

*Passage Seven:
Embracing the Collective Spirit*

Harmonizing the Voices in the Choir

Angel

My mom tells me that when I was a very small baby I had two undeniable attributes: I had a strong voice and I was stubbornly outspoken. She recalls that hours after I was born, while I was lying in my hospital bassinet, I raised my head and looked around as if to survey my new world. She was concerned when she saw me. She asked the doctor, “What is my baby doing raising her head when she is only one day old?” He told her not to worry, but mom knew from the beginning that she was going to have her hands full with me.

Shortly after my mother brought me home from the hospital, she took me to the doctor's office for my shots. She said that after the nurse stuck the needle in my thigh, I raised my leg straight up to the sky and let out a scream that could be heard around the block. Mom figured that I was making my protest to all concerned. It was as if to say, “Don't you know that you are hurting me?!” I really don't know what it meant—but I still don't like shots.

At three-and-one-half months, I was crawling, and at six months I was standing, but I only did these things when my mom was around. Mom told others of my feats, but they dismissed her claims as those of an overly-proud mother. This all changed when a family friend walked into my bedroom one day and caught me—a seven month old child—climbing up the partially-opened drawers of a dresser so that I could jump off the dresser onto the bed. They didn't think my mom was crazy after that observation. I'm not sure what they thought of me, though.

Mom did her best to contain and direct my energies, but she said that I had a mind of my own and that she couldn't watch me every minute of the day. Sometimes she would wake up in the night to check on me and find me sitting up in my crib trying to get out. She said that I would persist in whatever I tried, no matter what it took—I had a determined body and I had a determined mind.

One night after a hard day's work of preparing for our family's holiday barbecue, my mother was awakened by noises in the house. When she opened her eyes she saw a light coming from the kitchen and she could hear metallic

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sounds, like pots and pans crashing together. She was frightened and tried to wake up my father. “Roosevelt, wake up! Somebody's in the kitchen.” she whispered.

My father rolled over, tried to calm her with a kiss, and then whispered back to her, “It's just your imagination, Betty, now go back to sleep.”

My mother wasn't easily dissuaded by my father's excuse to go back to sleep. She rose from her bed and crept into my bedroom to see that I was all right. All she could find in my crib were pillows and covers—but no Angel. She thought, “Oh my God, Angel's been kidnapped! And the burglars must be taking everything in the kitchen, too.” So she grabbed one of my toys for a weapon and tiptoed her way to the kitchen. She peeked around the corner. There, much to her surprise, she found me all bundled up and sitting under a stool. I was holding a big slab of ribs and munching on them like it was the thing to do. She couldn't help but laugh out loud. At eleven months old, I was dwarfed by the huge chunk of meat in my hands—and mouth. She said that I was so engrossed in my feast that I didn't even look up when she came into the room. It was such an unbelievable sight that she ran and got my father so he could see me holding a rack of freshly cooked ribs, barbecue sauce all over my face, and my mouth stuffed full of juicy meat.

I was fascinated by things that moved. At fourteen months, I borrowed my brother JoJo's skates. A neighbor called my mom to report that I was skating down the sidewalk. Mom had to work overtime to keep up with me. It wasn't long, though, before my abundance of energy was channeled into my true calling and number one passion in life, singing.

Singing is my gift from God and is a major priority at such a young age. Most of my singing was inspired at local churches where my mother played the piano for Sunday services and other church functions. I went to choir practice and to church with my mom almost from the time that I was born. It became second nature for me to sing along. I memorized the words of the songs and hymns that the choir sang—even at age two and three—and it wasn't long before I was actually singing before the church congregation.

Not only did I accept singing into my heart at a young age, but I accepted God into my heart as well. And from that point, singing and the church became one for me. I was surrounded by spiritual people—my mother, my aunts and uncles, and my grandparents. My grandfather was the pastor of a church. I sang in the churches so much that people recognized me as soon as I entered. Some parishioners even greeted me with a smile and a nickname. They called me “Mahalia Jackson Number Two.”

