

WRITING LESSON

YOUR UNIQUE GIFTS



The YES! Magazine article, **Blessings Revealed** by **Puanani Burgess**, is a story about finding our unique and valuable gift and learning how to share it.

Students will use Puanani Burgess' story to write about their unique gifts—gifts that are not necessarily easy to see or valued by society.

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Blessings Revealed

Puanani Burgess tells the story of one student with a gift—a gift our schools are not cultivating.



Puanani Burgess remembers playing in these giant banyan and kapok trees as a child on the grounds of Iolani Palace in Honolulu. Photo by Paul Dunn for YES! Magazine

By Puanani Burgess

Reprinted from YES! Magazine, Winter 2009 issue

A SOUGHT-AFTER MEDIATOR, POET, COMMUNITY ORGANIZER, AND ZEN PRIEST, PUA ATTRIBUTES HER ABILITIES AS A CULTURAL TRANSLATOR to a personal heritage as varied as her homeland, Hawai'i. She's Japanese, Chinese, Native Hawai'ian, German, and French, and grew up poor in one of the Islands' roughest towns. It is fostering that connection—with self, with place, with community—that is the key to her success in bringing people together.

Here is a story she told at the Seattle Green Festival that shows the power of discovering your gift.

One of the processes I use to help people talk to each other I call Building the Beloved Community. There's an exercise that requires people to tell three stories.

The first is the story of all of your names. The second is the story of your community. The third story I ask them to tell is the story of your gift.

One time, I did this process with a group in our local high school. We went around the circle and we got to this young man, and he told the story of his names well and the story of his community well, but when it came time to tell the story of his gift, he

asked, “What, Miss? What kind gift you think I get, eh? I stay in this special ed class and I get a hard time read and I cannot do that math. And why you make me shame for, ask me that kind question? What kind gift you have? If I had gift, you think I be here?”

He just shut down and shut up, and I felt really shamed. In all the time I have ever done that, I have never, never shamed anybody before.

What would happen if our community was gift-based? If we could really understand what the gift of each of our communities were, and really began to support that?

Two weeks later, I am in our local grocery store, and I see him down one of those aisles and I see his back and I’m going down there with my cart and I think “Nope I’m not going there.” So I start to back up as fast as I can and I’m trying to run away from him. And then he turns around and he sees me, and he throws his arms open, and he says, “Aunty! I have been thinking about you, you know. Two weeks I have been thinking: ‘What my gift? What my gift?’ ”

I say “OK bruddah, so what’s your gift?”

He says, “You know, I’ve been thinking, thinking, thinking. I cannot do that math stuff and I cannot read so good, but Aunty, when I stay in the ocean, I can call the fish, and the fish he come, every time. Every time I can put food on my family table. Every time. And sometimes when I stay in the ocean and the Shark he come, and he look at me and I look at him and I tell him, ‘Uncle I not going take plenty fish. I just going to take one, two fish, just for my family. All the rest I leave for you.’ And so the Shark he say, ‘Oh, you cool, brother.’ And I tell the Shark, ‘Uncle, you cool.’ And the Shark, he go his way and I go my way.”

And I look at this boy and I know what a

genius he is, and I mean, certifiable. But in our society, the way schools are run, he is rubbish. He is totally destroyed, not appreciated at all. So when I talked to his teacher and the principal of the school, I asked them what would his life have been like if this curriculum were gift-based? If we were able to see the gift in each of our children and taught around that gift? What would happen if our community was gift-based? If we could really understand what the gift of each of our communities were, and really began to support that?

So that for me is a very native approach—being able to see the giftedness in every aspect of life.

Puanani Burgess’s article is part of Sustainable Happiness, the Winter 2009 issue of YES! Magazine. Pua is a community building facilitator, trainer and consultant in Hawai’i, the U.S. and the Pacific. She is also a poet and cultural translator who is noted for her experience in community, family and values-based economic development, mediation and storytelling processes. Pua is also a board member of the Positive Futures Network, publishers of YES! Magazine

Part 2: The Writing Prompt

What is your gift? How do you share it?

Part 3: Writing Guidelines

The writing guidelines below are intended to be just that: a guide. Please adapt to fit your curriculum.

- Provide an original essay title.
- Reference the article.
- Limit the essay to no more than 700 words.
- Pay attention to grammar and organization.
- Be original. Provide personal examples and insights.
- Demonstrate clarity of content and ideas.

