Embraceable Me
Reclaiming Voice through Reflexive Writing and Singing

by

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‘Embraceable Me’ is my own story. It is a reflexive account in which I explore the silencing and reclamation of my voice, both my literal singing voice and the more figurative ‘empowered voice.’ By ‘empowered voice’ I mean the awareness of my thoughts, feelings and body in context, with the acceptance and expression of this authentic self in the world. This personal history account begins with an exploration of my seven-year-old framework. I then explore four critical turning points that led to epiphanies about my relationship to voice. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 1).

Through these epiphanies I consider my disconnection from (and reconnection to) my body, the dark feelings of grief and rage held there and the taking back of my own authority. I also look at the reflexive writing process as it opened me to self-compassion and in turn deepened my sense of empowered voice. While this is not a feminist analysis, it is a story that is set in a patriarchal context, which links it implicitly with my take on feminism. It is a feminism that seeks to embrace the masculine and feminine dimensions of myself and of all forms of life. It is in this light of acceptance that I consider a shift from the dualistic thinking of good versus bad, to a more compassionate holding of the inherent paradox of life – the dark and light in the world and within me. It is a shift in self-forgiveness that enables me to look at my own reflection and see the embraceable me.

I have explored this story on an enclosed compact disc. It includes narrative, song and excerpts from voice lessons intended to capture insights around both literal and figurative voice.
Dedication

To my family,

Mum, for your strength, creativity and love. I am honoured to live with you.
Dad, for loving me unconditionally.
Dave, for the experience of rubbing your white belly. Thank you for reminding me of the pleasure in the basics – to eat, to sleep, to clean, and to be rubbed.
Debbie, for your nurturing, wisdom and perspective.
Daniel, for singing with me in the car with such great abandon.
Ben, for playing with me and for loving Dave, and all animals, with such intensity.
Peter, for picking me up at the airport and holding such a strong sense of family.
Gee, for being open to forgiveness.

To my healer friends,

Margot, for showing me that I’m never truly alone.
Kevin, for walking beside me.
Fides, for creating a safe place for my song to emerge and for being my friend.
Tom, for guiding me back into my body and for staying with me in my grief and rage.
Eimear, for modeling strength in vulnerability.
Gary, for believing that I can be a writer.

To all of my loved ones, furry or not. You know who you are.

Thank you for embracing me and gently guiding me back to myself.

'Pikorua' sketched by Lauren Satok.

The symbol depicted on this page and throughout the text is the 'pikorua.' It is a Maori symbol of friendship and close connection between people. The spirals represent growth and change in life. To me, this symbol represents not only the connection between my loved ones and me, but also my connection to myself. I see balance, solidity and movement in the pikorua that grounds me in the acceptance of all that is dark and light within me. It helps me to hold my own paradoxical nature, and that of others, with compassion through the waves of personal growth and change. It helps me to see the embraceable me.
Preface

My intention in writing this reflexive, personal history account is to make meaning from my life's experiences. It is simply a representation of a life from my own worldview. It is only one perspective amidst a multitude of versions of this same reality. I do not intend to suggest blame for any of the stories you will read. In fact my intention is to depict the loving intentions of those around me by considering the contexts framing their stories.

The enclosed compact disc, entitled 'Embraceable Me,' integrates narrative, song and excerpts from voice lessons in an exploration of the key themes in this reflexive account. I have engaged in dialogue and felt experience around the topic of voice since 1998. It seemed only natural to continue this discussion and in turn, share it with the readers/listeners through an audio dimension of my thesis. How better to represent the complex, emotional experience of recovering voice, than through engaging with and listening to the voice itself?

The compact disc was recorded in the final months of thesis writing. Four voice sessions were recorded with Fides Krucker (my voice teacher) and me. Each session explored one of the four turning points both vocally and through dialogue. (Ironically the recording of the third session was inadvertently erased. It was the piece I was struggling to take public due to the sensitivity of the topic.) The compact disc therefore includes segments from three, recorded voice lessons along with some additional elements of song and narrative.

Each recording session brought me into embodied contact with the feelings and thoughts presented in the particular turning point being explored. I built on this state of immersed embodiment by focussing my writing efforts on that very incident, in the days following the recording session. The compact disc reflects
both my singing voice and my sense of empowered voice at this particular stage in my life.

There are references to specific tracks on the compact disc throughout the written thesis. Sometimes the reference indicates a section of text that is narrated on the CD. Sometimes it points to a track of the CD that exemplifies the point being made in the written text. You choose your preferred way of engaging with this medium. That is, you can listen to the associated track in the moment you are reading about it, or, you can listen to the compact disc in its entirety after reading the whole thesis or, whatever method makes sense to you.

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The Overture
This story is my own. It is a reflexive exploration of the silencing and awakening of my voice from age seven to thirty seven. ‘Voice’ includes both my literal singing voice and the more figurative ‘empowered voice.’ My sense of the term ‘empowered voice’ is the awareness of my thoughts, feelings and body in context, with the acceptance and expression of this authentic self in the world. Through this journey of awakening my voice, I reconnected with my body and the dark feelings of grief and rage held there. I took back my own authority, my own sense of power and worthiness.

In reclaiming my voice through reflexive writing and singing, so too have I experienced a shift from the control of my voice of judgement’s dualistic notions of good versus bad, to a more kind and integrated sense of forgiveness for myself. When I was unaware of my own thoughts, feelings and body in context, my voice of judgement held tremendous power. This dynamic kept me stuck in conditional self-acceptance based on externally defined notions of ‘right’ and ‘wrong,’ ‘good’ and ‘bad.’ I remained stuck in my disempowered voice. As I expanded my self-awareness and my view of the contexts in which I lived through reflexive writing and singing, I shifted to a more empowered sense of voice. I came to understand the oppression of all that is feminine in the world, including the devaluation of the physical and emotional dimensions of life.
came to know that the feminism I choose is about shared power of both the feminine and masculine realms in women and men. It is not exclusive in any way.

Through writing and singing I witnessed my voice of judgement and saw her fears in context. My sense of empowerment expanded. As I placed my so-called 'faults' within my own story it was impossible to continue to judge myself so harshly. I began to loosen the reigns of my voice of judgement and felt tremendous forgiveness towards her, and all of myself. Now I am able to see the embraceable me. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 6).

I frame the journey with four critical turning points in my life – events that have led me to moments of 'epiphany.' These epiphanies were pivotal in the loss and discovery of my voice. Denzin (1989) describes epiphanies as, "Interactional moments which leave marks on people's lives. In them, personal character is manifested. They are often moments of crisis. They alter the fundamental meaning structures in a person's life" (p. 70-71).

There is no doubt that my experiences with epiphanies marked me and altered how I make meaning in my life. However, I want to clarify one element of Denzin's definition. Epiphanies are not the moments of crisis themselves but rather the meaning we attribute to those events – like a river looking back at its own rapids. It is in the calm after the churn where there is a readiness to reflect and consider the meaning made through the crisis. It is in the reflexive nature of writing a personal history that I have found a preparedness to redefine who I am as I flow in a shifted direction.

I begin the account in 1970 with a time I call 'Innocent Bliss.' It was my seventh year of life – a time of simplicity and lack of self-consciousness. Like most young children, I was remarkably free and open with my feelings. They emerged in the moment they arose with little resistance to their expression. I recall howling sobs
that once released were forgotten — left behind in the name of becoming fully present to my next experience.

I inhabited my body with an unconscious ease. It took me on bike rides and backyard adventures. It was a time of complete physical engagement in the world — a time before the disconnection from myself began. I was still completely in my body and recognized all of its signs of pain and pleasure. I was living in flow with myself not yet wounded by life's journey.

Photographs reveal the sense of comfort I had in my own skin — a blissed-out, unselconscious state of beingness (see Figure 1 — Innocent Bliss). When I look at these photographs I see complete ease in my body. My arms hang naturally and my shoulders are dropped. I do not know this for a fact but I would guess that my jaw is relaxed and my stress level is low. The hopscotch is ready for a tournament with Dad, and I am now busy being commander of the frog-catching squad. For the most part, I am a child still connected to myself — my body, thoughts and feelings.

There is no doubt that I view this time period with rose-coloured lenses. (I'm aware that the seven-year-old-me would have told this story differently.) I see it as the time before the great losses, or at least my consciousness of them, began. My seventh year seemed to be the transition phase between the lack of self-consciousness of my younger years and the hyper-aware self-consciousness of the next phase. The voice of judgement did not reign yet, she was just making her entrance.

I use this state of 'Innocent Bliss' to set the stage for the rest of my story. I consider the influence of my British expatriate family environment and other relevant dimensions of my seven-year-old context that influenced my literal and figurative sense of voice.
Then I explore four turning points:

- 'Stiff Upper Lip – Grief Goes Underground' (17 years of age – my mother's aneurysm);
- 'It's All in Your Head – The Body Breaks Down' (28 years of age – Multiple Sclerosis 'probable' diagnosis);
- 'The Fall from the Pedestal – Authority Shifts Within' (32 years of age – shifting relationship with my father);

This exploration is not intended to determine whether these turning points caused the silencing or awakening of my voice. For it is undoubtedly true that my own maturation process, gender and other factors contributed to my journey with voice. My intention is rather, to track the journey itself, looking at the times when my connection to my empowered voice hit peaks and valleys.

Each turning point is set within its context before looking at the specific experience itself in more detail. Then I reflect on the experience, exploring epiphanies related to the injury and healing of my voice. My relationship with my singing voice is a thread that is woven throughout, from the inhalation and withholding of my voice as a girl, through to its exhalation and release in recent years.

In accessing the singer in me I reawakened my consciousness of both my body and the sorrow and rage buried within me. Singing led me safely into the dark corners of my physical and emotional worlds, enabling me to experience the bliss that coexists with pain in this space. It mirrored the pain/bliss edginess of a major injury from a car accident. It brought me to a similar state of natural self-acceptance and expression. Singing opened the door to forgiveness of myself for shutting down feelings that were once too hard to bear. And it supported the reclaiming of my own power – my own voice.
Singing helped me to heal the split between my mind, heart and body. In that healing, I became empowered to let go of the past and open to the future. As my journal entry depicts,

_The creative process of singing…has taken me out of my head and into my heart, my emotions centered in my body – and let me access these fully and finally grieve the losses in my life. It has created a sense of loss/pain as well as a freeing/letting go…a rebirth (Journal, March 19, 1999)._ 

I reflect on my experiences with writing a personal history, considering the challenges and the gifts inherent to the process. Parallel layers of truth emerged in both the content and process of this writing experience. Writing was, and still is, a journey that could easily be included as a fifth turning point. It has profoundly impacted my sense of voice. As I witnessed my own story in context, I deepened my sense of voice through the acceptance and expression of my authentic self in the world.

Looking forward I still find myself asking, ‘So what?’ What exactly is the outcome of this personal transformation story? What meaning have I made from these epiphanies? What impact will that have on my life, both personal and professional? What might the implications be for healing of the self and community in general? I briefly explore these questions in the closing text.

I am writing this for me – to let my voice out onto the page. I am doing it to practice letting go of a lifelong concern of “What do they want to hear?” and whether or not I’m ‘right’ or ‘good’ in the eyes of others. I write this to make more meaning from my life’s experiences and to ask: What was that experience like for me? What were my feelings at that time? What was my relationship with my body? What significance did that event have for me? Who was I then? How was I changed by this passage? How did it contribute to my journey after that? What might this mean for my future? How might this relate to other people’s experience?
I also write this for you, the reader. Perhaps you may find a layer of your own journey reflected in my story – perhaps not. There might be some unturned stones in connection to your own sense of authority and worthiness or your feelings resting in your body that you’re ready to explore. Maybe you’re experiencing the transformative effects of a creative outlet – the healing qualities of expression. Or you might have silenced your creative interests in the name of self-preservation.

‘Embraceable Me’ is my own story. The act of putting it down on the page was transformational. It has been an important layer in my journey back, or perhaps forward, to myself. As I drop my jaw into my breath I am reminded of the little girl in me. I am the seven-year-old at ease in my body. My arms hang naturally and my shoulders are dropped. My jaw is unclenching as I shift my focus away from “What will they think?” to “Am I aware of myself, my thoughts, feelings and body? Am I accepting that? What do I choose to express in that?” As the thirty-seven-year-old-me sees my own story in context, I awaken to the seven-year-old in me. She is the one who is immersed in her body and feelings in the present moment with little stress. She sings freely and has little doubt of her self-worth. Maybe it’s time to set up the hopscotch.
First Movement

Innocent Bliss –
My Childhood Framework
1970
Figure 1. 'Innocent Bliss'
When I was seven, I loved to sing in the bathtub. “You are the sunshine of my life, that’s why I’ll always be around.” Stevie Wonder’s lyrics of optimism somehow encouraged me to sing with great abandon. So I sang into my thumb, completely immersed in the joy of singing, naked in the tub. I sang with no resistance, embarrassment or self-consciousness. The lyrics held a truth about unconditional love that was easy for me to understand. It was the kind of safety I felt in the care of my family in my seven-year-old-world. Singing was a natural expression in this lovely, naïve time of my life. It was a time that left me with little doubt about my self-worth. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 1).

But I did not waste much time on pondering my self-worth, I was too busy experiencing the world around me. I felt competent as I took on the challenges of making friends, learning at school and playing hard. There were moments of self-doubt to be sure, but for the most part it was a time of self-confidence, a complete engagement in my world. There was no need to hold back from being fully in my life – no need to hold back from being who I was, for I was curious about everything. I knew who I was and I liked what I saw.
Is it possible that this perspective is simply how I look back on it from where I sit today? Was I aware of myself then? Or was I so busily engaged in each moment that most of my focus was ‘out there,’ rather than ‘in here.’ My guess is that both are true. I retained a child’s ability to be fully focussed here and now but was also beginning to reflect on myself. That is, my opinions of myself were deepening within a learned framework of what was acceptable and what was not.

The earlier stages of my life were not graced with such reflective abilities. As a newborn baby, I undoubtedly had access to, and expression of, a wide range of emotions with little editing. There were no fears around letting my feelings be known at this stage. In fact, the free expression of my needs and feelings was critical in getting me what I wanted. And I probably used all of my body to make deafening sounds, as most babies do. For without the fears developed through the consciousness-raising of life’s experiences, babies scream using their whole bodies as resonating chambers (Kalo, Whiteside & Midderigh, 1997).

As time went on my experiences with embodied emotional expression were influenced by my family culture. My parents and other authority figures role modeled certain values around emotional expression and the physical body. I learned certain ‘truths’ about the dualistic nature of ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ ‘right’ and ‘wrong.’ Although I didn’t realize it at the time, I was beginning to internalize my understanding of the rules around hierarchy and authority.

My seventh year seemed to be a critical turning point in the deepening of my self-consciousness and my awareness of the rules in the world around me. Perhaps it was the socialization process of meeting my first ‘best friend’ that year. Or perhaps it was just the natural development cycle of a child. Whatever the cause, it was in this year that I began to reflect on myself in relation to the world around me, in ways that have been highly influential on who I have become.
At this stage, my family environment was an important dimension of the world around me. I was a Christian, Caucasian, upper-middle class, British expatriate, living in Canada. My story was shaped by the fact that I was born an able-bodied girl. And it was influenced by the political and historic environment of the 1970s.

Our British Expatriate Home

In 1970 I was learning certain ‘truths’ about the world through the lenses of our hierarchical, British expatriate family living in Canada. We arrived into upper-middle class economic privilege, a class level that was achieved through my father’s escalating success in the British motorcar industry. He started as a parts salesman with aspirations for improving our economic lot. His promotions led to his role as the company President and included moves from England to New York to Toronto all within the first two years of my life. I was a seasoned traveler before I was out of diapers.

I thought I had a perfect life. My mother was beautiful and nurturing; my father, successful and funny. My older sister was an inclusive and caring friend. I had a profound sense of home on our tree-lined street in North Toronto. I was fortunate and I knew it. Our home was filled with:

The sounds of Frank Sinatra, British comedy and the many voices of our animal contingent;

The sight of space and comfort. The furniture was a soft, lived-in kind of green, and the yard an open space meant for adventure and play;

The smells of clean laundry, ‘dinner’s almost ready’ and Daddy’s aftershave;

The tastes of British comfort food. There was ‘bubble and squeak’ (a sausage, potato and cabbage leftover delight), bacon and roast beef;
The feeling of the bellies of our two dachshunds Gus and Katie, my mum's soft lap and the warmth of my dad's big hands.

I had no awareness of the concept of needing to feel safe, because I always did.

There was a familiarity in the British culture that 'lived' in our house. It was predictable and consistent. We were given books about the Royal family. (My sister and I pretended we were reading it as we giggled flirtatiously about the young male royalty.) On Christmas day we all stopped what we were doing to listen in silence to the Queen's message. And whenever there was a royal visit, we sat on the curb, cold bums and all, waiting for a glimpse. These were the times of reverence towards our British heritage.

I didn’t know the word ‘hierarchy’ then, or understand its implications. But I knew that this royal family on the other side of the ocean held a great deal of authority over us. It was a family that could make my parents tear up with sentiment. I was in awe of that. It was a power that somehow helped us to define who we were as British expatriates. I didn’t really understand it then, nor do I fully now, but it gave me my first glimpses into the notion of authoritative power.

Accustomed to the high population density of the U.K., my parents and grandparents were in awe of Canada's natural beauty and the vast empty spaces it provided. They reflected explicitly on their thoughts about this new land and culture. These contemplations included my grandfather's speech, delivered in his upper crust accent: "How Lucky You Are to Live in a Country Like This." (One year, as if it was planned, his speech was accompanied by the sound of two loons.) And I often heard them puzzling over Canadian behaviours that didn't seem 'proper.' (Just as I’m sure that the Canadian locals puzzled over the 'proper' British attire my grandfather chose to wear at the cottage!) This gave me great perspective on my context in the world and grounded me in my understanding of what it was like to be an outsider. I was given the gift of
cultural relativity; the idea that ‘truth’ depends on the position from which you are looking. These reflective conversations helped me to identify with a home that was far away from Canada. It was a place that held a lot of the rules by which we lived. I learned that people other than me hold the truth about what is ‘right’ and what is ‘wrong.’ These dualistic, hierarchical and reflective lenses framed my vision of reality as I moved through my life at seven years old.

"Be a Good Girl"

There was a ‘truth’ in our home that seemed universal: There are rules about how to be and what to do. They held a certain authority – a position of power – in our every day. They governed our manners and how we spoke to each other. Rules told us where to put our boots and our jackets. They clarified what we needed to clean before going to bed. (This was not vastly different from other families I knew.)

The all-powerful rule that encompassed the others was the notion that there is a way to be ‘good’ and a way to be ‘bad.’ These categories were reinforced explicitly and implicitly on a daily basis. ‘Good Girl’ was the goal. ‘Bad Girl’ was not. The good/bad duality led us to a clear understanding of ‘right’ and ‘wrong.’ This external source of truth began its role as the measuring stick against which to evaluate the thoughts and feelings of my inner voice.

Whenever a rule was being discussed the word ‘one’ was involved. “One wouldn’t even think of starting one’s meal before everyone is at the table” or “One never risks offending someone.” There was a certain objective truth implied in the language and a kind of depersonalized distance that made it all the more powerful. They were messages that came from the top-down – parents to children. Defining what was in and what was out, they clarified our roles to ensure that things ran smoothly.
It was not a stern authority that I feared. I would never have considered breaking the rules, so what was there to fear? I was a 'good girl' after all.


Sunday night family dinner was a ritual in our house that brought to life many of the rules of my upbringing. The scene began with the arrival of my grandmother and the unconditionally loving embrace with which she greeted me. Her arrival signified 'chippie-time' - a joyous moment for my sister and I as the sacred 'chippies' and 7-up would emerge from their banned locations. The rules around this ritual were well defined: Before you can have some, you must offer chippies to others. This was clearly the polite thing to do. And politeness mattered. And so, on automatic pilot I would circle the room praying that there would be some chips left over for me. I learned the rules of manners, even in the scheduled decadence of Sunday night 'chippie time.'

There were rules about roles at Sunday night dinner. My sister and I set the table in the prescribed manner. Mum was the cook, Dad the carver. We knew what behaviour was appropriate, and what was not. (For example, the time that I responded to 'finish your peas' by threatening to mail my peas to the starving children in India? Inappropriate.) After the meal, my sister and I were given the power to choose our own radio station while doing the dishes. That rule was a thrill. There was undoubtedly a freedom and comfort in the clarity of the rules in our house.

It was family hierarchy in action. The lines of authority were to be respected. It gave us structure, order and a clearly defined way of being. At the time, I did not experience the rules in our house as rigid or limiting. I see now that they provided me with a sense of security. I don't recall a lot of discussion about why these rules existed. In fact, they were such permanent fixtures that they were
almost invisible. It was like forgetting the nose on your face because it's so close.

The poem I chose for my newsbook entry from September 22, 1970 shows my awareness of the outcomes of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ behaviour:

Neighbours are people who live on your street
And tell you you’re noisy, or naughty or sweet,
They smile when you’re helpful,
They frown when you’re bad.
Neighbours are folks like your mother and dad
(See Figure 2 – The Good/Bad Poem).

I can’t remember if I wrote this. I doubt I did. But it must have resonated with me since I chose it for my sacred newsbook.

Although it was rare, I recall the feeling of shame that would accompany the ‘bad girl’ in me. It was that horrible sinking feeling of knowing I’d disappointed one of my parents, even if they didn’t know what I’d done to deserve the self-induced label. It wasn’t that I feared making them angry. (They didn’t get angry.) It was that I knew how unacceptable my actions were. That usually generalized to a feeling of ‘bad girl.’ How disappointed they would be, if they knew. (The withheld feeling of unacceptability was always worse than my parents’ eventual reaction. My self-inflicted judgement and cruelty was never matched by my parents.)

I could not have known at the time how rigid my sense of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ would become. I could not have known the power of dualistic thinking in silencing my own voice. How could I have understood that my need to have others approve of me came from my own sense of being bad – my own sense of imperfection? How could I have known that my sense of being ‘bad’ was entangled with the cultural norm of seeking the approval of others?

How could I have known. I was only seven.
Tuesday, September 2.

who live

tell us

not we

are helpful

our time like

Figure 2. The Good/Bad Poem
"All Things Work Together For Good"

Like most young girls, I learned certain 'truths' about what is 'good' and 'bad' by listening to and watching my role models. I knew from a very young age that it was a 'good' thing to focus on the positive, the upside, of life's circumstances. This message was transmitted through school, church and every other context I can think of in my seven-year-old world. I knew that this rule also applied to the emotional realm. That is, I believed it was good to focus on positive feelings, and bad to focus on the negative such as anger and sorrow.

My grandmother had a way of transmitting such values through delivery of well-timed, direct phrases. Her 'rules to live by' were easy to figure out. They were biblical phrases or sentiments that made sense to her based on her life's experiences. They seemed to bring a much-needed breadth of perspective when I was stuck in the details of a problem. I did not perceive them as forceful or judgemental, but rather as a gentle reminder of the bigger picture view as she saw it. As a seven-year-old girl who adored her grandmother, I treated her words as gospel.

Whenever I was sad she always said, "All things work together for good dear." She always reminded me of this perspective (see Appendix A – All Things Work Together For Good). How loved that made me feel. Her words didn't take the sadness away but they softened the blow. There was a reason this was all happening, and my grandmother didn't think I was a loser – and so I wasn't. Just as she expressed her love for me in the closing of each letter, so too did she remind me of my inherent worthiness. And the fact that I deserved her delivery of "All things work together for good," confirmed my sense of self-love.

There were other phrases she used: "Every cloud has a silver lining." "When God closes one door he opens another." "Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil." There was no doubt that her faith influenced her worldview. And the
message was clear. When you are down and out, look on the bright side. Don’t wallow in your misery, focus on the positive. They were key to her survival in the childhood poverty of London and in the darkness of widowhood in the Indian Himalayas. If she had chosen to go into her pain, would she have survived? If she had let out her rage what would have happened? I am quite sure these options were barely considered. Proper ladies didn’t do that after all. They got on with it.

Many families have a matriarch that heavily influences that family’s culture. We were blessed with one in my paternal grandmother. She came from a low-income family in the east end of London. As a young woman interested in changing her lot, she accepted the marriage proposal of a young miner who was on his way to a job in India. They lived in the foothills of the Himalayas and had two children.

When the children were young, her husband died of a duodenal ulcer – a curable illness in other parts of the world. Widowed at a young age, she raised two children thousands of miles away from her homeland. And yet she always felt more connected in India than she ever had at ‘home.’ Her true love Mac then appeared on the scene. He financed her elocution lessons – a sign of her passage to a new level of economic privilege. Less than ten years later, he died.

Her losses were great. And in her grief, she vowed to continue sending her children to English boarding schools to receive a British education. It was the ‘right’ thing to do; the ‘proper’ place for the children. She was proud of this shift from the simple dwellings of London to the vast expanse of her home in India. It was a pride that was rooted in a shame of her past and manifested itself in her judgement of others.
These dualities showed up in many dimensions of her life. For this she was often called a 'Martha and a Mary.' She was dark and light. Open and closed. Flexible and rigid. Vain and humble. These are the contrasts that mirrored the complexity of the woman. I am convinced that she survived because of her 'stiff upper lip' – her undying will to overcome emotion, persevere and move on. It helped her to focus on the silver lining behind the cloud of the death of two husbands, the depression and two world wars.

Her whole life was about courage and strength.
And it was all done with such grace and humour.
She loved me unconditionally.
For that I am eternally grateful.

Like everything in life, there is an upside and a downside to this story. It has elements of darkness and light, the eternal cycle. The upside? My grandmother survived. She survived due to her tremendous strength of will focusing on the notion of 'All things work together for good.' And she helped many others to do the same.

There was also a downside to this belief. For in a black and white world, if one focuses on the 'good' one cannot let in the 'bad.' There is no room for pain in the
'good.' There is no room for the open expression of sadness or rage. These are ingredients of the 'All things work together for bad' philosophy. These dark feelings don't fit with being strong or 'getting on with it.' They don't align with the notion of a silver lining behind every cloud.

The power of the British people did not evolve through the open expression of pain – it evolved from pushing it down. They did not survive wars or conquer the colonies by losing emotional control. And British women were by no means excused from the rule that anger is 'unwomanly.' In fact they were held accountable to this notion to ensure that everyone stayed in their 'rightful' place – to ensure that the structure and order of hierarchy would not be broken.

I can see all that now. I could not see it then.

When I was seven, I was afraid of the dark. I was afraid of literal darkness, as many children are. And I was learning to fear the dark in the emotional realm too. The darkness of sorrow and rage were not considered 'good' after all, so why let them in? Why not focus my attention towards all things 'good' and pretend that the 'bad' feelings of sorrow and rage, and their associated fear, don't exist? Just as I turned on my closet light to reduce my fear of the dark in my room, so too did I begin to cover up the darkness of sorrow and rage.

When I was seven, I was afraid of the dark.

I just knew the boogey man was going to come and get me. Besides, the entrance to the attic was in my closet! This deep fear of all things 'dark,' also showed up in the TV room when the flying monkeys stole Toto in the Wizard of Oz. It appeared in the basement as I turned out the light to make my escape up
the stairs in the dark. And the worst fears of all showed up in my dreams as
monsters and powers much greater than me. I was weak and vulnerable and
alone in my nightmares.

Although my fear of 'dark' feelings was beginning its entrance, I was not yet
paralyzed by the fear of sadness. For the most part, my sadness still erupted
relatively soon after the feeling showed up inside me. My childlike openness to
sorrow was still somewhat untainted by fear. When I wasn't chosen for a team at
school, or invited to a birthday party, I usually expressed my sorrow freely, in the
company of a loved one – usually with one of the dogs.

And yet even at the age of seven I was beginning to repress my sadness. I was
learning that crying was associated with a lack of so-called 'strength.' I held the
lump of sadness in my throat to avoid the 'scene' that I would make with tears.
The script for the scene included, "Sshhh, don't cry. There, there, it will be okay.
Stop crying now." The intention behind these words was kindness, the message
was clear: "When you are sad and crying, do what you can to get over it. Stay
there for as brief a time as possible."

I wrote about my maternal grandmother crying in my grade 2 news book. In my
world, adults never cried. My grandparents were saying good-bye as they were
leaving to go home to England. In a tight-lipped but elegant way, my
grandmother got tears in her eyes. She nervously laughed to try to cover up her
sadness. I was confused by this mixture of emotion and wondered if something
was funny. She pulled herself together and left in her mink. I felt sadly
disconnected from her in that moment.

