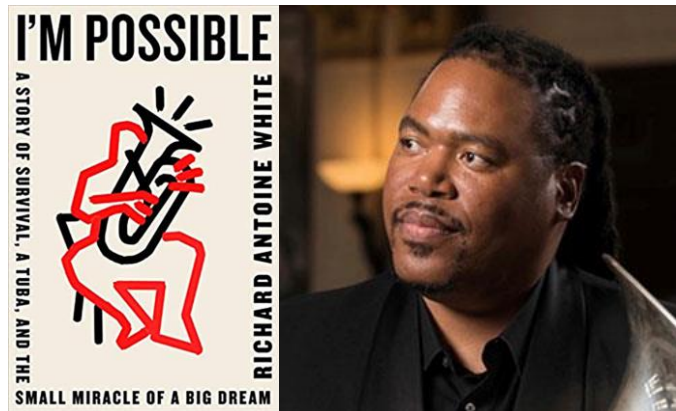




I'm Possible:
A Story of Survival, A Tuba, And the Small Miracle of a Big Dream
A Teaching Guide



This teaching guide is a companion to *I'm Possible* by Richard Antoine White and is organized around four themes that emerge in his memoir: identity, education, choice, and community.

IDENTITY

A person's identity is comprised of the many qualities and beliefs that give an individual their sense of self—their memories, their experiences, their relationships. Our identities are shaped by things like our gender, race, age, socioeconomic status, culture, religion, sexual orientation, where we are from, what languages we speak, what our families look like, and even what our bodies look like. Identity can be described as the ways in which an individual describes themselves, or the ways in which a society can describe a person. Identity is a powerful theme woven throughout *I'm Possible*. Richard's sense of self was shaped, developed, and challenged as he travelled through many different worlds.

Exploration/Discussion:

- What does "identity" mean? How do people identify themselves?
- Some identities can be seen by others, some are internal. What are some of the identities that you can usually see? What are some identities that you might not be able to see?
- How does the place you are from shape your identity? How was Richard's identity shaped by Sandtown and Baltimore?
- Before Richard goes to live with Richard and Vivian McClain what did he think of them? What assumptions did he make about their identity? How did his relationship to them evolve over the course of the book? In what ways did they influence his identity?



- On pages 77-79, Richard describes how the administration at the Baltimore School for the Arts expected him to present himself. How did the school express their expectations? How did Richard react to those expectations? How did they make him feel? Do those expectations make sense to you? Do you think the superficial shift in clothing and speech changes something deeper in Richard? If so, how, if not, why not?
- When Richard starts high school at the Baltimore School for the arts, how is his sense of self challenged? How does he respond to this? How does he grow?
- On pages 98-99, Richard is facing Dr. Ford and Mr. King on a disciplinary issue. Instead of being humble and apologizing, the words that flowed out of Richard's mouth had more to do with representation and belonging. Why do you think that was his response to this situation? Do you think he did the right thing? What would you have done if you were in Richard's place? What do you think about the school's response to what he said?
- Throughout his life Richard encountered prejudice. Discuss some of the stories of prejudice that were most striking to you? In the chapter "Play It Again, Prometheus" Richard is stopped by security after having watched his white colleagues be waved through. What assumptions do you think the security guard made? What were these assumptions based on? Were those assumptions accurate? What are the benefits of knowing certain identities of others and what can be misleading or harmful about making assumptions about the identities of others? Use examples from the book to support your thinking.
- Richard's name takes on major significance for him, and even as a small boy he always used his full name (p9-10). What is your full name? What does your name mean to you? Do you know where your name came from and why your parents chose it? Do you have a nickname? Do any of your names represent a particular character trait? How is your name tied to your identity? Ask a parent, grandparent, or guardian about your name.
- A key part of your identity are your personal values. Personal values are the deeply held beliefs that each of us carries through our lives. These qualities can include kindness, honesty, perseverance, integrity. Richard's personal values emerge through his choices, his relationships, and how he faces the challenges that arise in his life. What do we mean when we talk about personal values? Is it important to have personal values? Why or why not?
- Which people in Richard's life had strong personal values? How did they demonstrate them? Were there any people whose strong values surprised you? If so, how?
- On page 2 Richard describes the orchestral auditioning process, which includes playing behind a curtain. "A black curtain portioned the church in two. The screen was there so that the auditions were truly blind. The auditioner's voice was not allowed to be heard. Even their footsteps were not allowed to be heard. The church's floor was wooden and there was carpet spread over it so the committee couldn't hear the click of women's heels or the squeak of sneakers. The committee didn't know the race or gender or age of anyone who played. There was only music." What do you think of this practice? Is it useful? Necessary? What are the pros and cons of assessing candidates this way?

