

## Life of Music

It was late evening when my mother and I got back home. It was a memorable trip to Mumbai, the land of many dreams, and it had become a land of a shattered dream for me.

I was 19 and much too young in my mind. All I wanted to do was to drown in a cloud of shame. I had just been shortlisted out of the second round of auditions for a singing talent hunt competition. I had to also look good there. It pained me that I had lost the chance of making it big in something that I had been trained in since age five. I rejected music; rejected my voice, condemned my failure and retreated into a shell where I vowed never to honour my voice again.

Rerouting back eight years later, I had been dabbling in my own spiritual growth in an eternal quest to find my true self - one that wouldn't betray me, instead stand by me as I went through highs and lows emotionally and in my physical world. As I stepped out of a simple programme called Breathwork, I had the most profound experience - God in my body.

No, I wasn't possessed for it was just a discovery that I belonged to him. This was through the startling memory of being in-utero. I re-experienced my own traumatic birth, this time releasing the hurt, pain, depression and anger within me. A year later, the quest in me to explore my cellular God through my own intimate breath was even stronger.

As I entered yet another Breathwork programme, I spoke about my previous year's experience of humming and crooning in my mother's womb. It was the most stilling experience. It confirmed that which I knew so deep within me, that music is the DNA of my soul. Every cell in my body leapt with an urge, an ecstasy to live life that I had probably experienced for a very brief while at birth, and that too unconsciously. This life in me expressed itself through sounds. Being aware of the in-utero sounds, the soft circular sound of fluid around as I moved my leg and the stillness I lay suspended in, safely and gently protecting me, was beyond any silence I had ever experienced. I felt the slow swish of tiny hair on my back moving like corals swaying beneath a deep, blue sea in a wave of warm softness. I was home. And home was filled with sounds of silence. As I made my leap out for a second time, this time very aware of my emotions as I lay there breathing in the swimming pool, supported by my motherly facilitator, I heard the splash of the pool water around me. It was like a crash of a whale in the ocean. And as I uttered my first cry, my primal cry, I heard my voice for the first time - crystalline clear, angst and passion with a thirst for life that was ready to engulf within it all in its wake. I was alive. I was life.

Life since then has been a soundscape more than ever before. When I gave my session for someone on the first day, he told me I had a sweet voice. Little did I read into it then! As the Breathwork programme progressed, I wanted to hum and sing and pirouette and dance. I was in rhythm. For the very first time, I followed my heart's desire and sang for our Breathwork group at the dining table. I was touched by the loveliness of my own voice and moved by my life urge. As the programme ended I realised that one of my closest soul connects had called me up a couple of days before the programme to check how I was doing and I had told him I felt lost because I had imagined myself singing as an adult since childhood, while singing was nowhere in my wildest imagination, I spoke to him dejectedly. As I left the programme, however, I could

point the cells on my solar plexus and the specific pockets of my body that kept calling me to sing.

Sing for life, I heard my body say. I wanted to sing for life. I had forgiven myself for rejecting music then, nine years back when it had hurt me by rejecting me when I thought I lacked a good enough voice, a good enough sound.

My ears though were alive. I heard sounds when I stood at a traffic signal. I heard a column of silence, irrepressible, above which was a layer of magnetic hum, above which were the machines that were gutting out sound through their very churning, and above it the various horns. Somewhere in the distance, scattered amid this column of soundscape was the swishing of bats and branches and the low-volume cries of various birds making their way home at sunset. Life has sound, one that our ears can infinitely fathom without the noise in the mind. As I came out of the workshop, humming, dancing and singing, I had found my organic love - one that could decompose me in a single instant into nothingness and recompose me into that throbbing and pulsing *sufiana* madness.

Days later I told the UniVerse that I wish to sing - for life - like an African mother sings to her unborn child to find her child's song; I wanted to discover my voice by exploring it to see what seeped in through those organic pockets which wanted me to hum and dance and sing for Joy. As I was invoking the angels and made calls to my musical companions who were with me five years back, I got a call from a friend asking me if I wanted to audition for the backing vocals of a TV show.

Life reached a full circle. I turned to my dad to help me out in recording the audition track. When I did that, I was shocked because I had missed him all along while he was right next to me. I had missed him sharing his musical tastes and tidbits with me as he did when I was a child. Memories came flooding back of how he played the violin, rehearsed at 7 am every morning even as he got late for his daily job he needed to keep as we were poor. Dad was rich with life urge, and I had never noticed it. I had missed my treasure as I became obsessed with killing myself and my talent because of a small rejection. As a child I liked to wake up listening to him play the violin and having noticed that, he would often come to my bed and practice his arpeggios. I would sit up, dazzled at heart, sleep in my eyes, as every note reached within every pore of my skin like fish making their way through every corner of a stream. Every note was imprinted in me; each of the 22 frequencies of sound knew their way and place in me. They ruled the domain of my awareness and besotted my mind. I recollected of how often I woke up with a tune in my head, how elated I felt in the front row of a musical concert, how I looked for dad in every violinist and cellist, how I longed for him in every man, how my 80GB iPod was always running out of space to accommodate the diverse music that I carry in my soul, how so many of my friends are amateur musicians, how my favourite book that makes me cry by the sheer beauty of the words doing justice to a musician's love for music happens to be 'An Equal Music' and how my very first film was 'Sound of Music' when I had sat in our huge Mazda Hall on the dusty floor, with my music teacher sitting on the piano stool, a film that I watch almost every month and how I did indeed hear the aliveness of the hills when I had first made my journey to the same quiet, majestic mountains.

