Extension Activities:

- Draw a picture or make a diorama of the horse stall in which Jimbo lives. Draw a map of the racetrack camp: the stall, the mess hall, the common bathroom, guard towers, barbed wire.
- Write a poem about how Jimbo feels about living in the camp.
- Look up information about the Bill of Rights. Which rights do you think were violated? Explain why.

“Letter from a Concentration Camp”
Yoshiko Uchida

*Mailing Address: Barrack 16, Apartment 40
Tanforan Assembly Center
San Bruno, California*

*Actual Address: Stable 16, Horse stall 40
Tanforan Racetrack*

May 6, 1942

Dear Hermie:

Here I am sitting on an army cot in a smelly old horse stall, where Mama, Bud and I have to live for who knows how long. It's pouring rain, the wind's blowing through all the cracks, and Mama looks like she wants to cry. I guess she misses Papa. Or maybe what got her down was that long, muddy walk along the racetrack to get to the mess hall for supper.

Anyway, now I know how it feels to stand in line at a soup kitchen with hundreds of hungry people. And that cold potato and weiner they gave me sure didn't make me feel much better. I'm still hungry, and I'd give you my last nickel if you appeared this minute with a big fat hamburger and a bagful of cookies.

You know what? It's like being in jail here—not being free to live in your own house, do what you want, or eat what you want. They've got barbed wire all around this racetrack and guard towers at each corner to make sure we can't get out. Doesn't that sound like a prison? It sure feels like one!

What I want to know is, What am I doing here anyway? *Me*—a genuine born-in-California citizen of the United States of America stuck behind barbed wire, just because I look like the enemy in Japan. And how come you're not in here too, with that German blood in your veins and a name like Herman Schnabel. We're at war with Germany too, aren't we? And with Italy? What about the people at Napoli Grocers?

My brother, Bud, says the U.S. government made a terrible mistake that they'll regret someday? He says our leaders betrayed us and ignored the Constitution. But you know what I think? I think war makes people crazy. Why else would a smart man like President Franklin D.

Roosevelt sign an executive order to force us Japanese Americans out of our homes and lock us up in concentration camps? Why else would the FBI take Papa off to a P.O.W. camp just because he worked for a Japanese company? Papa—who loves American just as much as they do,

Hey, ask Mrs. Wilford what that was all about. I mean that stuff she taught us in sixth grade about the Bills of Rights and due process of law. If that means everybody can have a hearing before being thrown in prison, how come nobody gave us a hearing? I guess President Roosevelt forgot about the Constitution when he ordered us into concentration camps. I told you war makes people crazy!

Well, Hermie, I gotta go now. Mama says we should get to the showers before the hot water runs out like it did when she went to do the laundry. Tomorrow she's getting up at 4:00A.M. to beat the crowd. Can you imagine having to get up in the middle of the night and stand in line to wash your sheets and towels? By hand too! No luxuries like washing machines in this dump!

Hey, do me a favor? Go pet my dog, Rascal, for me. He's probably wondering why I had to leave him with Mrs. Harper next door. Tell him I'll be back to get him for sure. It's just that I don't know when. There's a rumor we're getting shipped to some desert-probably in Utah. But don't worry, when this stupid war is over, I'm coming home to California and nobody's ever going to kick me out again! You just wait and see! So long, Hermie.

Your pal,

Jimbo Kurasaki

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