

Singing

Music is my first language. Before I could speak I sang the language as a small child. My Aunt recalls that I loved to hang out in her beauty parlor as a toddler. She rolled up my hair in curlers for a flip and put me under a dryer. Propped up to the right height I would sing the hour away under the massive hot cone. Her customers would say, "My, she knows all the words!" I thought no one could hear me. Today my aunt knows the words to all those songs due to repetitive performance.

My father sang to win my mother with hip Elvis looks and country guitar. Music means pure love to me. The first facsimile of passion, listening from the womb in the circular hogan warmed by the cast iron stove and kerosene lamps. Later, as a bundle passed like the guitar between uncles, and my father, they all sang Country Western, Roger Miller, Elvis. Secure in a circle of Navajo men, and my mother's brother, privileged as a first born baby girl. My maternal uncle said the uncles and my Dad all talked in Dinè. When they sang it was in English, so he joined in. He held me when I came around.

Grandpa would go once a week to choir practice. On Sunday mornings I sat by my classy Grandmother who was dressed in all navy blue. Her hair would be waved on the sides and pulled back into a bun. She would wear her cotton stockings and good shoes. We shared our book of hymns and sang while watching my grandfather and his best friends, like Mary Schlick and Clayton Earl, sing in front of the whole church. We spent a good part of the week devoted to song.

My grandfather decided on piano study for me to learn the basics of musical language. I played his parts for him from borrowed sheets. His eyes would look off following his voice with his whole body. Even when he whistled, I felt calm. He said, "Music can calm the wild beast." If you run into a bear, sing to it sweetly. He bought a stereo phonograph and Mahalia Jackson albums. To make it a gift for me was his excuse for extravagance. He sat perfectly still to listen with his eyes closed.

He would come to all the school choral concerts. He would say I had a beautiful strong voice and he could hear me. The music teacher said I had an amazing ear, whatever that means.

If I cried and was inconsolable, my grandfather and my Uncle Louie would throw their arms around the other's shoulder and sway back and forth. They would solemnly sing with one fist holding an imaginary beer stein, "Ach die leiber's Ki-yash shtinks. Ki-yash shtinks. KAY-yash shtinks!" They would begin another round exaggerating the glottal stops and consonants of German, Indian and slang. Always, I would laugh hysterically, because they were serious and perfect.

My image of collective love is best understood from memories of the Longhouse with every person singing devotion and gratitude accompanied by the seven drums. This happened in the intense healing times my grandmother attended, as well. This was not as often. My grandmother's tone was in the Indian key. She sang to make her grandchildren strong, so we would not feel lonely. Her great-grandmother sang these songs for her, too.

My Grandfather secretly wanted to sing for the La Scalla Opera. He envied Jackie's Dad, Frenchie Thomas, who was supposed to go study and sing there. When Jackie and her dad both sang "The Indian Love Song," it made my grandfather weep. Frenchie did not go and study. He was afraid of becoming too lonesome in Europe. Every person could sing. Every one has a voice, a personal song that helps the earth remain the beautiful place it is.

Somewhere his voice is recorded in Forest Grove, the Chemawa Indian School.

As he returned from work my grandfather at night, lifted me up into his arms rubbing my cheek with a five o'clock shadow. I would giggle. Unlike all the wholesome magnificent memories, the generations of power in our family, he died in a house fire. His death broke this gift of singing for me. Physically, he was there every day in my recollection as a child. He was always somewhere, as a measure of peace. I tried to call him once, dialing our old number, then realized he was not going to answer. There wasn't even a house.

Losing the ability to sing is similar to losing the courage to love. It hurts to fail at such a necessary and exquisite art; to become ultimately weak as a result. To not have any confidence in one's own voice feels is a touch the ecstatic edge of love to recoil tense and static. A roommate told me that I sang wonderful songs in my sleep. She laughed because she wanted to ask me what I was singing one night, and realized sleep had my voice. Perhaps I can learn to sing, but it is significant for me to learn how to breathe again. To feel pleasure in my body, feel strong and peaceful.

How to love and how to sing, are the same lessons. It begins inside with all the breath and courage accumulated in one vibration, from the solar plexus. Stand in front of someone and try to sing. Stand in front of someone and try to say, "I love you." What happens to the throat? It tenses and the words stop. Are you afraid?