It was an incident that lasted about 30 seconds and I recall it with great
vividness. It was the only time I ever saw my grandmother cry. (See Figure 4 –
Grandma Never Cries).
Today is sunny.

Last night my sister and a
to cry, I thought

to wait:

Good

Figure 4. Grandma Never Cries
As I look back on it now I see that my father was given a hard lot in relationship
to his sadness. He feels sadness very deeply and yet is an Englishman whose
ancestors tell him 'be strong' and 'don't get overly emotional.' (I think most men
are told that the rules for being male include suppression of sadness. And I
believe that the focus on maintaining control, inherent in British culture,
intensifies this rule.) I've watched Dad battle back tears on many occasions.
The tears often welled up in his eyes from hearing a beautiful song. Then he
cleared his throat and shifted his body in some way in order to 'pull himself
together.'

I've seen my father weep on three occasions. He wept when our dog died, when
his wife had an aneurysm and at his own mother's funeral. And who could blame
him? It is not due to a lack of experiences that would justify sadness. This man
has had cause to weep. And he has been told it is shameful to do so. The lyrics
of 'When I Look in Your Eyes' reinforce this pressure to maintain control of
sorrow. "And when we part, there'll be no tears, no good-byes. I'll just look into
your eyes." (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 4).

While I had more permission to express sadness than my male counterparts,
anger was an absolute no-no. "Anger shows weakness and a loss of control.
Anger is hurtful to others," said the subtext of our lives. Anger had no place in
our house. There were hints of its presence to be sure, for what is it to be human
without anger? When my father was angry he walked the dog. Or he
closed himself off in the dining room to pay the bills. "Take that emotion out of
here and cool off. Later the conversation can be more civil," the voice of so-
called reason would say. It was seen as healthy to isolate oneself when this ugly
emotion showed up. It was like having a nasty pimple. Don't show it in public
and strive to get rid of it.

This lesson came early and I learned it well. I don't recall feeling any anger at all
at this age. I was somehow 'above that.' There is no doubt that anger lived
within me. Crossing paths with angry-making experiences is a natural part of the human experience. When anger did emerge, it showed up in my tendency to sulk. It somehow seemed like a lesser offence. My lower lip would jut out with a defiance that wanted to be seen. My third eye would be tied up in a knot, my brow furrowed and my mouth a transparent expression of pouting rage. "I want things to go MY way," was the voice in my head, never to be expressed with the fervor that it was felt. "Fine, if you won't give me my way then I'll make life hell for you. Just try being with me when I'm in this state." I was flexing my power while avoiding the condemned rage. Stubborn girl was in town.

My sulking anger came on our trip to the zoo (see Figure 5 – The Lower Lip). I don’t know why I was pouting. My sister got to bring a friend and I didn’t? I wanted to stay longer somewhere and wasn’t allowed? Who knows. And who really cares. (I guess I did at the time.) I remember the feeling – it was a black cloud of pissed-offness that was stuck in my body. It was the defiant stubbornness of unexpressed rage. Sulking was the explosion that wanted to explode – but never did.

When I look back on this now I can see the logic of my choices. I can see how irrational it would have been to let my anger be openly expressed. Such a choice would not have served my best interests. It would have been received with a scolding and a "you’re a bad girl." That was clearly not my goal. And I had no skills to express my anger. I had never seen it done well. In fact I had never seen it done at all. And so it was that I began to actively suppress dimensions of my voice related to anger and sorrow. I labelled such emotions "bad" and began to disengage my awareness from their presence.
Figure 5. The Lower Lip
"You Must Look Good and Do Good"

Like most girls in the 1970s, I received very clear messages about the role of women, which profoundly influenced my relationship to my body. At the time they did not seem like messages at all but rather a so-called ‘objective’ truth. This truth told me that women must look good and do good at all times. We must concern ourselves with ‘looking good’ in order to please others, especially men. We must concern ourselves with ‘doing good’ by giving unto others, not unto ourselves.

I learned about the importance of looking good through the role modeling of the women around me. Until the day she died, my grandmother was concerned about the state of her physical appearance. She wore girdle upon girdle upon girdle to ensure she looked slim. The pantsuits had to match with the shoes, and the purse, and the lipstick. It was all tied up with her concern about outward appearances. And I believe it was deeply connected with how she felt about herself. The topic was given a lot of airtime so I just knew that it mattered.

At seven, I too was concerned about my physical appearance. I was conscious of having a big nose like my forefathers and mothers. (I wanted an upturned nose like my best friend Fiona.) I worried about my scrawny physique and my oversize feet. I was conscious of my clothes and whether or not my friends would approve of them. I wanted to feel ‘in’ but mostly felt ‘out.’ At this young age my body awareness was already entangled with a focus on my appearance. I tapped into my voice of judgement who reminded me that I was ‘inadequate’ when measured against the societal view of physical perfection.

The media around me supported my focus on women’s appearance when they reviewed the visiting royalty (see Figure 6 – Showing Off Her Midi). Female royalty were described in terms of their outfits, while male royalty were lauded for physical or intellectual accomplishments. The pigeonholes were very clear.
Thursday, October 2

Princess Margaret showed up in a yellow coat, where she opened the door and made her conference in London.
Women should care about the opinions of others, especially as it relates to their physical appearance.

I also learned about the importance of 'doing good' through the role modeling of the women around me. They showed me that it was valuable to give not only within our immediate family but also to those 'less fortunate.' Giving seemed to come from a loving place with a layer of Christian guilt to ensure that it happened. It sometimes came with the hook of 'I'm giving to get approval' rather than 'I'm giving because I want to and really feel that I have it to give right now.' Those distinctions were never made. Giving of yourself was the thing to do, especially if you happened to be female.

There was a certain glory in this kind of selflessness. It was suffering in the name of helping others. In fact, it was almost shameful to take care of oneself. Selfishness was indeed a quality deserving of judgement.

My mother gave of herself everyday to my sister and me. I always knew that she would be there with my peanut butter and jam at lunch and Oreos after school. And she somehow managed to make our laundry magically appear folded and clean on our beds each week. She was a girl-guide leader and a meals-on-wheels-deliverer. I recall very few times when my mother put herself first. At least that's how I recall it.

My grandmother was also a giver. One Christmas day she chose to visit a friend in the hospital rather than stay home with us. When I questioned this choice she sat and explained, "He's been sick and had to have his legs taken off. He's feeling quite sad. I think he might need a friend today." It is hard to capture in words the impact this moment had on me as a little girl. I was repulsed at the thought of a man losing his legs, and in awe of my grandmother's kindness. She taught me about the art of giving unto others in humility and grace. I should know after all, I was on the receiving end of her love.
She also taught me about neglecting oneself in the name of giving to others. I learned about disregarding exhaustion and the needs of the body in the name of giving. Her 'get on with it' attitude led her to ignore many illnesses until they became serious. I am convinced that her will to give kept her alive on many occasions. Just as I'm sure that her self-neglect ultimately contributed to her demise.

It is this kind of loss of the authentic self in the name of pleasing others that made its mark in my seven-year-old context. I learned that in order to be a 'good woman,' I needed to focus my attention on the opinions of others to see if I was 'looking good.' My body awareness began its shift from my own experience of pleasure to the opinions of others. I also learned that I needed to give my attention to the opinions of others to see if I was 'doing good.' In this paradigm, I claimed certain thoughts and feelings as acceptable, thereby heightening my awareness of them. And I labeled other dimensions of my empowered voice as 'bad,' and shut them down in the name of fulfilling my expected roles.

"Focus on Winning"

My experiences with body awareness spanned from the childlike bliss of embodiment when immersed in the moment, to the stressful state of disembodiment in competition. I experienced high awareness of my body when I had no concerns about the judgement of others. This usually occurred in nature or when I was experiencing the pleasure of feeling my body move without a predetermined goal. My body awareness dropped most often in competition, when I was concerned about the opinions of others and turned my attention outwards.

When I was seven I learned that my body was meant to help me achieve success in sports. It began in school with games billed as 'play.' It continued
with track meets and volleyball games. The goal was to win, to be better than them. And I was not better than them. I was small and slow, or so I was told by the medals I did not win. I was the 'brain' with musical talent so therefore I could not be athletic. That wasn't my pigeonhole.

Skating gave me a freedom I did not experience in other sports. There was physical pleasure in the speed and solitude of moving myself around the rink. I felt the power and strength in the movement of my legs, and the graceful movement of my upper body and arms. There was a blissed-out-wind-in-my-hair-timelessness to the freedom of skating. It was an embodied experience of living in the moment.

But the stressful disembodiment showed up on the rink too, as did the humiliation. Skating competitions caused a churn in my belly and a fear in my soul. I loathed the idea of everyone watching and judging me. Who could blame me? I did not like to be looked at by eyes that were deciding if I was 'good' or 'bad.' I did not like to be told what I was doing wrong. There was little pleasure for me in competition. I was afraid of tripping and falling. My breath was short and my thoughts were racing. I was not feeling the pleasure of physical movement, or the wind in my hair. My focus shifted from my own sense of embodied pleasure, to a fear of external judgement.

Sports came to be a fearful place for me — a place of inadequacy. I learned from my past experiences that I was not fast or strong enough to be the best. And I wanted to be the best in all that I did. So I would restrict myself to the limiting thoughts in my head. 'I can't do that well, therefore I won't do it at all.' There was little attention paid to what brought me pleasure. It was all about where I found success.

There were moments of pleasure in my childhood body when I was immersed in natural surroundings. My most vivid memory was a ritual that my grandmother
created for us at the cottage called, 'The Walk of a Thousand Acres.' In the early morning hours, she managed to get my sister and me out of bed. We let go of our frog-catching yearnings and walked in our morning haze on a grass-trodden trail across the fields. When we reached the top of the hill she asked us to choose something that looked beautiful to us. Then she told us what we were to do. "We are going to be completely silent for a couple of minutes, so stand in a way that you can’t see each other. Just breathe in and out while focusing on the beauty of what you have chosen. Try to think of nothing else but its beauty and thank God for creating it."

I was seven years old and completely in my body. Completely immersed in the beauty of a tree or a cloud, I was at the same time connected to my breath and the wind. In my childlike way I was experiencing the profound connection between the spiritual and the physical – myself and the divine. And we usually continued the bliss by singing on the walk home, or just being together in silence. What a woman my grandmother was. What a gift.

These moments of pleasure in my body were always marked with a lack of self-consciousness. They were the times when I felt that nobody was watching or judging me. I was totally immersed in the glorious sensation of my physical body in space. There was no distinction between me and my surroundings and it felt good to be in my own skin. They were rare and precious moments that gave me a taste of the body awareness dimension of my empowered voice.

"You are Clever"

At seven years of age, I was highly aware of my thinking world – at least the thoughts that evoked the positive reinforcement of those around me. My brain was my ally in building my self-concept of 'smart.' I relied on my intellect for my self-definition, especially in my diminishing connection to my body and feelings.
While my intelligence was considered 'good,' the feeling and physical dimensions of myself were more strongly associated with 'bad.'

I always knew that I was smart – at least in the academic sense. My teachers gave me the marks at school to tell me this was so. I excelled in writing and reading and math. And there was pleasure for me in learning, in my own curiosity and analytical abilities. When my marks were good, my teachers and my parents showered me with the approving tones of 'good girl' and 'well done.' I can still feel the glow.

I was a girl, like many other girls, who wanted the approval of others. As I recount the feeling of report card day, the affirmation of others stands out more than my own sense of myself. Or at least it seems that the affirmation of others preceded my sense of self-worth. Perhaps it was simply the nature of being seven, wanting to be liked and told I was 'good.' Or perhaps it was the continuing shift in my focus from authentic self-expression to expression-tailored-for-the-approval-of-others.

Regardless of the underlying dynamic, my self-perception as 'smart' combined with the applause around me, caused me to lean heavily on my intellect for my sense of self-worth. (It is often difficult to distinguish between others' opinions and my own as the line is so fuzzy at this stage.) I avoided the realms of the physical and emotional, for they were usually associated with failure. I was becoming increasingly aware of my thinking world, for concentration on the intellect led to 'success.' This head focus tipped my internal awareness-scale in a way that decreased my consciousness of my body and feelings. Why would I pay attention to the dimensions of my voice that were less valuable?
"If You’re Going To Do It At All, Do It Right"

I learned early on that striving for perfection is a worthy goal. I also began to understand that while work can bring success and pleasure, it can also lead to stress and disconnection. An important layer of this messaging was the fact that the goal of the perfectionism — meeting externally-set expectations — was seen as more important than self-care. They were messages that set the stage for my obsessive, workaholic tendencies, even at the ripe old age of seven.

My father was brilliant at getting things done, and doing them well. He organized the garage and his shoe cleaning room with the same meticulous perfection that he ran a corporation. He was a 'get-it-done' guy with tremendous amounts of energy. His success in the business world required tremendous dedication and passion. He was a 'doer' and the whole world was telling him he was on the right track.

His passion for work and success was energizing to me. It showed up when he brought home the new advertising jingles and when he delivered a heartfelt message to his staff at the Christmas party. His energy around a new car launch was infectious. He was clearly enjoying himself and was highly skilled at what he was doing. These are the times I associated work with success and pleasure.

His drive for success also meant that he travelled frequently. He arrived home after my bedtime sometimes and kissed my forehead as I was falling asleep. In the morning he would often be 'running out the door.' I used to think that Dad was always either at the office or on an airplane (see Figure 7 — Daddy’s Coming Home). At least that’s how I recall it. These are the times I associated work with stress and absence.

A successful man at that time was responsible for ‘bringing home the bacon’ by remaining financially sound. His job was to make sure that the family was
Tuesday, March 30

Tomorrow, my father is coming home.

Figure 7. Daddy's Coming Home
provided for, financially speaking. Dad focused his time and energy to that end. And he did it well. He was not there for us emotionally – that was Mum's job. I'm aware that my story is not unique. I followed in his footsteps with a similar energy and passion. I had the same intensity for success and work. (Although my work context was still in the realm of play.) I recall learning to play 'footsie.' It required the proper skipping step to successfully jump over a ball and not trip. My sister had mastered it. I had not. It was time for the obsessive workaholic to take over.

So I skipped and I hopped and I fell on my face. I wouldn't let my sister help. Stubborn-girl had to do it in her obsessive way. My focus continued. My mother finally gave up trying to call me for dinner. It was no good when I was in one of 'those' moods. I had to do it my way, the whole way and with perfection. Finally I got it, the rhythm was mine. I kept going and going just to prove my success. When I finally sat on the stairs to rest, I noticed the blood oozing out of my little obsessed feet. These were the early signs of Joanna-the-workaholic. Joanna-the-perfectionist. Joanna-the-over-achiever.

This is not to suggest that this was all bad. Like anything, it had its upsides and downsides. I learned about the value of hard work and taking responsibility for myself. I learned about the power of saying 'I can do this' when I wasn't sure I could. I learned about dedication and passion for work and about the importance of spending my time doing things that are a natural extension of who I am. I learned that with hard work and commitment like that of my father, a person can change their lot from 'parts salesman' to 'company president.'

I also learned some things that have not been so helpful. When this kind of drive is framed in a need to please others, the focus often shifts in an unhealthy manner. It becomes 'success at all costs,' including the cost of losing my understanding of who I am and what I need to be healthy. I learned about not taking care of my body and overdoing it in the name of pleasing others. I learned
that personal boundaries are not necessary as long as the job is done well and I learned that success at work is a major part of one's identity. I learned that working day and night is okay if the job is done with perfection. Little did I know that my drive for perfection was fueled by my need for the approval of others, or that it stemmed largely from my burgeoning sense of imperfection. Little did I know that my focus on externally-measured success would move me further away from my own voice — my own thoughts, feelings and body.

My Relationship with Music -
The Creative Zone of No Judgement

When I was seven, I loved to sing in the bathtub. In fact, I loved to sing in just about any location in which I felt safe. In this realm of play, there was no fear of judgement. The rules that defined what was ‘good’ and ‘bad’ seemed to dissipate in the safety of this private creative space. It was only about experiencing pleasure, which is why I did it after all. It just felt good. It was an honest and open expression of being alive. It was quite simple really.

My friends and I even formed a band — the ‘Halmterkies’ — a name we created from one syllable in each person’s last name. We leapt around the basement completely consumed in our original music, singing at the top of our lungs. I improvised in the moment I felt it and was barely aware of anything outside of myself. I held little awareness of the need to be ‘good.’ That wasn’t the goal. (And yet if asked, I’m sure I would have said we were ‘good.’) But the focus was on having fun. Time would fly as we focused on ‘being’ rather than ‘doing.’ I cherish the lack of self-consciousness in this childhood memory.

There were no rules in this timeless space of imagination. We were blissed out in our voices in the freedom of the creative space. It was a world of total permission to do what we wanted to do, and be who we wanted to be. We didn’t
have to worry about meeting the expectations of others. We only had to be exactly who we were. There was very little stress in that freedom. We were not consumed in self-reflection in this timeless space of creative play, but rather we were completely immersed in the moment. The voice of judgement was not yet limiting our authentic expression of thoughts and feelings. And I would be surprised if we were holding much tension in our seven-year-old bodies. It is more likely that our bodies were relaxed and engaged in the free-flowing thoughts and feelings of the creative process.

I have little doubt that I felt good about myself in the context of singing for I remember it as my favourite way to pass the time. I don't recall holding any bad feelings about myself when immersed in song. In fact, I don't think I reflected much at all when engaged in my voice. In the absence of an external source of authority, singing provided me with a stress-free outlet for the authentic expression of my seven-year-old-self.

**My Relationship with Music — The Creative Zone of Right and Wrong**

My experience of formal music education was not about this kind of timeless imagination. I remember standing in my assigned row in the classroom, stiffly holding my small plastic recorder. The pictures and notes on the page told me where to put my fingers. It felt more like work than play. I was proud of myself for getting it 'right' — for playing what was expected. It was clearly like any other task at school. Use your head and strong discipline to master it for this has little to do with pleasure.

How much of my interpretation of this dynamic was the way I received it and how much was the way it was delivered? This is a question I will never be able to answer. For me, it was another activity of 'right' and 'wrong.' An exercise in dualism that tapped into the intellectual in me. It also accessed the one who was
striving to please others. It reinforced notions of hierarchy and dualistic thinking that I was learning at home and in all other realms of my life.

Music was about being perfect. This notion intensified when I started piano lessons in grade two. I practiced and practiced until I played exactly what was on the page, until it was perfect. ‘Well done Joanna,’ my teacher would say. She told me how ‘good’ I was to have practiced so much. I pleased her with my performance of ‘Ten Little Indians.’ Since I made no mistakes, it was ‘perfect.’

I recall sitting at our piano for what felt like hours, with the obsession of a true perfectionist. I played scale after scale until my arms ached. My thoughts churned: "What's coming next, what is the time signature, key signature, fingering?" I'm sure my breath was shallow as I stayed in my head. I was not wallowing in the pleasure of the sound I was making. I wasn't sinking into my feelings or the movement of my body.

For me, music was often wrapped up in performing for others. I was always anxiously preparing to show myself to somebody else. There was not much pleasure in that. Lessons and recitals and exams were the goal. "Get in and get out unscathed and make them happy. Then you'll be fine," said the voice in my head. Music was an experience outside of me that I happened to perform. It was about focussing out there, not in here. It was a disembodied experience that took place in my head.

I learned about rhythm and harmony in these years. And I learned about the structures of music. For that I am eternally grateful. But music was clearly taught as a matter of the intellect that others judged as ‘right’ or ‘wrong.’ It lived in the head, not in the heart. As I moved slowly but surely towards puberty, my lens on the approval of others was about to widen. The emotional and physical disconnection between music and me was about to be firmly planted.
I was naturally connected to my own thoughts and embodied feelings as an infant and expressed them as they arose. As I grew towards my seventh year, my childhood environment taught me to think about life in terms of dualities – good/bad, right/wrong. Some people had more power than others, and the people further up the hierarchy defined what was ‘good’ and what was ‘bad.’ The value systems around these dualities showed up in sayings, actions and reward systems.

From this context, I learned that sadness and anger are not ‘good’ feelings, they should be reframed in a focus on the positive. For girls, it seemed that anger was extremely bad, whereas for boys the expression of sadness was a particularly harsh crime. I began to develop my ‘stiff upper lip’ (which often showed up in my sulking lower lip) as I actively pushed down ‘negative’ feelings. And it is likely that I clamped down on my body when I sulked in the squelching of my anger. In exploring the notion of little children sitting still before they are ready, F. Krucker (1999) states, “The way they manage this in order to please parents or teachers is to hold their breath by locking their diaphragms. It is a first step towards separating themselves from their bodies and their emotions” (p. 73).

At seven, my body awareness still had the childlike elements of play and creative expression providing it was not in a competitive context. I learned early on that I was ‘good’ at all things intellectual, and for the most part ‘bad’ in the physical realm of sports. So I focused on my smarts at school, and avoided all things physical. I also began to see the externally driven reinforcement of women’s bodies when they were considered to be ‘pretty.’

My relationship to music exemplified this tension between the body and the head. I still engaged in the childlike embodied expression of play when I followed my
natural urges to sing and create in the company of friends. But the dualistic head-focused thinking of good/bad showed up in the power-based relationship of teacher/student. I was not engaged in my body or pleasure when focussed on trying to be 'good' for someone that I viewed as an authority figure.

As I focused my awareness on all that was 'good,' I actively rejected the parts of myself that were 'bad.' The voice of judgement inside me began to form and she had some serious opinions about who I was becoming. She wanted to keep me on track with the goal of 'good girl.' Her views were formed from the rules that lived in my hierarchical world. She shaped my awareness by judging what was 'bad' and applauding what was 'good.'

So I listened intently to this judgemental voice that was forming and headed towards my adolescence. My view of reality included the following 'truths':

- **Feelings:** There are feelings that are good and some that are bad. Anger is bad. You can express some sadness since you are a girl but don't let it get messy. (Remember, “All Things Work Together For Good” so don't focus on the negative.)
- **Body:** Your body is meant to help you win. If it does not perform as you wish, push harder. It should look pretty for others but not so pretty that you engage in sex. That is bad. God lives up in the sky, not in your body.
- **Authority:** Other people know what’s best for you. They define what is 'good' and 'bad.' You need someone else to take care of you. (Read: ‘Find a husband.’) Listen to what 'important' people say. Focus your energy on 'pleasing others.'
- **Dualistic Judgement:** There is 'good' and 'bad,' 'right' and 'wrong', and you'd better get it right. Striving hard to be perfect is good.
- **Music and Singing:** Music is about using your head to get it ‘right.’ (Other people judge what ‘right’ is.)
And so it was that these 'truths' began to influence my voice, both literal and figurative. As I actively suppressed anything associated with 'bad,' I began to disconnect from these dimensions of myself. That is, I began to lose touch with 'bad' elements of my own thoughts, feelings and body. The freedom of singing in the bathtub was being replaced with a need for control and getting it 'right' in the name of pleasing others. The voices of judgement, both external and internal, were starting their reign of power in the silencing of my voice.
Second Movement

Stiff Upper Lip –
Grief Goes Underground
1981
Figure 8. 'Stiff Upper Lip'
Similar to the experience of most adolescent girls, over the next decade my empowered voice (the awareness of my thoughts, feelings and body in context) contracted in the expansion of my focus on the views of others. There was little possibility for self-acceptance or expression, musically or otherwise, in this state of low awareness.

The Context – The Chameleon Always Changes Colour

Between my seventh and seventeenth years, I tuned into the opinions of others, diminishing my awareness of my own thoughts and feelings. The space in my childhood consciousness dedicated to the perception and expression of my own voice was squeezed out by the voices of external definitions of 'good' and 'bad.' The internal editor that asked, 'what will they want to hear?' was so loud that my own voice became inaudible.

I cared deeply about being well-liked by those around me. "He's so nice and I'm glad he finds it easy to talk to me...(he) was really nice to me today" (Journal, March 12, 1978). My focus rested on their opinions of me, not on how I felt about them. So I did all that I could to make sure that I became who they wanted me to
be. My needs-detector was so well developed that it enabled me to change form with great chameleon-like skill. So I set out to meet the expectations that I believed others held. Gilligan and Mikel Brown (1992) describe the story of an adolescent girl’s experience with this loss of voice:

Pushing these feelings underground, she moves out of relationship with herself and into relationship with an image of herself that other people respond to and seem to desire or value — one that she herself has come to see as nicer or safer (p. 197).

As I moved through the passage to womanhood, the prospect of isolation was terrifying. I did what I could to minimize this terror by becoming astute at reading the needs of others. The underlying thoughts went something like this: If I behave in a way that meets their needs, they will like me and I will not be alone. This need to belong is not an uncommon response for a teenage girl entering womanhood. As Gilligan (1982) says,

Since masculinity is defined through separation while femininity is defined through attachment, male gender identification is threatened by intimacy while female gender identification is threatened by separation (p. 8).

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) describe this experience for women with little confidence in their own voices, who they refer to as ‘received knowers,’ “Because women at the position of received knowing believe that all knowledge originates outside the self, they must look to others even for self-knowledge” (p. 48). In the hierarchical systems to which I belonged there were others who clearly had more wisdom than me. I focused on getting it ‘right’ and being told I was ‘good.’ So it is not surprising that my voice moved into the background. Not only was my voice less knowledgeable than theirs but the risk of breaking relationship in voicing my opinion was far too great of a threat. I gave my voice away to external authority without ever really being conscious about it being a choice. It was the only way to survive with my ‘good girl’ intact.

So I was friends with the nerds and the jocks and the artsies — and found myself somehow still an outsider. Everyone liked me, from the powerful to the
powerless. But nobody really knew me as I didn't know myself. I shut down access to the thoughts and feelings of my authentic self. (I suppose it could be argued that this disconnected state was my authentic self at the time.)

My external world continued to tell me about the inappropriateness of expressing sadness. Being happy and positive was well-liked, being sad and negative was not. Dualistic thinking once again dominated my perception of reality. So I continued out the legacy of my 'stiff upper lip' heritage by pushing down sadness whenever I could, and judging it when it showed up. "Today I almost cried but I didn't want to feel like a jerk" (Journal, January 5, 1978). "I started to cry but I felt really dumb so I went into the back yard" (Journal, June 2, 1978). When I felt the dreaded feelings of jealousy and hurt, the volume of judgement was turned up higher. "Everybody got invited to the party except me. I'm so stupid sitting here feeling sorry for myself" (Journal, March 25, 1978).

When I first started high school I wanted to play the saxophone. My music teacher told me my ear was too good to play brass. (I think that was his perspective of musical hierarchy!) So I ignored the truth from my position of received knowing and began to play the violin. In my perfectionistic determination, I mastered the instrument to show them I could. I sailed through the usual stages of the school music program's hierarchy and was chosen to be concertmistress of the orchestra. It was an expression of who my music teacher wanted me to be. (In truth, beneath the good-girl-concert-mistress, I wanted to be the 'bad girl' playing the saxophone in the stage band.)

There was little chance of exploring my 'bad girl' through sexuality, for I was a full-fledged 'late-bloomer.' My friends had already blossomed into the world of boys. And I was desperately wanting to flower. I detested the isolation of my extended girlhood. So I filled my need to belong by being everyone's friend. There was a tension between the 'good girl' status of not being sexually active, and my natural yearnings to explore sexuality and to belong.
My first experience with romantic love was with a dear friend who was two years younger than me. (Our age difference somehow helped me maintain my internal status of ‘loser.’ He wasn’t one of the coveted older boys after all!) Sex was all wrapped up in my ‘thou shalt not’ notions of ‘bad girl.’ It was not about pleasure or connection or embodiment. It was dirty and wrong. (This was not uncommon in the world of adolescent girls in the ’70s.) I was raised on fairy tale notions of love and marriage. My instincts said ‘yes’ but my head said ‘no.’ This journal entry shows my response to the news of my friend’s ‘lost’ virginity (an oppressive expression in and of itself!) “Somehow I wasn’t all that shocked and disgusted. It’s her life anyways” (Journal, March 21, 1978). My choice of words reveals my judgement of her ‘bad girl’ actions.

It was a time of heightened awareness of the textures and hues of my external world. This enabled me to shift my chameleon colours to fit in. When I was seventeen my adolescent disconnection from my body and feelings peaked. This was the stage for a scene that would change my life forever. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 2).

The Experience – June, 1981

It was almost dark by the time I arrived home from my weekend up north. There was a note on the stairs. Dad’s English-schoolboy handwriting read, “Come wake me up.” A pit rolled over in my stomach. Why was he writing this note? Mum always does that.