Common Core State Standards:

This writing exercise meets several Common Core State Standards for grades 6-12, including W. 9-10.3 and W. 9-10.14 for Writing, and RI. 9-10 and RI. 9-10.2 for Reading: Informational Text. This standard applies to other grade levels. “9-10” is used as an example.

How did this lesson work for you and your students?

Share your feedback with us and other teachers
by leaving a comment on our website:

www.yesmagazine.org/for-teachers/writing-competition-essays/writing-lessons/your-unique-gifts

Part 4: Evaluation Rubric

Our rubric should serve as a guide, not an unreasonable or rigid standard. You've probably encountered similar rubrics before, but here are two quick pointers for using ours:

1. In the left column, find the criteria for evaluating essays.
2. In the top row, find scores from 4 (outstanding) to 1 (poor).

	4	3	2	1
Focus on topic	There is one clear, well-focused topic. Main idea is supported by detailed information.	Main idea is clear, but general.	Main idea is somewhat clear, but there is need for more supporting evidence.	Main idea is not clear. There is a seemingly random collection of information.
Organization	Details are placed in a logical order and the way they are presented effectively keeps the reader's interest.	Details are placed in a logical order, but the way they are presented sometimes make the writing less interesting.	Some details are not in a logical or expected order, and this distracts the reader.	There is no clear introduction of the main topic or structure of the paper.
Originality and strength of ideas	Formulates a thought-provoking, well-developed, and fairly original position on an issue.	Writer takes a clear position on an issue, though it is not developed fully.	Writer's position is evident, though it is vague.	Fails to take a clear position, or writer contradicts herself.
Evidence and/or reasoning	Provides specific reasons and/or evidence that demonstrate understanding and insight.	Offers adequate – though perhaps vague or incomplete – supporting reasons and/or evidence	Provides less than adequate or contradictory reasons or evidence to support position.	Offers only general reasons or evidence or none, or offers evidence contradictory to the writer's thesis or main idea.
Command of grammar and conventions	Command of conventions exhibited. Creative word choice and varied sentence structure.	Correct use of grammar and conventions (for the most part).	Weak control of grammar and conventions. Errors are distracting.	Use of grammar and conventions interferes with understanding.
Voice	Author's voice is strong and engaging. Draws reader in.	Writing attracts reader's interest. Author's voice shows engagement with the topic.	Technically well written; however, author's voice is weak.	Writing fails to engage the reader. Does not demonstrate writer's interest in topic.

* Adapted from "Rubric for Editorial – Commentary Essay" from LAEP.org and "6+1 Traits of Writing Rubric" from ReadWriteThink.org.

My Gift

By Bronson Ho'omaikai Afong, Grade 6

Our class read “Blessings Revealed,” by Puanani Burgess. We were given an assignment to reflect and respond to the questions: What is your gift? How do you share it? The article speaks about things that we are familiar with because we are Hawaiian. We do not take our gifts for granted as we know that our gifts help to keep our culture alive.

My gift is kamaehu. Kamaehu means resilience, or the power to bounce back. Resilience and the power to bounce back means that if I am having a bad day or feeling sad, I have the power to come back strong and happy! To me, it's like being given the power to overcome the sorrow and hard times that I am facing. I have a choice in what I want to be and how I want to feel. An example of a day or situation I just explained was when I was little, I would sometimes be put down, but to me, those were just words. Yes, words can hurt, but still, I have a choice. I would just go on with my day.

Another gift I think I have is lokomaikai. Lokomaikai means compassion. An example of how I exemplify lokomaikai is when a new classmate came to the fifth grade and everyone called him stink or told him he smelled like poop, I didn't care what my classmates thought. I made friends with him, and that made him happy. Now, in the sixth grade, we are still friends. It made me feel really good because I like making people happy. Another example of lokomaikai is when my sister didn't know what she was doing and needed help. I used the value lokomaikai. It helped her understand that I just wanted to help her, and that I wanted nothing in return because it was the right thing to do. It was the Hawaiian thing to do.

My last gift is what my family thinks I have. It is called Aloha kekahi i kekahi. It means to love one another. I try to live this by attempting to make friends—not enemies— because in my

future, I've got to pick either money or friends. I choose to pick friends because money can get you things, but it will run out. Friends can pull you up and help with all they can. They will help you because you helped and cared for them. Another example of this is at school, where if you look weird or you're not as skinny as others, you get teased. I feel really bad for these kids who get teased. I try my best to comfort them and let them know that being different isn't a bad thing. Aloha kekahi i kekahi is showing others love, kindness, and compassion in school. I try my best to show it. Seeing people sad or hurt really makes me mad at the people who would do such a thing. Most of the time, I walk up to the hurt person, and I try everything to make the person cheer up.

