

*Passage One:  
Finding a Family*

*The Beat of the Distant Drum*

*Tamika*



My grandmother tells me that I have two lines of ancestry. Both of them have etched my character; both have left a distinct sound in my heart, a constant, driving beat, much like the beat of a drum. The drum, the rhythmic beat of an ancient drum, has always been my sanctuary when the world around me seems to close in and I am about to abandon hope. When I sit alone and close my eyes, I can feel the deep beat inside me—steady, strong, and full of meaning and history. Sometimes I have felt that it is the only connection I have with my past; all else has been erased.

I was born into an imperfect world. I was thrust into a family that was bruised. Our family consisted of my mother and my seven brothers and sisters—from four different men. I was the sixth child and, by the time I was born, my mother was with another man. I never had someone that I could call a father, just a man I never knew. My mother did her best to survive, but as the men in her life moved on, we were left with another brother or sister, a mother deeper in despair, and a life with no one to look up to, no money, and no promise of a future.

My mother died when I was only seven years old. I didn't know what death was; I saw everyone crying, so I cried too. I just thought that that was what you were supposed to do when people died. Later, when I realized that she wasn't coming back, I was devastated. My mother would never be here again to kiss me, hug me, or let me sleep with her when I was scared. I remember pretending to be scared so that I could sleep with her. Now I **was scared** but I would never be able to get in bed with her again.

I felt abandoned and alone. Years later, I was able to express my feelings in a poem.

Mothers Don't:  
Mothers don't leave you alone  
at night to cry yourself to sleep;  
they don't leave you to wallow

in the hole of pain they dug so deep.  
Mothers don't send you away  
when they don't want you any more;  
they aren't supposed to scream  
and yell, then throw you out the door.

Mothers don't tell you they love  
you as a form of punishment;  
instead it is supposed to delight you  
like a bird that heaven sent.

Mothers don't leave you at the tender age  
of seven to cook and prepare your own meals;  
instead they should care only about  
what you think and how you feel.

Mothers don't discipline you  
for something you haven't done;  
they don't make a difference  
between their daughter or their son.

Mothers don't push you away when  
you need a soft kiss or a warm hug;  
they're suppose to wrap you up  
and keep you safe and snug.

Mothers don't let you go around  
with dirty clothes and ragged sleeve;  
Mothers don't close their eyes on you  
but most of all, Mothers don't leave.

Tears weren't helpful either. My cries for help were answered by a hollow emptiness, followed by sadness, more sadness, and more emptiness. The drum seemed so faint now. I wasn't so sure that I could even hear a distant drum.

The State wanted my twin brothers and me—we were the youngest kids—to live with our fathers, but the men could not be found; I don't think they wanted to be found. We had a desperate need to live somewhere, so we were separated and placed with foster families. We wanted to be together and our prayers were answered when my grandmother arranged for us to move to California to be with her.

When we got to move in with our grandmother, we became a family again. Oh, how I could hear the drums when grandma held me real close to her chest; my heart seemed to flutter when I hugged her back, not wanting to let go.

My grandmother says that I am a descendant of a proud tribe of West Africans who lived somewhere in the Congo Basin. They lived a simple, yet peaceful, existence that depended on a harmonious relationship with the land and the water and the cycles of life. My ancestors developed this way of life thousands and thousands of years ago by adapting to change in the environment and making friends with the forces of nature and by learning to work together with their brothers and sisters. There was a clear voice within these people, an ancient soul that bridged time. The voice bore the accumulated inner wisdom of the time in which they arose from ancient bones, somewhere in the heart of Africa.

My grandmother enrolled me in the neighborhood school. It was tough, but I made it through with the help of my fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Kaje-Weng. She was amazing, so caring and giving. She taught me so much about living in the world and taking care of life. She saw all of life as being precious, especially, it seemed to me, mine. She helped me get through

some terrible times. I didn't know at the time that she would be such an important person in my life.