I flew up the stairs instinctively missing the stairs that creaked after curfew and woke my clearly exhausted father. "Mum’s got some kidney problems so she’s in the hospital getting fixed up. She’ll be fine." Shaken to see my dad alone in their king-size bed, I was somewhat relieved at the she’ll-be-fine prognosis. I headed down the hall for a good night’s sleep.
I awoke the next morning to my father’s six-foot-three frame at the edge of my bed. Trembling in his yellow cotton bathrobe, he looked like a little boy. And he told me the truth with fear in his eyes. "Mum collapsed on the tennis court on Saturday. She had an aneurysm that burst in her head. They will operate when her blood pressure comes back down." Then he pulled himself together and assured me that everything would be fine. I know that he wanted to believe that was true.

My mother lay in a dark room with her sunglasses on. She held me and comforted me. She assured me that everything would be all right. I don’t really know if she believed that.

We were told that the surgery went well. But there was a concern that the blood vessels in the brain might react to the surgery by going into spasm. Two days later we got the bad news. And so began my mother’s losses.

Loss of speech.
Loss of feeling in the left leg.
Loss of recall of how to pour a cup of tea.
Loss of use of the left arm.
Loss of function of the left side of the face.
Loss of memory. Loss of comprehension.
Loss of knowing who we were.
Loss of my mother as I had always known her.

(Listen to Compact Disc, Track 2).

On one of the darkest days of her losses – our losses – the nurse brought Mum a tray with her tea. There was a new vacancy in her eyes beneath the turban of bandages that wrapped her head. She lifted the milk jug and put it back down. Frustrated, she lifted the cup and moved it to the other side of the tray. Her confusion showed in her eyes. She didn’t know how to do the most familiar of all
tasks – she could not make a cup of tea. My father turned away and buried his face of tears in the corner of the room.

We spent most of the next seven months in the sterility of hospitals and rehabilitation centres. I don't remember much from this time. My state of numbed-out-grief affected my memory. (The body is so helpful with its selective memory. Why would I want to remember every detail of this time?) My mother couldn't talk. She didn't know the difference between a fork and a spoon. She couldn't read or write. She didn't notice the food when it fell from the paralysis of her mouth. I didn't know who this person was. And there were times when she didn't know me. I was embarrassed about her. And I was ashamed to be embarrassed.

Grief Goes Underground

There was no longer any truth to the notion of "All Things Work Together for Good." It was a lie. There was nothing good after my mother collapsed on the tennis court. Joy seemed to up and move out of our home. The sorrow was so deep that it dropped right out of my reach. It was so far beyond imagining that I didn't feel any familiar sadness, just a dull sense of flat numbness. It was almost like a mini-death of a piece of myself – the end of my awareness of sorrow. The grief in this passing was suppressed with a super-strength denial to protect me from the feelings of ultimate isolation, ultimate fear – life without my mother.

The chaos of adolescence secured the lock on this grief. To maintain my 'happy' status and belong to my peer group, I simply had to use more energy to deny such a level of sorrow. It was so natural it was almost like breathing. (Although I'm convinced that my breathing was anything but 'natural' in this state of repressed pain. It was probably quite shallow in my disembodiment.) And everybody around me seemed to be denying grief too. The voices around me were focused on celebrating the fact that Mum lived. They talked about how
much progress she'd already made and considered action plans for the future. 

"Think positive. Stiff upper lip.' That was the culture that I was brought up on, so that's what I did" (Personal Writing, March 6, 1999).

I followed my father's lead and focused on doing what is 'sensible' in times of difficulty. We were already kindred spirits living by this code of optimism and strength so there was no change required in managing this way. (We had enough change to cope with already.) And it certainly allowed us to get up in the morning and function each day. In fact, I believe it was key to our survival.

And so it was that I entered grade 13, the so-called 'peak year' in the life of a high school student. I was armed with my 'stiff upper lip' and completely unable to access the voice of my sorrow. It was as if I had unplugged from my own body wherein these dreaded dark feelings lay. It was a natural extension of the disembodied experiences of a late-bloomer – and the choices that made me a 'good girl.' I intensified my focus outwards, set my self to 'numb' and got really busy.

I took on a heavy course-load and set my standards high. As music council president, concert mistress and friend-to-all, I had my hands full. And that's exactly how I wanted it to be. It was the perfect framework for someone wanting to avoid her pain at all costs. I was clearly not ready for the kind of grief that was lurking behind the experiences of that summer. Losing access to further dimensions of myself hardly felt like a loss at the time. In fact it didn't' seem like there was a choice at all. It was the only option.

Even without the trauma of a lost parent, adolescent girls tend to lose their sense of themselves. They stop expressing their real feelings, especially anger, when they realize that the expression of anger would risk the loss of personal relationships (Gilligan & Mikel Brown, 1992). My sense of self-worth was all
wrapped up in maintaining relationship. How could I possibly risk losing that at a time when my losses were already so vast?

I needed a block the size of a fortress to keep out this anger and grief. So I built it up strong and lost connection with my body and my voice held within it. I lived up in my head, which had served me so well and detached myself from any connection with pain or pleasure. While this unconscious strategy helped me survive, it also had great costs. As Fisher (1999) so clearly states, “By giving up our voice, we relinquish the right to a whole range of emotional experiences and to many of our talents and personal gifts” (p. 8). I could no longer feel much of anything. Like damning a river – you can’t turn off one feeling without stopping them all. But there wasn’t much choice. There never is without any awareness of oneself.

I broke up with my boyfriend, convincing myself ‘it just wasn’t right.’ I didn’t make the connection then, but I can see it now. If I had continued my experiences of pleasure with him, it would have threatened the fortress I’d built against feeling. I would have risked opening the floodgates to the pain. For pain and pleasure are two sides of the same coin. Intimate relationship would expose me to both. This was not a step I was ready to take.

I could not feel my body when I jogged obsessively to get acceptably thin. My physical injuries were a nuisance to me, obstacles to my control of the outcome rather than signals for help from my body. My physical limits went unnoticed amidst the constant barrage of critical thoughts: “You’re too fat…. You’re not pretty…at least if you’re thin, you’ll be a bit more attractive. Then maybe you’ll find a boyfriend.” I disassociated from the pleasure of my body as a child in the throes of competitive sport. Adolescent pressures to be thin and beautiful simply deepened this disconnection.
There's a photograph of me on the 'happy' occasion of my grade 13 formai. I recall feeling grown-up in my black fancy dress. Someone took this picture when I wasn't looking. When I look at it now I can see an explosion brewing. It's the kind of explosion of pain withheld that shows up in the puffiness of my face. I see the deep sadness through the window of my eyes. I see the rage that I know was swallowed. It shows up in my tense jaw where I cut off my voice (see Figure 8 - Stiff Upper Lip). As Newham (1999) says,

If we do not allow ourselves to cry unabated...we feel as though we are always about to burst, always dammed up and stressed, and we long for an opportunity to depressurize, to bleed away the steam arising from the simmering stew of unsounded emotions (p. 109).

My Relationship With Music – Avoiding Vulnerability

Authority still lived outside of me in every realm including music. My focus on what 'they' wanted increased in this state of inner disconnection. Standards for success were set by sources other than me. The composer told me what he wanted, my teachers told me how they wanted it played. Any sense of embodied joy I'd had in music as a child was completely gone, replaced with a controlling head-focus on 'right' and 'wrong,' 'good' and 'bad.' This gave me a much-needed sense of predictability in my chaotic world.

I felt deep envy towards people who played with music freely, especially singers. (I recall this feeling with a clarity that sheds light on my closeted yearning to sing.) I got as close as I could to the performers by taking on other production roles, but never got on stage. There must have been something too risky in that, too threatening. How could I have explored the emotional realms of music when I was busy shutting down that dimension of myself? How could I have walked towards pleasure when it demanded that I also experience the darkness of pain?

Singing requires connection with the body and breath, as well as access to one's feelings. It involves a certain letting go of control, and a trust that song will emerge as it should. I chose a more disembodied focus by applying my intellect
and discipline to playing the violin. (Which is not to say that playing the violin should be a disembodied experience!) It helped me to maintain an illusion of control in this phase of chaos. Having an instrument between me and the audience enabled me to stay hidden with my chin firmly planted.

It never even crossed my mind to just play for the sheer enjoyment of the process. Enjoyment was not part of my world anymore – not without Mum.

So What?

My adolescent brain was firmly planted in the dualistic thinking of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, especially in how I perceived myself. I entered this stage of my life with a biased acceptance of feelings and thoughts that were ‘good,’ while chastising myself for those that were ‘bad.’ I chose to edit my own voice in order to live by the rules that made me ‘good’ to please others. And I was completely unaware of this dynamic.

Inherent in this self-editing was a growing disconnection from my body. For it is impossible to block out certain feelings without cutting off body awareness and all of the thoughts and feelings therein. The isolation of being a ‘late bloomer’ simply reinforced this body disconnection as did society’s messages about all that is ‘bad’ about women’s bodies. These realities all played out during adolescence – a time when needing to belong was critical. The case for changing my chameleon colours on demand was powerful.

In the wake of the trauma of my mother’s aneurysm, the rules of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ became even more rigid. (It makes sense to pull on the reins of control when life hands us a profound reminder of our inherent lack of control.) I believe it was necessary to focus on “All Things Work Together for Good” in order to maintain my sanity. I did not have the tools or the support to know how to manage this level of sorrow. A self-protective pattern of suppressing enormous grief began as
I cut off all awareness of my body and focused my lenses outwards. I did not feel my sorrow. I did not feel embraceable. In fact, I did not feel much at all.
Third Movement

It's All in Your Head –
The Body Breaks Down
1992
Figure 9. 'It's All In Your Head'
In my late teens and early twenties the disconnection between my sorrow and my awareness expanded. I did not dig up my voice of sorrow when my parents split up in 1983. It was not found when my beloved grandmother died in 1985. In the face of the dissolution of my family, I buried my sorrow with a stubborn resistance. At the time I did not perceive it as ‘buried sorrow’ for I had no consciousness of there being a choice. I turned up the tempo of my life to secure this disconnection. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 3).

The Context – Stress Supports Disconnection

Throughout university I chose to be busy, busy, busy. My world included a hectic schedule of student politics, classes, orchestra rehearsals, friends and yearning for boys. My musical experiences continued to reinforce the outside-in approach to music with which I was so familiar. The conductor and the audience gave me my information about whether I was ‘right’ or ‘wrong,’ ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ It was all about pleasing them. The connection between music and pleasure had almost completely dissipated. My childhood love of singing had vanished into the sea of subconscious loves that lived within me, unexplored in the name of self-preservation.
After graduating from university, I expected to release the musician within when I chose to travel for a year in the intercultural educational performing arts program, 'Up With People.' But that was not meant to be. After the first vocal placement I was told that my singing voice was too low. (There were some other words about the band not being able to transpose the female solos to a lower range but I recall only the words, "your voice is too low.") The day the callback lists were announced, I felt the rejection viscerally. Years later, my reflections on this event capture the feeling. “I remember the hot, sweaty gym, the heat of the summer in Arizona – the feeling of rejection going deep to my core. How much I wanted to sing. I loved singing” (Journal, February 13, 1997).

It's strange how the memory loses the full picture of a wounding incident. I am quite sure there were other details to this story, perhaps they would help me see a less wounded perspective. All that I recall is the deep sense of inadequacy I felt. I was not 'called back.' That destroyed me. How could a musician like me not play a key role in the show? As my self-definition still came from 'out there,' this feedback had the power to confirm my worst fears. I was an impostor and it was true that I was not good enough. I shut down my singing voice and moved into my head where I could focus on marketing and public relations, a role where I found great success.

There were great rewards in my marketing skills. I could focus 'out there' and continue my workaholic pace. When I moved back to Toronto the intensity of this tempo continued. For the next three years I worked day and night while spending my 'down-time' in emotionally abusive relationships. My self-loathing was at an all time high. And I pushed harder and harder to try to prove my worth. It was a time of great darkness and solitude and fear covered up by a mask of activity and 'fun.' My memories of this period are vague as I was barely aware of myself in the disconnection of stress.
This pace peaked in the early 1990s when I chose to return to Up With People. My life was one of constant travel. It was exciting. It was interesting. It was the perfect fit for someone who wanted to keep busy and avoid her pain. I was based in far away from home in Tucson, Arizona. Tumbleweed and cacti replaced the familiarity of Ontario’s northland vista. The ‘sweater weather’ of the north gave way to the Sonoran desert heat so intense that it melted my windshield wipers. There were no reminders of home here. It was a perfect fit. I was foreign to this place, just as I was foreign to myself.

It was my job that had landed me here. I was the Director of Educational Programs for ‘Up With People.’ Most of my time I was ‘on the road’ with one of the five international traveling casts. My responsibilities as a one-woman department included designing an experiential learning program for 650 students per year and implementing it in all corners of the world. As part of an under-funded educational initiative in a male-dominated performing arts bastion, I had my work cut out for me.

The physical demands were intense. A typical day on the road began at 6 o’clock in the morning and continued until well after midnight. The daily schedule ran with a multi-tasking fervor that rarely allowed for a slowly eaten meal, a walk alone or any other introspective activities. It was extraversion to the extreme as we interacted daily with other cast members, host families, audiences and sponsors. And this show was on the road. We traveled every two or three days to a new community, hauling luggage and show equipment with our weary, unstretched bodies.

The emotional demands were intense. Each cast consisted of over one hundred young people living and travelling together with very little personal space. And in these close quarters, each one of us was on our own personal journey of transformation. It was an environment of constant change lived in community that brought with it the extremes of joy and sorrow and every other emotion
imaginable. It was an emotionally taxing environment, especially for those of us who were actively resisting feeling our pain!

My role as the lone developer of the learning program intended to facilitate these personal transformations was a challenging one. There was a constant demand for my energy – a neediness extraordinaire. When I was out on the road, I was focused on the many needs of this traveling community while sharing their unhealthy lifestyle. And when I was home, I was scrambling to catch up with work and friends. It was a workaholic's delight.

I moved into each day charged by stress. Arriving early at work to prepare for the day, I drank coffee to quell the fatigue of working late the night before. Everyone around me supported this style. Why wouldn't they support me when most of them also lived this way? After all we accomplished so much in this state. There were needs 'out there' – they were needs we could not meet if we slowed down the pace.

It was an environment that kept me distracted. The workaholic ethic supported my need to be busy. The tempo itself helped me maintain my lack of consciousness of my voice – my thoughts, feelings and my body. Most of the journal entries in this time period were written on airplanes. They reflect my workaholic ways:

*I'm in the Denver airport....Had a great trip out to Cast E...stayed in a weird motel...Waterville Valley, New Hampshire was beautiful...then back to Woodland, Maine....Got up at 4 a.m. for the travel day....tried to keep each other awake as we drove to NYC...had dinner with M....then got up the next a.m. and flew to Boston...great to have alone time with S...then flew to Denver (Journal, September 18, 1993).*

Just reading these passages brings about a visceral exhaustion – an embodied fatigue that I did not feel at that time. Everything seemed to be just as it should back then, and perhaps it was. I had great passion for my work and for the beautiful relationships with my colleagues. And yet this passion also fueled a
drive that knew no boundaries. It was a limitless energy in a context of never-ending needs. (But of course the body providing the energy did have its limits, I just wasn’t aware of it at the time. The voice crying out for body care had been silenced for years.)

I was not ready to slow down and hear the voice of my sorrow. I needed the sheltering that the stress of workaholism can bring. It protected me from having to sit still and feel what was waiting there in the silence. It saved me from experiencing the enormity of my grief. For reasons I may never know, this was not the time to feel my grief. I needed to continue to live ‘all in my head,’ numbing myself out from my body and my feelings. I was not yet ready to greet my heartache. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 3).

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Up With People was a ‘be-positive-and-get-happy-now’ culture.

The message was delivered on many levels. It said, "be positive and focus on doing something to improve the world." After all we were Up With People, we weren’t supposed to be down about anything. It was an organization that was created to counteract the ‘negative’ messages that young people were delivering in the 1960s; anti-government, anti-war, anti-this, anti-that. "If that’s what young people are against," asked the Up With People founders, "then what are they for?"

The Up With People theme song says it all:

"If \textit{more} people were for people, all people everywhere. There'd be a lot less people to worry about, And a lot more people who care."
There is no doubt that this ‘be positive’ mentality helped us to get a lot done. It helped us to overcome barriers to travelling in politically volatile contexts such as south central Los Angeles, China and the former Yugoslavia. I believe this focus on the positive, the possible, was a critical element of these successes. And like anything that is overutilized, it did have a cost. For the dualistic guideline that dictated a positive outlook also told us what not to do. It was not okay to disagree and it was not acceptable to express ‘negative’ emotions. They were seen as counterproductive. There was some tolerance for the expression of sadness, as long as it didn’t get too ‘messy,’ but very little room for anger.

It was the perfect mirror of my family environment. My ‘stiff upper lip’ background had proven that anger was rude and a sign of weakness. Sadness, while more tolerable, also had it’s limits. It was a context that ensured that my wounds were not opened – they remained sealed in my body to prevent pain from erupting.

The intolerance for ‘negative emotion’ showed up in office staff meetings when differing opinions emerged. If someone offered an alternate perspective that was perceived as confrontational, they would be quickly shut down and labeled a ‘nay sayer.’ Sometimes this was done directly through a comment like, “can we please be more solution-focused?” (The Royal ‘we’ was used to avoid offending.) And other times, the collective discomfort of the management team indirectly silenced the negativity. It was program focused on global tolerance that was intolerant of people who had differing opinions, especially those expressed through any form, or perceived form, of anger. Perhaps others experienced this differently. As always, my lenses undoubtedly influenced this perspective.

My intolerance for sorrow emerged when my loved ones and I parted ways. Good-bye scenes were a regular occurrence in such a global and transitory program. There are few journal entries that express the true sadness of these scenes. (How could I have expressed something I did not feel?) There is one journal entry that mentions my sadness while reflecting my need to deny its full
expression: "I was so sad saying good-bye. I should sleep. Tomorrow is a new day" (Journal, September 13, 1992). I could not stay in the pain of the here and now. It hurt too much. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 3).

There are no journal entries about my anger. At the time, I didn't feel any.

The Up With People culture had a focus on community service that led to a strong emphasis on taking care of others. This norm operated under the Judeo-Christian ethic that serving others usually requires sacrificing one's own needs. In this light, taking care of oneself was often seen as an act of selfishness, counter to the goal of building understanding in the world. In my experience, Up With People focused externally on helping the world more than internally on healing the self.

While admirable in its intention, this focus on giving to others left little room for permission to give to ourselves. Staff and students alike were physically and emotionally burnt out from this cycle of over-giving. We were unable to give from this state of depletion – and we felt badly about that. "Good people can always give more," we told ourselves. Giving without consideration of the self was seen as an admirable quality.

So I gave from this place of disconnection with myself, with an unmentionable resentment building up behind my smiling face. My body was telling me to slow down and take care, while my job description told me to move faster. (I'm aware that this dynamic is not limited to this organization.) I recall the 'happy mask' that I would put on to hide my true feelings in order to keep functioning in my role. It built up the image of the Up With People brochure copy: 'a positive happy young person doing good in the world.' And to the untrained eye, it covered up my lack
of self-care. At the time I didn't know it was a mask. I was too out of touch with myself to make this distinction.

When I look at photographs of myself in this time period, I see the 'happy mask' (see Figure 9 – It's All in Your Head). It is 'happy' in the way that looks forced and intended to show a sense of 'fun,' not happy as in a child's face of innocent bliss. I am the entertainer in this picture – the one who makes everyone laugh. I am seemingly 'open' but literally closed, not one who inhabits her body or is at peace in her own skin. I am too busy worrying about what they will think. I can see the tension of withheld pain in my body. My shoulders are raised and my body seems tight. My arms are pinched in close to my body, as if somehow that will protect me. Holding in. Holding back. I am disconnected from my body and my feelings. I am living 'All in My Head.'

When I ran away from home to work for Up With People, I ran away from myself. Who could blame me? I wanted a new life – a life filled with fun and joy, one that focused on the positive. I did not want to feel the losses of the life I had left behind in Toronto. It was a life that I associated with my disabled mother, alone and without friends, and my remarried father from whom I now felt a palpable distance. I wanted to escape the home where my grandmother no longer lived and the abusive relationships in which I had lost myself.

So I kept doing and doing and doing. And masked pain withheld over long periods of stress takes its toll. As it did on me. As it did on my body.
The Experience – May, 1992

It was another hot day in Tucson. Like most days in our office, the pace of work held a manic level of productivity. I stood up to get a file and felt a strange wave of imbalance come over me (or was it 'dizziness' or 'numbness?') There is no language to accurately describe the feeling. It was an odd, fuzzyheaded feeling that permeated my whole body. My tingling, wooden limbs seemed strangely disconnected. I held on to a desk nearby to stop myself from falling.

It was a bizarre combination of feeling out of my body while also trapped in it. I was enclosed in an invisible shroud – a kind of cotton wool veil between me and the world. The shroud brought with it noise to my ears and spots to my vision. It was a strange new vibration to my entire body. The ground didn't feel stable underneath me anymore. I could no longer deny my own dis-ease. My body wouldn't let me.

I felt disconnected from the world.

Disconnected from myself.

I blamed the heat and pushed on with my day. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 3). I moved faster and faster, to run from the terror. Shifting my focus towards this full-body invasion simply led to more fear, so I used the approach that I knew so well. "Get on with your day, this is all in your head. There is so much to do and you must get it done. You're not falling over, stop being a wimp." (Such is the arrival of my stiff upper lip!) The little girl voice showed up too. She was meek and afraid: "What is this feeling? Am I going to die? I am terrified." Denial and fear continued their dance when the sensible-me finally asked for help. As usual the help was there in the love of a friend. As we drove to the hospital, I reclined in my seat, lying in the sheer terror of the unknown.
Doctors' appointments led to more doctors' appointments led to test after test which came up with nothing. I was told it was time to be tested for Multiple Sclerosis.

M.S. Two letters had never before brought on such a terror. Horrific stories came fast and furious in that moment: Richard Pryor's battle; Annette Funicello; full body paralysis; loss of vision; bladder and sexual dysfunction and ultimately death. Two letters had never before brought on such a terror.

The first test was a series of tasks that had to be done in the doctor's office. I was able to touch my finger to my nose with my eyes closed. I did feel the pinpricks and walk a straight line. And my reflexes were normal. I was not falling over like the 'typical' M.S. patient. I was told I had 'failed' the tests.

The second test was an MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) scan. I arrived for my test at a nasty-looking trailer (a common sight in Arizona), where they prepared me to slide into a long machine-tube barely bigger than me. This was not a claustrophobic's delight. And if that wasn't enough, they pinned down my head with a strap made of Velcro. "I'll close my eyes before going in and not open them until they slide me out," said the sensible-me. But the stubborn-curious-me said with a biting tone, "Don't you tell me what to do. I've got to see what's going on in here." (She always wins.)

And the darkness wasn't as terrifying as I had expected. But then again, it never is once you're in it.

That pounding machine was more deafening than my own ringing ears. Lying in the dark skinny tube, I visualized my grandmother and what she would say, "All things work together for good dear." I softened at the thought of her tenderness
and chuckled at my own skeptical response. How could all things work together for good if I had M.S.?

I exhaled as the pounding stopped and the technician moved me out of the tube.

My roommate drove me home that night. I reclined in my seat lying in the sheer terror of the unknown.

The phone rang at my desk.

"Hello Joanna. It's Dr. G. here. Fine, fine thank you and how are you?" he said with no real interest in my response. "We've got the results of your MR scan and there are in fact lesions scattered across both hemispheres of your brain that are suspicious for M.S. So we will want to do more testing but it's okay for you to go on your business trip to Europe. We can follow up to confirm with a spinal tap when you get back."

My brain tried to process what he had just said. Did he just say that I have M.S? It seemed in fact, that he wanted to confirm the disease. Perhaps he was tired of me 'failing' my tests. At least I'd 'passed' the MRI scan! Why do doctors always use positive terms for disease? Did he say 'spinal tap'?!

I walked home down the road in the heat clutching my newfound fear. Curling up in a ball on the couch by the window, I wept. And wept. And wept.

But not for long. There were airplanes to catch and work to do and, and, and.... I went off to Europe in the interest of maintaining my stiff upper lip. I worked in denial, distraction and numbness. "For what good would it do to wallow in fear?" said the avoider-workaholic-me. I traveled the globe in a body that was sending
clear signals, trying to say to the stubborn-one, “Okay dear. This has been nice but we need to listen to each other and slow the race down.” I was living my life in the extreme and my body’s response was in the extreme — not a stubbed toe or a twisted ankle — M.S.

A few weeks later my spinal tap and evoked potentials turned up with ‘negative’ results. This landed me somewhere on the continuum of disease between ‘black’ and ‘white.’ There was no official diagnosis except ‘probable’ for M.S. Sometimes they shifted me to ‘possible.’ It depended on the day. Regardless of the diagnosis, there was nothing they could do for me. I found myself in a medical black hole.

The same doctor told me to go away and come back once I’d lost function.

“Lost function? Lost function of what?” I asked.

“Oh, maybe your arm or perhaps the vision in one of your eyes,” he said with no semblance of emotional shift to his voice.

He was telling me that I would undoubtedly lose physical ability. It was just a matter of time. On this occasion I recall having a glimpse into my anger. I was angry at his underlying tone that said to me, "you are not interesting to me until you are exhibiting more 'significant' symptoms. Come and see me then." Come and see him then? Come and see a guy who has the sensitivity of a door stop — who practically diagnoses me with M.S. over the phone and tells me to just sit and wait until I lose function?! No thanks Dr. Doom and Gloom.

But I never said a word. My connection to this feeling of anger was so momentary that I only recall it as a burning in my cheeks — a clenching of my jaw. And I instantly turned to the familiarity of sadness. I’d never expressed my anger overtly before, and I certainly wasn’t about to start with someone in a position of
authority. This brief eruption of my anger was pushed back down where I felt it belonged — into the silence of my lost voice.

I didn't lose function. And I don't plan on it. The symptoms come and go with little change and for that I am grateful. Since then the doctors have tentatively undiagnosed me – or should I say that they didn't know how else to label me in this dualistic realm. Go figure.

The Crack in my Protective Coating

This was the beginning of the call from my body to come back in — to come back home. It was time to start feeling the wounds of my past — to find my own voice — or else suffer the loss of my physical health. The only way I could begin this process was to shift my radar from an external focus to an internal one. This was not going to be an easy task — after all I had been avoiding listening to my body for good reason. And it took drastic symptoms to get me to consider tuning in. As Marion Woodman (1995) states,

Many people can listen to their own cat more intelligently than they can listen to their own despised body. Because they attend to their pet in a cherishing way, it returns their love. Their body, however, may have to let out an earth-shattering scream in order to be heard at all (p. 25).

There is a gap in my journal writing that year that points to my lack of empowered voice. I withheld myself from the place where I tell the stark truth. I focus on the people in my life and what they are doing. I report on my travels and accomplishments seemingly trying to convince myself of my happiness. My focus rests on what I've been 'doing,' not what I've been 'feeling.' The truth is I don't recall feeling much of anything at that time.

There is one brief journal entry mentioning my health that feels cold and distant. It is the only mention of fear in the year following the onset of my symptoms:

My health has been a major issue, pretty close to diagnosing me with M.S. — maybe will never actually get a diagnosis. Symptoms are constant
Dizziness, tingling/weak arms and legs and strange things with my vision...sometimes ringing ears. I hate it. It has changed my entire life/outlook on life. Fear is the biggest challenge (Journal, August 3, 1993).

But 'challenges' were meant to be overcome in my world, not felt. So the goal was about getting beyond fear, being above it. 'Get on with it and be positive' still coursed through my veins, so I chose to push my fear out of my awareness. But fear doesn't go away when we choose to ignore it. When a feeling isn't given its voice, it seeps out in other ways.

My fear came out sideways in the anger I felt towards my boyfriend. "Me with M.S. doesn't fit his checklist I'm sure - can't picture him wheeling me to the San Juan ferry!! Are babies possible?" (Journal, August 3, 1993) This was my form of anger at the time. It was an indirect anger that was barely available to me and never expressed to him. It was held in my jaw when we spoke on the phone and clenched in my body along with my fear.

