

## TAPESTRIES

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*ABSTRACT: In our work with youth, there are special moments of connection where our understanding, sensitivity and helping potential release us. Drawn by the other person's developmental readiness and the demands of the moment, an opportunity emerges for heightened relationship and communication. This is when we are at our best as CYCWs. Tapestries is dedicated to the telling and retelling of the stories that describe the 'soul' of child and youth work practice. Stories that exemplify the merging of CYCW art, technique... and 'soul'. Readers are encouraged to contribute stories for publication by contacting Varda Mann-Feder at the address listed inside the front cover. Tapestries was first included in the Journal of Child and Youth Care Work, Volume 18. Tapestries was originally published in the early 1990s in the Texas Youth and Child Care Worker Association newsletter, Directline. It is reprinted here with permission.*

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### IN TAMIKA'S MOMENT

I was sitting in my office one evening. The piles of paperwork on my desk were reaching epic proportions and a couple of long evenings were necessary to lessen the possibility of an avalanche. As I sat with head down and pen in hand, busily scribbling responses to various requests, I became aware that someone was standing at my door. As I turned I noticed Tamika.

Tamika had been in our program for about a year. When she first arrived she was a handful; easy to anger and usually the first to ball up her fists and plunge headlong into bouts of fighting and clawing at any provocation. This had been her way for many years as she had learned to live in the chaos and constant fear that was her life in the 5th Ward district of Houston. Tamika was raised by her crippled mother and a steady stream of her mother's 'boy friends', many of whom had physically and emotionally abused her.

I smiled at Tamika and asked her if there was something that she needed. She didn't respond immediately. She just continued to look at me with her sparkling dark eyes.

"You're unfair to me," she finally said.

"Really," I replied, "How do you figure?"

Thus it began. She went on to relate her view of me. I was both fascinated and dismayed as she explained that I liked her white roommate better. She knew this because I always seemed to have time to speak to her in the hall and ask her about her day, to take the time to listen to her frequent complaints, and help her think through solutions to each day's myriad problems. From Tamika's point of view, I never had time for her. I realized as I listened that she was speaking the truth as she knew it – no games, no subterfuge; the simple truth, flatly stated.

Her perceptions were, of course, very different from mine. As a professional CYCW, I thought of myself as infinitely open and available to her and to all the youth in my care. It was puzzling and painful to listen to her words. The small voice in my head wanted to cry out and refute the accusations. Fortunately, my self-control won out and I remained silent and listened.

When she paused, I explained that I was sorry that it seemed that way to her; that I didn't realize she felt that way. I continued by saying that I appreciated her coming to me and telling me. I told her that our relationship was important to me but I wasn't sure what to do next. Again she silently regarded me with her shiny dark eyes. And then, a decision made, she quietly left the room.

Several minutes later she returned bearing several scrapbooks. She pulled a chair over close to me and sat down with the albums in her lap. For the next hour we went through the books, picture by picture, and she related her story. Beginning with her first placement, she introduced me to a vast cast of roommates and significant others who had lived with her and helped her painstakingly make her way through her troubled early life. She told me their stories and detailed the contributions that each had made to her growth and changes into the teenager that she was today. As I listened, I realized that I was being given a most remarkable gift, the opportunity to view another person's world and their understanding of it through their eyes.

When the last picture was shown and the final album closed, I turned to her.

"Why have you shared all of this with me? Why me, and why tonight?" I asked.

With a shy smile she replied, "I have been watching you for a long time. You know I don't get along with many men, especially white ones." I had noticed that nearly all of the photographs were of female peers and staff, and most of her close relationships in our program were with females.

"My roommate is off-campus on a home visit tonight. I've been wondering for a long time what it would be like to have a close relationship with a man. You seem like someone I would like to try it out with. I guess I'm just ready."

She used the word 'man', but I instinctively knew she meant 'father'. She was opening the door to a new possibility that all men are not the same; the possibility that she might now be able to discern the difference

between the ones who hurt you and the ones who might be able to love and value you.

Our relationship changed that night. After that, I always knew that she was keenly aware of me and that my attention was important to her. I felt a new permission to give her more of myself, and she received the gift openly and gratefully.

It became more common for her to stop by my office upon return from school; sometimes to talk over a problem, sometimes to simply share her day and experiences. I suspect, most often, she just wanted to spend a little time basking in that wonderful experience of feeling important enough to be listened to and to continue testing and retesting the possibility that a 'man' could care about her and respect her.

When she graduated from our program a year later it was like losing a daughter. She continued to bloom and by the time she left, had many significant relationships with other males, both staff and peers; even a 'boy friend'.

I'll never forget Tamika or that night. I hope I'll never forget the importance of what I learned that night about the power of willingness. She had been willing to take a chance on me. She had been willing to test out a new possibility. I had been willing to stop what I was doing and engage. She had been willing to be direct with me. I had been willing to look at myself through the eyes of another; eyes that did not see me the way I saw myself. Between the two of us, we unfolded one of those magic moments in a relationship. Between the two of us, we created the opportunity for both of us to grow. Tamika found an opening into a new world. I found new meaning in the importance of being open to how differently youth perceive me and how important it is to be sensitive to emerging opportunities for connection. Both of us were changed by that moment. Both of us were better for it.