

A guide to healing through song (lessons from Şifa)

1. For a song to be healing, it has to first invite you to remember. To come near, and closer, closer, closest. Carefully and with hesitance it whispers:

“شفاء

Shhhhhhhh

Shif. aeh.

shifa”

Because healing, at first, is inevitably painful. An invitation can also look something like this:

“I had a really good friend, she used to love this song very much.

We used to sing it together a lot.

While she was going through cancer treatment, she asked me to sing the song at her funeral.

I told her I couldn't do it. The idea of singing without her scared me.”

“Gule' is short for the name Gülizar.

My friend's name was Gülizar, like in the song.

The lyrics are '*Let's go Gule, Let's go!*'”

Singing *is* scary. I've thought singing was scary because of shame, but perhaps it is scary because singing is about healing and healing, at least at first, is inevitably painful.

2. For a song to be healing, it must have been sung by many before (by many other women, by tribes, throughout generations, or by someone who embodies many lives).

I call a friend I made quite recently but have already developed a strong connection to, without really knowing that much about her or her life (I call these 'soul connections'). Cait is a musician and has been researching songs and music from her tribe, the Kalina people, in light of ritual and the circle of life. We had talked about this before, but more in terms of writing and research. I wanted to ask her what makes a song healing and *where it hurts*.

I find her on the metro and every two minutes or so a lady blasts through the speakers into my ears.

“Hi! Can you hear me?”

“ yes! I am on the metro! Can you hear me!?”

“Cait! Cait, I wanted to ask you about song and healing. I am writing ...”

“DIJKZICHT STATION, EXIT AT THE RIGHT SIDE. IT IS MANDATORY ...”

“I WANTED TO ASK YOU about healing through song...I'm writing this piece... It's about Şifa, about Maral, and Hümeýra, and Rengin, who are trying to heal now. But it is also about you and me, our parents, and migration and home, and ...”

“I wanted to ask you where it hurts.”

“hmmm
I hear you”

“IT IS MANDATORY TO WEAR A FACEMASK THAT COV...”

“How do we heal through song?”

“ ... I think it has to do with initiation...yes, it has everything to do with initiation and vibrations and taking responsibility.”

I wonder whether I should call her at another time, but I feel like I’ve entered this headspace now, we are on this ride together and I can’t get off at this stop. Despite all the noise, I might get the answers I’m seeking if only I stay patient. We laugh at the sheer volume and aggression of the announcements and the ridiculousness of our current reality.

“Ok, ok, but how are these connected? What do you mean with vibrations?”

“Look. Once you understand what it means to be initiated... I mean, people think of healing as something that has to do with restoring what is broken, but that’s not true. It’s about loss, for sure, but more than that it’s about making room for something new, a birth of something else. That is why you need to understand initiation. And also, it is not just personal.”

“...what about songs?”

“We carry the vibrations of our ancestors through singing. You have to breathe, and sound is vibration. Sometimes, actually often, we stop breathing, but when you are singing it becomes a simple form of catharsis. Like, letting go through breath, and reaching out to your ancestors through vibration; taking in light, hope, but most importantly knowledge. With this knowledge you regain a sense of your place in the world and what your divine responsibility is...”

“This is why we need to keep singing these songs; singing is cathartic, it is about initiation and about the transfer of knowledge”.

“...And that’s where ‘responsibility’ comes in?”

“I mean, approximately, the responsibility to transfer knowledge”

“ DELFSHAVEN STATION, EXIT AT THE LEFT SIDE. WE KINDLY REMIND YOU IT IS MANDATORY ...

“What is up with this lady?! O.k. I think I get it, it sounds quite obvious, of course it is about breathing... Thanks so much!

Are you on your way home?”

“No! I’m going to meet a new baby!”

3. For a song to be healing, it must be sung out loud.

“I sing publicly from time to time.
But I’ve never sung an Azeri song before.
I wish I had sung an Azeri song for my grandfather.
I think he would’ve loved it.
Which is why it was good to sing this song now”

I call T and tell her about my conversation with Cait. About vibrations and breath and singing and about Şifa. Obviously, she knows about all of this already. She is wise through experience and is world renown. I tell her anyway and ask her what she thinks of song and healing.

“I don’t know anybody who doesn’t sing, you sing when you cook, I know people do this thing where they sing in the douche...”

She says this as if singing under the shower is some special activity all people secretly participate in except for her, which makes me smile.

“Everybody is a singer. It is the first instrument you have; it’s the oldest instrument there is and it’s directly connected to emotion. Some speak as if they are singing and some sing as if they are speaking. You wonder, what is singing, what is speaking, what is yelling? Do you know Cathy Berberian ? She sings everything, literally ...

“ This reminds me, I included a lullaby in my last movie. At the very end of the process I added it, it just ended up to be such a personal and emotional movie, I decided to put it in. Just like that...”

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Singing while sad is hard, that’s why sometimes we need to whisper songs.
I think about lullabies and how we cradle children to sleep while transferring knowledge.
Lullabies are healing preparation stations created by mothers who carefully carry whispering vibrations, who reach inwards and then out, in joyful preparation of all that will be new. From the divine to a mother, from mother to mother, to another mother, to child. Anyone can be a mother, just like everyone can sing. Like a balm, knowledge is transferred in the most loving way as an act of initiation.

I think of my healing song. And that, perhaps if I’d sing more, I would be in less pain and understand better what my place is in the world. I wish someone would ask me to sing a song out loud. I wish to visit a baby and sing them a lullaby. I hope to have the courage to feel the inevitable hurt and feel the consequent healing through my ancestors’ songs being sung.

And I wish for your song to be sung, to be felt, to be heard. For you to reconnect to your ancestors and their vibrations, how painful they may be. Where does it hurt? What can we accept? Is this the space in which resolution can be found without the prerequisite of peace?

And I wish you love.

I love you.

I love you Maral

I love you Hümeyra

I love you Regnin