

FINDING VOICE by Shannon Sullivan
for Swan Day 2012

The strength, clarity and range of the voice are gained only by exercising it. Not exercising in the sense of dutifully repeating a prescribed sequence of notes on the paper, but exercising it the way you exercise a right.

There are often constrictions, and the constrictions make things muddy. The sound may seem discordant and small; it may seem one has "no voice." But the constrictions are simply holding patterns. The tensions squeezing the voice are born of a held back laugh, a held back scream, a held back sob, a held back shout. They are born of experiences where we have been silenced; they are born of a lack of air. After enough silencing or being silenced, holding back or being held back, it becomes difficult to get a sound out. When it comes out it sounds weak, timid, maybe out of tune. This is the point where the most courage is asked of us. In regaining voice, we need faith in the process. We need the ability to zero in on the place there is still movement. We can encourage this vibration with our ears, allow it to grow. It's so easy to hear the limitation. It takes incredible commitment and many deep breaths to keep returning our attention to the place that is clear, the place that vibrates.

Finding voice after generations, perhaps even thousands of years, of silencing is no easy task. Forced silence is held in our muscular patterns, our thought patterns. What we have to realize is that the same tension that can cause us to choke, freeze or tremble can be converted into tremendous power. It's a question of coordination. As we regain our ability use our voices, we unleash our potential to move in any direction – forwards, backwards, sideways, curved - as needed.

I have many a time been plagued by extreme doubt. Doubt strong enough to keep me from producing anything for years. Now at age 33, I'm finally beginning to discover my voice. The doubts haven't disappeared. Sometimes I still wonder if what I'm doing has any significance for anyone other than myself.

Then I think of my grandmother. My grandmother was gang-raped when she was 12 years old. She never told anyone about it until right before she died. She died of throat cancer. I think the throat cancer was the frozen scream, the paralyzed story that never came out of her mouth until it was too late. Almost too late. She died of throat cancer, but at least I know what happened to her. In the last moment she broke her silence.

Lately when I've been tempted to give up on my own process of finding voice, when I feel flooded by feelings of shame or inadequacy, I think of my grandmother. I think of how not one of us comes into this world unmarked. We come born into a situation, a circumstance, a history, and more often than not also suffering and limitation.

Humanity evolving isn't some abstract process that happens in some group "out there." Humanity can't evolve unless I evolve, you evolve. It's personal as well as collective. The end of silence and under-representation of women's voices isn't going to take place somewhere "out there." Finding voice takes place personally. It takes place in the moment I decide not to be derailed by false thoughts. It takes place in my decision exercise my voice, my right. With steady attention our voices grow bigger, more vibrant and very, very colorful.

Voice can be expressed in many things – in anything. Sing, dance, paint, write letters, write poems, carve wood, string beads, weave cloth, weave stories, sound sounds. Keep it coming. Thanks for all that you do.

- Shannon Sullivan