When I step back to look at the longer view of my life, my lack of awareness makes a lot of sense in this scene. I held mostly negative associations with my body and I had been living in my head for years. My lack of desire to feel and express the darkness of fear, sadness and anger was completely understandable. It would have been foreign and frightening to let in such darkness. I was afraid to let go of my resistance to the fear. I wanted to control it. It was the only way I knew how to be.

Fear and sadness and rage were sitting deep within my body untouched. To tap into the fear of my disease meant opening the door on all of it. That was a task that was much too daunting.

Brief flashes of the fear were all it would take to motivate me to continue my strategies of avoidance. The fear in this abyss was much bigger than me. It was
totally consuming and beyond my control. It would show up in waves grabbing at my throat in my room alone at night. My fear of the fear would scare me to death. Images crowded my brain – trapped in my own body, drooling and dying. No husband, no babies, no friends would come visit. I'd be all alone.

These eruptions of fear were rare and necessary moments of truth. For they were the truth about how I was feeling. It was a terrifying experience. I was voiceless in an extremely angry-making experience with the medical system. I 'respected' the authority of the doctors by holding back my expression of rage when diagnosed with M.S. over the phone! I lived into my pattern of passivity with people in positions of power. It forced me to hold down my anger with greater intensity – and I'm sure it made my symptoms worse.

My head told me not to make a scene. My body told me to scream like hell. My head told me to keep a stiff upper lip. My body told me to howl out my fear. My head told me to be a good girl by respecting authority. My body told me to let out my rage. (As my head had more power than my body at the time, you can guess who ruled in this discussion.)

I lived in my head, unaware of much going on below the neck. I was numb and disconnected emotionally. I was numb and disconnected physically. (The link between the two seems so obvious now.) One way of looking at the situation is to consider that the disconnections living within me were forcing my body to crack wide open. My body might have been trying to tell me it couldn't house all of this darkness anymore. It might have been crying out for a little attention. My own lack of body and emotional awareness might have caused this warning system to kick in.

Another possibility is to consider that M.S. symptoms actually support the notion of losing feeling. ('Numbness' is defined as a 'lack of feeling.') Is it possible that the physical body began to manifest its version of what was already taking place
emotionally? Did I somehow want to/need to diminish my awareness of myself even more? Was this my body's way of wanting to check out of the feeling world altogether?

I find wisdom and insight in both of these possibilities and trust that I may never know why this happened to me. I do know that my body had been safely protecting me from my own fears, sorrow and anger for a long time. But holding onto unexpressed emotion takes energy which, over time, begins to wear down. Just as the protective myelin sheath is broken down in M.S., so too was the protection of my body beginning to crack. And in the cracks I would find my voice.

“There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in” (L. Cohen, Anthem, The Future CD).

My Relationship With Music – The Shadow Artist

There is not much to say about my relationship to music at this stage of my life. I did not have one. Just as I barely knew myself, I knew little of the artist in me. The singer was long gone – disposed with all the other aspects of myself that received disapproving stares from me. I listened to the views of others as if somehow they had a better handle on the truth. The musician in me was in hibernation.

It is interesting to me that I chose to surround myself with artistic people. I got as close as I could to my passion for music, without ever diving in. This guaranteed that I did not have to expose myself in a vulnerable context. Cameron (1992) refers to this phenomenon as the 'shadow artist.'

Shadow artists are to be found shadowing declared artists. Unable to recognize that they themselves may possess the creativity they so admire, they often date or marry people who actively pursue the art career they themselves secretly long for (p. 27).
So What?

My body has always known what it needs to do to protect me. As a child, my knee always miraculously developed a scab to ensure my healing. As an adolescent when my mother had an aneurysm, my body shut down an unbearable grief. (I am convinced that this too was critical to my healing.) As each new loss occurred my body responded with this same sense of numbed-out self-preservation. It took me around the world and enabled me to work at a frenetic pace.

But a body can only take so much.

The overgiver couldn’t maintain the same level of energy anymore. The ‘footsie’ girl could no longer keep up the perfectionist pace. The workaholic with the ‘stiff upper lip’ was beginning to crack open. My body had reached its limit. It was time for me to open to the feelings that had been held there for so many years. I could not maintain my lack of consciousness of my own voice – my thoughts, feelings and body. My body would not allow it.

I can see from where I sit now, that this was the beginning of an important journey back into my body. It is unlikely that anything would have changed without these dramatic warning signals. At the risk of turning everything into an “All Things Work Together for Good” scenario, the breakdown of my body was a critical step in the recovery of my empowered voice. It was a turning point that shifted me from an external to an internal focus. It was not an easy road that lay ahead. But I was ready for it now.
The Fourth Movement

The Fall From the Pedestal –
Authority Shifts Within
1997
"Stripping Away"
(42" x 54")

Audrey Jolly

Figure 10. 'Stripping Away.' Copyright Audrey Jolly (1990)
(42" x 54") Acrylic on Paper and Canvas
Reproduced with permission of Audrey Jolly.
As I shifted my focus inwards, I considered the impact of the contexts in which I lived on my sense of empowered voice. I began to deconstruct the dynamics of authority and power inherent to these contexts. I looked at my disconnection from my emotional and physical self in light of this deconstruction, and in turn considered the links to my own sense of unworthiness. It was in this awareness that I began to reclaim my empowered voice.

The Context – Beginning the Journey Home

I can’t remember the exact moment when I decided to listen to my body, quit my job and move home to Toronto. Perhaps it was when I pushed myself to new levels of workaholism and stress on a project in south central Los Angeles and began to feel the toll it was taking on me. Maybe it was upon realizing that I wanted to go back to school and explore the nature of personal transformation. Perhaps it was in my neurologist’s office when he told me to consider a drastic lifestyle change. (He was the first doctor to admit that he had no idea how to diagnose or treat my symptoms. I will be eternally grateful for his humility and honesty.) Perhaps it was because of my sister’s impending move to Washington D.C. and the need for care for Mum. Regardless of the timing or reasoning, in 1995 I followed my intuitive sense to begin the journey back home to my roots in Toronto and within myself.
As I began this move, my views of authority and power were already beginning to shift. I learned through firsthand experiences with the medical system, that people in positions of power do not always have the answers, they are not always 'right.' As I landed in a medical black hole, my view of the location of authority shifted from external to internal. It was time for me to take my power back and heal myself.

But it is difficult to be empowered without much awareness of one's own body, or sorrow or rage. How could I take charge of my healing without feeling my physical experiences? How could I direct my own recovery without having grieved my losses or felt the protection of my own anger? Although I had a burgeoning sense of the need for such awareness by recognizing my lack of it, I had barely begun to discover it. As the crack in my protective coating opened, I began to listen to dimensions of myself that had been silenced for years.

I am committed to being more honest in my relationships – including speaking up when I'm sad, angry, jealous or any other negative emotions I might have... if I can just be with my symptoms and not try to push them away, I might feel better... my fear of disapproval is huge – dad came first... not saying how I really felt when I was unhappy (Journal, June 9, 1995).

I still considered sadness and anger to be 'negative' and I could not see the link between my symptoms and my emotional world. But my awareness of repressed feelings was expanding, as was my understanding of the dynamics of authority. I was slowly beginning to turn up the volume of my inner voice.

My return to Toronto marked the beginning of my intentional journey within. It was as frightening as the first day of kindergarten, and just as exciting. The discomfort of the unknown always seems to hold this edginess. I began to explore my feelings and thoughts in the context of my coursework in a Masters Program in Adult Learning. (I believe that my subconscious played a role in choosing 'Developing Human Resources' as my focus – a direction that would
undoubtedly receive my corporate father's approval. Oh the joys of assumptions.)

My learning centred on intrapersonal processes of adult learners. In a 'Creativity and Wellness' course, I looked into my own experiences with health and creative discovery through a stream-of-consciousness writing project in *The Artist's Way* (Cameron, 1992). Through this practice of private writing, I found a new sense of voice – one that did not focus on the reactions of others. My true thoughts and feelings showed up on the page. Insights around the silencing of my own voice began to emerge.

I explored different views of feminism, which helped me to understand oppression while placing intrapersonal processes in their societal context. And I came to understand that my version of feminism is about shared power of the feminine and masculine in women and men in harmony with all forms of life. It is not an exclusive feminism. And I began to understand my own experience with the oppression of my feminine side i.e. devaluation of emotion, body, relationship dimensions of life.

My body awareness began to expand through yoga and walking in natural surroundings. I reduced my stress by taking a part-time job involving no travel and soaking up the love of my family at home. My context had shifted dramatically from global to local – from airplanes to a bicycle. After years of focussing 'out there,' I was beginning to take a look 'in here.'

These shifts took place at the same time as living with my mother for the first time in 13 years. (Note: Mum is aphasic and struggles with both the sending and receiving of verbal communication. She is hemiplegic, paralyzed on the majority of her left side and sometimes uses a cane to help her walk. But her stiff upper lip helped her to recover much more than expected. She engages with life every day. She is a burgeoning artist and everyone who knows her, loves her.)
This of course, includes me.) At the time, I was facing the loss that I had run away from. I was face-to-face with Mum.

Perhaps it was the threat of my own disability that enabled me to open to a new way of being with her. Or maybe it was my expanding awareness of the fact that amidst her disabilities, she was still Mum. Her soul was still right there in her eyes. We laughed at the ridiculous antics of our neighbours. And we got frustrated when we collided in our mutual stubbornness. We began to heal our adult relationship for the first time.

I have always put my dad up on a pedestal. Up there I was convinced that he did in fact, hang the moon. I looked up through my rose-coloured lenses at his perfection. Funny, smart, handsome, reliable, ambitious and interesting are the words I would have used to describe him. British class and fun-loving-adventure, all rolled into one man who danced by himself to Ella Fitzgerald. Who could resist adoring him? He loved engaging with people and learning what makes them tick. And he softened in the presence of animals. It was the kind of softness that seemed so endearing in a man of such large stature.

In my eyes he had always been flawless. He took part in endless games and roared with laughter that afternoon that he split his pants in the intensity of our hopscotch competition. He taught me how to ride a bike by running down the sidewalk beside me shouting words of encouragement. He even helped me through the sacred passage of learning to drive a car. And he shared his economic success willingly, helping me to grow through its rewards of theatre, travel and many other privileges.

We always had a special connection and everybody knew it. It was there in the long winter walks we would take. 

“Dad and I went for a walk tonight. It’s so
beautiful out there with about two feet of snow. I felt close to him tonight” (Journal, January, 1978). His pet name for me was 'Pebbles.' And when he used it, it touched me with the love that was intended. Being together was as easy as breathing.

A pedestal is defined as, “An insulated base for a column, statue” (The Concise English Dictionary, 1984). And that is where I perceived him to be, solid and unchanging in his elevated position. He kept the cold out and the warmth in, as insulation does. He was my great protector. This provided me with a tremendous sense of security. Murdock (1994) describes this experience, “…when a young daughter looks at her father, she sees not a mortal hampered by age, personality…but a magical, perfect figure shining with power and promise” (p. 72). This disproportionate admiration provided a tremendous sense of safety within which I could flourish and grow.

While this is a normal dynamic, if overemphasized this adoration also has its drawbacks. In my story, it reinforced the notion that power lived outside of me. And I could not see my father as a normal, flawed human being – for statues are perfect and somehow unreal. This set up a dynamic of striving to please my father, regardless of whether or not he wanted me to. At a time when girls often start realizing the fundamental flawed nature of their fathers (and all adults), we were experiencing the loss of my mother. Our dependence on each other in the face of my mother’s aneurysm solidified this pedestal dynamic.

He lost the woman he had married when he was only 50 years of age. After months of hospital visits when Mum finally moved home, he channeled his grief into solution-oriented energy by organizing our neighbours into volunteer teams. They came every day to help mum with her recovery.

And we were roommates throughout this time. If I was missing her, he let me stay up past my bedtime. He fed me Beef-A-Roni and kept me laughing. And he
came to every concert and event that mattered to me. "He supported me no matter what I did. He came to the 'NT Soiree' to support me when mum was really sick in hospital. He was always proud of me...it seems he was often working" (Journal, February 10, 1997). He gave and he gave with all that he had at the time. In a sea of change, the consistency of my father's love was critical. This was no time to be taking him down from the pedestal. It was my dad who kept me afloat.

When my parents separated, I still put him up on a pedestal. And when he got remarried, he maintained his position – I blamed his new wife for the discomfort of this change. (She was a likely scapegoat for a daddy's girl.) Other people reacted to this situation with anger. But I couldn't feel any – not towards him, or anyone for that matter. I thought it was the new intruder's fault.

If my father's position on the pedestal had changed, it would have threatened my sense of security at a time when it was already shaken. I would have lost the fairy tale of the perfect father. I still wanted to believe in happy endings – that people don't always leave. He was proof of that. In my mind, that made him perfect. And my definition of perfect did not include any flaws. I could not see any flaw in his 'stiff upper lip' or in his focus on reason. These were qualities we shared and had learned from our ancestors.

Without being conscious of it, I inherited many of my father's qualities – likely some through nature and some through nurture. And like all 'daddy's girls,' many qualities were developed in the interest of gaining his approval. As always there is a yin and a yang to this story. I perceive myself to be smart and funny and interesting like my dad. And akin to his style, I am also a perfectionist, a workaholic and have pushed down my anger and grief for most of my life. Murdock (1994) states,
A father's daughter seeks to emulate her father at all costs. Adoring him, she internalizes his values and dictates as the inner voice that drives her, demanding that she be productive... a father's daughter is ambitious and responsible in the world of work... she demands perfection from herself and has little tolerance for her own vulnerability... A father's daughter yearns to be like her father and to be liked by her father (p. 8).

As I began my intentional journey inwards, I clung to this elevated perception of my father. But living in Toronto, face-to-face with both my parents while also expanding my body awareness, I discovered some dark feelings there waiting for me. There was hurt and anger and shame. I was afraid to feel these banished thoughts and yet knew that they held some important truths. So I stood in the face of my pain's triggers and squirmed in the discomfort of being home. This was the context of the fall from the pedestal.

The Experience – February, 1997

The fall from the pedestal encircled the renegotiation of my parents’ divorce agreement when my father retired in 1997. His financial support of my mother needed to be reconsidered given his changing economic status. In order to represent our mother’s best interests in light of her cognitive disability, my sister and I became her legal guardians. This role involved understanding financial planning and learning to speak legalese. It required learning how to draw boundaries around what we could discuss with our father. And we felt inexperienced in all of the above.

All this was taking place at a time when I was beginning to see that my father was less than perfect — that he was in fact a normal human being. I had never before felt angry or frustrated with my dad-on-the-pedestal. This was a first. (I guess that’s what happens when you open to your body, sorrow and anger while interacting with a parent on a more regular basis!) I began to see that I had been using my stepmother as a scapegoat to avoid having ‘bad’ feelings towards my
father. And I did feel resentment about the 'business' approach he took to our conversations about the settlement, and I was angry (and hurt) about his lack of willingness to have one-on-one time. The discomfort of these feelings, especially directed towards my father, was almost unbearable.

We were unable to reach an agreement about 'fair' financial support for my mother. We agreed to engage in a mediation process. I knew he was not happy with my behaviour leading up to the mediation. And even though I was a woman, I felt like a 'bad girl.' There was a building fear leading up to that day and it affected my health.

My stress level is at a peak right now... This Friday...is the mediation with dad. I feel physically sick about it. I have been fairly dizzy over the last couple of days and my hemorrhoids are in full action. All of my weak spots have flared up. I am so scared to see dad face to face...it takes every ounce of strength I have to stick to my beliefs and go up against him in the process (Journal, February 10, 1997).

It was February 14, 1997 and I was not spending Valentine's Day with my loved one. Instead I was in a so-called 'mediation' against my father. ('Against' is the only appropriate word to describe the adversarial nature of this process. There was no semblance of being 'with' my father on that day.) My father, sister and I met with our respective lawyers in tow, in a Bay Street office tower. We were gathered to determine what would be 'fair' support of my mother.

The false niceties in the room made me feel physically sick. The handshakes and smiles built up a ridiculous pretense of 'amicable' in a room that was not. It was phony central. After so many years of wearing a forced smile, it suddenly became clear on this particular day that I could not do it anymore. The room held the tension of years of unfinished business between my sister and Dad. And it held the stress of the unexpressed hurt and anger I felt towards my father, and that he undoubtedly felt towards me.
After the opening comments, laden with words like 'win/win' and 'collaboration,' my father and his lawyer went to another room. It was as if the boxers were going to their corners. The mediator moved back and forth between the rooms, talking with both sides and attempting to determine what would be 'fair.' He brought in an offer and presented it in his "this is really quite reasonable, girls" tone. Our lawyers rejected it and sent back a proposal for a larger amount. And so the game continued. Like children negotiating the division of a chocolate bar. "Come on, that's fair." "No it's not." "Yes it is." "No it's not." And so on.

Many hours later, my sister and I had to make one of the hardest decisions of our lives. We either had to accept the offer in that moment (which was considerably less than what we had hoped for), or go to court against Dad. I knew that look on our lawyer's face. It said, "You think this process has been hard on your relationship? Wait until you see what the courts will do." He confirmed my suspicions with his words and we decided to settle.

My sister and I left without saying good-bye. It is something for which my father will likely never forgive me. But I could not stay under the pretense of 'amicable,' when it wasn't what I was feeling. I could not keep a stiff upper lip anymore. And I definitely would not have been a 'good girl' if I had stayed. I listened to my voice of self-preservation and walked away.

It was February 14, 1997 and I was not spending Valentine's Day with my loved one. Instead I was deconstructing my perception of my perfect father. He was taking the fall from the pedestal. It was time for him to become human in my eyes. I was ready now.
Reflections on the Fall

It seems that my readiness to access my empowered voice emerged in synchronicity with an angry-making situation in an authoritarian system. This timing gave me the platform to deconstruct my view of the location of power and truth. Authority had always lived outside of me. My experiences in the powerful systems of medicine and law were showing me that they did not hold the only authority on ‘truth’ anymore. I could see the oppressive nature of these systems and was beginning to hear my voice within these contexts.

‘Mediation’ is supposed to mean, “To interpose in order to reconcile parties; to serve as connecting link or medium” (The Concise English Dictionary, 1984). My experience of mediation was more of a disconnecting experience serving to derail parties from ever trusting each other again. Reconciliation is not built on negotiation devoid of feelings. Nor is it possible when power differences are affecting people’s ability to speak their truth and truly hear one another. It does not happen when the dialogue is focused on symptoms rather than underlying issues.

The mediation process I experienced was set in a sterile business setting of a Bay Street office tower. In this corporate environment some people are more comfortable expressing their voices than others. And some voices are undoubtedly more readily received by the white-collar-and-tie mediator. The language of law and finance provides power to those that are comfortable in this realm, and takes it away from those who are not.

Rational thoughts were sanctioned in this context; ‘irrational’ feelings such as anger, were not. The pretension of ‘happy and friendly’ made it clear that this was the acceptable emotion, regardless of its authenticity. At one point the mediator said in a condescending tone, “Your father seems like such an agreeable fellow. Why are you two girls so angry?” As if being angry was a
crime. As if he knew the stories behind these three faces. How dare he call us 'girls.' How dare he assume that being angry is 'bad' and agreeable is 'good.' The dualistic paradigm of right and wrong held the power in a situation that required a pluralistic approach. (Everyone's perspective of 'fair' depended on his or her worldview after all.)

The thoughts and feelings about my experience of voicelessness came fast and furious. It was as if the floodgates opened to my awareness of the power difference in this process. I became clear about the divisive nature of physically separating family into different rooms, and the misunderstandings that can result from this faceless process. I had great clarity about the clash between my own needs and the intolerance for feelings in the process. My frustration soared in the realization that a bottom-line model was being applied to my family context—a system that is clearly not a business.

We all had our pain and it needed to be integrated into the conversation. Our viewpoints needed to be tabled along with the reasons and feelings behind them. It could have been a place of understanding rather than one of misconception. To me, lawyer-as-mediator-between-family-members is a scary proposition. Or at least it was in our context. It brings in a win-lose mentality with an adversarial style. Stories get twisted like pretzels in this forum of indirect communication. And misunderstandings grow exponentially until the truth is hardly recognizable anymore.

My anger showed me the way back to my own voice. It helped me to define the boundaries of self-protection and realize that I too had a voice of authority that was worth hearing. My awareness of my empowered voice was expanding through this extreme circumstance of representing my mother's needs in collision with the needs of my father. By accessing my feelings of anger, I was beginning to break away from our family tradition of maintaining a 'stiff upper lip.' This passage says it all:
The mediation process was cold, sexist manipulative and divisive. I found the mediator labelled [my sister] and I as the 'bitchy daughters' and that our openness of feelings i.e. anger, was not accepted as normal behaviour of two daughters finding themselves in this awkward situation of being torn between their two parents...the feeling of damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don't was unbearable. I don't think the truth came out in that mediation, just a lot of dancing around the real feelings, a sense of 'let's smooth this over' when there was real hurt and anger that needed to be expressed to find out what was really going on (Unsent letter to Dad, July 24, 1998).

The tension between the masculine quality of rational thinking and the feminine quality of emotional expression also played out between my father and me. In all of our mediation-related discussions, my father focused on logic while my needs were emotional. We could not meet each other in these differing languages. He needed me to be businesslike and I needed him to be deeply empathetic. I was afraid of the loss of the emotional connection to my father while he was afraid of the loss of financial control. (I believe that we both had deeper needs and fears underlying our concerns, but this is how they presented themselves.) This is not an unfamiliar story line distinction between men and women.

The reclamation of my empowered voice coincided with the loss of my father's approval. This was a profoundly painful experience, as significant change tends to be. I began to understand why I had been avoiding this journey for so many years. He was the 'other' I had always wanted to please most. Who would I be without his approval? The tension of my shifting voice shows up in my journal entry two days before the mediation:

I've never let myself get this dark before. It's scary. Feelings of 'how am I going to live my life without dad'...focus on the fact that he may be incredibly angry now – actually, change that – shift my focus to my anger, not his...I'm so sick of walking around feeling like everything is my fault (Journal, February 12, 1997).

I was uncomfortable in my newly found anger. And yet I was beginning to understand its purpose and its blocks through my coursework at school. The mediation gave me a real-life experience to apply my learning. As the dam to my
'negative' feelings opened, it all came flooding out into my consciousness – the anger, the hurt and the fear.

It was the anger that made me the most uncomfortable. I didn't know how to express it. I wanted to run away from it. It showed up in my journal entries, "I feel angry that he was choosing to spend only a few hours with me.... Once it came to getting together to discuss his need for his retirement, he had all the time in the world for me – that really pisses me off.... I feel angry about his first offer" (Journals, January, 1997). Feeling these emotions was an important step in accessing my empowered voice.

Although I feared the loss of another parent, when it came down to a choice between being true to myself or acting in accordance with my father's approval, I chose me. The risk of losing myself felt greater than the risk of losing him. That was a new experience.

Living out what feels right for me, even if it's not what others want, has been a transformational experience for me...having spent most of my life attempting to please others and most especially you, to be presented with this experience in which what I thought was right opposed what you thought was right, was the most difficult experience I've had in life to date (Draft letter to Dad, July 24, 1998).

I was not being a 'good girl' anymore. I was not behaving 'appropriately' or keeping a 'stiff upper lip.' I was messy and vulnerable and feeling quite dark. I was moving away from my need to 'please others.' As Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) state,

When their social arrangements collapse and demands for change are imposed many women must look inward for self-truths, abandoning the notion that they can and should rely on others for knowledge, direction and care (p. 51).

I was starting the process of defining myself according to me.

It was a shift from my externally-oriented perspective on knowledge (received knowing), to subjective knowledge in my truth, seen as personal, private and
subjectively known (Belenky et al., 1986). Although the source of truth shifted, it continued to be dualistic in nature as I believed there were 'right' answers — but this time they came from within me. This shift to subjective thinking was a necessary step for me. After years of focusing on other people's perspectives, I needed to swing the pendulum over to the other side. To give myself voice I needed to see my father's perspective as 'wrong' for a while. It helped to fuel my anger, which I so desperately needed in the discovery of my own voice.

Although I had taken a step towards myself, I had also stepped away from my father. And I needed to grieve this loss. (My changing relationship with sorrow has helped with that.) I can still see the image of his wounded face the day of the mediation. It was an image that destroyed me on some level. And I realize that it's the same face I saw in my mother's hospital room when I was a teenager and at my grandmother's funeral years later. Nobody ever wants to see their loved ones hurting that much. Not ever.

I recall this time as one of my first experiences with authentic anger and sadness. I could not hide from the darkness that this event brought on. To run from my anger and sorrow would have been out of sync with my focus on looking within. It would have been inconsistent with my interest in opening to such 'inappropriate' emotions. Although it plunged me into vast pain, I was ready to let go of my need to please others, in the name of listening to my own empowered voice.

A dear friend created a painting (see Figure 10 – Stripping Away) that tapped into this phase of my transformation. To me this piece exemplifies the joy and pain involved in stripping away the layers that kept me hidden from myself. Just as there is darkness in the letting go of old protective layers, so too is there light in the revealing of my essence. As I strip away dimensions of myself that are not tapped into my own voice, I am left with an acceptance and expression of my
authentic self. It is in these bright spaces that I find my empowered voice standing solo.

My Relationship with Music –
The ‘Coincidental’ Openings

In the months surrounding the mediation, I had several ‘coincidental’ musical experiences. I was introduced to a man who was looking for a singer to perform with his band at the Unitarian Congregation. Once he heard I had travelled with Up With People, he decided I was the right person for the gig. (He didn't know that I had skirted around the edges of the performance of Up With People with a shattered musical self-concept.) My newly discovered inner voice guided me towards this opportunity.

The rehearsals were healing. They took me back into the playful communal experience that music can be. I was reminded of the raw pleasure in singing. It was just what I needed as a recovering perfectionist musician. My inner voice of judgement still required a lot airspace in this new context. But I was in a different place in myself this time. I moved in and out of her control – but she lost her sting once her ploy was discovered. As if by design, our first performance was on Father’s Day. The elation of singing led me home to make a peace-offering phone call to my father. That call was the beginning of our healing process.

The other synchronistic experience was an invitation to attend a workshop for women interested in exploring their creativity, developed and facilitated by the interdisciplinary female collective, URGE. A trusted friend suggested we attend the workshop together. She knew that I was reconnecting with both my literal and figurative voice through my Creativity and Wellness course at school. The timing was right.
In the URGE workshop we focussed on learning the full body breath. It was a grounding process that heightened my body awareness to new levels. In this state of blissed-out embodiment, we eventually circled around the piano. When I was asked to sing I felt less fear than old memories would have dictated. Perhaps it was the focus on staying connected to my body rather than making a pretty sound. Perhaps it was the attention paid to allowing my body to take over by releasing my voice on my breath rather than controlling the sound with my head.

The sound that emerged astonished me. It was rich and full and without self-consciousness. What amazed me even more was that my focus was not limited to the sound itself. I was experiencing the blissed-out state of fully being in my body and my voice at the same time. It reminded me of the seven-year-old me that would get lost in play, immersed in song losing all track of time in the name of pleasure. I wanted to continue exploring this voice and arranged to begin singing lessons.

So What?

On the road to reclaiming my empowered voice I learned the importance of understanding the contexts in which I lived. As I uncovered the 'truths' of these contexts, I was able to deconstruct their impact on my development. I began to reconnect with my body and dark feelings in light of these understandings. And there was tremendous forgiveness that emerged. With the scenes of my life unfurled, I felt a deep compassion for myself. It was this compassion that opened me to my own voice.

Exploring the hierarchical contexts of my life shed light on the dynamics of occasions when I interact with someone I view as more important than me. I was given a firsthand experience with this in the mediation. Through that experience, I learned to speak from my own voice rather than bending my truth in order to
please others. I took back my authority after years of giving it away. I was able to
reflect on myself in the moment, hear the voices of judgement and stay in my
own power. My definition of who I was began to emanate from within me.

I also learned that painful experiences are an inherent part of reclaiming my
voice. As I began to recover my awareness of my body, thoughts and feelings, I
also experienced the pain of the losses that had been held within me. (I wonder
if anybody’s story of transformation excludes the pain of loss?) The enormity of
the grief was one of the reasons I had been avoiding this step for years. And yet
somehow I was ready to take on this task at this particular stage in my adult life.

In the years after the mediation, my father and I began to have some painful but
important discussions. We explored our intentions behind the actions leading up
to the mediation. With that door open, we revealed old stories of hurt and anger.
The pedestal I had put him on was made explicit. My steppmother, who I had
chosen as my scapegoat, was able to hear me and I was able to hear her
worldview. It seems that once you open Pandora’s box-of-pain, it all comes out.

