

“Don’t Let Me Fall” inspired by James McBride's memoir, *The Color of Water*

SONG BY VICKI RANDLE

SONG WRITER’S STATEMENT

What a revelation to find oneself mirrored in the pages of a book! In McBride's memoir was a familiar landscape of life details: a huge unruly bi-racial family, the lonely shame of sexual abuse and wrestling with God for answers. I set out to write their story into song, and so doing, wrote my own.

LYRICS

My kid sister was scrawny, but fearless and tough
She followed me around like a motherless pup
So I let her tag along while we tightrope walked
The backyard fences all along the block

I jumped onto an old shed roof and sunk through to my knees
I yelled at her to run for help, but instead she scrambled next to me
She clawed and pulled with all her might, even though she knew
That if that rotten roof gave way, that she was going too

Don't let me fall, don't let me fall
You got a hold of my hand, please
Don't let go

Don't let me fall, don't let me fall
I put my faith in you
Don't let go

Building a treehouse fort from scavanged wood we found
Rust on the railroad tracks staining my shoes brown

I believed in everything. I won at tag and spelling bees
And at night I bowed my head
And said my prayers on skinned up knees

Bogeymen and monsters were the only things to fear
Pulling all the sheets up tight will make them disappear

That was before the little wide eyed girl-
Pleas, that no one heard-
He pulled her down onto his lap whispering
"Don't you say a word."

Don't let me fall, don't let me fall
You got a hold of my hand, please
Don't let go

Don't let me fall, don't let me fall
I put my faith in you
Don't let go

They said God was the father, standing sentry in the sky
I know he breaks baby the bird shells so they can open up
their eyes

And God breathes in the ocean
He looks like sunrays through the clouds
God smells like the color of air and tastes like snowflakes
in your mouth

And God will never leave me, He'd never let me drown
Then He opened up the floodgates
And the world rushed in and knocked me down

Don't let me fall, don't let me fall
You got a hold of my hand, please
Don't let go

Don't let me fall, don't let me fall
I put my faith in you
Don't let go

SOURCE

As a boy in Brooklyn's Red Hook projects, James McBride knew his mother was different. But when he asked about it, she'd simply say, "I'm lightskinned." Later he wondered if he was different too, and asked his mother if he was black or white. "You're a human being!" she snapped. And when James asked what color God was, she told him, "God is the color of water." As an adult, McBride finally persuaded his mother to tell her story – the story of a rabbi's daughter, born in Poland and married in the South, who fled to Harlem, married a black man, founded a Baptist church, and put twelve children through college. *The Color of Water* is James McBride's tribute to his remarkable, eccentric, determined mother – and an eloquent exploration of what family really means.

A guitar and one-note organ part lay a path for this song to travel down. A small voice comes out, bringing us immediately to a tight scared place where this song lives at first. There's a great resolve though, of survival and faith that comes with the swell of music that arrives in the first chorus. One of the featured instruments in the song is an organ, so familiar to many of us as an instrument used in church. It brings us into the familiar and clashes powerfully with lyrics that deal with difficult topics like incest. This song is arranged to explode with the lyrics; as the child finds her voice and her courage, the music swells in support, magnifying her growth.

SUITABILITY

This memoir is an accessible and moving examination of race, faith, and identity, suitable for almost any reader beyond beginner level. While Vicki Randle was inspired by the similarities with her own life, her song does not treat race directly. Another difference is that the song deals with incest. Be prepared in case delicate material raises issues for your learner/s. In general, avoid asking learners to write directly about their own abuse or loss. Rather than focusing on the specific situation that troubles the singer, invite learners to discuss faith in times of trouble. The singer had faith first in her sister, and then in God: either one provides fertile ground for discussion of the learner's own experience and beliefs. Family is a universal topic and therefore generates rich and engaging language practice.

Lesson Plan “DON’T LET ME FALL”

MEMOIR • BY JOHN DARTER

LEVEL	This lesson is designed for adult literacy learners performing at a low intermediate to advanced Adult Basic Education level. It may also be adapted for high school students.
PARTICIPANTS	Volunteer tutor with a single, pair, or small group of learners.
LENGTH	3 tutoring sessions
MATERIALS	CD player and SIBL Chapter Two CD Individual copies of lyrics to “Don’t Let Me Fall” by Vicki Randle Copies of the book, <i>The Color of Water</i> By James McBride Pen/pencil/paper Photocopies of time lines
OBJECTIVES	Learners will: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• create a short memoir in the form of a song, poem, or short story
VOCABULARY	Memoir: n. an account based on personal experience.
ACTIVITIES	Session One <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Pass out the lyrics to Don’t Let Me Fall.2. Have the learner/s partner-read the song.3. Play the song for the learner/s.<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What feelings does the song elicit?• Is the songwriter talking about the present or the past?• Is the songwriter singing about herself? If so, how is this indicated in the song?4. Tell the learner/s that they are going to write their own memoir. Review the definition of a memoir. They can choose what form to use: song, poem, or short story.5. Do a free-write exercise with the learner/s using the following procedures.<ol style="list-style-type: none">A. agree with the learner/s that you will all write for five minutes according to these guidelines:<ol style="list-style-type: none">a) start writing immediately and never stop until the time is upb) write whatever is in your mindc) if you don’t know how to spell it, fake itd) never stop to look back, cross anything out, or decide which word to use – always keep writing

PRE-READING

- B. When time is up, read what you wrote, but don't make any changes.
- C. Underline or highlight your favorite thoughts that have to do with your personal life. The tutor uses these ideas to help the learner/s begin their memoir.

Session Two/Three

1. Play Don't Let Me Fall again, while the learner/s follow along on the hand out.
 - How is the song like a memoir? What did you learn about this character's life?
 - What are some of your memories from your childhood?
2. Using the Process Writing Approach (defined below) create a word bank from the free write. Help the learner/s with words that they want to include in their song, poem, or short story.
2. Help the learner/s generate a first draft. Make sure they:
 - a) write on every other line
 - b) focus on ideas, not mechanics
 - c) utilize a story map if learner/s have difficulty getting started
3. Revise for content only (not mechanics). Learners:
 - a) read it aloud, thinking of the audience
 - b) look for parts that are unrelated to the topic, incomplete, or out of sequence
 - c) get suggestions from others
 - d) rewrite (on a computer if possible)
4. Proofread for grammar, spelling, and punctuation. After the tutor proofs for errors, learners:
 - a) heck dictionary and other resources
 - b) utilize spelling and grammar check if using a computer
5. Learner/s take their copies home and do the final rewrite, after which they:
 - a) share the piece with the tutor or other learner/s
 - b) have it published in the program's newsletter

EXTENSION

1. Use the book *The Color of Water* By James McBride in a follow-up lesson. This will reinforce the learner/s understanding of a memoir. Read the first chapter and discuss how this is similar or different than the song “Don’t Let Me Fall” by Vicki Randale. If the book appeals to the learner/s, you may want to read the entire memoir.
2. With the learner/s, research other memoirs and autobiographies that might be of special interest to them. Utilize what you find in future tutoring sessions.

ASSESSMENT

1. Was the learner/s able to follow the revision process? Where did they have trouble? If it was with grammar, use following sessions to strengthen their grammar skills, and do the same with other areas.