Of course, I still hadn't completely reckoned with my childish independence. Most of the time when I was asked to bless the church with a solo, I would jump at the request. But sometimes I didn't feel like singing. On one such occasion, I stated plainly, “I don't want to sing today.”

One of the other parishioners rose to my support and shouted out, “If she doesn't want to sing today, she doesn't have to.” This seemed perfectly acceptable to the pastor and the congregation, but it wasn't acceptable to my parents.

When we got home that evening, my mother had a serious talk with me. In her calm, motherly way she said, “Angel, listen, I know that there are times that you don't feel like singing. Honey, that's okay when you are singing for yourself. But when you are singing for the Lord, sometimes you have to give when you don't want to. You need to share the beautiful gift that the Lord gave you with others. You never know when someone in the congregation needs to have his or her heart touched. You never know if this will be your last time to touch others. This is what God would want you to do.” With tears in her eyes, she embraced me, gave me a hug, and kissed me good night. I never refused to sing in church again.

My talent and reputation as a gospel singer grew faster than I did. At age two, I was invited to sing on the Wilson Brother's gospel music program held at the Zion Missionary Baptist Church in East Palo Alto. Unity Church was like my second home, though. I sang in the choir and was involved in all the children's activities. I was encouraged and inspired by members of the

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church. I was respected because I was willing to do God's will, and, with that focus, I always gained their support.

Still, I was challenged to harmonize my outgoing, sometimes aggressive, energy with my natural gift for song and my deeper calling for celebrating the spirit that I felt so strongly when I was in church. I was a normal child in many ways. Like so many of the other children that I grew up with, I loved to run and play at the park and I loved to watch Sesame Street. But I was also encouraged in ways that most children are not.

When I was five years old, my uncle, who is a minister, invited my mother and me to his congregation in Detroit. He wanted me to be the headliner in a gospel concert. Posters placed around the Detroit neighborhood proclaimed that “the miracle baby” would perform in concert on Sunday. The banners and the tickets read, “**ANGELITA BURGESS IN CONCERT.**” The master of ceremonies introduced me as the “Little Angel.” I was a small child with a big voice, singing to several hundred people—and I was as nervous as I could be.

As I began to sing, silence spread over the audience. All that could be heard was the quiet sound of my voice singing the words of a traditional hymn that had been sung during slavery:

Precious Lord, take my hand,
Lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.

As I sang, I could see faces light up in the audience. I could feel their warmth; hands began to raise as if gravity had been turned upward. People's lips began to move; I could hear their voices praising the Lord. I was inspired and my voice grew strong.

Through the storm, through the night,
Lead me on, to the light,
Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.

As my first song ended, I was greeted with “Amen!” “Yes Lord!” and “Hallelujah!” There was always a great spirit of worship in the wonderful Baptist churches that I grew up in. They certainly loved to hear the praises of the Lord in song, and everybody found a way to involve themselves in the service. Call and response was part of every sermon and every song.

Singing in Detroit was a remarkable experience for me. I even earned \$400 dollars for singing. Getting paid was strange though, because I always regarded my singing of the Lord's music as **giving testimony** rather than **entertaining people**. Getting paid for giving testimony didn't make sense, even to this five-year-old.

I was deeply moved by the spirit of the church. When I was six, my Aunt Ruby died. My mother was going to the funeral, but she hadn't intended to take me. I wanted to go the funeral—I wanted to be involved in everything in the church, even in a service for someone who had died. When my mom denied my request, I told her, in pleading words, “I know about death, mom. Please let me go to the funeral!” She relented. Two years later, I sang **Walk Around Heaven All Day** for our neighbor Ralph's funeral.

