

They're Playing Your Song

by Alan Cohen

When a woman in a certain African tribe knows she is pregnant, she goes out into the wilderness with a few friends and together they pray and meditate until they hear the song of the child. They recognize that every soul has its own vibration that expresses its unique flavor and purpose. When the women attune to the song, they sing it out loud. Then they return to the tribe and teach it to everyone else.

When the child is born, the community gathers and sings the child's song to him or her. Later, when the child enters education, the village gathers and chants the child's song. When the child passes through the initiation to adulthood, the people again come together and sing. At the time of marriage, the person hears his or her song. Finally, when the soul is about to pass from this world, the family and friends gather at the person's bed, just as they did at their birth, and they sing the person to the next life.

When I have shared this story in my lectures, a fair amount of people in the audience come to tears. There is something inside each of us that knows we have a song, and we wish those we love would recognize it and support

us to sing it. In some of my seminars I ask people to verbalize to a partner the one phrase they wish their parents had said to them as a child. Then the partner lovingly whispers it in their ear. This exercise goes very deep, and many significant insights start to click. How we all long to be loved, acknowledged, and accepted for who we are!

In the African tribe there is one other occasion upon which the villagers sing to the child. If at any time during his or her life, the person commits a crime or aberrant social act, the individual is called to the center of the village and the people in the community form a circle around them. Then they sing their song to them. The tribe recognizes that the correction for antisocial behavior is not punishment; it is love and the remembrance of identity. When you recognize your own song, you have no desire or need to do anything that would hurt another.

A friend is someone who knows your song and sings it to you when you have forgotten it. Those who love you are not fooled by mistakes you have made or dark images you hold about yourself. They remember your beauty when you feel ugly; your wholeness when you are broken; your innocence when you feel guilty; and your purpose when you are confused.

One summer when I was a teenager I went to visit my cousin and her family in Wilmington, Delaware. One afternoon she took me to the community pool, where I met a man who changed my life. Mr. Simmons talked to me for about ten minutes. It wasn't what he said that affected me so deeply; it was how he listened to me. He asked me questions about my life, my feelings, and my interests. The unusual thing about Mr. Simmons was that he paid attention to my answers. Although I had family, friends, and teachers, this man was the only person in my world who seemed genuinely interested in what I had to say and valued me for who I was. After our brief conversation I never saw him again. I probably never will. I'm sure he had no idea that he gave me the gift of a lifetime. Maybe he was one of those angels who show up for a brief mission on earth, to give someone faith, confidence, and hope when they most need it.

If you do not give your song a voice, you will feel lost, alone, and confused. If you express it, you will come to life. I have also done a workshop exercise in which everyone in the room is given a piece of paper with the name of a simple song on it, such as "Mary Had a Little Lamb" or "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." In the whole group there are perhaps eight different songs, and a half-dozen people have the same song named on their paper. Each person is then asked to mill around the room while

they whistle or hum their song. When they find someone else playing the same song, they stay together until they find everyone who is singing that song. Thus they create small groups that serve as touchstones for the duration of the program.

Life is very much like this exercise. We attract people on a similar wavelength so we can support each other to sing aloud. Sometimes we attract people who challenge us by telling us that we cannot or should not sing our song in public. Yet these people help us too, for they stimulate us to find greater courage to sing it.

You may not have grown up in an African tribe that sings your song to you at crucial life transitions, but life is always reminding you when you are in tune with yourself and when you are not. When you feel good, what you are doing matches your song, and when you feel awful, it doesn't. In the end, we shall all recognize our song and sing it well. You may feel a little warbly at the moment, but so have all the great singers. Just keep singing and you'll find your way home.