

The Art of Loving Well
A Character Education Curriculum for Today's Teenagers
Sample Activity
Art of Loving Well Book

One of forty selections in The Art of Loving Well anthology, Norma Fox Mazer's story "Up on Fong Mountain" chronicles in journal format the first romance of fifteen-year-old Jessie and her boyfriend, BD. Their relationship eventually evolves from a series of awkward, combative encounters and a hostile split to one that promises more mutual respect and care.

By talking about the actions of the characters, students have a safe avenue for discussing issues and practicing communication skills that are central to their own lives. And, incidentally, parents are typically relieved that nowhere in the curriculum is language any more explicit sexually than it is in the activities appended to this selection.

To conduct this activity, check out a copy of "Up on Fong Mountain" from your library.

CLASS ACTIVITY: Instant Replay.

Several times in her journal Jessie mentions that she is lonely, and each time she longs to talk with someone or to have someone listen to her and understand. In February she writes, "I feel sort of depressed. I wish I had someone I could really talk to." At the end of March, she complains that BD "is another one whose most favorite subject is myself—that is HIMself. The thing is, I really like to listen to him go on because, mainly, I like him. But if he never wants to listen to me, after a while, I get this horrible lonely feeling. I think that's it. A lonely feeling. Sad." At some level Jessie knows that our greatest happiness comes from the connections we make with other people, the friendships, the love. And she understands that true intimacy is based upon a profound knowledge of one another, NOT just intimate sexual contact. But for a long time BD's focus is mostly on the sexual part of their relationship, so they fight a lot and eventually break up.

Perhaps Jessie and BD would have had a less stormy romance if they had been better able to talk about their problems and disagreements. Learning to talk—and listen—are skills we often underestimate. Good communication takes considerable effort and a determination to hang in there even at times when it goes badly. BD eventually learns that communication is poor when it's too one-sided, when one person always feels overpowered by the other. Jessie reports that her mother "doesn't say boo to Dad, she's always very sweet to him," but Jessie is different. "I'm not like her in that way AT ALL. I'M NOT SWEET. . . I became aware of this because of BD. I have been noticing that he likes things his own way. Most of the time he gets it. I have noticed, too, that I don't feel very sweet about this at all." On the one hand, Jessie would be wrong if she never said "boo" to BD and always let his needs and

desires overpower her own. But is constant fighting necessary? Isn't it possible to be assertive and "sweet" at the same time?

Divide into groups of four or five. The setting is one of those nights down by the river. Jessie and BD are parked in his car, part of the "factory production make-out line" as Jessie calls it. Their kissing is wonderful, but BD starts "getting friendlier" than Jessie wants him to be. Instead of starting a fight, what else could Jessie say?

How could Jessie persuade BD in a kind, maybe humorous, but also strong and assertive way that he must respect her wishes and that she thinks it would be a mistake if they got carried away? Write her side of the conversation. When each group has finished, read the monologues aloud. Is one more persuasive than the others (you may decide to take a vote)? Do some sentences stand out as particularly good?

WRITING ASSIGNMENT: Friday, June 20 How might the ending have changed if Jessie had given in to BD's sexual pressure? Write an alternative Journal entry dated Friday, June 20, in which you imagine what her thoughts and feelings would be if she had NOT decided that "At this point in my life, the way I feel is—my body is my body, and I don't care to share it with anyone. I don't know totally why I feel that way, and I don't think I have to know why." How might the circumstances and emotions be different if she and BD had gotten "carried away" as her mother feared could happen?