



Finding our voice

By Gillian Stuart

As counsellors we often carefully consider how much of ourselves to reveal to a client. Sometimes we can get caught in the tension between being congruent and oversharing. But what happens when it feels that two worlds collide in a session? As a singer and a counsellor, I had never reflected that these two parts of me might meet, but they did.

We tend to think of singing as mainly about the voice, but there are so many other elements that feed into how a voice sounds, is maintained and developed. When we sing with a breath that is properly supported, we can create a beautiful sound that resonates in our chest or head, depending on the pitch. But singing a song is more than just the sound of the voice producing a note; it is the embodiment of the words, the fluidity of the performance and how the singer communicates.

Working with a client who sings

I had been working with a client (Rebecca, name changed) for some months as she navigated her response to a difficult relationship issue. I had noticed for some time that when we talked about how she felt, she told me instead how her partner felt. Everything was filtered through the eyes, experience and voice of her partner. It began to feel like Rebecca was missing in her own life. In our sessions, she began to not just recognise that she had a voice and a right to her voice, but to recognise that sense of unease within herself when she was being silenced or silencing herself. Over time, she began to be able to sit with feelings that were bubbling up, allow them to come into her awareness and voice them to herself.

One day Rebecca said that she would like to focus on singing. She had enjoyed singing in a competitive choir for many years. At a rehearsal, the soloist of one of the songs had laryngitis so the conductor asked for a stand-in and Rebecca volunteered. She knew that she was familiar enough with the music and was capable of

singing the solo. However, when she started to sing, her voice became shaky, her throat went dry and she said she sounded “like a sheep”.

Rebecca said she hated her own voice in that moment. She didn’t recognise the sound that she was making and the longer the song went on, the more she wanted to stop. How could something that seemed so natural when she sang it at home seem so alien when she did it in front of others? She was embarrassed to bring it up, wondering if it was even appropriate to bring to counselling. It was a departure from the norm, but as a person-centred therapist I believed it was appropriate to follow the client’s lead. However, I had to work hard not to slip into a vocal coach role.

Unpacking responses around singing

Rebecca shared feelings of shame and regret that she had volunteered and wondered if her assessment of her own singing was completely off the mark. We talked about what might have been going on for her physically, mentally and emotionally. The physical reaction of anxiety, a tightening of the throat and chest, shallow breathing all produce the opposite of good vocal technique. While we explored this, I was also aware of the pull for me to look at how to

improve this for next time. I brought this into the session and Rebecca joked that maybe we should have a singing lesson instead.

I changed tack, asking Rebecca if she could remember a time when she liked the sound of her voice. She shared that she used to sing a solo with the same choir; it was a song I was very familiar with. I knew then the standard of her vocal technique was not the problem; this solo demands incredibly good pitch, a pure tone and a clear confident voice. I decided to tell Rebecca this, as an objective acknowledgement that the soloist required would need to be an accomplished one.

As she talked further, she sounded hesitant and I mentioned this. She shared that although she

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liked the song, and was often complimented when singing it, it didn't bring her joy. She is also a dancer and has shared about how she feels when she is dancing. She is at one with her body and the music and feels free. I was struck by the difference in how she talked about singing. I wondered if there had ever been a time when she felt the same 'at oneness' when singing?

Her face lit up as she described singing in a swing band, where she felt in total command of her voice, embodying the song as she sang. She didn't have to think; she could trust herself, knowing when she could belt out notes, when to pull back and allow herself to be playful.

As I looked, I could see the joy turn to something that seemed more like sadness and tears began to well up in her eyes. We sat together for a few moments and let the tears flow.

A lightbulb moment

"I want to be like that in my life", she said. There was a realisation of how constrained her voice had become, that other's voices were louder and felt more important and often her own voice was more like a whisper. What would it mean to trust herself to know when to speak loudly or when she needed

to pull back? What would it mean to allow herself to be playful, to be free, to listen to the sound of her own voice and like it? What would it mean to listen to her own voice first; to allow it to be louder than others around her?

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When a singer is truly in command of their voice and sings a song which suits it, they can make it their own. Of course it takes courage, patience and experience; it even takes vulnerability. And yes, it might feel awkward at first, but awkward is not the enemy; being silenced is.



About the author

Gillian Stuart is a qualified person-centred counsellor who particularly enjoys accompanying her clients on their journey.