

Which is the True Self's Instrument: The Body Or The Mind?

*From Daniela Gitlin's blog on her experience in Jean McClelland's
Awakening Your True Voice class at The Rowe Center, Rowe, MA*

The phone rang. It was Rowe: Dan Gediman cancelled. Despondency swamped me. I needed to get away, to chew on something nutritious, to recharge. "If you'd like to transfer to another workshop, we'll give you a \$100 discount on the tuition," Rowe said. I liked. I signed up for Awakening Your True Voice, with Jean McClelland. OMG. What have I done?

Cursed with a good ear, I hear every sour note that leaves my throat. Before seventh grade, I hoped nobody would notice. Then the chorus teacher interrupted the practice—"Who's singing off key?" Her gimlet eye landed on me: "You." Beyond Happy Birthday, I haven't sung since. What the hell, I soothed myself. I like that adjective: true. My true Voice. My true Self. My true Self longs to express itself. (I believe my true Self just is, neither female nor male.) It moans for release. It suffers under the yoke of self-consciousness the same way my body pains from bad posture. I believe in the true Self. I believe in Self expression. Donning my tee shirt that says: Keep calm and carry on, I set off for the wilds of the Berkshires. Above the front door of the Farmhouse at Rowe, I read: *Sow kindness. Gather love.* Nice. My apprehension about singing off notes left me.

How did we awaken our true voices? By tuning our instrument: the entire body. Just as dancing is not about the choreography, singing is not about the vocal cords. Imagine that. "The process of good singing is a process of physical and psychological coordination. Physical coordination depends on the alignment of the singer's instrument. In Itself, it produces no sound, but it creates the conditions which allow the imagination to produce the sound." OLGA AVERINO, "Principles and Art of Singing")

How did we achieve that coordination in one weekend? With a mix of Alexander technique and exercises for the diaphragm from the ground breaking work of Carl Stough. Align the spine: the pelvis and rib cage fall into place. Which allows

the diaphragm and lungs to move naturally and fully. Which allows the breath to move easily and fully. Which allows the voice to effortlessly surf the energy of breath.

Chi. Elan vital. Prana. Hello life force, my old friend! I know you from tai chi, from dance, and now, song. All variations on a theme: Natural spinal alignment allows free flow of energy, bringing poise with it. When you sing with the whole body, from the diaphragm, the sound resonates and pulses, a living thing. The notes flow without constraint, on key and in time. My range doubled, at least.

The songs and the people were new to me, yet we sang in unison without effort, on key and in time, as a flock of birds on the wing turns as one. When we sang Happy Birthday to the birthday girl in our midst, I spontaneously harmonized at the end, without thinking. Amazing. No—Thrilling. How did I do that? By not thinking. By allowing the body to guide. By using imagination.

You imagine the music is out there, and you wait for it to come to you, no worries. You don't try to sing. You allow the music to enter you, and allow it to pass through, the music surfing the breath. You don't have to do anything more. Anything more gets in the way. There is no effort, no self-consciousness. The body knows what to do. And it does it lightly, quickly, and nimbly, without rush or force or anxiety or mental chatter. How does it feel? Quiet and uncomplicated and natural. No drama.

Today, I know this. But tomorrow? I'll probably forget. My mind will take over and I'll fall back, get self conscious and confused and inhibited. But that's OK. Relapse is part of recovery. The longing of the pent up Self makes the diagnosis. Rx: Return to my body. Realign my spine. Imagine the Muse waiting for me out there. Allow it in and let my Self express what is true in that moment, be it pressing charges, singing, dancing, writing, parenting, you name it. Repeat as needed.

This I believe: My real Self will express itself, provided I enable body and soul to stay in alignment. And that expression will be easy and true and unique and beautiful and alive. And this too I believe: It is not only possible, but natural, to live like that all the time. The body is my Self's instrument. Puts exercise in

perspective, doesn't it? Let the body's doings speak openly now, without your saying a word, as a student's walking behind a teacher says, "This one knows more clearly than I the way." (RUMI, translated by Coleman Barks)

— Daniela Gitlin, MD