As my singing matured, my opportunities to sing became more frequent. I got to sing with the **Soul Stirrers**, a group from my community. My independent energies and my musical talents continued to blend, but not without difficulties. I still had more energy than I knew what to do with. To channel my physical exuberance, my mom enrolled me in a ballet class. In class all the other little girls were doing the teacher's dance routines. Not me; I was running, diving, and doing flips and somersaults. I had fun on the mats. My antics drove my teacher crazy and distracted the other little girls. So mom took me out of ballet and enrolled me in gymnastics.

In the first grade, I enrolled in the South Bay Christian School. I remember being proud of the little red dress that I was wearing on the first day of school. I was excited by the idea of school, but I had a hard time conforming to the regimentation of school. It seemed to me that most of the little kids had their mischievous streaks, like I did, but that the other little kids would

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tell on me when I did something to them. I didn't know the **game**, so it didn't occur to me to tell on them. Consequently, I was seen as the perpetrator. When I finally figured out the game, I added a twist of my own. I bit myself and blamed it on a little boy that had been bothering me the most; he got in trouble. At the end of the year, because of my behavior, the school didn't invite me back for the next grade. It worked out okay for us though. By then my mother was a single parent. She worked hard to support me and the \$300 tuition for school was a hardship. So she enrolled me in a public school.

I attended Theurerkauf School for grades two through four. It was an exciting time for me socially; I made lots of friends. Then on to Crittenden School for fifth through eighth grades. I was always active, sometimes more than what the teacher wanted, but I learned to apply much of my energy to running, all kinds of sports, and dancing. Singing, of course, still ranked as my favorite activity. I began to write poetry and music. Some of my teachers asked me if they could keep my writings. I felt special and was inspired to write even more.

When I was nine, mom thought that I would benefit from formal music training, so she enrolled me in Chuck's Academy of Music. The instructors helped me to train and control my voice. During this period, I received a **Good Neighbor Award** and sang at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday Breakfast sponsored by the city of San Jose. The mayor commended the award winners and thanked me after my song.

My singing in the church continued. I recall my mom telling friends that, "Angel filled the church with the Holy Spirit." I would get embarrassed when she praised me too much. I was both embarrassed and humbled when she would say to her friends, "I've never known a person so young that has such talent and, at the same time, knows and loves the Lord."

Our family had a deep faith and trust in God; we learned through my grandmother and the church. We built our lives around the church and we trusted in God to guide us in our everyday life so we could endure. Life wasn't easy

for us; mom worked hard to support our family. God brought us through so much and we depended on him for everything.

When I was ten, I participated in a singing competition. I sang the spiritual, ***I'm Looking for a Miracle!*** During my song, a woman got the Holy Ghost. She jumped up and she shouted. She praised God right there; she wasn't self-conscious or intimidated. She was in God's hands because, after the Holy Spirit took control, she had no control over her body and mind.

Afterwards, the lady said she hadn't gone to church that morning; instead she had a premonition to come to the competition. She told me that I had helped her touch God. I didn't win the contest, but I felt that I had served a greater purpose. Some of the people in attendance told me that I would win in a much bigger way another day. I felt that I had already had a winning day. My mom says that the Lord must have sent us to the competition to inspire that lady's heart.

I didn't always sing alone. I was also part of the church choir. We had so many big, strong voices in the choir that I had to shout my message to be heard in the harmony of so many voices. When our choir rose up and sang the praises, I felt as if we were touched by the Holy Spirit. I loved to harmonize with the choir and the congregation; it was as if we sang with one voice. I experienced one level of personal harmony when I sang my solos, but I experienced quite another level of harmony when I sang with the choir.

When I was eleven-years-old, some members of our church started a street ministry to move the drugs out of our community. On weekends we went into the neighborhoods where homeless people, drug addicts, and drug pushers hang out. I sang songs and our group delivered the word to the people. Some of the hard-core people would leave. Those that stayed could listen to the word of God without having to be bothered by people who weren't interested.

