



finding my voice

creating harmony within

BY RACHEL HEALEY

I love to sing – I always have. I explored folk, classical, jazz, blues, world, rave, protest songs, choral, gospel and other religious music. I wrote my own songs too... yet I was always aware of a lack. There was a part of me unfulfilled by any of the music I took part in, a yearning for something that I knew I could get from singing, but could not find.

Since then I have discovered that I am one of the lucky ones who was encouraged to sing. The majority of people who come to my classes were told at some time - often at primary school age - by a music teacher, choir leader, or parent, to shut up and that their voices sounded bad. They were not allowed to sing, or were told to stand at the back and silently mime, mouthing the words. Whose tune are we singing to here? It seems we are expected to sound like the teacher's idea of how-the-music-should-sound, or forever be condemned to standing in the corner facing the wall.

The damage done to individuals by this attitude is profound. Not only our singing voices, but also the voice of our fundamental self, is beaten down and censored, and this can continue to be an issue for life. I facilitate groups in which people are often emotional as they touch the pain of having been silenced in this way. With courage and perseverance, they can go on to discover the

joy beneath the pain, of playing a full part in the creation of harmonious, beautiful and fulfilling music. Then they can go on to discover a more harmonious, beautiful and fulfilling life.

This is because the approach I now use and teach, enables people to explore the relationship with music and singing, and make use of this relationship to inform - and if needed transform - aspects of themselves and their lives.

Jill Rakusen, my teacher and founder of Giving Voice, discovered this in 1989, when she became ill following the publication of the 2nd edition of the classic women's health book, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, of which she is co-author. A health educator since the 1970's, Jill's work was rooted in a passionate belief in the importance of women, and indeed everyone, having the power – politically, emotionally, spiritually – to take charge of their lives. She also believed that health care, policies and attitudes of providers would change through such own initiatives. The book played a key role in inspiring people – men as well as women – to this end. However, after publication of the second edition in 1989, somewhat ironically, she found herself in a situation where her own health needs took over her whole existence.

From her sick bed, things began to look slightly different. She meditated deeply on the word invalid, as she felt somewhat invalid!

“Having become ill I got insight into subtle aspects of exclusion. I could no

longer do things I had previously taken for granted. Having a conversation, cooking a meal, or sitting upright were at times more than I could manage. While the gap between me and normal society was exacerbated by limitations in health care provision, there was another whole level at which I felt distanced from humanity. I had to look for ways to feel human, to feel alive, despite my disability. I knew I had to look inward, as there was no other way to go! So I found a whole new relationship with music.”

Jill had initially trained as a musician, completing a music degree and achieving highest level attainments in flute and piano in the 1960's. However she found her health work more exciting and it was two decades later before she found this fulfilment in music. Jill describes her phoenix-rising-from-the-ashes experience.

“I began to find the most profound possibilities when singing on my own – often silently, as I was often too tired to sing aloud. Nothing else gave me such satisfaction and animation, or such profound joy. For a long time, I nurtured myself through this practice. Then, as I took to singing out loud, people started to respond – saying things like “your singing really helps me!” I found it really difficult to believe at first, yet as I started to share my new relationship with music with others, it took off into what is now known as Giving Voice. Helping people to play a full part in creating music, in a way that respects both their individual needs, and the group as a whole, is key to my work. →



I'm stunned by the beauty of the music created by groups of people who may have come together for the first time, and who may also believe they have very little musical skill and experience."

I learned all I could from Jill. Like me, people who come to Giving Voice often talk about feeling respected and included in a new way. They then carry that experience with them in the wider world. It has certainly changed how I approach life, and my experience informs all my interactions and relationships, not just my work and teaching. For example, I'm a mum now, and I see the effect of my moods and how I express them on my young son. When I'm stressed, he's more badly behaved – it spirals. When I remember to sing, this restores my self-respect and compassion, and thus I respect and feel for my son as I usually do! Harmony is restored. It's not easy: training and practice are needed to be able to access the power of a song in a situation like this, and even then, I so often get stuck in feeling sorry for myself. But even a glimmer of the wider picture, in which I can see that my stress is worse than useless, and connecting with the song in my heart, can lead me to dispel negativity and embrace a healthier outlook.

Another way I use this technique is to help me rest. Jill was the first person I met who gave me permission to be tired! After years of living close to burnout, running on empty, I began to pay attention to my patterns of behaviour that left me exhausted. It's a long process and I still struggle with fatigue, but I've found that I can rest with a song, and feel refreshed after only 20 minutes.

"Disability can lead to ability", says Jill. "In my case being ill and how I responded to that led to everything that my work now is built on. Many people who come to our workshops believe they lack musical ability – but then they discover they are capable of far more than they imagined."

