



Finding A Voice

by MaryBeth Smith, GCFP

As a classically-trained singing teacher and vocal coach, it has been my privilege to teach aspiring performers at all levels. I always think of developing the person first, believing that the voice inside will emerge. To me, voice is an almost sacred form of self-expression. To help someone unleash that expression — or to find a self that has something to express — is interesting and wonderful.

And so, an unusual voice lesson sticks in my mind.

A new client, E., has sought several Feldenkrais® sessions to help him to manage his symptoms resulting from Parkinson's disease. He is tall, slender, and in his late 60's. His wife now accompanies him everywhere, including his Feldenkrais lessons. He says he was diagnosed shortly after he retired, three years ago. His left hand trembles almost continuously. His walk is slightly stooped, with the characteristic Parkinsonian shuffle. His natural soft-spoken demeanor has been rendered wispy, weak, and almost inaudible. He complains of unstable balance, and fatigue when walking. This was his third session.

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Previously, he and I explored how he senses and uses his feet, and how his center of gravity can be used for power and propulsion. We began this day with him lying on his back, with his right knee bent and right sole of his foot standing on the table. His left leg was long. His wife kept a watchful eye, pretending to read the book she brought along for the wait.

First, I asked him to hum a sustained pitch in a comfortable range. He made several attempts, each of them very soft, unsteady, and lasting less than two seconds. I asked him to review an earlier movement — to push, gently, into his standing right foot, and to experience again how the pressure from his foot can cause his pelvis to roll, as if beginning to roll onto his left side. We began to explore how his inhalation and exhalation could coordinate with the movement. He sampled inhaling while pressing with his foot, and then he tried exhaling with the pressure. For now, we settled on the latter.

After doing a few of these gentle movements on both sides, it was time for a rest. His breathing seemed less hurried, and his tremor had decreased noticeably. I asked him, once again, to hum.

There was more sound, and he was able to sustain the hum steadily for a full three seconds. As I brought his attention to the vibrations he could feel by gently

touching my fingertips to his forehead, cheeks, and chest, his breathing deepened, and he was able to hum for over five seconds.

Next, I asked him to press the table with his foot and turn his pelvis as before. This time, we added a hum as he rolled his pelvis. His hum became stronger, and of longer duration, each time. And then, I asked him to open his mouth, and to make an “Ah” sound on the same pitch as before.

E. took a breath, pressed his foot on the table. His pelvis began to roll, and I heard, “AAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!” Again, on the next press, “AAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

“That seems a lot stronger,” he said.

His wife’s eyes were the size of saucers.

His voice was just as strong while pushing with the other foot. And then, I asked him to find out — what would happen if he bent both knees, stood both feet on the table, and pressed into both feet? He saw how he could easily lift his pelvis away from the table. Nobody would have guessed that this frail man would be able to do a “Bridge.” And then, as he pressed the table, slowly lifting his pelvis, we heard, “AAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

We paused so he could rest. I spoke to his wife.

“He’s going to be “talking back” to you now. I hope you’re okay with that!”

She smiled broadly. “Oh yes! That will be just fine!”

He stood up, and walked. Standing tall, his gaze was now level with the horizon instead of down toward the floor. I asked him to take a breath, and to feel the pressure of his feet on the floor as he stood — and then to speak. “Honey, I love you!” he boomed. His wife beamed. His hand was quiet.

There is more that he can learn. Will we cure his Parkinson’s? No. (Although E. would fight me on that. He is a man of faith, and believes that he will be completely cured. Let it be so.) Will his tremor disappear? Now, THAT is quite possible. Just as he discovered his voice, quite surprisingly, he will discover how to manage and keep a good quality of life where it most matters. Like ““talking back”” to his wife.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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