Unfortunately, my family life with my grandmother didn't last for long. When I was eleven, she had a stroke and died. The beat almost died with her. I was used to caring for my brothers, but we were separated again. I felt that I had lost everything. I went to live with my aunt and her family. I felt like I was a cloud of disruption to them; my time with them lasted only for eight months. After that, I was sent back to Chicago.

Finally, my brothers and I were placed in foster families. We were caught in the system, and, while we had food, clothing, and a roof over our heads, we didn't have family. We never had a dad, mom was dead, and now we were split up. I felt lonelier than ever. I lived with a foster family for the next two-and-a-half years. That worked out for a while, until the man tried to molest me. When I refused to cooperate with him and complained about it, the family didn't want me anymore. I had to leave and become a ward of the court until I was assigned to live with my older sister, Sarah.

As I suffered through the ordeal of changing households, I found some comfort in my natural talents. I choreographed my own dances. When I lived with my younger brothers I involved them. We laughed and danced and played for hours. I always loved to move with the beat, and sometimes I spent hours in my room dancing. I really didn't want to drown in my situation. I liked things upbeat, so I always walked into a quiet room, even at school, and said loudly "Good morning, everybody!" It usually worked; the energy rose immediately.

Sure, I had my dark days, days that I just wanted to stay in bed and hide under the covers. And I had a temper, but I had to go inside myself with it because there was no way to work it out in the world. If someone came down on me in a negative way, I'd get really pissed and go inside. It wasn't always safe to show my anger outwardly. But most of the time, I'd just use my talents to get other people up.

When Sarah took me in, it was a homecoming, to some extent. Once again, I got to live with my younger brothers and my older sister and brother. But, by now, I was afraid to hope for much. I was a fourteen-year-old girl with the responsibility of taking care of myself in the home. Now I had to take care of myself on the streets of Chicago as well.

One cold winter day in March, I woke up at the usual time for school. I am not a morning person, so I hesitated for a while before I actually got up. Finally, I rolled out of bed and went to the bathroom. Inside, I sighed as I looked at the job ahead of me in the mirror. I almost cried realizing how long it would take to make my hair look halfway decent. Not stressing too much, because it was a Friday, I went ahead and got dressed. As usual, I was the only one awake in the house; I knew I didn't have time for breakfast, so I grabbed my backpack and keys, then ran for the door.

Outside, the morning air was still brisk. Although there was no snow on the ground, I could still feel the piercing Chicago wind blowing down my neck. Pulling my jacket closer around me, I walked towards the bus stop.

Every day it depressed me more and more to see the streets that my friends and I lived on—the vacant lots filled with trash, the train tracks scarred with graffiti, the homeless sleeping in doorways, and the drug dealers up early knowing that their customers had been waiting for them. These and all the other signs of poverty stared me in the face as I walked down the familiar, well-populated street that led me to a refuge, the safe haven that school was supposed to provide.

Thousands of thoughts filled my mind as I made my way across the street. Lifting my head to look down the alley as I passed, I made sure there were no cars rushing through to the street. I heard footsteps and I felt the presence of a person walking behind me. Nervousness built up inside of me. I started to pick up the pace when a male voice said, “Hi,” and asked me my name.

I turned just enough to see the face belonging to the voice and relaxed a little. It was not uncommon for guys to try to talk to any girl they saw, so thinking that was all there was to it, I prepared myself to give him the “I’m not interested” talk. That plan backfired because he didn’t stop talking and asking questions. I thought I might try a different tactic and tried to cross the street. That escape faded when my uninvited escort told me not to move or my head would be blown off.

At that moment my jaw dropped, as did my heart. I realized that the man was a criminal and I was being added to his list of victims. I swallowed hard while the tears rolled down my face. Unconsciously, I followed the commands that were given to me in a steady stream. Even though the sun was shining, everything started to get dark before my eyes. He told me to walk down steps that led into the entryway of the basement beneath the porch of a vacant building. There I stood wanting to plead, scream, and pray that he would not go through with his crime, but the sight of the gun kept all my emotions inside. He told me to remove my clothes. I hesitated until he reinforced his statement by pointing his “steel manhood” at me. He pulled me down onto the cold cement. The cement reflected the coldness of his heart and the feeling that gradually overcame me. I cried softly as I lay there unwillingly having my sacred pureness taken away from me.