When I got to high school, I became involved in activities that nourished me and my schoolmates. I helped start a gospel choir with Tamika and some of

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the other girls at school. We called our group the **Voices of Light**. I joined the **Los Altos Steppers**, a precision drill team—with soul. I also enrolled in The Learning Community; I needed room to be myself and I wanted to help make school more exciting. I knew some of the people that had been in the program, and they all talked about having grown personally and having built a community together. I wanted to do something special in high school and I needed more flexibility in my life.

I was trying to balance a blossoming professional singing career with my school activities and my singing in the church choir. I had made some appearances in concert as a featured vocalist with rapper M. C. Hammer and I got to record a popular song and a gospel song on his CD. I even got to perform on television with him on the **Arsenio Hall Show** and **Soul Train**. It looked as if I would be doing more of this. Yet, I still had to deal with high school and with my personal life.

One of the studies that particularly interested me in The Learning Community was **Psychological Systems**. It was a course that our teacher had developed over the years that explored models of personality and spirituality. It wasn't at all as I thought it would be—rats running around in mazes, men in white coats looking inside people's heads, or crazy people in an asylum. It was much more personal. I discovered why I do the things I do, what I could do to get along better with others, and how my view of the world compared with others.

I didn't need help from school to understand my purpose on the Earth—that came from my church, but I did need help to understand why and how I continually got off track. My ever-present question was, “Why don't I always do the things that I really know I should do?” I was at home with the spiritual world that I knew inside me—the Spirit is perfect. But I was not as at home with all my day-to-day actions. Life was not so perfect. Sometimes, I felt like that **little Angel**, still enrolled in ballet class, tumbling on the mat while the rest of the class did **pirouettes**. I wanted to understand myself in the world so that I could be the Christian that I wanted to be.

At the beginning of my first year in The Learning Community, I watched carefully to make sure that the teachings in psychology didn't conflict with my faith. I noticed that my classmates grew and changed in ways that they wanted to change and that they did not change their faith. As I began to get involved in the seminars, I began to change as well. My mother was pleased as my attitude and behavior became more positive.

I learned many things about myself. I learned that events in my past, some of which I had even forgotten, influenced the way I responded to people and circumstances. As I thought back to important events in my life, I wrote about them in my journal, and discussed them in the group, I noticed that I began to act more from awareness and less from reaction. I listened to other student's stories as well. I was deeply touched by Greg as he shared his story; he was so open and honest.

Sometimes, I attempted to rescue others when they were being confronted for not being responsible—I came to realize that it was my way of protecting myself from being responsible. There were times when I wanted to leap in and stop my peers when they confronted Tamika about being late. I had my own problems with being on time.

I found that I engaged in “flight” or “fight” reactions when I was confronted—more often in fight—and tried to manipulate people by sheer force and by being right. I got reactive when I got pinned down by the group or caught in a game. I didn't agree with Jeremy's seemingly racist attitude, but I squirmed when he got pinned down.

I developed ways of keeping others at bay or protecting myself from the truth about myself. I discovered that I rationalized my behaviors or denied my responsibility. It was easier to see these defenses in others—I noticed them most in Shawn. Many times I didn't own up to my behaviors until well after the event had passed.

I learned lots of things that helped me understand myself better. I learned that I was an extroverted-sensation-thinking-judging type. My tendencies

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were different from those of others, yet all of us acted out our types. It was reassuring to know that my uniqueness was okay.

I saw how I could shift from being a “critical parent” to being an “angry, rebellious child” during the heat of conflict with my mother. I experimented with more effective approaches in dealing with her; it was easier to resolve things when I wasn't so reactive. I learned how I hide from my own abilities and, at times, settle for less than the best for myself. Certainly this was true in my contracted studies. Also, I discovered that I could understand myself better by watching how my body reacts to stress. Sometimes I assumed a defensive posture as Shawn did when he got upset.

