

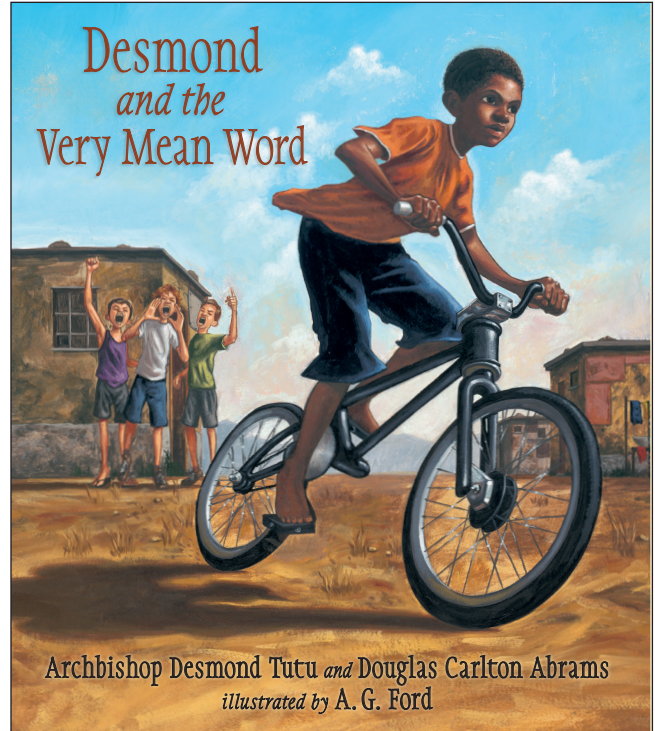
# Desmond *and the* Very Mean Word

A STORY OF FORGIVENESS



Archbishop Desmond Tutu  
*and* Douglas Carlton Abrams

*illustrated by* A. G. Ford



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## INTRODUCTION

In *Desmond and the Very Mean Word*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Douglas Carlton Abrams deliver a moving story about the power of words and the secret of forgiveness. Desmond, the young boy at the center of this story, learns that words can hurt, and that “getting back” at those who do us harm does not always provide the desired result. In fact, it is forgiveness that releases us from the pain.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Here are some questions meant to open conversation about diversity, respect, compassion, and the meaning of forgiveness.

1. Describe how Desmond feels when he sees the gang of boys. What does Desmond feel after hearing the mean word they yell? Why do you think they yell that mean word to Desmond?
2. How does it make you feel when someone says mean things to you?
3. Why do you think Desmond tells Father Trevor that he won't forgive the boys?
4. Desmond tells Father Trevor that instead of forgiving the boys, he will “get them back.” Explain what Father Trevor means when he tells Desmond: “soon our whole world will be filled with nothing but ‘getting back’ ” (page 10).
5. Do you agree with Father Trevor when he says that forgiveness is a way to heal our hearts (page 21)?

6. Why do you think Desmond wants to be alone when Father Trevor comes to visit?
7. Does Desmond forgive the boy with the red hair in order to make himself feel better or because he feels sorry for the boy?
8. Who has the power to forgive? Has there ever been a time when you had to choose between forgiving someone and “getting back”? Was it a difficult decision? How did you handle it?
9. How do Desmond and the red-haired boy show each other respect and forgiveness?
10. What are some ways that people can show compassion and respect for one another?

## ACTIVITIES

These activities will encourage students to continue to think about how words and deeds affect others, to learn more about their classmates, and to build a supportive classroom environment.

### *I Messages*

Discuss the various emotions that Desmond feels throughout the story. Create a chart with the following headings: *Before the Mean Word*, *After the Mean Word*, *After Getting Back*, *After Forgiving*. Ask the children to describe Desmond’s feelings as they relate to each category. Their responses will provide a word bank for the “I Messages” they will write. For example, before Desmond hears the mean word, he feels scared of the boys: other words for this column might include *afraid*, *terrified*, or *nervous*. After the boy says the mean word, Desmond feels mad; other words for this column might be *angry* or *furious*. Then, after Desmond gets back at the boys, he feels bad (*sad*, *depressed*). Finally, after he forgives the boy, Desmond feels good (*happy*, *relieved*).

Once the word bank is filled, have each student create a series of “I Messages” to share with the class. For example: “When you steal my pencil, I feel frustrated.” “When you say mean words to me, I feel hurt.” “When you won’t sit with me at lunch, I feel sad.” Then create a list of “When . . . I feel . . .” sentences for the children to complete. Have the children share their responses for further discussion.

### *We Are Alike, We Are Different*

Discuss with the class the fact that we are alike in many ways. For example, they are all in the same grade at the same school. Note that we are all also different from one another in some ways. Eye color can vary, as well as height, weight, and skin color. Discuss the ways that differences may be misunderstood and may cause people to become hurtful to others. Divide the class into pairs and instruct the children to take turns interviewing one another. Have the children note on one side of a sheet of paper all the things that they and their partner have in common (how they are alike), and on the other side, all the ways they are different. Hang all the responses on a clothesline in the room so that both sides can be viewed.

## *Situation Cards*

Does Desmond change his feelings for the boy with the red hair when he sees the way his brothers treat him? Have a discussion with the class about empathy, compassion, and respect. Ask the children if they know what those words mean. Define them as treating others the way you would like to be treated and to have feelings of support and love for those around us.

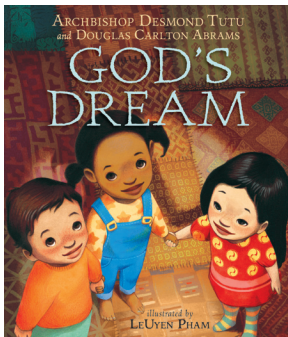
Brainstorm with the class various situations in which you might show empathy, compassion, and respect. Examples: when someone is sitting alone, when someone is not being allowed to play, when someone is crying, when a new child joins the class, when two children fight over a toy, when someone yells a mean word at you, and so on. Once the situations have been listed, discuss the compassionate ways one might respond to each instance. For example, if someone is sitting alone, you might approach that child and ask to join him or her. If someone is crying, you might ask why and try to find out what is wrong, to see if you can help. If someone is fighting, you can suggest ways to compromise.

After the discussion, write each situation on an index card. Call two or three children at a time to the front of the room, hand them a card, and ask them to act out the situation and a compassionate response to it. Modeling such behavior in class may help transfer it to real-life situations.

Create an “Empathy, Compassion, Respect” chart to keep in the classroom. Whenever you observe a child acting out those qualities, write his or her name on the chart.



## **Also by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Douglas Carlton Abrams**



Aided by vibrant artwork evoking such images as a rainbow and a sharing circle, Archbishop Desmond Tutu offers the essence of his ubuntu philosophy, a wisdom so clear and crystalline that even the smallest child can understand.

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