I understand him better now and he sees my story too. I believe that we have all
found forgiveness through this painful process. There is no doubt that mistakes
were made by all of us – none of us were ‘perfect’ in the old sense of the word.
He is perfect in my new sense of the word, as am I. It is the kind of perfection
that emerges from life’s twists and turns. It is beautiful and flawed and motivated
by good intention. And it is very forgiveable.

He is not up on a pedestal anymore. He’s down on the ground next to me. He is
my Dad and I love him. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 4).
Figure 11. Dad and Me
Fifth Movement

The Awakening –
Reclaiming My Voice

1998
Figure 12. The Awakening
As I look back on each turning point there is a bizarre sense that the meaning made and actions taken in each stage somehow prepared me for the next. When my mother had an aneurysm, I learned how to shut down awareness of my body and grief. It was a survival strategy that helped me to continue functioning. When the frenetic pace of my life became too much for my body to handle, my health deteriorated. My body told me to move home and start my journey inwards. Just as I was coming to understand the dynamics of authority and perfection, my relationship with my father dissolved. It is strange how in retrospect, life seems to give us just what we are ready for. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 4).

The Context – Introspection Prepares Me

In August of 1998 I spent two weeks at a cottage with a dear friend. Each morning I sat on the porch in my pajamas looking over the milky-smooth lake. It was there in the sunrise that I reflected on my life and wrote about feminist perspectives of self-esteem. It was an exercise in deconstructing long-held beliefs about my sense of inadequacy – and it was deeply empowering. It was a time of rich conversation, laughter and nourishment all set in a magnificent natural setting. I was more grounded and relaxed than ever. There seemed to

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be a wave of self-acceptance in the air. I was somehow ready for the shift that was to come.

The Experience – September, 1998

It was just a standard business trip to Philadelphia. I was chatting with the shuttle driver as we left the airport grounds and headed downtown to my hotel.

The Accident

We were talking about West Africa, the driver and me, when the swerving began.

I am told that my state of relaxation in that moment was a saving grace. My relaxed and genuine interest in the topic of West Africa precluded any I-can-see-it-coming tension. The swerve jerked us to the right and in one seemingly fluid motion the van tipped over and began to roll. This slow motion roll had a certain gracefulness to it. Perhaps it was the fact that I was rolling in sync with the van, held in relative stillness by my seatbelt. Or maybe it was the grace of walking on the edge of life and death. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 5).

There was even a kind of bliss in this experience – a peacefulness in which my body let go of all tension and gave over to a calm helplessness. My arms instinctively covered my head as I leaned into the roll. I did not scream. It was a timeless out-of-body experience. As Shirley Maclaine as this may sound, I felt held in divine hands. It was an overwhelming full-body sense of "everything is going to be okay. You are not alone." That's one layer of the memory of September 16, 1998.

Some might say this was my encounter with God. Others would say it was simply the effects of shock. I say "all of the above and much, much more."
There were brief surges of terror that punctuated the bliss. They showed up when I focussed on the deafening sounds of smashing metal and glass. I felt it when I saw the driver's head thrashing back and forth. There was no vocal expression of this terror, but rather a kind of shallow breathlessness. It was never a "this is really going to hurt" full-body scream like I'd seen in the movies. I never once thought, "I'm going to die." In fact there wasn't much thinking involved at all.

I lost complete control of my surroundings but somehow I was not consumed by terror. In fact there was a kind of freedom in this loss of power, this letting go of control. It felt like letting go to a divine dance between bliss and terror – an edge where the dark and the light seem to coexist. But it wasn't really coexistence because the bliss held more space. It seemed to softly support the terror, like a soft cushion surrounds a kitten.

One stanza from a poem I wrote after the accident captures this edginess:

Terror in the background
Calm slow motion of the rolling van
Complete helplessness and calm
At the same time
There is no time in that moment suspended.
(See Appendix B – There is No Time in that Moment Suspended)

Perhaps these were my final moments of denying the fullness of my fears. Or maybe they were my first look at letting the fear in and knowing I would survive. This was not an experience with no fear. But it seemed to be more about 'knowing' fear. And not dying from it. This is the message for which I was prepared.

We were talking about West Africa, the driver and me, when the swerving began.
And in an instant it was over. The van was upright on its wheels next to a valley at the edge of the highway. I was conscious, as was the driver. "Hey, things are not too bad. I can feel my legs, my head is in one piece and I am conscious," said the optimistic-me. And then I looked left and caught a glimpse of what used to be my left arm.

Mangled and bleeding, my arm was exposed in all of its layers—flesh, fat, muscle and blood. The grey, opalescent palour of my bone mesmerized me. There were blues, reds, pearls, whites and every colour in between. I was in awe of the magnificence of the internal workings of my arm. And so much blood. Witnessing myself in an almost cold, scientific manner, I neatly folded the flesh into its proper position and tucked the fat back into my lacerated arm. (Shock is undoubtedly a bizarre state.)

And then the pain made its entrance. The scientist in me took leave in that moment and let the cave woman take over in a scream I won't soon forget. How to express this kind of visceral pain in writing? You have undoubtedly experienced something like it. It is the kind of pain that is so all-consuming and in-the-moment that there is no energy for, or focus on, fear. It's not a 'bad' thing when you're in it, because you can't reflect on a notion like 'bad.' You're too busy just being in it.

My mind was on 'numb' as my body took over with screams that were not chosen, they simply erupted. All that existed in those moments was the scream. It was as if I was not physically there, and yet somehow I was more in my body than ever. The pain went straight from my arm and rode out on my voice. My body was finally having its say.

It was between the waves of pain that the fear showed up. Fears of "Is my arm attached to my body right now?" "Will I lose my arm?" "Do I have a spinal injury?" "Will I survive this pain?" appeared between my blood-curdling howls. When I
wasn’t fully immersed in the pain, I was afraid of it – I wondered if I could do it. It was an odd dance between pain and fear – between the present moment and reflective concerns. It seemed somehow natural and well beyond my control. I was living my pain and fear fully for the first time in many, many years.

We were talking about West Africa, the driver and me, when the swerving began.

The first person I saw was the kind man who ran over to me from the side of the highway. I think he was on his way to work. He spoke to me with a calm reassurance. Then the firefighters arrived. I fell for the bald-headed one first. He was the one who wrapped my left arm in gauze while nurturing me with his voice. I experienced him as a grounded soul in a smiling face of levity. I was in awe of these caretakers with such a clear focus on easing my pain, both physical and emotional. My angels had arrived.

There was a voice that showed up in response to the firefighters’ arrival and the intensity of the pain. The voice said, "Flirt. Definitely flirt." The shift to flirtation was as seamless as the accident itself – like breathing. It came as instinctively as the need to scream out my pain.

"Can I touch your beautiful bald head?" I said to the gauze-wrapper. He exchanged a look of surprise with his colleague and willingly obliged. (It was a beautiful head.) The flirtation continued when another firefighter laid my head on his lap as we waited for the ambulance. The beauty of his eyes rested in their kindness. "You have the most beautiful gold flecks in your eyes," I said. He blushed. (That just made me want to flirt more.)

These were genuine feelings that emerged from my attraction to these human beings who accompanied me in my pain and fear. It might have been the first
time I accepted the sexuality of flirtation as a natural and beautiful form of human expression. There was nothing phony or manipulative about it. It was a delightfully honest connection between a woman with her arm cut in half and her caring rescuers.

The other voice amidst the pain and flirtation said: "Be assertive. Take care of what you need." She was a new voice on the block. Neither selfish nor pushy, she focused on unadulterated self-care. She told them what she needed with an assertive tone. Beyond the need for medical attention, she needed to form a connection with those around her. This need to reach out seemed just as instinctive as the physical demands. In times of crisis, and in fact at all times, relationship matters. It is deeply instinctual.

I asked every one of them, "Who are you?" They told me their stories, each in their own way. I learned about wives and children and pets. And they teased each other the way that boys do. I cherish the distraction they gave me in those moments. We talked and we waited while the ambulance was stuck in traffic on that hot Philadelphia highway.

A wave of relief came with the sound of the siren. The ambulance finally arrived. The medics' job descriptions were clear: #1 talks to the patient; #2 deals with the medical issues. My needs were different. The assertive inquiry continued. I learned about #1, and then I wanted to know #2 — the guy hooking me up to the bag. "Hey, you, what's your name. Get down here and tell me who you are. I need to know who you are! Do you have morphine for me?" He was taken aback by this lack of procedure. But he squatted beside me and looked me square in the eyes. (It was the kind of look that lets you know that everything is going to be okay.) He explained that I couldn't have morphine until after my CAT Scan. Then he told me his story too.
I don't remember the medics' names but I do remember the warming sound of a Southern drawl. They empowered me with information about what to expect, when it would hurt, and how long it would take. And I remember the feeling. It was flirtation and fear all wrapped up in the sense of unconditional love for my caretakers.

The dance between bliss and pain continued for the ambulance ride:

- Bliss to be out of the hot Philadelphia sun.
- Pain searing my arm as we drove over the bumps.
- Bliss to be in the care of the angel-medics.
- Pain throbbing in my arm triggering fear of the future.
- Bliss to be alive.

We were talking about West Africa, the driver and me, when the swerving began.

Ten minutes or ten hours later (I'm not sure which), we arrived at the hospital. I was wheeled to the emergency room where my mood shifted from flirtatious assertion to full-fledged rage. "Why the HELL won't these people give me morphine. Why the HELL are they lifting my arm in 14 directions to take x-rays? Can't they see my arm is hanging wide open??" the angry-me thought. This voice knew that I needed protection. The cave woman instincts were lashing out in defense – searching for relief from the pain. "I don't need a fucking CAT Scan, I need MORPHINE! HELLO! PEOPLE! I'M IN A LOT OF PAIN AND I WANT MORPHINE!" (My fingers pound on the keyboard as I type my recollection of this feeling.)

And yet these words were never delivered with such rage. I had no idea what to do with such an unprecedented level of dark emotion. The feeling emerged instinctively and yet its expression was still a scary proposition. The anger rode
out on my screams of pain but not directly in my words. So I spoke from the visible peak of my iceberg of anger: "I really need morphine." But most of my rage was still underwater churning within me. This tension between awareness and expression of rage was the beginning of my visceral rebirthing of anger.

The anger shifted as a wave of pain subsided. A sweet intern assigned to 'keep the patient calm,' looked down at me with his boyish nervousness. 'Who are you?' I said. The flirt was back in the room. The beads of sweat on his forehead showed his discomfort. That just made him more endearing. He was Southern too.

These shifts between rage and pain and flirtation continued through all of my medical tests. As the pain intensified, my anger seeped through more and more. It continued until the waves of morphine release finally floated me into peaceful oblivion.

We were talking about West Africa, the driver and me, when the swerving began.

Later that day I awoke in my hospital room after my surgery. The morphine haze was accompanied by intense nausea. It was a nausea that peaked as my clients arrived. I vomited as if to greet them. (I'd reached a new level of authenticity with my clients after all.) The only other details I recall are hands with long red nails giving me a Philadelphia T-shirt and a teddy bear. I chuckled at the notion of wearing that T-shirt to commemorate my trip. These are just some of my morphine memories.

My hospital room soon became known as the 'love zone.' It was a name that was well-deserved. The energy in that room held the kindness and caring of unconditional love. Just as love does, it held the levity of humour amidst the
weight of pain. It was a safe haven for me to be exactly who I was in each changing moment. I felt like an infant receiving the care that all babies should.

I think the love zone first began between the nurses and me. One nurse in particular exemplified these great healers. She always checked on me, even when she was not assigned to my care. Pre-op, post-op, she always made contact. There was a directness in her gaze and she didn't make things sound better than they really were for the sake of painting a 'happy' picture. She spoke with me, not at me, resting her hand on me for reassurance. I appreciated her ability to laugh and be fully present when I know she was stretched in many directions. When the pain took me over she responded with care. And she always remembered my name (see Appendix C - She Always Remembers My Name).

The essence of the feeling in my hospital room was warm and safe. The centre of that feeling was in me. I felt a new kind of love towards myself and was encircled by love in connection with others. It was a groundedness that seemed to replace my fear of being alone for the first time. I was finally forced to stop in my tracks. I could no longer keep busy and run away from myself.

Two of my dearest friends arrived the next day. And the following day, in walked my sister. With them, the love zone expanded. I recall my surgeon coming into the room to a scene of them stroking my hair and rubbing my feet with peppermint foot lotion. He began to tell me about the prognosis for my arm and then stopped himself. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be telling you all of this in front of other people. I should have asked them to leave." And the line that will stay with me forever: "It's just that you all seem so...close."

He was right. We were like family – or at least one that has a deeply authentic and loving connection. 'Close' is not the word I would choose to describe the unconditional love I felt in that room. 'Spacious' is more how I experienced it. I
felt free and open to be myself. (It's amazing how sharing basic bodily functions amidst an emotional roller coaster will do that to you.) They sat with me through my rising fears about the future of my arm. And they shared the jarring experience of having to recollect the accident scene to a photo-taking lawyer. It was a highly intimate experience.

If there were words to express the gratitude I feel, I would write them here. But there aren't. I'm still searching.

I recollect the faces:

My sister's face. It's the face that tells me I'm unconditionally loved, the one that is trying to hide her worry and concern (her version of the stiff upper lip);
The face of my friend's two-year old daughter. Her open hearted curiosity comforted me;
My friend's face of laughter and fatigue as I tried to identify the image in a painting through my morphine haze;
My partner's face never leaving. He was there when I fell asleep and when I woke to the pain. Even in the brief moments when he wasn't in my hospital room he never left me alone. That's how I remember it.

I was not alone. I was never alone. Or perhaps it was that in the centre of this love zone, I never felt lonely. I felt only compassion and love for myself and others.

Physiotherapy
When the morphine haze of the hospital was behind me, I began adjusting to my new life at home. Not only was I now incapable of taking care of my mother's needs, I could barely manage my own. And I started the ritual of daily physiotherapy. It was a process that forced me to recognize the extent of my disability. I could no longer deny that I needed to rebuild every muscle in my
arm. And nobody knew how much mobility or strength I would regain. The work and pain that lay ahead of me was daunting. I thought that the hard part of this ordeal was the accident itself. I was mistaken.

Who knew that the glow of celebrating my 'saved' arm would fade so quickly in the shadow of the rehabilitation process? The only movement I had was in two fingers. I could wiggle them up and down two centimetres. The rest of my muscles were either riddled in scar tissue or starting to atrophy. My brachioradialis, the big meaty muscle of the forearm, had been severed down to the bone. One scar stretched from just above my wrist up the whole length of my arm. There was a triangular scar on my forearm – a focal point of pain – that came to be known to me as 'The Bermuda Triangle.' Another scar ran from the top of my shoulder around to the back of my armpit. There was a small chunk of Philadelphia highway in the back of my upper arm, kind of like a memento from a trip.

I spent hours each day rolling Plasticine and trying to squeeze a ball – a bizarre reversion to my childhood pastimes. And my vocabulary expanded as I learned what I could no longer do – pronation, supination, flexion and extension. My respect for the mechanics of the arm expanded. I was astonished when sweat formed on my brow as I strained to lift a finger. It seemed that my arm resisted this motion. It recoiled as if to protect itself – such a natural response to the trauma of the injury.

When my physiotherapist began straightening out my arm for the first time, a fully embodied sound emerged. "FUUUUUUUCK!" I screamed into his face – one that was clearly uncomfortable with such a voluminous expression of pain. My eyes were riveted on the second hand of his stopwatch. It was the longest 15 seconds ever. When the second hand hit zero, I rested in relief, then took another breath in and began the cycle again. "AAAAAAAAAGH!" The cave
woman screamed in response to the pain. I had never felt such a consuming pain before – such a resistance to the opening.

"Did you take your pain killers?" was the question in response to my 'excessive' expression of pain. "Yes, it's just that it still hurts and I don't want to be 'strong' today," said the sarcastic-angry-me. The session continued as my physiotherapist became more and more comfortable with my howling. (He could see that it was helping my progress.)

Rage was the feeling that dominated during the howling. At first, it was rage directed towards my physiotherapist. "How dare you inflict this pain on me!" the angry-wounded me would think. I would pull my arm away from my therapist like the sulking child I used to be (and still am), as if to say, "don't touch me you mean person!" And then the anger would shift to a more general sense of rage, towards nothing in particular and everything in general. It was a hot-headed scream that arched my back and made me yowl.

As Fischer (1999) says,

> When we begin to tune into the emotion in our muscles and tissues, it is possible to feel all the parts of our body recoiling from something in fear...This deeply physical quality of emotions is part of the reason why making sounds – singing, wailing, deep sobbing – is an important part of emotional release (p. 29).

And the emotional release was a shared experience. With the torture session over and the 'privacy' curtain pulled back, the woman with the chewed-up leg propped herself up and said, "Wow, that was good." We talked about our injuries and our journey with pain. We discussed the tremendous release involved in authentically vocalizing it. And we laughed about the disapproving looks we had noticed from some of the staff and patients. It was clear to both of us that not only did screaming improve our progress but it also felt cleansing somehow. It was an honest release of feelings in the moment. Giving voice to the pain made it more manageable – a kind of letting go.
I would feel desperate sadness amidst the scream on some days. It was the hopelessness of depression filtering into my physiotherapy experience. "What's the point. I think it's actually getting worse, not better. What's the point."
Sometimes I just needed to weep after one of our sessions. It was usually when the recovery of my arm had actually regressed in some way, or when the darkness of other people's stories would bring me down. There was a lot of pain held in that one room. But it always felt better to let it out on my scream.

Although a counterintuitive concept to a stiff-upper-lip woman, I was experiencing the benefits of expressing my pain. My arm was improving more quickly than others. This is not to say that it was an easy experience. The pain-avoider kept pulling me back to the 'good girl' I had once been who doesn't make such messy scenes. But I could not deny that vocalizing my pain was helping me heal, both physically and psychologically. So I struck a balance. Sometimes my voice needed a raw expression of pain and other times it assertively said, "that's enough now let's take some pain killers."

Nobody can feel her pain all of the time. In fact I believe that limits healing. There's a balance between fully experiencing pain and taking breaks. It's almost like recharging a battery. Some time in safety and comfort helps build up the energy to go back into the dark corners of pain. It's a very different experience from pain avoidance because it's a conscious choice.

Physiotherapy gave me this opportunity. At home every day, I breathed into my belly and exhaled as I tried to stretch into my arm. I tried to turn my hand over and found myself consumed by the pain. Breathing and stretching the tears arrived, sometimes unexpectedly. It seems I was so in the pain that I could not be in anything else. Similar to my experience in the accident, my body seemed to be in charge. This immersion in pain was somehow meditative. It held the timelessness of fully 'being' in something.
In my home physiotherapy sessions, my exhalations began to naturally include sound. It was a dark, windy sound that expressed my woundedness. The only effort involved in releasing these sounds was to let go of my inner voice of judgement who told me to 'be strong'. It seemed in fact, that it required more effort to withhold this dark sound. It was like getting out of my own way to let my body and feelings heal themselves. When I expressed my feelings vocally alongside the pain, my emotional state following the session was improved. That was good for everyone.

Sometimes thoughts would show up, taking me out of the moment. They were too stubborn to float by. "I'm SICK of this pain. Will it never end? Will my life always be so desperately painful??" Then there was a brief interlude of self-pity and some sobbing from my clenched jaw of rage. Then I would come back to the breath and voice, using my stubborn energy to focus on the goal of regaining the use of my arm.

And so the opening of my voice became deeply entwined with the journey of my physical recovery. It helped me to connect with grief and rage through my body, which in turn enabled me to deconstruct notions of emotion as 'good' or 'bad.' With this newfound respect for the natural release of sound and emotion, I took back my power through the discovery of my voice.

Reflections on Embodied Pain

On September 16, 1998, I was in a car accident that gave me an embodied experience with pain. It opened me up, both literally and figuratively. Through the pain of my lacerated arm, I dropped down into my body and moved out of my head and its daily judgements of 'good' and 'bad.' There in my body I found access to the most fundamental human awareness' and insights. I operated from an instinctual place of basic survival and was therefore open to the feeling
and expression of embodied pain, sorrow, anger and fear. And I felt the innocent bliss of a child as I wallowed in the love that surrounded me.

My inner voice of judgement, who edited my voice in the name of 'appropriateness,' did not make sense in this place of basic human instinct. In the face of unconditional love and enormous physical pain, why would I edit my thoughts and feelings? It seemed there was little choice. My injured arm gave me a direct link into my pain. The door to my body, and many other layers of myself, was opened. I just needed to walk through it, with a little help from my friends.

And so my physical and emotional recovery became my primary focus. It seemed impossible to do one without the other. They were fully integrated. Physiotherapy took me into my body, stretching both my arm and my notion of how much pain is bearable. It enabled me to voice newfound emotions. Psychotherapy focused on my emotional healing within the discovery and expression of my own pain and power. This shift in my empowered voice helped with my physical healing. The emergence of my pain was a difficult and sometimes-terrifying experience. My healers gave me spaces of safety within which to do this work. For that I will always be grateful.

From a practical standpoint, it seemed that the goals of my recovery could not be achieved if I held on to my old 'rules to live by.' It no longer made sense to withhold my sorrow or rage with a 'stiff upper lip.' I could not heal myself if I 'gave unto others and not unto myself.' It didn't serve me to push my body in the name of my old version of 'perfection.' (Besides, I no longer had the physical capacity to accomplish my former standards of 'perfection.') My view of the so-called 'truth' began to shift.

My former 'rules to live by' were:
- **Feelings**: There are feelings that are good and some that are bad. Anger is bad. You can express some sadness since you are a girl but don’t let it get messy. (Remember, “All things work together for good” so don’t focus on the negative.)

- **Body**: Your body is meant to help you win. If it does not perform as you wish, push harder. It should look pretty for others but not so pretty that you engage in sex. That is bad. God lives up in the sky, not in your body.

- **Authority**: Other people know what’s best for you. They define what is ‘good’ and ‘bad.’ You need someone else to take care of you. (Read: ‘Find a husband.’) Listen to what ‘important’ people say. Focus your energy on ‘pleasing others.’

- **Dualistic Judgement**: There is ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, and you’d better get it right. Striving hard to be perfect is good.

- **Music and Singing**: Music is about using your head to get it ‘right.’ (Other people judge what ‘right’ means.)

I no longer hold ‘rules to live by,’ but rather choose ‘guidelines for now.’ (I’m aware that these might change as I make new meaning in my life.) The letting go of my former rules marks a healing shift to a greater sense of empowered voice:

- **Feelings**: Anger and sadness are a natural part of the human experience. They are guides for my own protection and well being. They tell me who I am. There are no ‘bad’ feelings.

- **Body**: My body is sacred and it’s mine. It tells me what it needs and leads me to all of my feelings. My sexuality is a beautiful energy. It is healthy and good.

- **Authority**: I can take care of myself. I define myself. It serves everyone if I focus on pleasing myself.

- **Integrated Forgiveness – A Compassionate Holding of Paradox**: ‘Good’ and ‘bad’ are relative terms defined by the values of the user. We all have dark and light within us. Using ‘good’ and ‘bad’ as defining labels only
restricts access to my empowered voice. 'Perfection' includes all of my flaws and boundaries. This requires forgiveness and compassion towards myself. My authentic self in the moment is perfection.

- **Music and Singing:** My body, heart and head are integrated when I am engaged in singing. This place of integration is healing for me. It is more about pleasure and release than it is about control and getting it 'right.'

  **My Relationship with Music – Forgiveness through Singing**

This shift in my 'rules to live by' was mirrored through the journey back to the singer in me. In fact, the exploration of my singing voice was one of the cornerstones of this awakening to my empowered voice. Through this process, I have reconnected with my body and so-called 'dark' emotions held there. It has enabled me to witness my judgement and constriction around the arrival of sorrow and rage, and then gently let go into a natural release of these emotions. In the context of my shifting view of authority from external to internal, this authentic expression has brought me to a new sense of forgiveness and love for myself.

The line between healing my literal singing voice and the more figurative empowered voice is difficult to distinguish. My experiences with singing gave me a direct link to the physical and emotional dimensions of my empowered voice – which was exactly the place where reconnection was so badly needed. As Newham (1999) says, “Working on the vocal instrument does not only nurture the sonorous power of the acoustic voice, it releases the soulful power of our psychological voice and increases the sound of our presence in the world” (p. 10).

The car accident turned my whole world upside down, both literally and figuratively. It was no coincidence that it was also time to recreate my relationship with music. It had always been a matter of the head; now it was time
to move it into my heart. I had always let an authority outside of me judge whether my performance was 'right' or 'wrong.' Now I wanted to let go of this dualistic perspective of music and take back my power in self-forgiveness.

The Embodied Voice – The Roy Hart Theatre

My voice teacher’s work grew out of the principles and techniques of the Roy Hart Theatre. This school of thought originated in the work of Alfred Wolfsohn, a man whose vocal investigations looked at the value of ‘unacceptable’ human sound. The dogma about ‘acceptable’ sound at the time included the notion that every human being has a voice register that covers no more than two octaves. He discovered that, as is the case with many dimensions of the human experience, when artificial restrictions are let go, the natural human voice is able to go much further (Weiser, 1955). (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 3).

Wolfsohn, like many First World War veterans, suffered from the pain of shell shock and the guilt of leaving a comrade who did not survive. Although he knew he would have lost his life in any attempt to save his comrade, Wolfsohn could not exorcise his memory of the wounded soldier’s screams. Physicians and psychiatrists alike had been unsuccessful at treating his condition. Integrating his work with vocal exploration, Wolfsohn tried to cure himself by reproducing his comrade’s screams. It was in this vocal release that he finally let go of his pain. “What Wolfsohn discovered was that making audible these hidden or wounded areas of his soul actually led him to the inner healing he sought” (Kalo, Whiteside & Midderigh, p. 187).

When Wolfsohn died, Roy Hart took over a core group of his students. He was interested in looking at the relationship between actors and their personal lives. He expanded his mentor’s therapeutic vocal research to include artistic expression and performance. He explored the notion that every person has the potential to sing eight octaves, and looked specifically at the importance of integrating one’s life experiences into the process. As Kalo, Whiteside and
Midderigh (1997) point out, "They began to speak of 'living the voice,' the notion that if only all possible human feelings can be expressed vocally, without judgement, one can live consciously without being controlled by one's own feelings" (p. 189, 190).

It is this exploration of embodied feeling, the reconnection of the conscious with the unconscious that drew me into this voice work. Embodied voice work is just that – in the body. My car accident was a deeply physical opening. I was given a direct pass into my body. Reconnecting with my body through voice work flowed naturally from this state. It seemed there was little choice. My car accident was also a deeply emotional opening. It showed me the way to my sorrow and rage. And they all rode out on the 'unacceptable' sounds in my voice work. It was a synchronous trip to my empowered voice. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 3).

The Embodied Breath

I decided to cancel my voice lessons after my accident. My injuries demanded that I lie down and elevate so how could I possibly sing? My teacher responded to the cancellation with an invitation: "You could keep your arm elevated on pillows and sing lying on a mat. Can you take a cab over here?" And with this creative idea the membership of my post-accident healing team increased by one. My journey with singing was about to take a deep turn inwards.

When I began my 'horizontal voice lessons,' usually I was either experiencing pain or was slightly spaced out on medication. In our initial sessions, my teacher demonstrated the subtle wavelike motion of her body when immersed in a full body breath. I witnessed her belly rising up as she inhaled and dropping down towards her spine as she released the air with an exhalation. There was a fluidity throughout her body. As I tried it myself, the subtle movements of the body were difficult to feel at first. For many sessions, we focussed only on this
awareness of body and breath. Any sound that came out was a secondary consideration.

Sometimes I felt confused by instructions like “relax your pelvic floor and your anus as you exhale.” Not only did the British girl in me feel embarrassed but also I could not really feel my body below the belly button. The pain in my arm contrasted with these blocks of non-feeling connection. It was as if the high awareness of arm pain helped me to notice my lack-of-awareness of any feeling ‘down there.’ Having spent years actively shutting off awareness of my body, breathing back into it was a new and scary feeling. It was a gradual process in which I needed to declare my limits in order to take care of myself.