Exercise:

What are your different identities? Remember, we all have many identities, include as many as possible in your list. Assess your list. Which identities are positive, which are negative? What are your



perceptions about your own identities? Of the different identities you listed for yourself write down how what assumptions society might make based on the identities on your list.

For example:

- Identity: big and tall
Assumption: good at football
- Identity: has an accent
- Assumption: uneducated

How do those assumptions make you feel? Pick three identities and a specific thing you can do to reinforce positive perceptions OR tackle the negative ones.

EDUCATION

“Knowledge is the fiercest weapon you can have.” (p96)

Education—both formal and informal—confers knowledge, critical thinking skills, and helps a person to develop their ability to approach challenges with resilience and perseverance and to face unfamiliar situations with flexibility and open-mindedness. A good education can help people establish a foundation for success and contentment, a good education can profoundly affect an individual's life. That was the case for Richard.

Exploration/Discussion:

- What is an education?
- How would you describe your education so far? What are some of the best and worst educational experiences you have had? What made them especially bad or good?
- Is there one teacher in your educational experience who has had a profound effect on you? Describe how that person has influenced you?
- What kind of student are you? How does that influence your education?
- What kind of student was Richard? How did he change over his time at the Baltimore School for the Arts?
- What were the most pivotal turning points in Richard's educational experience?
- How do you think his life might have been different if he had not gotten into the Baltimore School for the Arts?
- Describe some of the teachers who were most influential in Richard's life. How did they help him grow? How did they challenge him?
- What motivated Richard to succeed as a tuba player?
- What was Richard's greatest frustration during his time at the Peabody Institute?
- After Richard becomes a college professor, he has a few students who struggle to graduate in four years. He offers one of them the same words he offered his friend Dontae, “Guess what? When you get your degree, it is going to say the same thing as the person who graduated in four



years” (P 199). Describe the different contexts in which Richard uses this particular framing to talk about education? What do you think he means? How did this idea land with Dontae? With Jordan?

CHOICE

We go through every day of our lives making decisions, big and small, that determine our futures. Sometimes our decisions are as small as what we will eat for lunch, sometimes they are more consequential—whether we will do our homework, or tell the truth about something that happened, or choosing what dream we want to pursue.

While reading about Richard’s life we witness not only the choices he made along the way, but the choices other people made as well. Like his brother William, his adoptive brother Ray, his mother, and his friends. Some of these decisions have positive consequences and others have negative ones. Richard places a lot of stock in our ability to make choices. On page 240 he writes, “It is up to all of us to preserve and protect the right for all our youth to have the ability to make good choices, good change, and a real difference—to themselves and their communities.” All people need is the chance to make a good choice and to create change.

Exploration/Discussion:

- What is a choice?
- What are a few decisions that you have made today? What are some of the most impactful decisions you have made in your life? How did you make those decisions?
- Define and discuss short- and long-term decisions and provide examples of each.
- In elementary and middle school, Richard gets into several fights with other children. Discuss his decision process and explain the consequences. When did he stop getting into physical fights? Why do you think Richard stopped getting into fights?
- On page 49, we learn that the McClains, especially Vivian, had a lot of rules for Richard, and all the children they had raised. What were some of their rules? Do you think their rules were fair or too strict? Why do you think they had so many rules? How did these rules effect Richard compared to how they effected his mother? How does Richard’s experience with rules and structure relate/differ from your experiences? How did these rules effect Richard’s decision-making?
- After Richard dislocated his hip on the football field he decides to audition for the Baltimore School for the Arts. Why did Richard make this decision? What other decisions could have made in this situation? How did his choice influence his future?
- On page 239 Richard writes, “It took me years to see that my mama was a hero.” Discuss what you think this statement means to Richard, and what it means to you. How would you define something as heroic? What makes a choice heroic?
- What choices does Richard make in order to get an orchestral job? What choice does a person need to make if they want to go to college?



