

READING

What Do We Do with a Difference?

Poet James Berry raises important questions about the ways we respond to differences in a poem titled “What Do We Do with a Variation?”:

What do we do with a difference?

Do we stand and discuss its oddity

or do we ignore it?

Do we shut our eyes to it

or poke it with a stick?

Do we clobber it to death?

Do we move around it in rage

and enlist the rage of others?

Do we will it to go away?

Do we look at it in awe

or purely in wonderment?

Do we work for it to disappear?

Do we pass it stealthily

or change route away from it?

Do we will it to become like ourselves?

What do we do with a difference?

Do we communicate to it,

let application acknowledge it

for barriers to fall down?¹

¹ James Berry, "What Do We Do with a Variation?," in *When I Dance: Poems* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991). Reproduced by permission of Harcourt, Inc.

Connection Questions

1. James Berry uses many verbs and verb phrases to show what we “do” with a difference. Pick out these verbs and think about the variety of responses to difference that they present.
2. Reflect in your journal about how one of these verbs or verb phrases connects to a time you experienced difference. Is there a word to describe how your school or community has reacted to difference?
3. What do you think the phrase “let application acknowledge it” means? How might it connect to the idea of barriers?
4. What is the message of the poem?
5. Write another stanza of the poem describing how you’d like to see your community respond to differences today.