As I became more familiar with this experience and really let go into my breath, it felt like melting into my own body. Without ever trying, sound eventually began to emerge. It sounded like a primitive cave woman or a dark windy tunnel. It was an animal sound riding on top of my breath. The strangeness of the sound left me feeling a bit embarrassed and frightened. It was one of the first times I had let my voice release from my body, rather than pushing it out. When the dizziness of this deep breathing experience set in, I rolled over into the fetal position to bring myself back into balance. (It seemed an appropriate position for such a primal sound.)

This was completely different than my former experiences with music. There was no focus on the quality of the note I was singing. The sounds did not need to resemble anything ‘pretty’ – at least in the traditional sense of the word. Initially it was odd to hear my teacher say ‘good’ in response to the growls and gurgles that emerged. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 3). There was no sense of ‘right’ or ‘wrong,’ but rather a gentle opening to my own natural, embodied voice.

*It is such a release to sing…such a focus on what’s happening in my body (process) as opposed to the sound coming out of me. Seems I just observe what’s happening and enjoy it – doesn’t seem connected to my*
Relaxing my jaw, my tongue, my anus and my vagina and all of my muscles in my pelvis – feels like a real letting go (Journal, January 23, 1999).

Reclaiming My Body and Feelings

There was a synchronicity between the dark emotions evoked through my car accident and physiotherapy, and the release of such feelings involved in embodied singing. Embodied voicework heightens body awareness and whatever feelings may reside therein. It helps to release 'dark emotions' with so-called 'unacceptable' sounds. Given my 'stiff upper lip' history of withheld grief and anger, you can probably guess where this story is going. When I was focussed on the full body breath, my body took over with a wisdom all of its own. It spoke the truth about the emotional world that my clever brain had been dodging for years. I could no longer hide from what it wanted to say. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 1).

Figure 13. Releasing Sorrow Through Song
**Exhaling anger**

In the safety of the space created by my voice teacher and me, I was able to access whatever emotion was there, waiting to be heard. With her help I became conscious of my resistance to accepting these feelings and was able to reframe my notions of 'good' and 'bad' feelings with the idea that emotion just is. It was a shift in my fundamental view of my emotional world. In this acceptance, the process of giving voice to my embodied breath started to become a deeply emotional experience. As I reconnected with my body, sorrow and rage began to make their entrance.

[I'm] clear that exploring my voice has truly tapped me into my very essence...that somehow the sharpness and depth of the pain of my accident took me not only physically deep into my arm but also deep into the rest of my body. My feelings and my voice gave me a place to release the blocks, the pain, the anger – whatever is there when it's there – simply to express is – to give myself voice. That's it (Journal, March 21, 1999).

As my father and I attempted to rebuild our relationship in the aftermath of the mediation, I experienced the messiness and discomfort of anger. In my voice lessons, whatever feeling was there in my life, showed up in my voice. As I breathed into the movement of rotating my pelvis on a large inflated ball, the dark sounds of my voice began to emerge. My mood was there too. It was easy to decipher the feeling embedded in the sound. It was a voice that was dying to get out – a powerful voice that was extremely angry. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 3).

Initially it frightened me, as anything that's been repressed does. To me it was ugly and out of control – the exact reasons for my former avoidance. I felt hot in the cheeks and embarrassed to express such an unseemly feeling. But my teacher showed no signs of discomfort. She encouraged me to go with it. So I closed my eyes and went back in to let out the monster. There was usually a point in my exhalation of rage when the feeling would shift to a deep sense of sorrow, and then it would swing back to anger and so on. Eventually I found the
part of myself that rests in both worlds—a voice softened by sorrow and powered by the fuel of self-protective anger.

In one cathartic voice lesson, I finally let out my anger about being told that my singing voice was too low. "I sang my anger to D.B. for telling me my voice was too low...I sang it once (on a very low note)...and she asked me to sing it again but more beautifully—it changed everything—I took my power back into myself and was still angry—it sounded beautiful" (Journal, January 7, 1998). I began to make the distinction between anger that gives away my energy, and that which holds it as my own. This was an important shift in my acceptance of anger as a dimension of my empowered voice. It was the difference between anger that is unacceptable and 'bad' and anger that is beautiful and founded on self-acceptance.

At a workshop several months later, when my teacher and I were at a new level of comfort in our friendship, I got another glimpse into my healthy anger. As I stretched myself into the upper dimensions of my range, I began to run out of steam. My teacher seized the opportunity and began to playfully taunt me. After each note I sang she said, "I don't believe you," in a teasing childlike way. Even though I know her intention was loving, her tone still tapped right into my anger. With more freedom and power in my newfound rage, I let the energy flow right into my voice. I was able to stretch my range well above my former limits that night. I was a pissed off soprano for the first time and it was exhilarating. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 3).

It was a powerful lesson about the fact that, like every other emotion, anger is simply a life-giving force. To judge it is simply to block it with resistance and deny myself of its energy. I began to see that when I judged the arrival of my anger, so too did I clench my body in response to the judgement. This limited my access to my literal and figurative voice. When I opened the door to the release of my anger by moving out of my judgement and into my body and feelings, so
too did my body respond with openness and power. I could now choose between blocking the energy of anger or opening to it and then letting it go. This awareness helped me to let go into a more powerful release in singing, and it showed me the healing power of feeling my anger.

I began to feel and release my anger in many different realms. Some of my anger felt very, very old. As I wrote about my experience in the medical system, I experienced the fullness of my rage.

*I'm whacking away at the keys again. Enraged by how I was treated by Dr. G... enraged that there is no systemic support for moments of diagnosis like that...enraged that language creates distance between doctor and patient, with the doctor always having the power – after all it is their language not mine! So I want to ask the questions I could not ask then: WHAT THE F**K ARE LESIONS? WHAT DO YOU REALLY THINK IS GOING ON HERE? I WANT MORE INFORMATION. WHERE CAN I GET SOME EMOTIONAL SUPPORT??! (Journal, October 6, 2000)*

As I typed this, the feeling of release was enormous. Even with the doctor thousands of miles away, I took back the power I had given away. It wasn't about him after all. It was about letting out what I was truly feeling and then being able to let it go. I owned my part in this oppressive relationship and let my empowered voice speak out.

I used to believe that I didn't get angry – that it just wasn't part of my make-up. The paradox in this belief is that because I was still holding onto it, I was angrier than most people. Years of sulking had gone unexpressed. "If we are inwardly sulking...the anger will intensify" (Fischer, 1999, p. 24). As long as we deny the feelings we don't want to face, we cannot let go of them. In Branden's (1994) words, "when we fully experience and accept negative feelings, we are able to let go of them" (p. 92). (Note: I would reword this by shifting the dualistic idea of anger as a 'negative' feeling to a more integrated version of anger as a normal part of the human experience with both a yin and a yang.)
It seems to me that anger is there whether we like it or not. It is part of the human experience. It is a built in protection system. It just is. Where we do have control is in the decision to walk towards it by opening ourselves to its signals in our bodies. Then we can feel it and walk through it to the release on the other side of letting go. Without my anger I do not have a voice – I am unprotected and vulnerable to the misuse of others’ power.

As Lerner (1985) says,

Anger is a signal, and one worth listening to. Our anger may be a message that we are being hurt, that our rights are being violated, that our needs or wants are not being adequately met, or simply that something is not right (p. 1).

It is the choice of living a life with awareness of all of our feelings – rather than a life of numbness. It is the choice to feel our lives like children. It is the choice to be fully alive in our awareness of our feelings and body in context, with the acceptance and expression of this authentic self in the world.

**Grief emerges**

To make the shift to my empowered voice, I needed to ‘clear the emotional decks’ by releasing old grief. By holding onto years of unexpressed grief I believe that my awareness of thoughts, feelings and body in the present moment was reduced. How could I be fully aware of myself if part of my energy was tied up in clamping down on my sorrow? I needed to let go of old wounds and open up cleared emotional space to hear my empowered voice.

A critical step in this process was the recognition that I needed to grieve. Since I considered myself to be a ‘crier,’ I was convinced that most of my sorrow had been expressed. I was wrong. Yes, I had more experience with sadness than with anger. Yes, I had done some crying in my time. But grieving from the deep wounds of my life? These losses had gone underground years ago.
I was unfamiliar with the full body wracking sobs of free-flowing grief. And it scared me. But in the safety of my voice lessons, my journey into my body revealed whatever was waiting there for me.

[We] worked with opening up my chest and letting my voice resonate there – we did some work with opening my chest and my sacrum by doing the spinal twist – yoga and voice integrated – focus on my breath and letting out whatever's there – lots of sadness in my sighing – tightness between my shoulder blades and around my sacro iliac (Journal, November 6, 1999).

And the sadness evolved into the grieving of old losses in the comfort of my own home. The grief that went underground almost twenty years earlier was ready to emerge. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 2). Once again, I experienced my feelings in a deeply physical way.

Had an amazing night last night – felt like I hit the core of pain...in the kitchen alone I let the pain of mum's aneurysm in – it felt like glass blades slicing me in half in my belly – across my midriff at my belly button – a pain that was so embodied... it almost doubled me over and the tears that came – not floods but from a very deep place – felt like a 17-year-old (Journal, November 7, 1999).

I somehow knew that my body was ready to release this deep pain. Or should I say my body knew I was ready. It was time to stop resisting its expression of grief. Just as I learned that being in the pain of my accident did not kill me, so too did I learn that the fear of the pain was worse than its actuality. This understanding combined with the release of sorrow in voicework helped me to let go of my stiff upper lip and finally grieve the loss of my childhood mother. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 2).

The grief then shifted to forgiveness: "I thought 'no wonder I wasn't ready until now, that's a big, dark feeling,' but not as terrifying as I thought - never a sense of 'I will die in this pain' - but aware that that's how it felt at 17" (Journal, November 7, 1999). The acceptance of grief brought with it the forgiveness of the teenager in me – the one who could not take on this level of loss. Alongside this deep understanding of why she had maintained her 'stiff upper lip,' I felt such
tenderness towards her. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 6). What else could she have done after all? She had learned how to behave in difficult situations and had stayed true to her ancestry. It kept her sane. And just as the numbing effect of shock helped me through the car accident, my stiff upper lip might have even kept me alive.

Sorrow is not met with such resistance anymore. It's not that I'm thrilled to be sad. It just doesn't terrify me as it used to. I'm not trying to push it away but rather noticing when it arrives, judgement and all. Then I get out of my own way to let it flow. It feels more like 'being' than 'doing.' And when the darkness gets overwhelming, I try to remember to ask for help in a safe place. I believe that it emerges for a reason — to be felt and expressed without resistance. When it shows up, I try not to stiffen my upper lip but rather choose to reconnect with the little girl who shows up in my singing voice. She is the one who is connected to her body and is unafraid of her sorrow. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 3). I feel the fullness of my sorrow today. The cause somehow seems less relevant than the feeling itself. It's the kind of sadness that seems to actually cut me in half. Tears are always waiting right behind my eyes when I'm in this state. And yet it doesn't hold the hooks of terror as it did before. The deep resistance I used to feel to its presence is not as strong as before. 'Free-flowing sadness' is how I would describe it. I know that it's not going to kill me. It just is (Journal, November 5, 2000).

My resistance to so-called 'dark feelings' was softening.

As I have grieved the loss of my childhood mother and my grandmother, I have come to recognize one of the upsides of feeling this pain. Amidst the deep wracking sobs, (I find the bathtub is a healing place to indulge), I become aware of long-forgotten memories. The grieving of my grandmother presented me with such a gift:

The blessing in the pain is getting to remember her more clearly — the warmth of being enveloped in her breast...her devilish laugh...it is largely due to her kindness that I am able to understand what that term really means — and how I can treat myself the same way (Journal, November 3, 2000).
My experiences with music helped me to witness these paradoxes inherent to feeling my sorrow. Instead of labelling sorrow as 'bad,' I moved to a less judgemental and more integrated view of my emotions – a more integrated view of myself. What I formerly judged as 'bad,' I could now see as a normal part of the human experience. There was a tremendous amount of forgiveness in that shift. Just as I experienced the edge of darkness and light in the rolling of the van, so too was I finding this edge of acceptance in music.

The darkness of these last two weeks has softened and is still with me in a grounding kind of way – doesn't feel desperate – just dark – playing the keyboard, connected with myself and the divine intervention of music, had moments of light and dark almost simultaneously – self-reproach and forgiveness hand-in-hand (Journal, February 18, 2000).

My felt experience within the music seemed to bring forgiveness for my emotional self: "I've always been deeply sensitive, deeply emotional, and it's almost like this experience (car accident and singing experiences), I'm finally giving myself permission to live that way" (Personal writing, March 6, 1999). For there is a natural connection between singing and the tears of grief. As Newham (1999) points out,

There is a culture in Papua New Guinea where the word for crying is also the word for singing...where all songs are rooted in different kinds of crying...when we listen to a singer working from the soul, what we hear is crying made into an art form (p. 99).

There is such acceptance of sorrow in this viewpoint, and in my experience. The acceptance of my emotional world in singing marked a growth in my sense of empowered voice.

In a photograph taken after the accident I see deep sadness in my face, centred in my eyes (see Figure 12 – The Awakening). It gave me great comfort to see the expression of this authentic look of sorrow. There were no masks hiding my truth in this shot. The withheld pain of my puffy face in the 'Stiff Upper Lip' photo was finally releasing through my whole face and body. The tight shoulders of 'happy girl' in the 'It's All in Your Head' shot were finally dropping down into
released sorrow. I see an open authenticity in my post-accident face that reminds me of the seven-year-old on the beach, open to life's experiences in 'Innocent Bliss.'

A friend looked at this post-accident photo and said, “To me, you look very, very peaceful.” I feel such forgiveness and acceptance of what is, in that place of peaceful sorrow.

**Reclaiming my sexual energy**

As my body awareness expanded, so too did my openness to the healing powers of my own sexual energy. (I think it is impossible to reconnect with one’s adult body without integrating one’s sexuality.) As I let go and opened to the rhythms of my body and feelings, my sexual energy emerged as a vital and natural force. This vitality collided with my long-held beliefs about sex.

Like many women of my generation, I had a long history of equating sexuality with the notion of being a ‘bad girl.’ The ‘good’ part about sex, once you were married of course, was that it led to having babies. It had little to do with pleasure. Sex was about pleasing another person and being loved in return. It was all intertwined with my seven-year-old notions of ‘Give Unto Others (Not Unto Thyself).’ It came down to me from many generations before and it was deeply entrenched.

Through my own burgeoning body awareness and pleasure in singing, these beliefs no longer made sense to me. As I deconstructed my need to please others in this embodied context, I learned that my sexuality was actually more about me than anybody else. But I had not yet lived the link between sexuality and my own embodied pleasure. I had not disentangled this dimension of myself from my notions of authority. It was, and sometimes still is, difficult to accept the notion that sexual energy is a beautiful life force that is sacred and that is mine.
My perspective of sexual energy began to shift through the natural flirtation I encountered at the scene of my accident. I experienced my own sexuality as an instinctive response to the arrival of the firefighters. In that edgy place of pain and bliss my sexuality emerged in a healing capacity. How could I associate this feeling with anything ‘bad?’ It was all about authentic expression of what I was truly feeling. That could only be ‘good.’ My singing experiences confirmed this sense of sexual energy as a powerful and beautiful dimension of the human experience. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 5).

And so I was able to do it, and enjoy the bliss of simply being in the flow with the music, and I don't have to block my sexual energy, it can be a part of the music, in fact it must be, to truly bring myself to it, it just is a part of me. It doesn't mean there must be action to go with the energy (Journal, February 18, 2000).

I felt the tension between old and new views of my sexuality in one of my voice lessons. As I stretched in a yogic position my teacher and I explored the upper ranges of my voice – the place of my greatest insecurity. I called this voice ‘church girl’ as it reminded me of my childhood innocence.

[I let] church girl into my connection with my chest and my pelvis...seems wrong on some level – to let church girl be in the same room as her sexuality...still connected to the wind tunnel through my body – very restful and energizing (Journal, February 18, 2000).

'Church girl' evolved into 'cave woman' in my body-centred psychotherapy process. ("Bioenergetics is a therapeutic technique to help a person get back together with his body and to help him enjoy to the fullest degree possible the life of the body...including sexuality" (Lowen, 1975, p. 43)). In the safety of the therapeutic context, a release of anger opened me to the natural connections between my body and my feelings. I moved into the feelings deeply locked inside my body and felt the visceral release.

Unbelievable anger being released...the cave woman who's been 'dissed' came out this week - anger/sexual energy all wrapped up in a huge outburst of rage, always followed by sadness...it's scary but the way I feel when I leave is so released, open (Journal, March 24, 2000).
I experienced the healing dimension of my own sexual energy firsthand, through the reconnection of my body and feelings. Synchronous with the acceptance of anger and sorrow, I also began to see my sexuality as a normal and healing dimension of the human experience. (While I am aware of the link between my heightening awareness of my sexual energy and my sense of empowered voice, I will not explore this connection in depth in this work.)

**Stress and physical health**

As my body awareness expanded, so too did my understanding of the habits I had been using to shut down body consciousness. Just as I opened my eyes to the oppressive contexts that contributed to my body disconnection, I also needed to consider my part in that cycle. As I took back my own authority, I took back what I owned in this cycle of stress. (This balanced approach seemed to help develop my sense of empowered voice.) I looked at my addiction to stress square in the eye and began to understand how it had been serving to keep me externally focused and disconnected from my body.

Stress is defined as, “a condition or adverse circumstances that disturbs, or is likely to disturb, the normal physiological or psychological functioning of an individual” (Canadian Oxford Dictionary, 1998). Although I question the use of the word ‘normal’ (as if such a state exists), this definition helps me to appreciate that my turning points, and my responses to those events, likely had an impact on my health. With a little bit of forgiveness for the responses I chose, I can look into the links between my stress responses and my physical health without getting stuck in criticism.

The first step of this process involved grieving the loss of many years of embodied experience. In a workshop setting my colleague walked us through a guided imagery exercise. She had us relive our experiences with body awareness at different stages of our lives. I found myself struggling to recollect
my embodied experiences for most of my adult life. I had not been 'in' my body for very long at all.

(I had) big waves of sadness as I realized that I lost my body somewhere along the way – I couldn’t answer the questions about body awareness in my '20s and '30s – but I was very in my body at age 5 – I enjoyed being in my body then... I feel my body now... at least I could answer the questions! (Journal April 30, 2000).

As the years of disembodiment became clear, I considered where I was holding stress. I was (and sometimes still am) withholding my voice through the clenching of my jaw, and disconnecting from my lower body and sexuality by holding in my intestinal tract and pelvis. It’s a cycle that is hard to break, as there is no awareness of the holding because it is not a felt experience. The lack of awareness enables the holding to continue. Nothing needs to change in this numb state.

As I began to let go of the holding in my body through singing, I released blocks to a natural state of relaxation. I let my jaw hang open for the first time in years and discovered my full body breath. The tension dripped away. Resistance to letting go of the numbness is the foundation of stress. And the resistance is based on the fear of letting go. I experienced the stress-free zone of singing.

"There is no stress in this place. Stress is resistance. Self-acceptance is the antithesis of resistance" (Journal, October 2, 2000).

I believe that my experiences with trauma have affected my sense of disembodiment and the chronic conditions that have ensued. (I’m aware that this is not a new idea.) Research shows that catastrophic experiences not only alter our sense of self but also they change our biochemistry (Fischer, 1999). There is no doubt that there are quantum links between the emotional world of memories and its physical manifestations. Moon Joyce (1993) explored this notion in her thesis ‘Singing for our Lives’ when she quotes Deepak Chopra's definition of memory at the cellular level: “What is a cell? If we want true change to happen, we have to recognize what we’re made of. The cell is memory wrapped in
matter" (p. 88). It is not surprising that my cells eventually responded to the poison of painful memories held in the body.

Singing has helped me to let go of the holding by bringing me into more body consciousness. By feeling the blocks and relaxing into an exhalation of voice, I have been able to experience the relaxation of letting go. "If I'm singing, I can't get tense. Not if I'm really in it" (Journal, August 13, 2000). Following a release of voiced emotion, whether through a psychotherapy session, singing or physiotherapy, I felt noticeably lighter and somehow more grounded at the same time. My body was open and relaxed, particularly in the places where I tend to hold on. If I went for an extended time without embodied singing or some other form of release, my intestinal problems flared up. I was beginning to see the connection between stress and my chronic illnesses. "My rectum is the source of my stress, or shall I say that is where my body manifests it" (Journal, Feb. 18, 2000).

My body consciousness started to spill over into my every day. "Whenever I'm stressed, I stop breathing deeply – great awareness" (Journal, August 7, 1999). And it was affecting my sense of myself. "I am much more conscious of the state of my body than in the past. Coming back to the breath sooner. Yoga stretches every day, my body craves it now. I'm aware of my posture. Feeling very attractive these days, that feels good" (Journal, April 1, 2000).

My changing awareness has caused a shift in how my body responds to stress as can be seen in this journal entry. "I stayed more in my body than I think I ever have (facilitating a workshop)....It frightened me to have my self-doubt be here so much today, although my body did not take on the stress of it" (Journal, March 19, 2000). I was beginning to learn that it does not serve me to focus on getting rid of the self-doubt. It is in my own interest to stay in my body while welcoming in doubt, fear and all.
I began to understand my relationship with stress through my heightened body awareness in singing. It is a learning curve that continues to be integrated each day as I reclaim my empowered voice. As I feel the ups and downs of my thoughts, feelings and body in the context of stress, I empower myself with awareness and understanding that is key to finding my physical and emotional health.

Redefining Authority — From Dualistic Judgement to a Compassionate Holding of Paradox

With this newfound access to my body and feelings, I found a new level of honesty with myself. In that place of authenticity, my sense of unworthiness was exposed. It came from that nasty inner voice of judgement that calls me a “big loser.” She had such a cruel tone. It seemed she was trying to cut me off at the knees. It was time to take her down, or at least empower myself with the consciousness of her presence. Now it was time to see that she was part of the reason I had always given away my power.

Through my body-centred therapy work, I was able to access the physical dimensions of years of seeing myself as less worthy than others:

I spent some time in today’s session with my hands creating a line along the top of my chest to experience the shallow breathing I get when I’m doing the dance of looking for a protector, and therefore diminishing myself. The shallow breathing made me aware of the little girl feeling waiting there for me. The sense that the boogie-man is going to come out of the doorway in the ceiling of my closet...Quickly turned to tears of terror, as I felt how weak and vulnerable I am...Need to/want to recognize when I am feeling that pedestal feeling...see how it diminishes me (Journal, October 2, 2000).

I lessened my concerns about the opinions of others on the day of the accident. It was there on the Philadelphia highway that I heard my own voice shouting out what I needed. I was not concerned with pleasing anyone else. That is what crisis brought out in me. The cave woman instincts took charge of the situation
and released my voice of self-protection and authority. For nobody was going to push me around and no one knew what I needed better than me!

This shift of power from external to internal also played out in my singing experiences. “My voice has changed from pushing myself out in the world to one that is more still and smaller, and more focused on resonating inside of me as opposed to worrying so much about what the response is out there to me” (Personal Writing, March 6, 1999).

**Reframing perfection – Facing the voice of judgement**

An important layer of taking back my authority and reclaiming my empowered voice has been deconstructing the notion of ‘perfection.’ I used to think that striving to be ‘perfect’ was a worthwhile goal. I tried to minimize my flaws in the interest of pleasing others. I listened for the applause of my figures of authority up high on their pedestals. I eventually lost access to myself — to that wise voice inside of me that knows who I am. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 4).

Even when I got external approval, my voice of judgement was rarely satisfied. She reminded me of my flaws on a regular basis with an invisibility that secured her power. Without access to my empowered voice, I could not distinguish my voice of judgement as a separate entity. It was all true. I really was imperfect. And striving to be perfect. But perfection is an impossible goal when it stems from a fundamental sense of imperfection.

I used to equate ‘perfection’ with productivity. My competence at work and school contributed to my sense of perfection. These beliefs were so old they were part of my internal wiring. A ‘good’ day on the perfection scale involved a lot of ‘doing’ and ‘accomplishing.’ It had little to do with just being myself. In fact it had little to do with me at all. It was an external ideal that I built up in my head.
In the months after my car accident, my notion of 'perfection' shifted. In fact there was no chance that it could stay the same. It was no longer an option to be 'productive' in my old sense of the word. A 'good' day became one in which I would get out of bed. A 'good' day included concentrating hard enough to move my finger one more degree. I was not a consultant or a student anymore. I could not give to others and in fact, I could barely give to myself. All of my measures of success had to shift.

I had an instinctual urge to express who I was. It seemed to come in this territory of childhood reconnection. My measures of success were very forgiving here. It didn't matter if it was perfect or not. How could I focus on being perfect in the eyes of others when my journey seemed to be surrounded by unconditional love for me just as I am? I was shifting my dualistic notions of 'good girl' and 'bad girl' in a way that forgave my flaws. It seemed my life was a festival of flaws. And it felt perfect. It was a new kind of perfection that seemed so right, somehow so real. It was painful and messy and extremely uncomfortable. But it was authentically me. I finally exhaled my need to please others and reclaimed my voice.

My workaholic tendencies could not continue anymore. I had a built-in warning system in my left arm. 'Sally' (my affectionate term for my left arm) would monitor my tendencies to regress to old ways. I would push myself too far on some days. Old habits die hard after all. Then the throbbing would start at the base of my shoulder blade and continue down into the searing knife in my forearm. The message was clear: "YOU MUST ELEVATE ME NOW OH PERFECTION QUEEN!" So back into my body I would go. I'd let go a breath and tune into myself. After years of pushing, it was finally time to rest.

*My body tells me once again, "Excuse me can we please slow down a bit missy?" and slowly the realization of my limitations is upon me. Searing in vulnerability on some level. And blissfully restful. A warning system that gently prods, "sweetie, can we just listen to each other and we can all just get along! LIE DOWN... Let the judgement go free" (Journal, May 23, 2000).*
It was more difficult to accept my ‘flawed and authentic’ definition of perfection in the realm of music. My need to be perfect still had very sharp claws when let loose on the singer. (Change is always harder in the vulnerable spots.) The notion of “if you’re going to do it at all, do it right” dictated my singing experiences. There was never any permission to be a beginner or to learn from my mistakes.

I judged most of the sounds that I made. ‘Yuk.’ They were nowhere close to ‘perfect.’ My music teachers had told me for years what beautiful music was supposed to sound like, and this was definitely not it. There were pops and squeaks and gutteral groans. The seeping emotion brought forth a sound that made me blush. In my world, this was flawed and needed to be changed.

But there was no external critic in my voice teacher, and I trusted her implicitly. In this place of safety, I expressed my harsh judgement of myself. And she helped me to reframe my thinking about ‘perfect.’ She helped me to see that “the only ‘ugly’ sound is one that is caught inside of a person’s body” (F. Knicker, 2000). And my experience supported this notion. It seemed natural to integrate messy sounds into my new sense of ‘perfection’ when it felt so good to release it. It was beautiful. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 3).

Singing helped me to see that when I give away my power to others and to my voice of judgement, it shows up in my body. This in turn opened me to an empowered voice.

I felt grounded and strong in my voice — really in my body and every time I focussed on his perception of me, or my judgement of myself or anything external to me and my grounded spirit, my neck would strain, my voice would weaken and it felt like a push. Whereas when I was focussed on
opening and relaxing, my voice warmed and it became a joyful almost restful experience (Journal, March 18, 1999).

Reframing perfection – Forgiveness

Heightening my awareness of the voice of judgement was fundamental to reframing ‘perfection,’ and in turn reclaiming my empowered voice. This led to the acceptance, and forgiveness, of my so-called ‘flaws.’ By taking my imperfections under my wing, I was able to love myself back into greater self-acceptance. It was a move from dualistic judgement to integrated forgiveness and it was the cornerstone of taking back my empowered voice.

When the harsh judgement of my so-called ‘flaws’ was exposed, I could see the fear lying underneath. It was the fear of failure – the fear of vulnerability. Sitting in that awareness, I felt only forgiveness – a gentle wave of tenderness towards myself. In the place of forgiveness I am able to be more fully present in each moment. It is one of the rewards for going into the pain of my self-reproach. And boy, is it worth it. My thoughts after my first singing gig reflect my compassion towards and acceptance of myself in my imperfect perfection.