When I was finally released, I ran so fast I hardly remember running back home. I knocked on the door of our second-floor apartment. I was out of breath. I could see the look of wonder on my sister’s face as I walked back in the door. Tears were streaming down my face while I tried to tell her why I wasn’t at school. Somehow I managed to get across to her that I had been violated in the worst way. Instantly, pain washed over her face. She grabbed me, hugged me, and we cried together. Since we didn’t have a telephone, we went upstairs to use our neighbor’s. Hysterical and hyperventilating, I sat down to be comforted by our neighbor, Barbara, while my sister made the call to the police.

Curled up on the couch, I lay there and waited for the commotion to start. The trauma played over and over in my mind. I pictured a tall, stern police



detective with broad shoulders standing over me. Cold and distant from his work, he would talk to me and ask me what had happened. When the officers arrived, the man fit my expectation. Seeing the small, kind-looking woman officer who accompanied him gave me a little comfort. They both bent down so that they could talk to me. The male officer tried to be gentle, but he could tell how hard it was for me to respond to him. I tried with all my might to tell the story calmly, but the tears would not stop. After a long struggle, we got through it and then headed for the hospital.

I was frightened by the white, busy, sterile hospital. I knew pain and death lurked around every door; this was the place my family members had come to die. My case was an emergency, so I was taken in right away. They took me to a room that contained a table with paper sheets covering it. It was like most of the medical rooms that I had been in. The only difference was that the table had a place where the feet were supposed to go. As usual, I was told to undress, but this time the nurse didn't leave the room. With her glove-covered hands, she picked up my underwear and stuffed it inside a plastic bag. She told me it would be tested and that I would have to leave it there. After undressing, I lay back on the table and waited.

The doctor entered the room and smiled at me. In a calm, professional voice he asked me how old I was. I told him I was fourteen; he frowned and sadly shook his head as if he could see his own child lying there. He put his latex gloves on and told me to place my feet on each of the two metal stirrups. Before I could fully grasp what would happen to me, everything was done. I remember cold instruments, poking, scraping, and sticking. I know he told me what he was going to do, but it didn't quite register in my mind. After the tests, I was left feeling like a gum wrapper thrown away after the important part was taken out. The new detectives, who came in next, didn't help much either. Their line of questioning left me drained and empty as if I were the carcass remaining after the vultures' feast.

I became more frustrated and angry as each detective demanded that I repeat my story. My feelings had no where to go, they just piled up like dirty laundry. After a while I wished I were a part of that pile, for I was in desper-

ate need of being clean. I didn't want to remember, yet I was forced to relive the pain each time they made me repeat my ordeal. I felt myself drifting in and out of reality, confusing myself with my own words. Trying desperately to keep my story the same every time, I searched my mind to find the words and phrases I had just used. The questions that I was asked seemed to get more unfamiliar, and I wasn't sure how to answer them. I could hear myself responding; I felt awkward and unclear. I was getting closer and closer to feeling as if I was going to explode. Finally, the sense of tightness was released when they told me that I could go. I was left with a hollow and empty feeling—not even a hint of a drum sounded inside me.

The doctor came back into the room to give me medication and tell my sister what kind of care I needed. After he gave us his heart-felt advice, he asked us to fill out report forms in the waiting room. I was exhausted and I had an incredible headache. A huge gray cloud filled with all the disgusting things that I had been through, rested on my shoulders and stretched out above me. I wondered how I would get through the next hour, then the next day, and then the rest of my life. I tried to cry, but the tears were stuck inside. When we reached home, I looked out the window and searched for a place to go. Everything I saw made me realize home was the one and only place that I had. And yet, no where, not even in that apartment, did I feel like I was at home.

