

Callingness

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [May 12, 1999](#) issue

Our dictionaries are too small. We do not have nearly enough words to name the realities around us. My 12-volume Oxford English Dictionary and two supplements are too spare. We have to keep recombining words to express what we find in God's rich world.

For example, the OED skips from *teacher* to *teachership*, though there's a small-print reference to *teacherdom* as "obs. rare." I have another suggestion: *teacherness*.

I always have my net out for unique word usages. I found *teacherness* in the April 17 *Chicago Tribune Magazine*. The cover story featured "Karla Kelly's Classroom: Teaching Hope and the ABCs in a Violent World." Kelly teaches in a Chicago school near the high-rise purgatory of public housing called the Robert Taylor Homes. The children's trip to her classroom is a life-and-death journey through a drug-infested, high-crime neighborhood.

Kelly treats children with respect, provides a haven, shows love as she exacts discipline and imparts hope. The setting is anything but prestigious, and this teacher could well name her ticket at more comfortable places, but she does not seek them. The sign with her name on the door of room 106 at John Farren Elementary School is not as shiny as the brass plates on the desks of the investment bankers who were her high school classmates.

"She wore a red dress and sandals on her first day of teaching," says writer Rick Kogan. "When she saw the sign on the door that said 'Miss Kelly's 1st Grade Classroom,' tears welled in her eyes and she thought, 'I just can't believe this.'"

"I had this feeling of teacherness," she says now, "realizing all of the responsibilities."

My dictionary says that *-ness* suggests a state or a condition, and is usually the suffix in an adjective or participle, and occasionally in pronouns and adverbs. Illustrations: *I-ness*, *me-ness*, *whatness*. None of these fit Ms. Kelly.

She is evidently a verbal innovator, adding *-ness* to a common noun in an uncommon way. The way she immediately explains what *teacherness* connotes--responsibility--suggests that she is here enriching the concept of the vocation. Take responsibility, forget yourself and think of the people with whom you interact. You may not merit a sign on the door, but you can speak of *-ness*.

I'd trust a minister who is responsible enough to embody *pastorness*. We've all seen and benefited from *custodianness* and *trusteeness*. Of course, there can be *deaconness*--and I've experienced *deaconnessness*. And there is or should be *parentness*.

Kelly elaborates on *-ness*. "Just driving into the community I was overwhelmed. . . . A white teacher told me, . . . 'These kids are all crazy. You watch your purse. All it takes is one little black hand.'" Kelly found that the children are not crazy but frightened, eager to learn, ready to hope.

Every night Kelly prays. "For the kids to be safe, for my friends and family, for Gerald [her fiance] and his son." After her prayers, she will sleep well, Kogan says.

Free of responsibilities, she probably embodies *sleeperness*. There are more like Karla Kelly, but let her stand in for them all today. We have another word for what her *-ness* and sense of responsibility and fulfillment mean: calling.