The way Jill talks about her work is coloured by her health background, although she talks about health in its widest sense which includes the healthy functioning of every aspect of our life and society. When I first started doing Giving Voice, I was struggling with mental health problems;

feeling excluded, and had no idea how I could function as a member of society again. As a vegan for 10 years, with a worldview that could be summarized as 'alternative', I felt on the margins, but for me this was not in any positive way. It was meeting and working with Jill that reconnected me with something profound within myself. I felt I had come home. As I wrote at the time "I now feel part of an eternal singing community, stretching into the past and the future."

I knew I wanted more of this, and soon set up a Giving Voice group led by Jill in Leeds, where I live. Nearly 7 years later, this group is still running, and I lead it. I began training with Jill in 2001, and became a fully-fledged Giving Voice teacher in 2005. I've always striven for a better world, and been a deeply spiritual person, even though eschewing religion. The process Jill discovered is about integrity, amongst other things, and using it began to teach me more about my responsibility for what happens in the world. Becoming a teacher confirmed this, and I continue to learn and grow through my teaching as well as my personal practice.

After September 11th 2001, and the subsequent war in Afghanistan, I struggled with my feelings a lot. This violence was so far away, yet it involved me. At times I could not bear to watch the news, and I struggled with confusion, guilt, and pain. The pain I felt about world events was in some way linked to personal pain and grief, about the death of my father, my health limitations, and relationship issues. They were connected somehow. Giving Voice supported me in two ways at this time. Firstly, there was a particular song of Jill's about promoting peace, which eased my own anxiety and helped me have the first good night's sleep in ages! She also helped me to sing this song before listening to the news or reading the papers. By doing this I was able to take in the horrific stories fully, without being so overwhelmed, without losing sight of the possibility of hope and love in all the violence. Secondly, I saw that the ways I deal with conflict in my personal life have an effect that goes far beyond me, and ultimately relates to world conflict. It's hard to explain...it's a bit like living by example, but without the moral high ground.

Giving Voice for Peace (GVfP) is a special

initiative created following September 11th 2001, for people interested in promoting peace through song. It is a tool to address complex feelings about world events, and to build healthier, more harmonious attitudes – within the world and ourselves. Since the terrorist attacks in London on 7th July 2005, Jill has actually offered monthly group sessions in this format. This is not a 'feel good' group about singing for peace. It's about transforming our pain, distress and fear, through the strategic use of song, so we don't transmit it...so we can play our part in resolving conflict rather than fuelling it. This is no easy task, but Giving Voice provides a means whereby, if we're willing.

Jill and I worked increasingly together after I started training with her, and the number of people coming forward to find out what we were doing increased, and many of them wanted regular ways to meet. We began to see the need for an organisation to support the work and maximise its benefits, but we felt somewhat daunted. We had a lot of conversations like the following:

Jill: "An organisation? I don't have the energy for this!"

Rachel: "I want to be a teacher and facilitator, not a manager!"

Jill: "Yes! And what would an organisation offer that we can't do already?"

Rachel: "Well it would formalise what we do."

Jill: "Yes and I suppose it could raise the profile of Giving Voice so we could reach more people. Thousands rather than hundreds..."

Rachel: "It would help us support the people already involved, who have begun using Giving Voice in their own lives, to help them develop their skills. So it can become more useful as a tool. There could be a network of people who could all support each other."

Jill: "...yes, and perhaps the best way of offering that is through a membership scheme – open to those who support our aim of offering a tool that people can use to transform themselves and the world. Through their involvement, they would be able to develop their understanding, as well as their skill in using it ... and, through this, play a part in how Giving Voice develops. Ultimately we could offer membership for organisations too."

Rachel: "Yes, so when we run events for organisations, we could offer them follow-

up and ongoing input instead of a one-off injection of something. It could be a really sustainable intervention."

Jill: "The organisation could underpin – be a foundation to the work as it develops. And ultimately, it could also really make a difference to the way music is taught and used more widely ... and promote understanding about the part music plays in life ... it could be a real force for change, for harmonious living."

Rachel: "It would need to be a special organisation that embodies the values we strive for in our Giving Voice work. Maybe it should be a charity!!!"

Well, we had to take a deep breath and recognise that an organisation really was a good move. We've had to grow into new understanding, skills and capacity to set it up and run it – using Giving Voice to help us of course! It's been a long process and a steep learning curve, but the Foundation is growing. We are currently seeking charitable status and are running our annual residential in Cumbria this year on "Growing Compassion."

I've come such a long way since I first met Jill in 1999. I now have resources to help me with day-to-day demands, at home, at work, as well as world events, and am not only coping, but also actually thriving! I have learned how to embody my ideals in real, everyday life – qualities such as love and compassion. And I have learned how to keep feeding that yearning I always had, to sing, to connect, to belong, to take my place in the world. In doing this, I'm improving my own life, my relationships with others, and the wider world. And, in my work as a Giving Voice teacher, I'm fortunate to be able to share what I've discovered with others too. It's been a journey I would never have imagined when I was singing all those years back. But who can tell where a song will take you? 🎵

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