As my fellow students and I became more self-aware, we learned how to be more effective with one another. We confronted our peers when they were acting like victims and asked them to be responsible, to take charge, and not to go into self-pity. We challenged each other to be aware of the truth of our actions instead of projecting, reacting, or denying. We urged each other to use “I” messages and to be honest about our feelings. We learned theories about group dynamics and applied them to our group. We insisted that group conflicts be resolved—no matter how long they took. And, we always brought disputes back to the principle of gaining personal power by taking responsibility for oneself and one's actions.

In the final analysis, I learned that, with all my new awareness of who I am, it is up to me to take charge of my life and make it work. The more I learned and became aware and the more I engaged in constructive confrontations, the more my daily behavior changed. A more healthy, socially-conscious Angel began to appear. Oh, I wasn't perfect. I had relapses; sometimes I got mad or pulled back from the group. But I could tell that a subtle change was taking place in my personality. I felt freer; I felt more responsible; I felt more power in my daily life. It was as if a heavy hood was slowly being lifted off my head and my vision was getting clearer.

I found myself going home and teaching my family and friends some of the lessons that we were learning. It was interesting to see our lessons move

from personal awareness to personal power to personal responsibility. I liked the way we progressed from personal harmony to group harmony and I was curious to see how this could be taken to the next level. We discussed how moral reasoning progresses naturally from “What can I get for myself?” to “What is my duty to others?” to “What can we agree to do together?” I was especially intrigued by the final question: “What principles guide your behavior in helping to create a better world?” Second semester, this question became the guiding question for our decision making. I felt that I was in the process of cleaning and sharpening the focus of my spiritual lens so that I could be a better person in the world. I was developing a healthier anchor in the material world and I looked forward to applying this new clarity to my spiritual life.

As our group's awareness, ability to resolve conflict, and decision-making improved, we made ready for taking action in the world. The nature of our Psychological Systems course changed as well. We had been concerned with understanding personality and group dynamics to this point. Now we were about to shift our emphasis to understanding spirituality. We had had a glimpse of the Plains Indians' spiritual view of life at the beginning of the year when we had studied ***Seven Arrows*** by Hyemeyohsts Storm, a Native American author. During the second semester, we explored the philosophies of the major religions of the world. During that time we were introduced, briefly, to some of the major spiritual systems of the east: Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Sufism, and Yoga.

Gary told us that his approach in Psychological Systems was “an invitation to join others on the path of seeking wisdom.” He acknowledged that we each had our own personal set of beliefs. He suggested that by studying other major belief systems in the world, we might gain insights into the mind of the human species. His invitation was for us to attempt to understand other paths for their insight into human nature. That way, in understanding the spirit of each belief system, we might get some insight into the fundamental nature of human beings.

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I was confused by all of this so I spoke up, “I don't need to discover the truth through these systems; I already know it through my faith.”

Gary replied, “Your personal views are valid for you, Angel. I respect you for the strength of your religious beliefs. My goal in the seminar is to help you understand and appreciate the attempts that other cultures around the world have made to bring their view of the world into daily life. As we understand spiritual practices and systems that humans have built over the centuries, we may gain further understanding into the nature of human beings.”

Privately I remained confused. I looked at different sides of my life. I had always been taught by my church that there is only one truth. My family and my culture confirmed and reinforced the teachings of the church. I grew up as a cute little girl with a beautiful voice. The voice, my mother told me, was given to me by God to do his work. I wondered if I would still be doing God's work if I worked with people that didn't believe what I believe. I wondered also how they could be doing God's work if they didn't believe what I believe.

At this point Jenny spoke up. “Angel, I had some of your same concerns last year when we studied spiritual systems. I've been a Mormon since I was eight and I think that I have become a better Mormon from studying other religions.” I let my concerns go for the time being, but I watched cautiously and tried to be objective.