My family has helped me become the person I am. Using the gift of kamaehu has helped me get through challenges in my life. I can bounce back and move forward. Lokomaikai is doing something for others and not expecting anything in return. I use my gifts to support and love others when they don't feel accepted. My family has taught me to Aloha kekahi i kekahi and to feel compassion for others. These are the values that I know will keep me strong.

Who's Inside Dementia?

By Alex Gilliland, Grade 8

They didn't start out as Grandma and Grandpa; it took over ten years for me to consciously consider them family. Looking back I think part of me knew that's what they were all along. They started out as neighbors—I called them Auntie and Uncle. We moved to Molokai ten years ago when I was four, and I have lots of memories of spending time at their home when I was growing up. At that time they were in their seventies, but I never saw them as old because they were so full of life.

After three years of living next to Auntie and Uncle, our family moved to the other side of Molokai. The amount of time I spent with them slowly decreased as did their mental health. Two years ago they were diagnosed with dementia. Unfortunately, they didn't have family on island to help them cope with their condition, but they were there for my family in the past, and it was time for us to be there for them.

Our visits to Auntie and Uncle became more frequent. We helped them do the things they couldn't do independently anymore. We brought them groceries, did yard work, and made sure they took their medicine. A few months ago their daughter came to Molokai to look after them. While it took a lot of stress off our family, we couldn't leave their lives completely. After all, they were still my grandma and grandpa.

My gift is that I am able to look past my grandparents' dementia and see who they are inside. Others only see what's been lost when they repeat over and over again stories of events that happened long ago. They no longer see my grandparents; they see only the dementia that traps them inside themselves. I still love to spend time with them and I think they know that I love them with all my heart. Not a lot of people in their life believe that they're still here. I hear people talk about how much they've

changed and how they should get more help. Yes, they've changed, but I wish everyone could see past their fading exteriors.

One of the saddest things about taking care of people suffering from dementia is that there is no cure. You have to accept that their condition will just get worse, and that the best thing you can do is stay by their side. Even though some people see taking care of grandparents as an obligation, I see it as a privilege, and I've learned how special that is.

I never realized that my gift was important until I read the article about finding your gifts in the "Blessings Revealed" article in YES! Magazine. I spent a lot of time thinking about life, what I like to do, and what's important to me. It took a visit to Grandma and Grandpa's to figure out that our time together is truly a gift. I share companionship and love with them on a regular basis. Something they wouldn't have if I wasn't there. My gift is the ability to see beyond the dementia and recognize who my grandparents are, even when others no longer can.

They say that life is a circle; I went from being the one who was cared for to being the caretaker. I will be there for my grandparents, just like they were there for me. That's what family does.

Finding Your Gift

By Kamron Yazdani, Grade 12

I can easily read people. I feel if they are genuine and their motives are sincere. I look into their eyes and there is a knowing. Some might call this being an old soul, but I feel as naïve as a child most of the time. It might be because of this that children are drawn to me. There is no pretense with a small child; they are the easiest and most straightforward of all human beings.

I volunteer with my mother and sister at the 100 Oaks Youth Center, an arts initiative in my neighborhood. I have to admit I feel awkward when a horde of kindergartners trail behind me. I'm a 6"4 skinny seventeen-year-old. It's not supposed to be cool, and in some cases, not even socially acceptable, to play the Pied Piper. They can sense purity of intent, too, I guess.

Last January, at a conference in Florida, I sat in a roomful of teens and adults listening to a speaker when I suddenly felt the presence of little ones next to me. I glanced down and there they were again – four vagabond kids, having absconded from class, staring up at me with hopeful eyes. I shrugged and accepted my fate as the most popular playmate in the 5-year-old category. We all ended up sitting quietly in the meeting room, drawing a collage on a 6-foot banner of what we each have learned at the conference about peace. In the background the speaker elucidated on matters of great importance in the world.

This can be a gift in many ways—my ability to look through something and see. I can't diagram a sentence or expertly write a literary analysis, but I can decipher puzzles and see patterns. Like the boy in Puanani Burgess' article, "Blessings Revealed," I have a gift that isn't easy to see. People come to me to share their problems, and it's not just for emotional support—it's because they want me to help them come up with a viable solution. They tell

me I can break it down for them in a way they cannot do for themselves.