(If it was) a timeless experience that was grounding and lifting at the same time. I sang beautifully – made one mistake, got over it really quickly – such kindness towards myself! I went to a place...that was nervous and calm at the same time, strong and vulnerable – a whole experience – nothing black and white in it! Even felt confident playing my violin – a few mistakes there but didn’t try unrealistically difficult parts – let myself be a beginner! (Journal, November 15, 1999)

Within the natural process of releasing my voice, my focus moved from judgement to forgiveness. How could I judge fear? It is a response that is so innate to the human experience. Judging my own fear would be like criticizing the seven-year-old me who was afraid of the flying monkeys in the Wizard of Oz. She just needed to be comforted and told that everything would be okay. Who could blame her for having learned that something that scared her in the past might scare her again? The voices of judgement were not right. They were no
longer powerful authorities who held the truth about me. They were just frightened children needing (and deserving) to be unconditionally loved.

Singing mirrored this shift from judgement to forgiveness. Embodied in my voice, I found myself letting go of trying to control the outcome. It was like exhaling my voice, and it felt as natural as breathing itself. "To sing is bliss. To let go of every little thing and open to what flows naturally from me – the most natural, intuitive experience...it warms me on the inside – a place in which I finally relax and just be" (Journal, March 19, 1999). I was letting go of the physical blocks to my voice while releasing the debilitating voices of judgement in forgiveness.

Perfection is authenticity
My view of perfection was shifting from an external judge of my worthiness, to being authentic, flaws and all. When I went back to work I felt the tension of this shift.

This feels uncomfortable and new and so vulnerable. I feel exposed and incompetent. Why can't I stop trying and just be myself?...I don't want to screw up. But can I screw up if I'm just being myself? (Journal, March 19, 2000)

I was becoming more aware and accepting of my voice of judgement and in that I found myself more calm and embodied at work. "Stayed more in my body that I think I ever have with a group of women... let the self-doubt come up more now and there's a tail of forgiveness that immediately follows (Journal, March 19, 2000). By listening to my own self-doubt I was able to reveal it's connection to my need to be noticed and loved. Once again, I was able to forgive the childlike need that was driving the critical voice.

I was able to receive feedback in a different way now – especially in safe working relationships. With my self-compassion in the room, the opinions of others did not hold the same power anymore. There was information there that
was worth listening to, but it did not need to destroy me. My need to be perfect had diminished.

*We both openly talked about out impostor syndrome experiences and told each other the times we judged each others words...no hurt feelings...it came from so much love that I don't slam on myself. That's a lot of what yesterday was about for me...embracing the self-doubt with love (Journal, March 20, 2000).*

I don't use the word 'perfection' much anymore. It has too much history for me. Instead I consider 'conscious authenticity' to be my path – the process of accessing my empowered voice – heightening my awareness of my body, feelings and thoughts. When the voice of judgement shows up around my own 'flaws,' I try to let her in too. Once her fears are exposed in the frame of her context, she loses her sting. She is forgiven and I ask her to have a seat. With my vulnerabilities out on the table, I find acceptance and am able to choose to express myself in the world.

I strive to bring myself fully into relationship with others. And being authentic is scary sometimes. I have to stay in my body and continue to breathe. That helps me to stay forgiving in the moment. I can witness my reactions as they occur. It's scary if I'm saying something I think they don't want to hear. Then the cycle begins all over again. The judgement comes in to point out my wickedness. I squirm in discomfort and look for the fear underneath. I search for forgiveness in my breath, trusting that love is built on forgiving relationships with myself and with others. I listen to my empowered voice in my breath. In this empowered voice I find my strength, my strength in vulnerability.
Sixth Movement

So What?
Writing a Personal History
In the process of writing a personal history I expanded my sense of empowered voice. I became more aware of myself – what I think, what I feel and who I am. My thoughts, feelings and body were visible on the page, set in their contexts. I was able to understand myself with such forgiveness with that insight. As Cole and Knowles (2001) describe, "A personal history is an accounting of one's life or segments of one's life written or told for purposes of understanding oneself in relation to a broader context – familial, institutional, societal" (p. 13). By witnessing myself in the many contexts of my life to date, and reflecting on my relationship to these contexts, I understand myself with greater compassion. I guess it is hard to hate someone once you know their story.

Reflexive writing expands awareness of thoughts, feelings and body in context. It is about self-acceptance. And it is undoubtedly about expression. It was, in fact, a fifth turning point in the reclamation of my empowered voice. It is helping me to understand and feel more compassionate towards who I have been and who I am. "I figured out that by writing I can discover new things about who I was in the past and why I was there. I can make more sense out of who I am now because of this. It is so helpful. So forgiving" (Journal, October 17, 2000).
The parallel journey between the content (the turning points themselves) and the process (writing about them) expanded my insights. It was a firsthand experience in living out the very dynamics I was exploring. I was writing about my experience with the embodied journey to grief and anger and my shifting view of authority while living it daily as I wrote my own story.

Some days it seemed I had a split personality with part of me focused on the content and the another on the process. (This is not an unfamiliar dance for a facilitator of learning.) On many occasions I noticed a dynamic in my writing process that shed light on the very issue I was trying to address. When this happened, I quickly shifted over to my journaling document. For example:

As I write this piece about my neurological symptoms I notice myself typing over the descriptive words about a million times...it's like the struggle I've been having for eight years - to get language that accurately describes this experience. Maybe it's time to start my own language (Journal, October 6, 2000).

I used to believe that I was the one to blame for the physician's frustration with my ineffective descriptions. Reflexive writing helped me to see that the English language does not provide words to accurately describe most chronic illnesses. This was an empowering shift that gave me insight into my voiceless tendency to take on blame rather than assert my own needs and perspectives. I reclaimed important layers of my authority in this shift.

I was able to see my own sense of voicelessness by witnessing the way that I framed my reality in writing. My journey with reclaiming authority deepened through this process. As I explored my tendency to put people on pedestals, I saw how I diminished myself in that dynamic. “It's very revealing to consider when I choose a passive verb over an active verb...there's a layer of victim stuff in there...was it done to me or did I choose it? So helpful...” (Journal, October 6, 2000).
On some occasions, I found comic relief as I became aware of the fact that I was sitting right in the very point I was trying to make. "I love it when I'm writing lines like this: 'I recall sitting at our piano for what felt like hours, obsessed as only a true perfectionist can be,' and I get obsessed while trying to correct it...that cracks me up" (Journal, October 22, 2000). I wrote about perfectionism while living it. It was an awareness-building moment.

Some days writing felt more like a curse than a blessing. Just as I captured an experience and its associated epiphanies, more insights would come that would shift my perspective. There is no doubt that so-called 'truth' was in the eye of the beholder but when the beholder's eye kept shifting in light of new meaning, it was overwhelming. Deadlines start to become a joke. "It's hard to do personal history research — my perspective on the past changes every day with new insights — like a constantly moving target — ugh" (Journal, September 12, 2000).

There was a tension between my need to honour the 'moving target' nature of the process and the reality of wanting to complete my thesis. As a teacher in Cole and Knowles (2000) articulates,

The process emerges in its own time frame, which can be difficult for those of us used to establishing time lines or having our lives governed by timelines created by others. Externally imposed timelines serve to hinder and silence the creative process (p. 83).

As I was exploring the nature of forgiveness in the emergence of my voice, it seemed hypocritical to treat myself with cruelty around the deadlines of my writing process. Once again, the exploration of my voice spilled over into my writing. I treated myself with more kindness in that awareness.

I was astonished at the new levels of forgiveness I felt towards myself in writing my own story. Formerly, I felt great disdain for many of my responses to my life's experiences. I thought that my lack of grieving around my M.S. diagnosis was 'bad.' I can see now that any response other than denial would have been out of character and 'inappropriate' based on my surroundings. By writing down the
story in light of its context, I was able to see this dynamic and feel forgiveness. As Holly (1989) states,

As we reexamine our journals, we can become increasingly more self-accepting and less judgmental. Once we see the broader context within which we acted, our behavior makes sense. What might now be viewed as a mistake seemed logical at the time. With self-acceptance comes self-trust (p. 72).

I used to feel embarrassed by the fear I felt in those years – that somehow I should be 'above that.' When I saw the frame around this story, I saw myself in a new light. I no longer felt the disdain for this 'weakness' in myself. "I'm just getting the full effects of the 'possible for M.S.' diagnosis and how justified it was/is to be completely terrified by that. It took writing it down on the page to get me there" (Journal, October 3, 2000). By giving myself permission to feel my fear and rage I was able to reconstruct my current notions of 'acceptable' feelings. Writing helped me to understand and come to know feelings that have been clamped down for a long time.

Writing a Beautiful, Frustrating Web of Interconnectedness

I have always been skilled at making connections between things. It is both a curse and a blessing. It is a blessing in that I see patterns underlying seemingly unrelated dynamics. This can be helpful in understanding concepts that connect experiences and in arriving at systemic solutions to root causes of problems. The curse is in my tendency to get lost in the muck. Everything seems so interconnected that I can become immobilized by its complexity. This dynamic was reflected in my process of writing a personal history piece.

I'm realizing that one of the struggles I'm having with writing is that I want to write about everything. I go on tangents because so many things are interconnected. So many things are interesting (Journal, October 21, 2000).

Oh the frustration of the interconnectedness of it all. Trying to structure 'Innocent Bliss' and finding all my contexts are so intertwined...I get waves
of feeling like my head is going to explode because I get overwhelmed by the amount of possibilities....I get paralyzed (Journal, October 9, 2000).

Once I recognized this tension, I was able to try some techniques to maximize its blessing and minimize its curse. When working on my computer I opened several documents at the same time to capture the tangents that would naturally arise. In my journaling, I began to create columns and shapes on the page to ensure that I did not lose the gold of the interconnection I was seeing. One journal entry is written inside a flower-shape. “Maybe I’ll create wild shapes on the page when I feel like it and give voice to the tangents” (Journal, August 6, 2000).

In an attempt to improve my ability to converge sometimes I resisted the temptation to go on a tangent. With one eye on my purpose statement, I was able to keep myself focused on the main thread of my writing tapestry. When tangents arose, I took a deep breath and make a conscious choice to stay focused on what I was writing in the moment. These were more difficult choices as I derive pleasure from travelling with my tangents. These moments taught me about the value of exploring depth over breadth.

Writing in the Creative Zone of Flow and Resistance

In many ways writing has paralleled my experience with the creative process of singing. When I am able to ‘get out of my own way’ and let it flow in its own natural course, it is an experience with pleasure in the moment. When I try to force it out of me and control it in the shadow of the voice of judgement, it is a painful and difficult process (see Appendix D — The Methodology of Resistance).

*When I went in to edit “Innocent Bliss” I kept thinking that the whole piece needs so much work...energy I cannot find today. And yet I stay fixated on this same goal. I keep trying to push myself into it and the blocks just seem to get bigger.... I’m going to try writing something else and see if things start to roll more (Journal, November 4, 2000).*
And things did start to roll. When I followed my intuitive, body-centred yeaming to head a certain direction, my writing began to flow. When I pushed against this calling, the walls of resistance got bigger. As my journal entry states, "It is not stressful to just let my writing go where it wants to go.... It is stressful to resist where my writing wants to go" (Journal, October 3, 2000).

There is a trust required in writing a personal history that is the cornerstone of being in flow with a creative process. When I sing I have to let go and trust that the song will emerge as it will, even though I don't always know where it is going. The same was true in writing my personal history.

This process is so emergent, I find myself saying, 'I don't even know if this part of my context influenced my discoveries because my discoveries keep emerging the more I write about it!' Just having to trust my gut that says, 'this is connected somehow'...(Journal, October 21, 2000).

I was only able to type for a limited number of hours each day due to the needs of my left arm. I found this frustrating given that I was used to working for many consecutive hours. After a few hours of typing my left arm clearly said, "time to elevate me now!" After much resistance, I would 'give in' and type with only my right hand. It was slow and frustrating.

After a while it became slow and enlightening. There was something about being physically unable to make it come out faster that caused a different kind of reflection. It was almost as if in the impossibility of perfection, I let go of the pressure I was putting on myself to be perfect at all. I am tyin this with one hand now to exoerience it. That's it. I breathe more when I do this because I'm more focused on my body. I'm not usef to where my fingers need to go. It seems that there's no room for my voice of judgement because it is all consumed by the newness of t ypin this way.

i am creating a new language...a language which is completely my own..i type with one hand sothar is the speedat which i type and sometimes i make mistakes and sometimes i don't feel like cganging it so there she
says stomping her feet... i feel really pissed sometimes... it gives me energy (Journal, August 15, 2000)

And in the middle of creating this new language of honest expression, my left arm has a voice all of her own: "Hey, let me in says my left arm... i want some exercise right now... i just do it a bit differently... and not for long but damn it i need a voice" (Journal, August 15, 2000). Writing provides me with a new outlet for emotional and physical dimensions of my empowered voice.

Writing as the Edge of Pleasure and Pain

My car accident was an experience on the crest of the wave of pain and pleasure. I went to this same edge in writing my personal history. It was an edge that I did not feel when the turning points happened. At the time I recoiled in fear, only looking at the layers of pain for which I was prepared. These painful monsters were still hiding in my closet. Writing the stories down on the page helped to let them out, at least the ones I was ready to explore. On the other side of the pain, I experienced something I did not even know had been buried – pleasure.

The exploration of loss around my mother's aneurysm was one of the most powerful examples of experiencing new depths of sorrow. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 2). In return for the pain, I was given the pleasure of long-forgotten memories.

Writing is cathartic for me. I'm having a big, deep cry right now. Feeling the darkness of my feelings when I was a teenager. How I missed her with such a physical pain. How I longed to have her at the edge of my bed one more time. Taking care of me, stroking my hair and being my friend. She was so funny and beautiful. I am being blessed with a full clear memory of her right now. Writing is like surfing. The waves take you up really, really high and then you come crashing down again. Kind of like life (Journal, October 24, 2000).

1 The misspelling of several words in this entry is intentional. It exemplifies my shifting notion of perfection through the results of typing with the use of only one arm.
Living the pain/pleasure paradox through writing my own personal history has helped me in my journey of walking towards pleasure through opening to pain, when it undoubtedly makes its entrance. As Cole and Knowles (2000) state,

The intuitive inquirer will experience exhilaration beyond words and deep levels of frustration; extreme joy and indescribable pain.... The dichotomy of opposites present a challenge to anyone embarking on an intuitive research journey (p. 83).

When I lost my hard drive (and six days of writing), I felt my sorrow and rage. I didn’t ‘get on with it’ and focus on the positive. At least not right away. I let my stiff upper lip get messy. It felt natural to do so, especially in light of that fact that it was the ‘Stiff Upper Lip’ chapter that was dearly departed! I felt rage about such a loss of control and a bizarre kind of peacefulness. Not only was I writing about letting go, but I was living it too.

I was able to see the virtue in focusing on the upside of a difficult situation, as long as it was not to the exclusion of feeling the downside. Writing about the loss of my hard drive helped me to surface this reality. I was beginning to integrate my old and new belief systems.

If I lose all of that hard work on Stiff Upper Lip I will be ANGRY and DEVASTATED. And somehow okay at the same time.... I can rewrite it and maybe even better in the end. There’s the “All Things Work Together for Good” in me again (Journal, October 26, 2000).

Writing helped me to understand a feeling avoidance strategy I’ve used for years. Instead of feeling what I’m feeling when I’m feeling it, I intellectualize what’s going on by quickly making meaning. Rather than taking a moment to sit in the experience and the feelings it’s bringing up, I often move to “What is the underlying dynamic here and what can I learn from this?” While I value my sharpness of mind, when I overuse it I can lose touch with my feelings. Writing has helped me to go into the details of the experience, conjuring up the associated feelings without running too quickly into problem-solving mode.

I notice that when I am struggling with writing the story part...it is usually about being too abstract and conceptual.... I move to meaning making so fast. So when I take a deep breath in and picture what I was wearing,
what my surroundings were etc. I can bring it back to life on the page more effectively (Journal, October 6, 2000).

Writing as a Way
to Empower Myself

The reflexive writing process paralleled my shifting view of the location of authority from external to internal. One night as I was wrestling with the voice of inadequacy, I reminded myself that this process was first and foremost for me. “The question is not, ‘will he like it,’ or ‘will they like it’ but rather ‘do I like it’” (Journal, September 26, 2000). This message became a mantra that was helpful in moving me through blocks of anxiety. It helped me to stay on course with what I wanted to say, rather than morphing my voice into what I thought they wanted to hear.

In sync with my exploration of authority, I began to accept my writing process as my own. As I tried to accept my ‘stuckness’ in my writing, I explored my need for approval from a figure of authority – my thesis advisor. “My need for the approval of others has lessened – if he’s angry – doesn’t want to work with me – I’ll be sad, but that’s his choice” (Journal, March 11, 2000). A few months later my thesis advisor helped my shift in the perspective of power from without to within when he said, “I don’t know what to say to help you but don’t forget that you have the authority’ – so helpful – a reminder that it’s all within me – I don’t have to rely on external sources. I can speak my own story” (Journal, May 20, 2000).

The most difficult dimension of my need to please others through this writing process was my concern about hurting my loved ones. While this story is merely my version of reality it still has the power to affect those around me. I spent many nights worried about the harm this work might do. My concerns were driven in part by old ‘please others’ demons and in part by a valid interest in protecting my loved ones. This tension helped me to focus on owning my opinions of reality rather than professing them as some ultimate truth. And it
tested my commitment to putting my true voice on the page. I struggled with some of the challenges this presented.

As I became more concerned with hurting my loved ones through my writing, I want to write more and more to show that I understand all sides of the story...the whys underneath their choices...I could overdo that...my perspective is still valid even if their intentions were good (Journal October 22, 2000).

This tension was particularly high in writing Chapter Four where I explored my relationship with my father. As I told my story, I feared that he might be portrayed as the 'bad guy.' This would have grossly misrepresented reality. In fact I have always struggled with the 'men are bad guys' feeling that emerges in some versions of feminism. “Because these were men with whom we were connected passionately and intimately, however painfully, it was impossible to settle for an oversimplified stereotype in which they could be objectified as ‘the enemy’” (Owen, 1985, p. 213).

The Vulnerabilities of Writing Show Up in My Body

As I ventured into the most painful corners of my life, I was not surprised when my body responded accordingly. As I wrote about my embodied emotions, I found myself living the very journey I was describing.

My body is on a wild trip right now. All of my symptoms are flared up...my immune system seems almost non-existent. Perhaps it’s exposing all of my wounds at once that’s doing it. Not that surprising really. My body is trying to tell me to stop? Perhaps not trusting that the pain is worth it? A reflection of my thoughts and feelings about pain too? (Journal, November 10, 2000).

There is no doubt that the stress of entering the dark corners of my life had a physical dimension. When I heightened my body awareness by breathing into it and letting the emotional releases happen, my health improved.

Sometimes it was difficult to get myself back into the scene about which I was writing. I found that getting into my body helped me get there. Before I began to
write the story of each turning point I grounded my feet on the floor and breathed into a relaxed space. Then I looked at the photographs from that time period, and closed my eyes to sink down into my body and the girl/woman I was then. This helped me to embody the feelings I had (or had repressed) at that time. I found that the flow of my writing was served by this process.

The Methodology of Flow

Just when I thought the parallels between my experiences with writing and rediscovering my voice had peaked, I had an unexpected loss. This journal entry captures my reflections on the experience as well as its synchronicity with the themes of my thesis exploration.

I find myself laughing as I type the title of this section. It's the kind of laughter that comes out like a heavy exhalation – the defeated kind. It's a laugh that somehow says, "Wow, I can't believe this is happening to me. It's so bad that it's almost funny." My hard drive crashed yesterday and I've just found out that the contents are not retrievable. I've just lost six days of some of the best writing I've ever done. I am still numb from the news.

I'm not too numb to slam on myself for not backing up my documents more regularly. If I was technologically capable I would have done back-up every night and all would be well. Alas, by the grace of god I backed up on October 17th. I did not lose it all. The thought of the possibility of losing it all struck a chord so deep that I can honestly say I understand why some people go over the edge. Had I lost it all, I just might be in a little white rubber room. I should not joke about that I suppose. But you get my point.

I am not all Zen about this yet. I am not peaceful or finding the gift in this yet. I cannot move to the "All Things Work Together for Good" place. Thank god. How human of me.

Instead I move back and forth between rage and sadness. It's mostly sadness though. It's the kind of sadness you feel when you've lost something really precious to you. It comes in waves like most feelings do – and the sadness deepens upon each new realization. My notes that I wrote about my writing process to Gary are gone. My torturous, blissful cathartic piece about my mother's aneurysm is gone. They were the words that prompted one of the most authentic conversations I've ever
had with my mother. They're gone forever. The revelations that I had about restructuring my thesis are gone, as are the integrated journal entries.

How can I possibly recapture that?

How can I possibly get motivated to move back into an old version of this work? It all looks like crap to me now. I guess that's how it works sometimes when you look back at writing from the past – like when I read old journals. I judge myself for my lack of awareness at the time, and yet it's just how I saw things from where I was. I was just doing the best I could. It's the same thing with this writing. That was how I managed to say what I was trying to say, on that day. That shifts all the time. Here comes a wave of forgiveness.

I guess I am starting to get a bit Zen about this experience.

Even amidst the ranting of my inner critic, I am still aware that it is not the only voice within me. I can choose to listen to the part of me that wanted to walk towards pleasure instead of pain. I can choose the music that I want to hear and bathe in the oil of my choosing. I can say what I feel like saying on the page and not fixate on saying the 'right' thing. The freedom to actually say what I want to say is a complete letting go of the judge on my committee. No it's not. It's inviting her in to the party. Saying, "Hey, I hear you and I know your game. You are trying to keep me just exactly who I am. I appreciate your protective nature but will you PLEASE LAY OFF! I actually want to walk towards pleasure right now. You can just have a seat and watch."

I can stretch my body in ways that it wants and breathe into my feelings. I can take in the sadness of the loss of my stories and the anger towards technology. I can expand my belly with air in the pain of seemingly pointless hours of work – at the same time as seeing the point. I can breathe in all of my feelings and not die and then I can let them go.

None of these feelings are bad. I'm not bad for feeling them. Just as seeing the good in the bad does not mean you're repressing something. I can take the part of the 'All Things Work Together For Good' that works for me. I can see the good in the loss of my hard drive.

The words alone say it. I lost my 'hard drive' and I feel desperate without it. I am afraid of letting go of the hard driving part of me. I have always had a need to drive myself hard to be perfect. It comes from feeling imperfect. Letting go of my 'hard drive' means admitting my imperfection. It's uncomfortable to join the human race in my mediocrity – in my beautiful complex uniqueness.
If I let go of my hard drive I will have to slow down and face being alone.

That's where writing comes in. When I'm writing I know that it is only for me. I can edit what I want, when I want. I think that's the kind of real control that comes from letting go of caring about the judgement of others. It's the kind of control that's not controlling, it's forgiving. It helps me to reflect on myself and raise my consciousness about who I am, and who I am not. It's helping me to finally let go of the ridiculous notion that we are somehow not beautiful and worthy simply for being born.

The truth is, we are gorgeous because we breathe in and out every day, just like any other animal.

Sure we have these pesky frontal lobes that cause us to reflect on ourselves. But we must not forget that we are basically animals. So while I am in the intensely reflective writing process, I am also trying to stay connected with my animal self. I am choosing to enjoy stretching as a cat does. I am choosing to greet my loved ones with the intention of a dog. When I hurt I am choosing to cry out in pain as a wounded animal does and rage like an angry bear. And when I don't, I am choosing to forgive myself like a human. Reflect on that pesky frontal lobe (Journal, October 26, 2000).

I was given a close up view of my journey with empowered voice. It included the pain of the loss of my work and the pleasure in letting it go. With my humanity exposed, I could see the tremendous compassion and forgiveness that I now bestowed upon myself.

The Layers of Writing a Personal History

Writing a personal history is an individual, subjective journey and as such, I questioned the value in documenting my own. It is a different experience for everyone, so why bother? But I was still drawn to reflect on my experiences with this kind of writing, perhaps more for my own learning than anything else. These are not chronological steps but rather layers that emerged in my process of writing a personal history. I have written these thoughts as considerations for others who might take on a personal history piece.
Thoughts about Personal History Writing

- **Initial resistance** – Resist writing for one year or more. Repeat “there’s no way I can do this, it’s far too big and scary” over and over. Go back to this step many times throughout the personal history writing process.

Just kidding. But don’t force yourself past the resistance too soon. It will never be gone entirely, nor should it be. I believe you will know when it is time to let go and head for the fire into writing. There is a rhyme and reason to the timing of everything. I found that learning about the normalcy of the dance between resistance and flow was helpful. Adrienne Rich (1976) describes her ‘preparation’ for writing her own story: “I buried my head in historical research and analysis in order to delay or prepare the way for the plunge into areas of my own life which were painful and problematical” (pp. 15-16).

- **Open a document for writing about your writing process** – I suggest you create a document to write about your process whether you’ve been experiencing resistance or not. Give it a title that makes you laugh. Mine was called “writing hell process.” Go back and forth between documents throughout your writing process according to the wisdom of your gut.

- **Commitment to stream of consciousness writing** – If you haven’t been experiencing much resistance (or want to pretend you haven’t been), ignore this piece. If you’ve been experiencing resistance, sit down and commit to staying there in front of the computer screen or with your journal for 30 minutes or so. Write about your resistance by completing a sentence like, “My resistance to writing feels like…. I am resisting it because…. I’m afraid of…. How I feel about myself right now is…..”, or whatever works for you. Start writing. Keep going. Just say whatever comes up when you think about your experience with avoiding writing. If nothing comes, write about that instead (“nothing’s coming, nothing’s coming… ”). Don’t stop and edit as you
go. Try using this time bound stream-of-consciousness writing when you feel resistant or stuck in any way.

- **Forgiveness for resistance** – Resistance to writing is normal and useful. It is trying to protect us from the vulnerability of telling our own stories. Procrastination is one of the most common forms of resistance. As Cole (2001) says, "Others may call it procrastination but to me it is a necessary condition for writing and it deserves to be honoured" (p. 293). Hating our resistance only makes it worse. You would likely forgive somebody else for being in this place, so why not yourself? Forgive yourself for the resistance once you see how normal it is.

  I forgive the writer in me
  The most vulnerable, the most insecure
  She is so scared, and guilty
  I forgive her too (Journal, August 13, 2000).

- **"What I want to explore in my own history is..."** – When you are on the edge of resistance and readiness, sit down at your computer (or journal) again. Using the same stream-of-consciousness writing technique, write a letter to someone you trust. Tell them what it is that you want to write about. Picture them asking you:
  - What is it that you want to explore in your own history?
  - What do you hope to learn from this exploration?
  - What are your assumptions about what you are intending to explore?
  - What do you already believe to be true?
  - How do you want to explore it?
  - Who are you writing it for and why?

  Work with any or none of the above questions. Trust your instincts. Don’t edit when you’re done. It came out this way when it did, as it did, for some reason.
• **Personal history framework** – If there’s a natural framework that’s sitting with you after doing the last piece, capture it. If there’s one phrase that seems to capture the gist of what you want to explore, write that down too. (This might become your draft purpose statement.) If not, let it go.

• **Create big, colourful visuals** – Write your purpose statement, or two or three phrases that capture the gist of your purpose, on a big piece of paper. Make it colourful and inviting. Don’t slam on yourself for taking time to make it beautiful. It will be your anchor when you feel like you’re floating away from your focus. (Don’t forget that other people will likely be coming into your home. If you don’t want them to see your life on the wall, close the door if you can. I left them up and they evoked great conversations. Sometimes I chose to take them down.)

> "Today it feels like too much... I wonder if it is healthy to have all the pain of my life up on my walls on big pieces of flipchart paper??"
>
> (Journal, November 11, 2000)

• **Collect artifacts from your life** – journals, letters, pictures, and objects – anything that will help take you back to a former version of you. I looked at school projects, report cards and spoke with family members to access artifacts they had on file. I used photographs as triggers to get me back into the feeling of a certain time of my life. I found 2 - 3 photographs of myself for each turning point and made them visible to me while I was writing. I looked at them regularly. This helped me to get into the experiences I was exploring.

• **Interruptions** – If you have voicemail or an answering machine, change the message to tell your loved ones you're writing. Don’t fall for the voice in your head that says, “I have to answer it.” If you don’t have this service, don’t answer the phone. I found that people wanted to talk and visit more when I was writing. If you’re not good at saying “no” to people (like me) try it out. I found it hard at first but it felt really great to take care of myself – a great lesson in drawing boundaries.
• **Write from your energy** – Pick one dimension of your purpose statement that you are drawn to explore. Trust that you should go where your intuition tells you it wants to go. Follow your own energy. Think about that part of your topic you want to explore and complete the sentence, “what I really want to say about this is…” or “what really interests me about this is…”.