Gary went on to offer a metaphor to help us understand his approach:

Imagine a large, hollow lead sphere in the middle of the room that contains the truth about the universe. Imagine that human beings across the centuries have probed this sphere to understand its hidden message. The exploration for truth is like drilling a hole into the sphere. A person looking into that hole gains one perspective to the truth hidden within. As this “truth” is spoken or written, it represents a point of view of the

larger, whole truth. Others, who might journey to that view point, see the truth from the point of view of that entry point.

As other entry points are established and as other points of view are elaborated upon, additional insights about the ultimate truth are revealed. Over time, as more entries are made known, a greater sense of the mystery of the sphere is revealed. Some points of view seem contradictory and some versions of the truth are limited by their language or interpretation. In the end, each seeker of the truth is left to interpret his or her version of the truth, to accept a given truth, to simply conclude that we will never have enough information to really know, or to conclude that the sphere contains nothing.

Each of us in the class has his or her own spiritual perspective. You live in a predominantly Judeo-Christian culture although some of you may be Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, or a member of some other world religion. Some of you may still be seeking a religious affiliation. Some of you may be agnostic, believing that we, as mere mortals, just don't know the deeper secrets of the universe. Some of you may be atheists who simply don't believe in a god. It is a personal choice how you wish to function in the world—and in this seminar.

Whether you are a person who has committed to a religious path or you are a person who has no interest in committing to a path, you can view our class experience as simply a way to understand other cultures and beliefs—view it as an intellectual exercise. A person who is looking for a spiritual path will only get a brief overview from our study—you will have to look elsewhere if you wish to look deeper into any of these systems. A person who has an inner spiritual life but no wish to commit to an established religion might use this experience to get some clarity into the nature of spirituality. The way you use the information you obtain from this class is entirely up to you.

In the first Psychological Systems seminar of the new semester, we were given an opportunity to share our spiritual cosmologies. We shared our core

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beliefs about life and death and analyzed how those beliefs affect the way we live. Each person took a few minutes to share how he or she saw the world; everyone else listened and learned. I was amazed at the diversity in our group. Some students described mainstream Christian beliefs—Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopalian, and Catholic. Others described beliefs with which I was unfamiliar—Unitarian and Sikhism. Our discussion was an eye-opener for most of us. Some didn't know the difference between Protestants and Catholic; others didn't know that both religions were Christian. Still others didn't know that Judaism was based on the Old Testament and provided a common base to both Protestants and Catholics.

A big surprise for me was hearing some of our students—some of them good students and leaders—say that they were agnostics or atheists. My biggest surprise was hearing Adrienne say that she didn't believe in an external source of God, that spirit existed in everyone and everything. She said for her, “It doesn't matter whether there is a God or not. In either case, I would live a life guided by my principles. I would still love and be kind to everyone.” She added, “Being spiritual is noticing that the birds are singing and the sun is shining.” I couldn't understand how Adrienne, of all people in the class, could be so committed, so hard working, and so positive without getting her motivation from God.

When it was my time to share, I spoke proudly of my faith. I described it in detail—how those that were good would go to heaven on Judgment Day and how those who were sinners would have to live for seven years on the Earth with one last chance to redeem themselves. I made it clear that you had to be **saved** in order to go to Heaven and that all those who were not saved and who hadn't accepted Jesus as their savior would go to Hell on Judgment Day. This assertion set off an intense discussion in our classroom.

Jeremy asked if I believed that he, an agnostic, would go to Hell. I said, “Yes, but you could convert and be saved.” Others asked what I thought about their religions. I repeated my belief that they wouldn't get into Heaven—they didn't like to hear that I would be saved and they wouldn't.

Janna asserted, "There are many paths to God. It doesn't matter which path you chose. What's important is how you live your life." Others said that they agreed.

I held my ground. "There is only one way," I said. It wasn't a popular comment among many of our group. Some even got upset; it was like the temperature of the room rose by ten degrees.