I remember my grandmother's stories and often think of my ancestors. My ancestors were ripped from their homes in Africa and brought to the “New World” as a “cash crop” by the “civilized” races of Europe. After serving the agricultural aristocracy of the Old South for two hundred years, people like my ancestors were “freed.” Some of the former slaves stayed in the rural South and worked land owned by white people. Others traveled west in search of their own land or north where they became the underclass of the industrial age. My grandparents joined others who flocked to the big industrial cities of the North during World War II to find a home in places like Chicago.

I often wondered if the rapist was to blame or if I, too, was at fault. Society wants us to blame someone; because I didn't know him or understand why this had happened, I blamed myself. For a long time I went around with this thought taped to my forehead. If it wasn't my fault, why did I have to walk the same streets every morning to get to school? And if it wasn't my fault, how come nothing changed and I received help only that one day? Counseling was prescribed, but counseling was never received; when you are poor, counseling isn't an option. I felt trapped in an endless cycle of coldness, coldness that enveloped me and crept inside. Nothing could affect me nor could anyone make me believe that I didn't deserve the hand that life had dealt out to me.

I didn't really see what was going on until I was taken out of the situation. I know now that, as a woman, my world is similar to other woman's. What happened to me can happen anywhere and to anyone. It took me a long time to realize there is no in-depth selection process in crime. I did nothing wrong. The only problem lay within the heart and mind of the man who took that precious part of my body away from me. I will never know what train of thought led him to his decision, and I really don't want to know. I guess what scares me the most is thinking that I wasn't the only one, that he probably didn't stop his victimizing with me.

I looked to my immediate family for guidance and support. I looked to my older brother who lived with us. His girlfriend came around a lot so I got to know her pretty well. She was four years older than I was, but, since she spent a lot of time in our apartment and we were often alone together, we had long, intimate talks. I found out that I had it pretty good compared to her. Her life was tragic. She had grown up in a foster home, too, but she had never known her family. She went from home to home, got involved with the wrong crowd; now she was with my brother. Unfortunately, they used crack cocaine, and she couldn't seem to stay away from it. One day she was found lying dead in the street from an overdose—she was just lying there with a Newport in her hand, dead. She died with no family, no money, no funeral—just a cigarette. I never got to say good-bye; she was gone, forever.

Four months later my brother came into my room and asked me for twenty dollars. Money was scarce, but he said he needed it. He came back home a little while later with two rocks of crack cocaine. I was incensed; I argued with him and tried to reason with him. I said, "You are the oldest one in our family, you are supposed to be an example for us!" He left the apartment and I felt empty and alone. There was no sound of a drum left in me; I could only hear myself sobbing as I cried all night long. My brother returned the next day; I never looked to him for support again.

Sometimes all I had were the memories of my grandmother's stories. She said that when my people migrated to Chicago they didn't have an easy life. The lives of our people had been torn apart by so many forces. Generations had been dislodged, separated from their families, sold, and treated like animals. They had lost their connection with the past—their culture, their values, their teaching stories, their religion, and their sense of family. Some retained their connection with their history; many retained only a hint of the past; a few seemed to lose it altogether.

"Freedom" dumped us into economic poverty and did not restore our culture. We tried the "white man's way" but were constantly reminded of our status by dehumanizing signs reading "whites only" and by access to only low-class jobs. Some broke through this ceiling of inequity; many did not. These bruises of cultural pounding are present in many of the social issues that our people face today.

A few days later, I was with my cousin and her little boy. We were driving down the street and she pulled over to the curb where some men were standing. She called over to the men that she wanted to make a "buy." Then she got out of the car and went into an abandoned building with them; she returned with some **coke** and sniffed it right in the car. I turned her two-year old's head so he wouldn't see what his mommie was doing. I just sat there shocked, holding him tightly, as if I could protect him from the life he was about to lead. My cousin turned to me and said sheepishly, "I'm sorry, I just have to do this."

That was it for me. That was the point I realized how crazy my life was with people dying and using drugs. My cousin was gone; my brother was gone; his girlfriend was gone. I didn't want to end up like everyone else. I wanted to make it in my life; I wanted to pass the sound of the distant drum on to a child of my own some day. ***I wanted to survive!***

Fortunately, I had someone to turn to. Mrs. Kaje-Weng, my former teacher in California, had seen something in me that few people took the time to see. In fact, she helped me to value the distant sound that I felt inside myself. When I left the fourth grade, she never lost touch with me. She wrote cards and letters to me; she paid for a summer biology class; she sent me family pictures and told me that she always thought about me; she included me in her family. She often phoned me, even when I was living with the foster families.

