

When Surrender Becomes The Teacher

- TIKA

There are moments in a life when the body speaks louder than any stage, louder than any ovation, louder than even your own ambition. For me, that moment arrived when years of touring, moving from stage to stage, carrying the weight of performance, expectation, and survival, all collided with the silent truths my body could no longer hold. Injury forced me to stop. For someone who had built an identity on motion, sound, and presence, stillness felt like exile. But it was in that exile that surrender became my teacher.

My name is TIKA. I am a musician, a composer, a Canadian Academy Award-winning songwriter. I am a cultural strategist, a curator, a multidisciplinary artist, and a plus-size model. My life has been defined by creating spaces for sound, art, and visibility. In 2018, I was touring extensively, performing across the country, building my career as a touring artist, when I was booked to perform at the Opera House in Toronto. Alongside the show, I had interviews with major fashion magazines, workshops with leading organizations, and a press tour that demanded precision and energy. It was the culmination of years of preparation, visibility, and performance.

My manager at the time called with what I initially perceived as care and excitement. She informed me of the booking and the accompanying opportunities. I packed my bags, gathered groceries, and carried the weight of long-standing hyper-independence that had defined my life. I had always relied on myself for work, travel, and life—but that week, it betrayed me.

The first Airbnb I stayed in was noisy with construction. The Airbnb management company offered me a better property, a penthouse suite. It seemed ideal until I realized it was a four-story walk-up with no elevator. I carried two large suitcases and four grocery bags up four flights of stairs. By the time I reached the top, my back gave out. I did not yet know it, but I had herniated a disc. That injury became a defining moment, reframing my understanding of what it means to live with a disability in a world that often ignores pain.

Despite the injury, my manager remained passive about my pain. She saw it, yet treated it as an inconvenience. I had workshops to lead, interviews to attend, and the show to perform. I performed seated, enduring pain that the people closest to me seemed unwilling to acknowledge. Yet even in this state, every show sold out. People came not for my mobility or stamina, but for my presence and my music.

During that trip, I also realized something profound about my relationships. Toronto is a city built on motion, visibility, and performance. Many of my connections there were tied to me as a performer. After my injury, I continued to cook for others, chop vegetables, and do chores, but few noticed me hunched over or in pain. My existence outside of the stage went largely unseen. In Montreal, by contrast, life moved at a slower, more intentional pace. Friends checked in constantly, helped me with daily tasks, and made my healing a priority. It was there that I discovered which relationships truly allowed me to be a human being, not just a performer.

Returning home, I faced the full weight of recovery. I could barely get in and out of the tub without help. For the first time, I had to rely on others. Friends cooked, cleaned, and assisted me

through basic tasks. I had never received this level of care—not from family, not from work, not from anyone in my immediate circles. This experience reshaped my understanding of care. Care is not optional. It is essential.

While healing, I confronted the harsh realities of the music industry. I gained over 100 pounds during my injury, and the industry responded with exile. I was no longer welcome in the spaces I had inhabited for years. Yet in this exclusion, I discovered clarity. Those spaces did not reflect my values, my humanity, or my artistry. They were not my home. In their absence, I began to understand the work I was meant to do: creating spaces for true artistry and authentic care.

It was during this time that I surrendered to a new path: composition. A friend told me about the Slate Music Residency Program at the Canadian Film Centre, one of the few programs for musicians transitioning into composing. I applied, and out of more than 200 applicants, I was one of six selected. The program was meant to last nine months but extended to four years due to COVID. During that time, I immersed myself in the craft of scoring, voiceover work, theme songs, and immersive sound design. Had I not pivoted to composition and surrendered to this opportunity, I would have had no income at all during the pandemic—unlike so many of my peers, who, as touring artists, faced complete financial halt. By the grace of God, I caught this path just in the nick of time. Through surrender, I discovered unexpected abundance, stability, and growth beyond what I could have anticipated. Composition taught me to advocate for myself, honor my limits, and value my craft in ways that touring never had.

This transition was also profoundly personal. As a touring artist, I had existed in a state of constant servitude—to audiences, to venues, to expectations. Composition allowed for intimacy, for introspection, for the creation of worlds within sound while seated at my piano. I learned that my value was intrinsic, not performative. That my craft, and I myself, were worthy of respect, care, and sustenance.

The herniated disc injury taught me vulnerability. It taught me reliance. It taught me that pain can reveal systemic patterns, even within our own communities, and that the presence of care can transform survival into growth. My body broke, yes, but it also taught me to rebuild in ways that honor both the self and the support around me.

Today, I stand not as a victim, but as a victor. I continue to create, to compose, to perform, and to care. I continue to honor the sacredness of rest, the power of vulnerability, and the beauty of intentional presence. My body, once a source of limitation, has become my teacher. My experiences, once isolating, have become the blueprint for a life grounded in resilience, creativity, and community.

I share this story to illuminate the intersections of artistry, care, and disability. It is a testament to the strength in surrender, the abundance in adaptation, and the possibility of thriving beyond expectation. In every note I compose, every song I write, every space I hold, I carry the lessons of pain transformed into purpose, and the unwavering knowledge that even in stillness, life is full, vibrant, and victorious.