Gary stepped in before it got out of hand. He reminded us, "This process was meant to give people an opportunity to share their beliefs. Each person is entitled to have his or her beliefs, and one's religion is not subject to debate!" He asked us to respect each other's differences and learn from one another. He said that we needed to find common ground so that we could work together.

Then he recited a poem, ***Abou Ben Adhem*** by James Henry Leigh Hunt, that he had learned in the sixth grade. It was about a man who was awakened in the middle of the night by an angel who was writing in a golden book. When he asked her what she was writing, the angel replied, "the names of those who love the Lord." He asked her if his name was in the book, and she said that it was not. "Write me then, as one who loves his fellow men," Abou said. The next night, the angel reappeared and showed Abou the book, and "Lo! Ben Adhem's name led all the rest."

We went on with the seminar. The discussion that I had initiated cast a certain discord that reverberated through the group. I knew clearly that I was right in my beliefs and yet, given the resentment that my remarks left, I felt confused how to continue. How was our group ever going to achieve a common purpose when we had such diverse beliefs? How could we go beyond our differences and unite behind common principles to create larger goals? I just didn't know how.

I thought back over some of the things that we had learned. I wanted to take personal responsibility for my action. How was I helping to create this feeling of discord in our group? I thought back over my life. There have been

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many times when I've been in complete harmony with a group and times when I haven't felt completely in tune. As I sat there, I felt a tightness in the pit of my stomach—something wasn't right. I tried to understand what principles were involved in this issue. I knew that my beliefs were not negotiable, but then no one was asking me to give up my beliefs. The real antagonism was coming from people feeling that they were wrong.

My church taught me that I was always a voice of God, but it also taught me that, if a person wasn't interested in my message, I needed to respect his or her wishes. The hard thing for me to admit was that I may have helped create tension in the group by invalidating some of the other student's beliefs without even realizing it. I had a hard time sorting out being right and doing wrong at the same time. It took a long time for me to put it all together.

As the year progressed, I realized that the group needed to find a way to work together. I wanted to find a way to make my contribution. We needed to find a way to get everyone to work toward some common good. On one hand, we had to be faithful to our personal beliefs and values and, on the other hand, we had to find ways to unite our group behind some common principles. To do this we needed to accept our differences and be tolerant of each other's beliefs, then find ways to work together. I wasn't sure how this was going to happen. I needed more insight.

I thought back to critical times in my life when I had needed to pull myself together. Usually when things weren't working out for me, it was because my body, my emotions, and my mind were each calling me in a different direction. I had to listen for a deeper voice inside me to lead a harmony of all my voices. When I could go within, my actions became harmonious. It was no different from harmonizing with my church choir. When each member of the choir lent his or her voice to a higher purpose, our choir made beautiful music.

I thought back to earlier in the school year. Some of my inner voices had been calling me in different directions. I noticed that these voices were starting to change. One of these voices used to be quick to judge people—now I

am training that voice to be more accepting. Another inner voice stated a feeling; I attached myself to that voice. I was unable to separate my personal feelings from the real teaching of my faith. As the year has progressed, I have been getting better at telling the difference. Now, I am better able to detach myself from the personal feeling and express the real voice.

My new perspective has helped me to voice to myself that “we are all God's children.” I realize how much better that is than my saying, “I have the answer.” It helps me to see and it encourages me to look more deeply into my religion. I am able to relate to my peers with a clearer voice. I am able to approach people with a positive, non-offending voice. My message has become more harmonious now. People are willing to listen to me when I am willing to harmonize with them.

I realize that each member of The Learning Community has strong values and principles. Together we have a higher purpose—everyone is in agreement that we want to work together to make a difference in the world. Like the voices in the choir, each of our voices is unique. We can raise our unique voices in harmony to make a difference. I realize that it is the difference in the voices that creates the harmony and it is the purpose in the collective voices that creates the melody. I want to join the other voices in our group and create more harmony in the world, the kind that brings joy and happiness into other people's lives.

