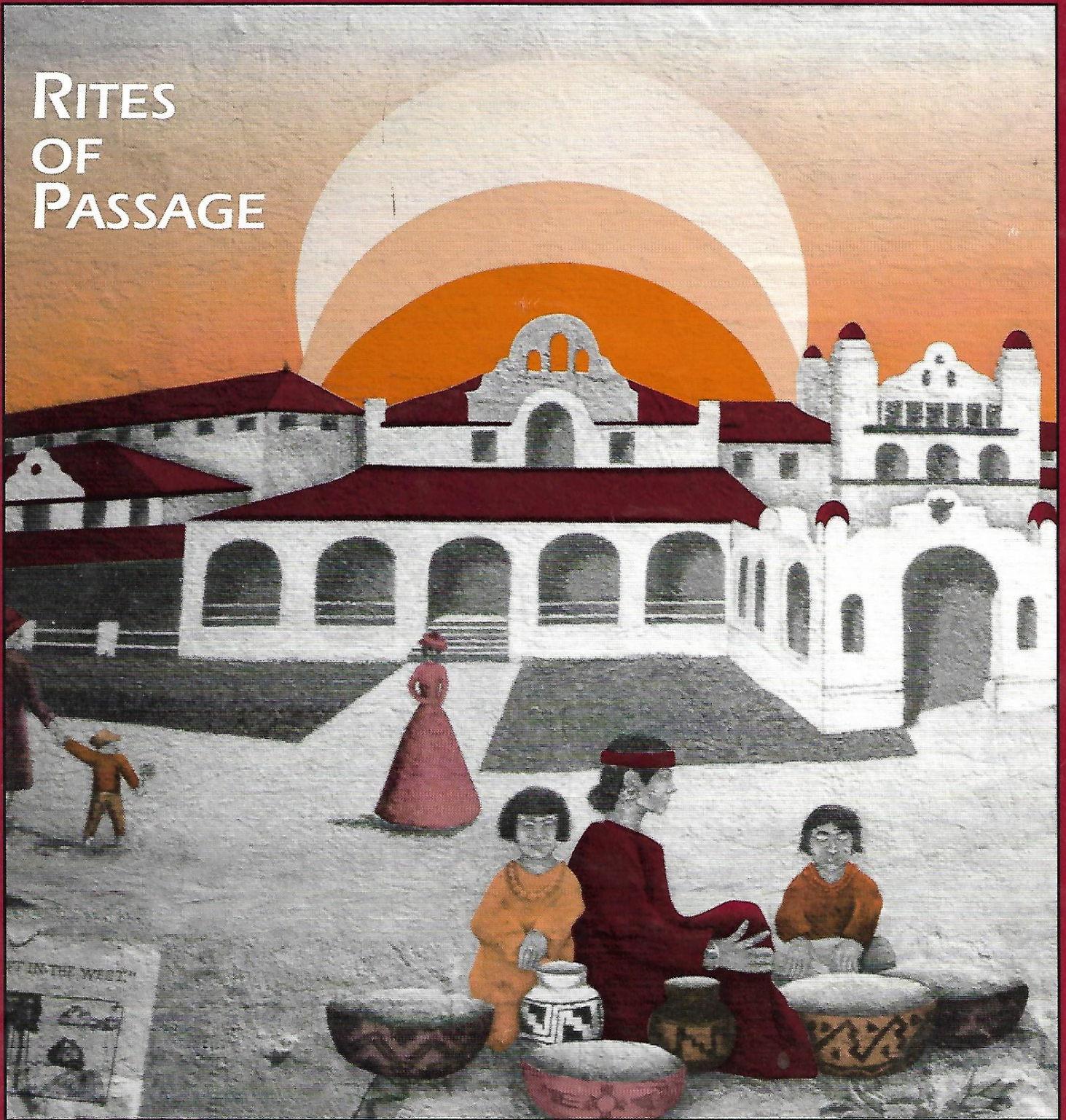


Reaching Today's Youth

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rites
of
passage



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“Hey, That’s Sarah’s Song!”

Kathleen Van Antwerp

This story illustrates the unique rite of passage that occurs when one child who has been tossed out into the world to survive on her own comforts and begins to heal another child.



*“Echoes of Grandparents” © 1998 by Alfreda Beartrack,
Akta Lakota Museum, St. Joseph’s Indian School,
Chamberlain, SD*

Some people keep shoes and clothes in a closet. Sarah’s parents kept Sarah there. She was six years old, with blue eyes that didn’t shine and hair like a field of gold. Sarah carried two stuffed, worn, and torn friends under her arm at all times—a rabbit with a torn blue suit and a turtle with a worn-out shell. These two companions never left Sarah’s side. All three of these beautiful, lifeless creatures arrived to join our circle one Monday morning about two months into the school year.