- How does having a dream or goal change or influence the way Richard makes decisions?
- Richard doesn't believe people are born great. He says, "We may have certain advantages or disadvantages, but no matter what we have or what we lack, we must nurture our own greatness. We have to know our own dreams and do everything within our power to achieve them, and we must, above all, maintain hope." (p239-240) What do you think of this statement. Do you agree? Why do you think that hope is the thing that Richard thinks we need most of all? What is the mnemonic he has for hope? Why do you think he chose those four pillars for to help propel himself and others toward change?

COMMUNITY

Based on how my life began, I can see that my musical journey seems like a minor miracle, that even the fact of my survival is some kind of marvel. But the most miraculous part of my story is not me—it is the people who kept me from falling through the cracks, the people who saved my life. The people who cared enough to take me in, to teach me, to push me, to tell me something I wouldn't have otherwise known, and to challenge me to be better. I'm no different from the next person, although I do possess a profound belief in what is possible and a deep gratitude for how I came to be here.

A community is a group of people who are linked by a place, social ties, or who share beliefs or perspectives. Your neighborhood is a community. Your school is a community. Communities can also be groups of people linked by profession—like the medical community or the academic community. The communities that Richard was part of were a powerful force in his life. His choices were influenced by the people he was surrounded by.

Exploration/Discussion:

- Where do you find support? How do your friends support you? Your family? Your school? Think of as many examples as possible.
- How would your life be different if you did not have the support of your community?
- What might your life look like if you had more support from your peers, family, or your community at large? What kind of support would you find helpful?
- What groups are you part of? If you are a member of something, like a band, or a church, or a sports team, or a volunteer group, share your experiences. If not, which organization and groups sound the most interesting to you and why? Would you consider joining them? If you're interested and haven't joined, what is holding you back?
- Who are the people in your life that have a positive influence on you? How are they important to you? How do you think they might shape your future?
- Reading this book did you discover anything new about people in your community? Did you think any differently about yourself and/or other people around you in your neighborhood or in your community?
- Where do you feel the safest? What do you feel most like you belong? What makes you feel that way? In what communities did Richard find belonging? What experiences fostered his sense of community and connection?



- What are the situations in which Richard feels most at odds with his community or experience?
- Discuss the types of friends that Richard has. Talk about his friendship with Dontae as well as the other friends described in the book—especially Chris, Craig, Ronald, and Brandon. How did they influence Richard? Do you have any friends who you have known since elementary school, or even earlier? Are those friendships different than the ones you developed later in middle or high school?
- How do you define family?
- Discuss the role of family in this book.
- How would you describe Richard’s relationship to his adoptive brother Ray? How was his relationship with Ray different from his relationship with his half-brother William?
- On page 117, The McClains tell Richard that they want Richard to call them Mom and Dad rather than Grandma and Granddad. What prompted this shift? What did it signify to Richard? Did this change effect his relationship to his mother?
- Within a few short months Richard’s friend Craig had been shot and paralyzed, his old classmate Tupac Shakur had been shot and killed, and his cousin Tracey had been murdered. How did this traumatic series of events effect Richard? How did it change his relationship to Baltimore?
- Recently Richard’s aunt Regina implored her nephew not to be mad at his people in Sandtown, “The seventies was a wicked time.” What does she mean by this? Explain how drugs negatively impacted the community that Richard spent the first four years of his life in?
- How do you think Richard’s sense of community shaped his actions around the bankruptcy of the New Mexico Symphony Orchestra?
- Describe and discuss the different communities that Richard is part of and how they shaped his identity and influenced his life.

Exercise:

In *I’m Possible* we learn about leaders who had a positive influence on Richard. We also see how Richard evolved into a leader. Consider what it means to be a leader and list the leadership qualities you value. Who is a leader--past or present--who had demonstrated each of the qualities you value in a leader?

Identify a leader from your own life who you would like to interview, make sure it is a person that you have access to. Think of leaders you know personally in some aspect of your community. Some examples are your principal, assistant principal, or teachers, coaches, conductor or band leader, church leaders, family-members. Write out ten questions you would like to ask that person. Contact that person and request a day and time to interview him/ her. You can either interview the leader in person, by phone, or by e-mail.

Following your interview, prepare a fifteen-minute presentation to share what you learn with your class. Your presentation should include a brief introduction of the person you selected, the leadership qualities they possess, the reason you chose to interview them, and a few of the most interesting take-aways from your interview.



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For Teachers:

- What is your plan to discover and nurture the strengths of a struggling student and how can you work with your colleagues to support them?
- How do you mentor your students' character development? What more could educators do?