She called during this crisis period. I was fifteen and time was running out. I told her how depressing things were; she heard my plea for help. Then things started happening fast. She called her daughter and son-in-law, who had no children of their own. They were willing to fly me to their home in California during spring break to see if it might be possible for me to live with them. I jumped at the chance.

To say that my trip to California was a piece of heaven wouldn't be saying enough. My hostess and host, Kirsti and Gordon, took me to all the sights, fed me great meals, talked to me for hours, and even let me stay in my own bedroom! The week flew; it was like a fairy tale. At the end of the week we stood at the airport gate and said our "good-byes." Then they asked me if I would like to move to California and live with them. It was a perfect end to a perfect week, but I already knew my answer. I just couldn't leave my ten-year-old twin brothers alone in Chicago. My brothers needed me more than I needed out. I thanked this wonderful California couple and got on the plane and headed back to Chicago.

Kirsti and Gordon must have talked long and hard about my coming back because they called me a few weeks later and wondered if my brothers and I

would spend some time with them while they were in Chicago for a summer conference. They came in July; shortly thereafter, they bought one-way tickets for all three of us—my twin brothers and me—to move to California. My life was turning around and the drumbeat was beginning to return.

My new home proved to be more hospitable than I had ever expected. My brothers adapted quickly to their new family, made lots of friends at school, and proceeded to eat our new parents out of house and home. I knew how much I had to be thankful for. Now I lived in a nice house, had two loving new parents, and had been accepted in a very different culture. School was different, especially being in school with a lot of white kids—we had only one white kid in our school in Chicago. I had a chance to experience very different things. I had adapted to change before, so I knew I could do it again. I had to—I didn't want my brothers, Eric and Derrick, to go through what I had gone through while I was growing up.

That first year was busy and exciting. People were really friendly to me. I enjoyed being able to move smoothly from one social group to another. I made it into cheerleading (all of the other cheerleaders were white), helped launch a girls' **stepper** group (they were mostly African-American), and just generally hung out with the rest of the student body (a real mix of ethnicity). The Steppers had the beat though; we became a hit at the assemblies, got invited to perform at other schools, and inspired similar groups wherever we performed.

I guess most people would have been content just to live the “good life” for the rest of high school, but I liked having new challenges. I liked being the first to try new things, so I sat up and listened when a group of students came into my English class to make a presentation one day toward the end of my first school year in California. I was about to make another change.

I liked school and I liked my classmates and my teachers; my life was full and I should have been content with the way things were. But, somehow this group visiting our classroom caught my attention. They seemed so supportive of each other. They seemed to know each other in a way, unlike any that

I had seen before in school. They talked about trusting and caring, building community, taking responsibility for themselves, creating their own education, educating the whole person, hands-on learning, building a collective vision. Many of the terms were new to me, but I felt I wanted the sincerity and connectedness these students had in my own life.

They invited those of us who were interested in enrolling in their program for the coming year to join them in a game—a three-day simulation of society—to be conducted at Venture Lodge, an old rustic cabin located between the Santa Cruz Mountains and the Pacific Ocean. I jumped at the opportunity. Two weeks later I was riding in a bus with a bunch of strangers, singing and laughing and making ready for a whole new adventure.

We had a great time. We all slept in a big cabin, cooked meals together, played games outside, swam, and participated in a simulation of society that was run by the students and their teacher. It was also challenging; I realized that besides getting to know some other students very well, I was being challenged to think.

The final evening, all of us assembled in the big living room of the lodge—twenty-four participants, eight second-year student-coordinators, and our teacher, Gary. Then I saw something I didn't expect. At one end of the room were drums, real drums, a big conga, African drums with goat hide, tambourines, even a flute, sticks, and bells. We were making ready to participate in a creative dance. The lights were replaced by candlelight, and we became silent. The student-coordinators and our teacher started to play, and led us through some wonderful group and individual dance creations. I felt as if I was being transformed to a time when life was connected and harmonious.