I remembered the many choirs that I was always a part of in my school, the middle path forever my destiny as I join the dots and recollect how, every time when there had to be three groups in the choir, I would be neither a soprano or an alto, but the one in the middle, balancing the harmonies of both. I remembered as I left school, the only thing I really missed was my choir days – the excitement of standing in new shoes, socks, tunic and shirt twice a year, with hands interlocked in front of my belt, an electric feel to the early evening air. I remember the thrill in me when I was taken to the high school library by my English teacher after an audition to learn a Bengali song for the 50<sup>th</sup> year of Indian Independence; I remember picking up the words in this language, foreign to me then, by the mere sweetness of its syllabic sound. That was my first exposure to singing in a different language - a trend that inculcated a deep love for experimenting with songs of different languages and their styles. I remember the thrill of being asked to lead the song all through, helping others in the group with their harmonies. I remember the feeling of joy as my school won first prize in that competition.

I remember the quivering of my heart and the surrender to my fingers while playing AR Rahman's *Bharat humko* on the synthesizer in my high school assembly on a huge ground that same year. I remember cycling twice a week across town and traffic to a narrow, ancient place in the old city to sit under the bored fan in a hot, perspiring room with a bunch of girls of various ages, each singing a *raag* in turn as my passionate music teacher belted out notes with a furious urge on the harmonium, doing antics with his voice that enraptured me. I remember pointing out the incorrectness of pitch or non-adherence to the format in the other girls when they repeated verses after my teacher. I remember their heavily-classical influenced style sound strange to my semi-classical style, something in me asserting the middle path as I sang along with them. I remember being the last one to get up after the class and touch his feet. I remember him telling me that I have a beautiful voice every time and that I should wake up early morning and do *riyaaz*.

I remember not believing him then. I remember the tedious music exams I had to give to get certified which made me stop my music classes, ingraining this deep belief in me that my skill has no value without a certificate. I remember winning my first public competition outside school in the final year and being applauded by my classmates on the last day of my 10<sup>th</sup> standard private tuitions. I remember going to junior college and enamouring guys from the senior-most division of college who were at least five years older to me, if not more, due to my confident stage performances.

I remember my disastrously nervous first date with the guy who played drums in the college band. I remember winning the 'Most talented person of the year' crown in my final year of junior college as I swept everyone away by singing for the final round. I remember my strongest love-relationship with a man who had the most soul-stirring voice and was a charm with the guitar.

I remember my first project's manager putting up my pictures on the pillar in the office bay and labelling it "star" because of my active participation in the organisation's annual music show. I remember the lifelong friendships with my two band members then and the timeless jamming sessions in a hall with a heavy echo in the after-work hours for the show and the delirious yet intimate silent communication we shared through the performance on-stage, coordinating our

performances to reach the perfect synchronisation and the immense energy it poured through each of us as we made it, note by note, beat on beat.

I remember enchanting my overseas clients at a client party to the extent that on their last day the visiting managing director felt compelled to appreciate me in spite of the hundred odd pair of eyes staring at him, kissing me on my cheek saying that I am a star, and he hoped that when I make it big, I shall remember him and invite him for my concert. I remember travelling onsite and being recognised by strange faces in that bizarre office as the girl who sang like a dream.

I remember holding hands with the love of my life after attending the concert of a revered violinist. I remember fighting with my colleagues who I had to stay with for not letting me put my kind of music that was too eclectic for their tastes aloud. I remembered a few days before I returned to India, jamming with my clients including my manager exploring a little of jazz and a little of rock at the end of which he gasped that though he had played several times with different people, he had never before truly felt part of a band.

And yet through it all, I forgot the presence of music in this state of unconsciousness, until I plunged into meditation.

For at least a year nothing about meditation made sense to me. I could see my awareness and focus shifting but my mind could not absorb and accept what this whole act was all about, what was the happening that people referred to as meditation. It was then that I found the most apt description of meditation – meditation is when you listen to God.

Mother Teresa's quote helped me discover this. When asked by a journalist what it was that she did when she prayed, she replied that she listened. And when asked what God said, she replied, "He listens". Meditation is a two-way listening. And as I recollected this, I became aware of how my dad always told me that singing is more about listening than singing – you recite what you hear, he always instructed me. He was my teacher above everything else.

As I join the puzzle now, I realise that I had a fabulous vocabulary in school because I connected words to their meanings through their sounds, which is how they appear to me when I write even now. Writing is a listening act, as is remembering multiplication tables through their sounds, as is remembering phone numbers by the lilt of sound pattern a phone number carries.

Circling back to my present life-time, there are times when I have visions of giant people playing huge instruments that emit vibrations which make giant structures appear by magnetising the material around. There are times when a piece of music evokes a fragrance or a colour that reveals to me that the UniVerse is creating wondrous links in me, that I am its playground.

In my most recent Breathwork session, I was amazed to notice that my client had a deep experience of sound being a very vital part of her embryonic memory, as she became aware of her own intimate awareness of the silent movements of her mother's actions as she made her way through her daily chores.

Today life has completed a full circle in more than one way – dad has become my teacher once more as I learn from him his effervescent Life urge that he has preserved through all these years of our collective death urge as a family. I remember defending his decision to quit his unfulfilling job and turn to music for livelihood and yet inwardly vowing never to follow this pattern as we faced the incredible financial upheaval in due course.

At this juncture in my life, I trace the same pattern a million times in my head of quitting my job for something that is as creatively fulfilling as music. And as I move from breath to breath I am in deep homage to this very Life Urge that I have experienced biologically within me, hoping that soon the incredible healing that turned my life from a banality to a state of worship would reveal to me its footprints in the world outside.

Today, I owe my life to music and I feel each of us is made from music that has simply been solidified. Spiritual texts say we are vibration. I know I am. I am sound - every sound giving birth to the light ecstatically exploding into life. And the more I discover this, the more I hear myself moving to the center now, breathing in and out of these spaces with you, listening to you as you are to me, like an apple and its core.