For so long, I felt out of step because my sister is academically inclined. She's the kind of person who knows what to do and when to do it – an organized person. She has confidence and self-esteem. I have never felt that I could measure up to those standards, and now I realize that every person has a gift and they have to find the ability within that makes them unique from everyone else. It has suddenly become clear to me that success isn't measured only by a report card or a performance review or the amount of cash you have in your wallet or how well you can give a presentation. It's measured by how fulfilled you feel inside about who you are—and in the shining eyes of a child or the thankful hug of a troubled friend.

Realizing My Gift

By Tim Hefflinger, Appalachian State University

I accrued hundreds of community service hours before the age of 12 as a “Junior Naturalist” at Cattus Island County Park in New Jersey. My work was typically something like chopping frozen minnows into bite-sized pieces for the reptiles, or hunting for toads to feed to the snakes, or constructing boardwalks. I grew to love this kind of work.

Another option for duties was to stay in the visitor center and assist with educational programming. This kind of work always tugged at me and appealed in a way that was wholly different from feeding the tortoises—but I never felt qualified to speak about any of the animals in front of a group. Every time I showed up for my shift, my supervisor—a real naturalist named Chris, and perhaps the only bearded man I had ever seen in New Jersey—would ask me to help with programming. I would decline every time.

Eventually, I grew tired of the prep work and started feeling the need to stretch my legs. One day I boldly accepted the challenge of talking about a beautiful hognose snake to a small group of people outside of the visitor center. I had dealt with this species for a few years, and I was familiar with the particular individual I was holding. I remember hopping up on a bench with hognose snake in hand, turning to face the group—and having absolutely nothing to say about the hognose snake. The truth is, though I knew what this snake ate and that it was male, I didn’t know any other scientific information. I didn’t know its Latin name, its breeding habits, what other snakes it was related to, or how it survived in the wild. I couldn’t share anything interesting about the stunning creature I was holding. I stood there dumbly for a few moments before blurting out the name of the snake and that it was male. I was mortified. I never volunteered to present animals at Cattus

Island ever again.

For many years, the only lesson I took from that experience was “Don’t speak in public.” I spent much of my childhood as a shy, quiet, reader-of-books who didn’t share much of what he knew with anyone else. Growing up and moving around a lot, I began to realize that not only was this introversion often interpreted as aloofness, rudeness, or inattention, but I was also unhappy and not well-adjusted. My unwillingness to speak up contrasted sharply with my active mind; I was always thinking, but opened up very little to others.

My break from that demeanor took the strange form of joining Model UN and Forensics (speech and debate) teams when I entered high school. For an introverted person, this was a big step, and—much to my surprise—I was good at them. Something about the structure of those settings freed my ego from fearing embarrassment. Presenting a position paper in front of hundreds of people as pretend a delegate of the Russian Federation was not nearly as scary as asking a pretty girl to Homecoming.

As in the story, “Blessings Revealed,” told by Punani Burgess, these experiences have led to the gradual realization of my gift. The lesson that I have since learned from my failed presentation at the county park is not to avoid speaking, but to acknowledge that what I know and care about has value. I know that I must research issues that are important to me, I must learn all I can about injustices and abuses, and I must allow myself to feel passion. Though I didn’t know its Latin name or its breeding habits, I could have held up the hognose snake that day and said that while they were reasonably plentiful in central New Jersey, the species and its prey were rapidly losing habitat everywhere they were found. Fowler’s Toads—

Part 5: Sample Essays

(Tim Hefflinger essay continued)

its main prey in the area—were becoming scarcer due to the heavy use of off-road vehicles and agrichemicals. I could have made these points, but froze up because I was uncertain that it was okay to voice my concerns about the snake. I thought I was supposed to recite the basic facts.

I now believe that it is my calling to talk and write about what impassions me. I must seek out those who feel the pain of injustice. I must work to understand their situation. And I must hold these people (and creatures) out to the world and say in no uncertain terms—voice shaking—that it is our duty as human beings and neighbors to take care of them. Be they Fowler’s Toads threatened with death-by-pesticide, the people poisoned by lead near one of the 12 Superfund sites in Ocean County, NJ, or a single mother who now faces the inability to keep herself and her children warm throughout the winter because the government has cut her heating bill assistance. I will find them and tell their stories. I am called to be a dot-connector and a whistle-blower. And I will find my voice in this calling.