Our classroom circle was unique. It had 12 desks filled with children who had been labeled as severely emotionally disturbed. These children, ranging in age from 5 to 12, lived in group homes away from both their families and communities. They were placed in our program because the anger and fear they felt inside was often displayed through behaviors that were not understood in the public school environment. Our desks were arranged in a circle to represent a number of important things: unity, partnership, belonging, and acceptance. Although Sarah and her friends, Rabbit and Turtle, could barely see over the top of her too-big desk, her tiny feet dangling above the floor, all three were quickly placed into our circle. They were now a part of our classroom community and helped to make our circle complete.

During her first few weeks with us, Sarah and her friends didn’t contribute much in the way of conversation. In fact, I wasn’t sure if Sarah had any more verbal skills than her two stuffed friends. One thing that was obvious, however, was that they all appeared to enjoy listening to our stories and music each day. Sarah sat cuddled on the floor beside another student or me as we participated in storytelling and singing each afternoon. It was during this time when I would notice Turtle, Rabbit, and Sarah falling asleep. Sarah often slept in school because, unlike most of us, Sarah didn’t sleep at night; she had to wake up a lot to escape her nightmares.

One day, when we were singing one of our favorite songs, we finally heard Sarah's voice, gentle like dandelion seeds in the wind. The lyrics to our song talked about being wonderful, feeling wonderful, and sharing wonderful thoughts with others:

I think you're wonderful—when somebody says that to me, I feel wonderful, as wonderful can be. It makes me want to say that same thing to somebody new. And by the way, I've been meaning to say...I think you're wonderful too!

—Teaching Peace
Red Grammar Red Note Records, 1986

On this particular afternoon, Sarah decided to sing. She knew every word. She'd been listening each day in class, even when she was peacefully sleeping. Along with her singing came her smile. Sarah seemed to come to life. There was dancing in her blue eyes and a new strength in a six-year-old who had been raised in a closet. The music was almost magical for Sarah. It seemed to touch something deep in her soul. It felt good to listen to her sing; she was awakened.

On a Tuesday morning, almost eight months after we first heard Sarah's singing, a social worker came into my classroom to tell me that she had found a foster home for Sarah. She would be leaving that Friday after school. Suddenly I had only three days left to be sure Sarah found a way to carry her new strength with her. On the day Sarah was leaving, I reached into the tape recorder and pulled out our tape. As Sarah collected her memories and stuffed animals, I followed her to the door. As I wrapped my arms around her, I handed her the tape and simply said, "I think you're wonderful."

One day, almost three years later, Sarah came back to me through the words of a small, brown-eyed, five-year-old boy. I was teaching in a completely different school, with a new population of children who had been hurt or deserted. We were singing our song about being wonderful. We were building self-esteem and a sense of belonging. As soon as we started the lyrics, Jimmy yelled, "Hey, that's Sarah's song!" In my heart I immediately knew who Sarah was, yet I had to wonder if this young boy knew the same fragile Sarah. I crawled over to sit next to Jimmy on the rug, with our song continuing to play in the background. As I put my arm around his shoulder, I had to fight back my own tears. I asked Jimmy what he meant. The words that came reassuringly out of this beautiful child's mouth still make my heart smile.

"That song about being wonderful, that's Sarah's song. Sarah came to our foster home, and when I was sad and crying for my mama, Sarah would sing that song to me. She would tell me I was wonderful. She made it not hurt so bad."

It was at that precise moment that I understood the meaning of the word "wonderful." Sarah had taken our song with her. She had incorporated its meaning into her soul. She had used

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the lyrics about being wonderful as a form of healing. Yet what struck me as even more fascinating was her ability to capture this process and give it to another lonely child. What took me weeks to accomplish as a teacher took Sarah only a moment. This instant "soul comforting" is a unique rite of passage that can only be shared by children who are tossed out into the world to survive on their own.

Sarah gave me a gift, a solid reason to continue using music in my curriculum. I am comforted with the knowledge that Sarah, Jimmy, and I will continue to use this music to heal many other children.

Kathleen Van Antwerp is the author of the book I Can't Come to School Today...My Mom's in Prison and I Don't Have a Ride. With more than 10 years of experience teaching at-risk youth, Kathleen is on the cutting edge in developing programs for this population. She is currently the children's services advisor for Head Start, Santa Barbara County, as well as teaching child development at California State University, Northridge, and Moorpark College. She can be reached at P.O. Box 2097, Ventura Park, CA 93002, fax 805-642-8794.