

STORY #3

From Angry Kid to Peace-Prize Winner

(Age of child / youth in story: age 7 through High School in story)

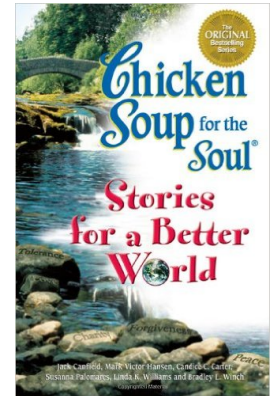
p. 41 in the book

Chicken Soup for the Soul: Stories for a Better World

Canfield, Hansen, Carter, Palomares, Williams, and Winch

Songs:

- ♥ ♪ [Another Word for PEOPLE](#) (2:00)
- ♥ ✓ ♪ [Eyes of Compassion: A Trauma-Informed Lens Song](#) (1:33)
plus [YouTube video/ slide show of song with lyrics](#)
- ♥ ♪ [What if That Were Me?](#) (1:48)
- ♥ ♦ ♪ [The Golden Rule Song](#) (1:10)
- ♥ ✓ ♦ ♪ Bonus Resources found at CaringandCapableKids.com



A hush fell over the banquet room. It was time, and my heart was beating wildly. I couldn't believe I was here, and that, in a moment, all eyes would be on me. I stood as I heard my name called, and with sweaty palms I began my walk to the podium amidst thunderous applause. As I stood there, acknowledging the outburst of approval from my peers, I couldn't help thinking how my old friends from my tumultuous high-school days would roll over laughing in disbelief if they could see me now!

I was the angry kid who had joined them in petty thefts, joyriding in stolen cars and various acts of vandalism, and I was about to accept a California Peace Prize from the California Wellness Foundation! My second thought was, I really can't get into any public conflicts anymore! How embarrassing would it be to read in the newspaper that "Wayne Sakamoto, Safe Schools Lead Coordinator—who is responsible for violence prevention, conflict resolution and gang prevention in San Diego County—has been in a fight!" I chuckled to myself as I smiled and accepted the prestigious award. "Thank you. I am honored to be here."

It had been a long journey to this evening's recognition. I remembered the anger I had felt as a little boy confronted by racism. My parents had tried to prepare me for the discrimination, but I was still surprised and deeply hurt by it. The first time it happened, I was about seven years old. There was this playground equipment in the park that I wanted to climb. It was like a rocket ship with a capsule at the top. It was difficult, but I made it to the top, only to be confronted by some older kids who were up there.

"You don't belong up here!" they yelled at me. "You're a Jap!"

"What do you mean? I'm an American!"

"No, you're not! You're a Jap!"

I was outraged and so confused. There weren't any adults around to help me. I went home. I didn't tell my parents. I had learned from them that there are some things—and feelings—you don't talk about. I knew that they had been interned during World War II as teenagers. Only rarely did they talk about it, giving me the briefest glimpses into what it must have been like. My mother spoke of the cold draft that was always blowing through the shack they were forced to live in. They both spoke of the shortage of food, of going hungry. The property their families had owned before was taken away from them, as well as scholarships to college (their only way to attend), the senior prom and all the social activities so important to teenagers—so many things that could never be replaced. In spite of their losses and humiliation, they were fiercely patriotic Americans.

But the injustice of it all smoldered inside me.

I started experiencing more and more of these discriminating messages. No, you don't belong! No, you're not one of us! I became more and more angry. I began hating myself. I didn't fit in. I was filled with rage. The name-calling continued, and I started getting into fights. I never told anyone that it was because of the racial name-calling.

By the time I was in the fourth grade, we had moved from Orange County to Riverside County. We were the only Asian family in the barrio. Recess time from the first day on was a time to fight—until I could prove I was pretty tough. I was always proving myself.

My only escape was at night when I told myself stories to get to sleep. I was always the hero in my stories, living in a big house, being the best athlete and having wonderful parties. When I got older, instead of stories, I went over in my mind what had happened during the day—how I could have changed the outcome, what I could have done differently. I think a lot of our youth today don't have an opportunity to do that.

When I work with an angry kid now, I ask, "Where do you think your anger is coming from?" I encourage them to reflect on their lives. Looking straight into their eyes, I tell them, "Until you can accept who you are and what you cannot change, you will not be able to move on."

I certainly did not change all at once. It was very gradual—baby steps. The first person to really help me was my sixth-grade teacher, Mrs. Madeline West. She entered my life on the playground when I was still in the fourth grade. She saw me shoving another kid, and she grabbed my arm and told me how unacceptable my behavior was. I saw her watching me after that and hoped that she would never be my teacher. I was really worried when the sixth grade came around and she was my teacher! I knew she knew who I was, but she never said anything about the past. Instead, she saw potential in me. She believed that I could do better in school. She helped me believe in myself. When she talked to me, it was genuine. I wasn't over being a knucklehead, but meeting her was a turning point in my life. Kids do need adults in their lives to care about them. It's a slow process, but they do make a difference in a kid's life.

In my work, I don't try to change kids. I just give them information. I tell them about my own experiences, how my own anger felt when I was a kid. I talk about the joy I felt being connected with other guys as angry as I was, inflicting hurt on those who had hurt us—and those who hadn't—and the addiction of the adrenaline rush. Kids recognize authenticity. I tell them that anger is a natural emotion; it's how you channel it—or don't—that makes it a problem. So channeling your anger is what's important. Kids tend to think that conflict, no matter how minor, always turns into a violent confrontation. They don't understand that there are other ways to resolve conflict. We must give them tools to communicate their anger other than a physical fight—or a tragic school shooting.

My dream is that all adults will realize that they are involved in developing young people, no matter what their role is with them. It does take a village to raise a child! We need to share our values, teach them manners, tell them what we think makes an ideal man or woman, and give them hope that they can make a difference.

The sound of applause penetrated my reverie. Looking out into the sea of faces, I began, "Ladies and gentlemen, I want to tell you a story about an angry young man. The important part of the story is how teachers and adults like you made a difference in his life. I want you to be inspired to be that person in another child's life. . . ."

Wayne Sakamoto
As told to Barbara Smythe