  *The ‘What I really want to write about here…’ sentence fragment just helped a lot…helps me to stay focused on what I WANT to say, not what I SHOULD say…keeps me in my passion (Journal, August 13, 2000).*

Sometimes I started with some deep-into-the-belly-breathing with my feet grounded solidly on the floor. Then I let in the feelings of the experience using photos to help me get there. I asked myself, “What happened?….Then what?….Then what?….How did it feel?….What did it look like?….Sound like?….Smell like?….Taste like?….Feel to the touch?….How did my body experience it?….Was there a spiritual dimension for me?”

Write and write and write and resist the temptation to edit as you go. When you get stuck, write about that too.

• **Take care of your body** – Take breaks and stretch your body. I found daily walks really helpful. Have healthy food in the house so that writing doesn’t support the lowering of your self-esteem. It’s hard enough to stay kind to yourself as a writer to begin with I think. Or is that just a human condition in general?

• **Emergent Themes and Structure in first drafts** – When you run out of steam, print off what you’ve written. Read through it, resisting the temptation to edit, while asking yourself,

  a. “What are the themes that are jumping out at me?” Use a coloured pen to jot them down in the right hand margin, next to the copy that explores that theme.
b. “When is my energy going up as I’m reading this, and when is it dropping? Is that telling me something? Or not?”

c. “Where does it feel repetitive? And where does it feel like it wants deeper exploration?”

d. “Is my exploration tied to the anchor of my purpose?” (Just notice this response, don’t necessarily cut out all the unrelated elements. Anchors can move – sometimes they should.)

e. “How am I judging myself right now?”

AND IT WAS really hard. I tried to keep my hands from editing. Tried to keep on reading without letting bitchy editor girl in the room ...she keeps trying to jam the door open and every once in a while she bursts in with a flurry of typing over (Journal, October 17, 2000).

- **Forgiveness for imperfection** – Be an intelligent critic of your own work and forgive yourself for whatever you read. I found it helpful to apply relationship dimensions of life history to this work. For example, I found it helpful to apply notions of relationality between life history researcher and participant to my relationship with myself. As Cole & Knowles (2001) say, “We think about the formation of a [life history] relationship like any other genuine personal or professional relationship – one that demands attention and needs care, thought, sensitivity, respect, and trust in order to develop” (p. 2). It reminded me to be kind and trusting with myself.

- **Feeling the Experience** – Notice feelings that show up while you are writing. Choose to let out any of them that want to be heard. Let them go. Don’t stop feeling them before it’s time to stop feeling them. You know how much you can handle. Ask for support if you get too scared.

- **Flowcharts of structure** – If themes emerge and show you a flow or structure, draw yourself a flowchart using brightly-coloured pens. I also drew the structure of each chapter on a large sheet of paper. My personal history
covered the walls of my dining room. It was an enlivening and safe space in which to see myself.

- **Editing** – Restructure the work according to your flowcharts, or in sync with what seems logical to you. Now read it over again and edit at a more detailed level. Trust your belly to tell you when something works for you and when it doesn’t. Don’t forget that first and foremost, you are doing this for you. Remember that simplicity can capture the essence of an experience. Make sure your writing process document is open and available to capture the voice of judgement. She seemed to show up most when I was in edit mode. When I felt stuck in trying to rework a passage, I found it helpful to read it out loud. (My cat was a willing audience). The flow seemed to appear more clearly to me when it was out in the room and not just my head. Maybe that’s an extravert thing.

- **Journal coding** – Read through your journals and begin to code them in some way. Watch the voice of judgement have a hey day and give her voice on the page from time to time. I often found myself laughing at her once she had her say. I wrote key words for themes on post-it notes and stuck them to the appropriate pages in my journals. It made it easier to access the journal entry when I was writing. I coded far too many journal entries and became overwhelmed. Remember that more is less sometimes.

  *Seems I don’t write about writing as much when it’s going well. I don’t need it then, to unblock. The last few hours have been really enjoyable and feel like decent writing. Why so? Using my journals as a starting point for one thing. Keeps me grounded in the reality as I saw it at the time of writing (Journal, November 10, 2000).*

  *Coding journals – I ran into that age-old problem...how to categorize...categories start all merging together because they're so interconnected...one passage in my journal seems to relate to all topics. Great on one hand because my energy goes up as I read my journals...it's clear that I've chosen a topic that speaks to my life over...*
the last couple of years...great that it's all interconnected...and it makes it hard to write about (Journal August 12, 2000).

- **Reading the ‘experts’** – Resist the temptation to read what others have to say about your topic. You are the best expert on your own life. If you must read, try to read about something else. Or at least wait until you have your first draft on the page. Then find the books, articles, tapes, films that might help you. As Knowles (2001) so helpfully reminded me:

  It’s all too easy to quote the apparent experts.... All too easy to defer, to lose my voice. Academe overflows with minds unwilling to venture forth without the power of authority invested from others and I remind myself of this fact and the primacy of experience (p. 99).

- **Writing as a parallel process** – If it hasn’t come up already, consider how your journey with writing might relate to your own topic. Hang out with these thoughts and feelings and then write about writing for a while.

- **Changing the energy of the writing space** – If you’re stuck, try changing the energy in the room. Change the direction you are facing, sit in a different position, go to another room, open a window, light a fragrant candle. Sometimes I wrote sitting on a large inflated purple ball. It kept me grounded and relaxed in my body while typing. The pain in my left arm limited the number of hours I could type with my two hands. So I typed with one hand. This forced me to focus on each word longer because I couldn’t move so fast. This tempo gave me a whole new level of self-consciousness and insight into my own story, and into who I am. What began as a frustrating limitation ultimately gave me more relaxation. You might want to give a slower writing technique a try.

- **Decorating the Walls with Final Drafts** – When you have a final-ish draft, print off the document and tape it to the walls in whatever design floats your boat. I did it in vertical screenplay style and loved it. I found it to be such a physical way to engage with my thesis. Editing on my haunches and my
tiptoes was a welcome shift in approach. Sometimes I read it aloud while moving around the gallery-of-text that decorated my apartment. I saw the whole piece in flow instead of in compartmentalized chunks. (I think there's a huge life metaphor there somewhere.) I gave myself written feedback in the margins. I wrote things like, “beautiful” and “repetitive, unclear, delete.” It was straightforward and very helpful when editing.
Finale

The Opening

2001
I am afraid of closing this personal history piece. This is the truth underlying the resistance that plagues me in the final birthing of my thesis. Fear is the cause of my unwillingness to let go of this particular phase of my life. Closings are filled with sorrow. I do not like to feel sad. Even as I acknowledge the normalcy, and in fact necessity, in feeling this sorrow, I am still afraid to feel the pain inherent in saying good-bye. Closings are supposed to mark a sense of completion. If completion means, “To make whole or perfect” (Canadian Oxford Dictionary, 1998), I do not feel complete. My imperfections feel exposed and raw as I release this account of my own story.

Perhaps this is the very nature of letting go of a reflexive writing project. Perhaps I must honour the inherently imperfect and incomplete nature of reflexive writing and of the human experience, by feeling it fully. In that knowing, I can reframe notions like ‘perfection’ and ‘completion’ and accept myself as I am today. Then I am able to accept this work and open to its closure. What a paradox. My writing paralysis begins to ease as I consider that the finale is also an opening. I am opening to the next phase of my journey as a reflexive writer, singer and human being. I am merely in a passageway of transition. This helps me to feel less fear in taking my story public, in putting my voice out there in the world. It is simply who I am at this particular juncture.
These fears are a normal response to any transition, and in fact they are critical to any of life’s turning points. All turning points reveal both a closing and an opening. In seeing this paradox I once again move from a dualistic critical position, to a more holistic and compassionate stance. I glance at the symbol of the pikonua that hangs around my neck. The waves could be either closing or opening. It depends on how you look at it. It calms me to know that both directions occur simultaneously. Any closing is also an opening. Whew. Thank goodness.

As I let go, I also acknowledge that the meaning I make in the future might shift my sense of the ‘truth’ declared in this account. This awareness helps me to exhale more gently into letting go. I drop my shoulders and let go of the tension in my jaw as I write. And I release the grief that accompanies this ending. I sit in my fears with more kindness and compassion for myself. I open to my thoughts, feelings and body in this final stage of writing and I find acceptance for myself in this awareness.

Where am I in this never-ending journey to reclaiming my empowered voice? I have not arrived at a place called ‘reclaimed empowered voice.’ For how could I know my thoughts, feelings and body in context when the contexts continue to shift, as do I? I know only the view from where I stand today. It is like standing in a river, looking back at the waters behind me, and turning to look forward to the me-I-will-become.

As I turn my head from looking back to looking forward, I stop for a brief moment, look down and consider who I am in the here and now. In the here and now I am more open to the natural cycles of grief in my life. Weeping doesn’t terrify me as it used to for I’ve experienced the healing qualities of grief’s release. And I reach for the comfort of a loved one when the sorrow overwhelms me. Through yoga, singing, healing therapies, and daily moments of return to the breath, especially in natural surroundings, I am more aware of my body than in the past. My body
leads me to my grief, anger and all other emotions with such interconnection that it is difficult to untangle the awareness of my body from the emotions themselves.

I continue to experience my neurological symptoms on occasion. I have never received an official diagnosis. I have pain in my injured arm daily. While this may not sound like an improvement from my former ways, what has changed is my response to the pain and fear of my so-called 'imperfect' health. Instead of disconnecting from myself to avoid the pain and fear, I tend to walk gently towards them. I am more compassionate with myself as I choose to slow down, elevate my arm for a while or say 'no' to a contract that will include the stress of travel. I am more aware of my thoughts, feelings and body in context when I am unwell, and ask for help when it becomes too much to do on my own. All of these choices seem to stem from a general sense of worthiness and compassion that I feel for myself in my physical and emotional healing. They are the choices that come from knowing who I am today, and from owning the authority of my own experience. I can see from where I sit now that the
deconstruction of the pedestal effect is not about letting my figures of authority fall from on high; but rather it is about elevating the height of myself. I care less about what others think and focus more on what my own voice is saying. I don’t give away the power (or the blame) for my healing anymore, but rather take this task of awareness, acceptance and expression as my own responsibility. (Like any change process I sometimes revert to my former ways of repressing sorrow, disconnecting from my body and externalizing authority. I try to find compassion for myself in those times.)

As I stand in the river and look around at my current reality, I see the others in my story. Mum is with me in our shared home and she too is on a creative journey of self-acceptance and expression. She is emerging as a gifted visual artist exploring her own creative healing through this realm of non-verbal self-expression. She is also experiencing the deep opening and healing qualities of bodywork. I am lucky to say that in my mother I have also found a friend (see Figure 15 – Mum and Me).

Figure 15. Mum and Me
Dad lives part-time in England and part-time in the warmth of Spain – a heat that I imagine might remind him of his childhood India. Although the physical distance between us is great, the emotional distance is less. As in any relationship, some days we have ease and on others, we have struggles. I am grateful for our e-mail connections, just as I cherish the transatlantic visits that bring us back to the playfulness of childhood.

My grandparents have passed now but the spirit of my grandmother (the Walk-of-a-Thousand-Acres matriarch) continues to live in my home. She lived in this house for years and on occasion I feel her saying “you can do it” when I think I can’t. She reminds me of just how embraceable I am. She is with me now as I close into this opening in the countryside northeast of Toronto. It is just a few miles away to the site of the “Walk of a Thousand Acres” and the terrain is very familiar. I caught myself staring at a beautiful tree last night, giving thanks for its beauty. Thank you Grandma.

My sister and I still do the dishes together from time to time, sometimes in the company of her two beautiful sons. And we continue to choose our own radio station with great delight. I rest in the consistency of her unconditional love every day. My nephews teach me how to live in the moment by showing me the freedom inherent in expressing all emotions without judgement. And I try to support the development of their self-compassion, as the voice of judgement begins to show up in their own maturation process.

This spot in the river also affords me a view of myself as a writer. The only way I can describe the scene is that it holds a deep sense of knowing that I will always write. I reach for the pen and page almost daily, not based on a schedule but rather on a need, or perhaps it is a ‘want’, to express myself, my views, my voice. It seems as essential as my morning oatmeal. Reflexive writing helps me expand my sense of empowered voice heightening my awareness of thoughts, feelings and body in context, and giving me an outlet for their expression. It is a
process that shows me my story in its framework, helping me to understand myself with greater compassion.

Through singing I also reclaim my voice. I unclamp my body and feelings and access the seven-year-old girl in me. She is the one who expresses herself openly and lives in the present moment. She plays freely and doesn't spend all of her time immersed in reflection. In singing, she integrates with the thirty-seven-year-old woman in me. This integration appears when my jaw is relaxed in bliss just as when it is open to my outpouring of grief. She exhaled and releases her stress. She sings "Embraceable You" to herself with great compassion looking in a mirror at her own reflection. It is not 'her' after all. It is me – my sweet embraceable me. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 6).

As I turn my head to look up the river to the future, I am unsure of what it holds. Who knows what turning points will show up to steer the flow of my river in a new and unexpected direction? I hold this lack of knowing as an important truth that helps me to destress and relax my attempts to control the future. There are a few things that I do know to be true right now, although I cannot be sure of their eventual manifestation.

I want to sing. I want to sing. I want to sing. I will be taking piano lessons again so that I can accompany my own voice. By creating music alone, I am more aware of my voice of judgement and then can choose to let her go. (I find this awareness is often reduced in the presence of others.) And I want to sing in community. Shared musical space helps me to integrate the me-I-am-alone with the me-I-am-with-others, all in the paradox of a challenging but blissful setting of childlike play. I want to wallow in the pleasure of singing that has been buried within me since the days when I sang into my thumb in the tub. I want to sing again in the creative zone of no judgement.
I want to write reflexively and read the writing of others, especially those who are writing their own stories. I have no idea what form this will take but trust that my current need/want to write will ebb and flow, as it will. I imagine that I will continue to improve my writing abilities. Perhaps I will write in community, rather than in the isolation of this personal history project. I needed to do this project alone and yet the collaborator in me is hungry to engage with others.

I want to continue my work as a personal and organizational development consultant, integrating my sense of empowered voice developed through singing and reflexive writing. I am intrigued by the notion of personal-history-telling as a healing tool for others, just as it has been for me. I have noticed that my one-on-one coaching work with corporate and private clients is already integrating the power of telling personal histories. My clients are doing their own healing work as they tell me the stories of their lives and we explore their critical turning points and contexts in a safe and confidential environment. I imagine that the healing power of singing might show up as a natural extension of my practice.

I have also noticed that in my expanded self-awareness, acceptance and expression I am better able to listen to the voices of my clients. In the past I was using energy to hold back my own voice – energy that is now freed up to hear the voices of others. As they share the contexts of their lives, I sit with them and explore the implications of these frameworks on their own worldviews and choices. I am aware of their body language, not in a prescriptive way, but rather as an avenue to explore the possibility of meaning held in the body. As I continue to accept my own sorrow and rage I notice my clients finding more freedom to express all dimensions of their emotional experiences. And as my consciousness of my voice of judgement continues to expand, I support the emergence of my clients' inner dialogue. I befriend them in conversation on the road to self-compassion.
I wonder about the healing powers of reflexive writing, singing and other forms of creative expression in the world. I wonder what the world would be like if we released the dams in the river by expanding our awareness of our thoughts, feelings and bodies in context. What would happen if we found our empowered voices through creative means, valuing the masculine and the feminine in each of us? And what if we expressed ourselves authentically in the world in that knowing? If we shared our stories of darkness and light, might we find a deeper compassion for one another and for ourselves? Would the compassion spill out into the world-at-large as has been my experience? Would we find that our own healing is the cornerstone of healing our communities and the planet? Maybe in this place of self-acceptance we might not need to put others down and oppress through power-based systems. Maybe we would not turn our self-hatred into violence against others. Perhaps we might find a greater capacity for balancing our abilities to reflect and understand ourselves and the world, with our ability to live in the moment with the wonder of a child.

My car accident took me into my fear— to the edge of dark and light. It was here that I learned that there is no separation between the dualities of terror and bliss, pain and pleasure. In fact they live in the same space. I got a glimpse into compassion for myself in this knowing, and for the human experience. It was a compassion that reflected the nature of love itself. (Listen to Compact Disc, Track 5).

I could no longer see the edges between me and other forms of life in the awareness of this paradox. I could no longer distinguish where I ended and others began. How could I feel such compassion and love for animals, friends, family, and not include myself in this knowing? It is the same kind of divine love that shows up when I am free in my singing voice, or when I am immersed in the
self-expression of writing. I see my own reflection. I can see my beauty shining through. My sweet embraceable me.
References


Bibliography


Appendix A – All Things Work Together For Good

I have been thinking about the meaning of life and how it relates to our daily experiences. It seems that when we focus on the positive aspects of our lives, we tend to see things more clearly. When we see the good in others, we become more empathetic and understanding.

I hope you are doing well. I am still enjoying my writing and reading. I have been working on a new project that I am excited about. I hope you are also finding joy in your life.

Take care.

Grandpa.
There is No Time in that Moment Suspended

Rising and falling am I
Through the darkness and the mist and the fear
I must go up the mountain

Staying in myself and trusting that shifts will come naturally
Trusting and letting go of the need to know
What’s on the other side of the mist

Breaking through the mist
The blue sky and sun soak me
As the challenge of the climb continues

Watery calm as the warmth of the sun drenches my face and arms
Terror is still in the background

Calm slow motion of the rolling van
Complete helplessness and calm
At the same time

There is no time in that moment suspended

At the peak of the mountain my own strength overwhelms me
Surge after surge of impenetrable power

I lie on my back drenched in sun
And scream, weep, bliss out
Terror and ecstasy in the exact same moment

All emotion as one.
There is no time in that moment suspended.

- Joanna Mackie (Imagery that emerged when listening
to Gorecki’s Symphony No. 3)
Appendix C – She Always Remembers My Name

She Always Remembers My Name

She is straightforward and clear
With no empty optimism
Maternally gentle with her care
And she always remembers my name

Wounded birds
Knocked over by fate
Opening the door to love and pain
Bliss and terror

Chorus:
I can move into my pain
Or push it further away
Howling from my open wounds
I find pleasure at the edge

She opens her story at the asking
And asks me "Who are you?"
As she helps with the pain.
And she always remembers my name.

(Chorus)

She brings information with her heart
Watching fear in my eyes
I watch her eyes too
And she always remembers my name.

- Joanna Mackie (For the Nurses of Thomas Jefferson Hospital, Philadelphia, PA)
Appendix D – The Methodology of Resistance – The Voice of Judgement

The Methodology of Resistance –
The Voice of Judgement

She is mean. She is nasty. She is the voice that tells me that I cannot succeed. The one that leaves me paralyzed by the notion of writing my own personal history. My own story.

She is Ruth the Resister.

The voice within me that stops me from writing my thesis. The one who tells me I can't do it. She is the doubting voice that keeps me small in the world. Striving to close the door on possibility by convincing me to avoid the unknown.

The Veil of Distraction

Ruth's power is complete as she veils herself in symptoms meant to distract and keep her in charge. They are symptoms that shift my focus away from the discovery of her true message: one that is full of self-reproach and holds the key to my writing paralysis. This game of distraction she plays ensures that her prediction of failure comes true – as long as her message remains undiscovered.

In attempting to understand this dynamic of distraction, I have been imagining a continuum ranging from "real-barriers-to-writing" to "self-imposed-barriers-to-writing," which I suppose are no less real but rather are internally driven. It has been helpful to distinguish where certain barriers fall in order to focus on either a) letting go of that which I cannot control or b) understanding the dynamics of self-imposed-barriers; disentangling them to create more flow in the writing process.
High on the "real-barrier-to-writing" continuum, computer crashes have literally stopped me from writing. And my disability on occasion impedes. On some days it is true that my mother's needs must come first. But these are sometimes also used as self-imposed barriers – an excuse to avoid the thesis process altogether. I don't need a computer or my left arm to code journals, or sort pictures, or explore the musical dimension of my thesis process. The truth is I'd rather avoid the discomfort of the unknown – the vulnerability inherent in the personal history process.

Ruth the Resister's powerful grip continues as her premonition of failure seems destined to come true. I am caught in a cycle of symptoms.

There is no doubt that some of my work as a change consultant is a very real barrier to writing my thesis. Time and energy must be invested in this role to keep food on the table and rent money in the bank. And yet if I'm honest I can see that I prioritize this over writing for reasons that are becoming more clear as I write about it!

Beyond the realities of rent and food lies a truth about a basic human need to feel competent and secure – a need to be in a familiar, comfortable role where one's limits are not always being stretched. I believe we have limits as to how much we can stretch into the unknown simultaneously. The last year has been stretching me to learn about my disability, guardianship, technology, lawsuits and money management. In this context, I have been avoiding writing by walking towards the comfort of feeling my competence as a consultant. I feel less vulnerable as a consultant than I do as a writer.

A change consultant who is actively resisting change. Oh, the irony of it all. Helping others increase their awareness and skill around change while avoiding my own. So human.
This preference for the familiar also spills into my support of my loved ones. Nurturing long-term, authentic relationships around the world has always been a priority. It is a core element of who I am. And yet I must look in and notice the times when I take on a support role because it's what I've always done and am good at. I don't consider any other way of being. It's like breathing. With all that energy going out to them, there's not much left over for me, or for my writing. It is a bizarre but understandable self-imposed barrier.

The option of writing my own story is a more daunting place. It is an unknown with no proven track record of success.

Once again I can see my resistance to change. My fear of a shift. Fear of the shift to "no, I can't be there for you now." Fear of choosing a path that seems to collide with my values.

But does it collide with my values to choose writing over supporting?

When I deconstruct this in writing I can see more clearly that choosing writing over supporting is aligned with who I am. I have been on a path of taking better care of myself and experiencing firsthand how that enables me to be in healthier relationships. It's just different from choices I've made in the past. And change is frightening.

The resistance to writing is so expansive that the symptoms continue with seeming importance: filing and purging and cleaning and exercising that "simply must get done." More cupboards to organize, more 'to-do' lists to write. I cannot deny the comic element of my behaviour. My rational mind is overtaken by the notion that these tasks must be dealt with before writing my own story. Before putting my own voice on the page.
I notice the self-imposed barriers I set up in my physical writing space. "I realize now that I have been booby-trapping myself. Making my space around writing...hard to be in. Stressful. Like I deserve that somehow. No resting of the arm" (Journal, September 2, 2000). It's an awareness that gives me insights into my life's journey. "My file drawers have been so crammed full for as long as I can remember. It's painful to find stuff...sometimes the metaphors are so obvious" (Journal, September 2, 2000).

It is almost as if everything is going exactly as it should. This is time to learn about how I sabotage myself. How I cut myself off at the knees to ensure I don't succeed. How I'm afraid to let go of the past.

Waves of forgiveness roll in as I begin to see my fear more clearly on this page. Fear of incompetence. Fear of exposing myself to the world in a new way. Fear of the pain in the journey of writing my own story.

Writing my own story requires a different role – a different kind of courage altogether.

**Underneath the Veil: The Voice of Ruth**

_The writing demons are here...and so mean... 'Who the hell would want to read this? You are so self-indulgent focusing on yourself so much. What could YOU possibly have to say that would be interesting or helpful to anyone in anyway??' (Journal, August 10, 2000)_

The truth spills out on the page late one night at the cottage – a night when I finally sat still in my ‘stuckness.’ Just sat there and stared at the screen in dismay. And heard the voice that was the source of my dance with resistance. The voice of Ruth the Resister – painfully true and ready to be heard.
I was no longer able or willing to get lost in the symptoms. I was ready to release the voice of Ruth. It was not pretty or kind. But it was necessary. "Why would anyone want to read what you have to say?" "What could you possibly have to contribute to the world?" (Journal, August 8, 2000)

I hear others' judgements of psychology emerge as my own. "Psycho-babble fluff" (Journal, August 2, 2000).

I take a deep breath in to prepare for another blow:

Sure you can help your friends and your clients, but an introverted activity like writing? Who are you kidding? Anything that you have to say is so obvious. It's all been said before. What the hell is the point anyways? (Journal, August 12, 2000)

And so it continues – the release of Ruth's voice. My writing is ironically prolific as I let her out on to the page. Her voice is so clear – she has something to say.

And then silence. My fingers are still. Is she done? Is that all it took to move through this resistance? "For now," a wise voice says inside. "Let her out when she needs to come out. That will free the writer in you."

She comes and goes to be sure. I naively assume she will be gone now that I understand her game. But alas, she appears unexpectedly. "She's there again when I awake: 'What? Lazing around in bed again? Not starting your writing until 9 today? When will you find your will and discipline that you used to have?'" (Journal, September 5, 2000)

The Real Deal

It is difficult to hear the cruelty of Ruth's message. And the pain twists deeper as I recognize that her voice is my own. Such disdain for one that inhabits the same body. It is not pleasant to look at the fact that my own limiting beliefs hold the
key to my paralysis. I can no longer limit the blame to the external world of my mother, clients, computers and friends. Feeling the pain involved in hearing my own voice of judgement helps me to understand why I avoided it for so long. That helps me to forgive myself. Then I ask myself the same forgiving questions that I pose to my loved ones and clients: Why would I have wanted to face that part of myself? Who wants to admit that such nastiness exists within us? Who wants to walk towards pain?

You weren't ready to do this work until now.
And look at all you have learned in the process.

I am forgiven.

This readiness to hear her has led me to a great paradox. Once she is out on the page, the pain diminishes. In fact it is a relief. I can see through to the truth about Ruth.

She's afraid.

I'm afraid.

Afraid of the vulnerability of telling my own story. Afraid of discovering I cannot really do it. Or that I can.

Once her voice is heard, she no longer dominates my actions. Her power lies in my resistance to hearing her truth, not in the message itself. Now I can see through her, around her and underneath her in a way that removes her power. She no longer dominates but simply reminds me that it's human to have doubt. Especially when trying out something new. The act of saying her words out loud in complete authentic disclosure sets me free as a writer.
With this newfound awareness, I find her amusing. Her cloak of colourful language hiding her fear. The ridiculous bias comes out in her message. I find myself chuckling at her black and white statements. So transparent in their fear. It is a cruelty that I would never let loose on my loved ones. So why let her loose on me?

They are words that show me the tremendous fear inherent to telling my own story. Putting my voice on the page. The way I see things. How I've made meaning of my life so far. And as I'm writing this I can see that letting out these voices that are part of me, is exactly the point. Giving voice to the truth that is going on inside of me. It is not about presuming that it is a universal truth. But rather that the telling of my own story is a worthy exercise unto itself. My own truth emerges when I translate my thoughts and feelings into the written word. To me, that is worthwhile.

I come to recognize Ruth as an important guide in my journey with writing. She is informing me of my fears that must be revealed in order to move through them. She lashes out in an attempt to keep me from taking risks. To prevent me from falling. To protect me from harm. And she uses cruel words. As fear-based protection always does. She is trying to protect the part of me that is afraid to say, "This is who I am. This is my story. With all its messiness, insecurities and doubt." For like all true stories, there is pain in this one. And it includes Ruth.

And she is a part of me. Part of the paradox of the human experience. The only way to move through the resistance to writing is to let her in. Let her out. Hearing what she has to say and acknowledging that she is a part of me. She reveals an important layer of who I am and how I have come to understand myself.

She is just a frightened child. Trying to protect me from the pain of change. The pain of transformation.
So What? What to do with Ruth?

With this awareness in hand, I try to witness myself with great intention. I listen for the voice of resistance when I notice myself getting caught up in extraneous tasks. I notice my resistance shifting with the intensity of the topic I am exploring.

I can access her presence by connecting with myself physically. I find her in my clenched jaw and shoulder blades. She's there in shallow breaths, a vague headache and tightly crossed legs. She drives my hand to my mouth in self-doubt. "The paralyzing voices of inadequacy...of 'what the hell are you trying to say and of what use is it?' Finger nail goes up between two teeth as a sign of their presence" (Journal, Aug. 13, 2000).

I can let her in by focusing my attention inward to my body. A moment of meditation as I sink into my tension. She loses her grip when I breathe open my jaw, my chest, my pelvis, my legs. Her grip is released and she is in flow with the rest of me.

She is not gone. That is not the goal. She is part of a necessary human process of protection. But coming to know her as part of me that emerges from fear helps me to dance with her, not against her. I notice her earlier and can gently sit myself down and let her voice out. Then bring myself back to the task of writing my story. Acknowledging my doubts and fears and letting them run their course as I stretch myself as a writer.