For the next two hours our little group was transfixed by the movements, the flickering light, the shadows on the ceilings, the creative dance, the sounds of the instruments, and, most of all, the underlying beat of the drums. ***It took me back to my roots and drew me forward to my purpose.*** We

seemed to move as one, and we were all directing the movement. I had never experienced anything quite like this before.

My grandmother told me that I have a mixed heritage. In addition to my African roots, I am also a descendant of the people of the proud Cherokee Nation. They were a nation of American Indians who lost their homeland and way of life to the onslaught of European squatters who believed it was their God-given destiny to radically alter the landscape and people of North America. The Cherokee also had a spirituality that inspired them to action, that defined their way of life. They, too, could hear an ancient drum. Many of them lost touch with their culture as their way of life was replaced by the “civilized” way of the white man.

The next day as we were returning home, I knew that the sound of the drum was with me. It was contained in my every heartbeat—strong, rhythmic, and steady. I knew that I had made my choice for the next school year; I would join this group.

Four months later, a new school year began. Twenty of us new students joined six second-year students to help create our version of The Learning Community. In the first three weeks of school we spent four hours each day getting to know each other, engaging in bonding exercises, and exploring ways to take charge of our education. We started to brainstorm ideas and resources for independent study; we wrote personal contracts, clarified our personal and academic goals, and developed specific content for carrying out our goals. Then we began to look for books, hands-on projects, names of potential speakers, and places where we could take field trips.

In addition to spending time deciding what we wanted to study for the year, we also spent a lot of time discussing how important it was for us to make some basic agreements to ensure that we functioned as an effective group. We talked about contracts, about giving our word, about trust and integrity. We made agreements with each other about simple, obvious things like coming to school every day, being on time, and giving full attention to whoever is speaking—norms of behavior that many high school students never



follow. We gave our word to agreements; I wondered if I could keep them. Would I be able to take full initiative in the group or be fully honest with myself and others? We also agreed not to use drugs and liquor during or within a day of all class activities. We even agreed to remind each other if we were breaking our commitments. We talked about taking charge of our lives, making conscious choice, and valuing commitment, self-respect, and personal dignity.

After the first three weeks of the new school year, we returned to the old lodge in the mountains to engage in a three-day orientation to help us get ready for our school year. We wanted a focused period of time away from the distractions of home and school, so that we could create a cohesive group. In one of our more compelling experiences, we introduced ourselves to the group by telling our life stories and explaining how our life experiences had made us who we are today.

Jeremy told of his childhood trips to the Sierra Nevada Mountains with his family, playing in streams and hiking with his dad. He recalled sitting in his elementary-school desk watching the fall colors, the winter rain, and the spring blossoms around the school. He daydreamed of hiking to the top of the far mountain, building tree forts, and floating down streams in inner-tubes. He didn't like school; it cooped him up too much. He joined our program to find a way to become more motivated and more interested in school. I saw him as a "country boy." Until now, I had never been around someone who spent time in nature. I thought he was different but he was easy to be around, always making funny jokes out of awkward situations.

Greg shared how he had always been in gifted classes and got good grades in school. He shared a variety of his interests—he was a long distance-runner and liked to act. He talked about how he "lost it" and went into a depression. He said his ability to act had helped him pretend in life but that he lost the ability to pretend, and that now it was just too difficult for him to deal with life. He said the doctor had prescribed **Prozac** to help him hide the feeling that he could no longer "pretend" away. He joined our group because he thought we would just let him be and he needed to figure out what to make

of life. He seemed distant at times, but he had the capacity to be honest about his life. I was touched by his vulnerability.

Shawn was a big, tough-looking, white guy. He said he grew up in Army towns because his mom was in the service. I had never stopped to consider that women in the Army had time to have kids, I wondered what it was like for her. Shawn spoke of having lived in the tough parts of town where he was a minority, having to be tough to keep from being run over by people, and always moving away before he made any friends. He described himself as an average student who wanted to make a few close friends. I identified with his courage, but I had a hard time getting close to him.

I liked Jenny right away. She and her sister, Wendy, were both in the group. They were warm and friendly with no pretenses. They had come to this country from El Salvador; both were dark-skinned and had features like their Mayan ancestors. I felt an easy kinship with both of them. Jenny told a story about how her family had traveled nearly three-thousand miles through Guatemala and Mexico to escape the brutal civil war in her country. She was a survivor, like me. I liked her even more when she said, with tears coming down her cheeks, that she was a good student and was in our program because she wanted to make something of herself. I intended to be her friend. Wendy was open and empathetic; I knew that we would become good friends, too.

Kristie, the nature lover, spoke of how a butterfly landed on her nose when she was five, how she had always loved nature, especially birds, and was an amateur taxidermist. She said she came into the program because she wanted to help protect the environment. She knew she could build her studies around real issues and take action to stop the abuse of the earth. She talked of how she and a friend liked to go to Santa Cruz and sit for hours talking to homeless people about their lives. I could feel her sensitivity and felt I could trust her.

Angel, the other African-American student, was a standout singer. Like me, she hadn't had a father in her life, but unlike me, she had had a strong

mother. Angel was a devout Christian and very strong in her beliefs. She was an interesting blend of the hip culture—she dressed cool, had her hair braided, could “talk the talk” (although she didn't have a foul mouth), and was a great stepper. We had known each other before joining the program, even though she was much younger than I. She wanted to be in the program because she felt she would be accepted as a full human being, not just a gifted singer. She didn't want to be just another “number” in a classroom or someone regarded as lazy or having an attitude because she missed classes or was late. She wanted to help make school become exciting so that she would be inspired to be there all the time. Angel already seemed to have a steady beat of the drum inside her.

Janna was a tall, introspective young woman with long brown curly hair. She talked of having attended private schools. Her mother had taken her sister out of school to be educated at home. Janna never watched television and she read a lot. She had been enrolled in honors classes in public school and got good grades. She joined us, she said, because she wanted to work closely with other committed people in creating a better world. She really seemed to believe in what she said.

Adrienne always shared well-stated, yet understated, solutions during our community-building activities. Most of our early activities were pretty boisterous, so her points were often ignored; but she had a way of persisting without pushing so that, when the most assertive members got tired of shouting, her point of view often stood out as the most sensible. Like Kristie, she had actually moved into the district to be in our program. Adrienne, who had been an honor student at her other school, longed for the personal emphasis of our program and wanted to have more freedom to design her studies. She really wanted to be part of the world—not to just study about it.

We had such a cross-section of humanity assembled in our group! We had sophomores, juniors, and seniors; we had excellent students and students wanting to find their excellence; we had students who had been born in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, the Philippines, and the United States. We had a range of students, some from solid, loving families and some from

non-existent or dysfunctional families. Each, regardless of privilege, had his or her personal scars, some deeper than others; each had his or her own personal strengths as well. We all shared a need for a fuller life. Also, we shared a common desire to make our own lives better and to make the world better.

I told my story about growing up in Chicago. Many of the things I had never told a soul before. I cried, almost uncontrollably, when I told about the rape; it was the first time that I had confided in anyone since that cold, winter day in Chicago. Wendy came over and comforted me. Several other students gathered around the pillow on which I was sitting and held me while I sobbed. Other students just sat in place and cried with me. I felt safe and I felt loved. I had never felt so accepted by so many people at one time.

As I sat there, surrounded by my new brothers and sisters, I could hear the strong beating of my heart punctuated by the quiet sounds of weeping in the room. More than that, I could feel another beat emerging in the room, it was the beginning of a beat that was new to me. It sounded as if its source was that of many drums. It was a hint of what was to come, the beat of the group's collective drum. These people were becoming part of my family, and I was joining theirs. I felt at home. I could hear and I could feel a strong beat inside and around my heart.