

**The Singer's Journey:
Voice, Self-Discovery, and Transformation**
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Introduction

Thousands of years of religious, contemplative, and mystical traditions, as well as theatre and voice training techniques have used the breath, voice, and deep listening to reach a unity of body, mind, and spirit (Anderson, 2009). By applying rigorous inquiry and research through the Polyvagal theory, and fMRI imaging, we can observe these same practices and explain their effect as the result of neurological and physiological processes. In other words, “accessing the reflexive neurophysiological coordination of the voice causes the dissolution of an apparent mind-body dualism, and catalyzes transpersonal experience and development” (Freinkel, 2011, p15).

Medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman writes that, before the 17th century, human consciousness was not only collective but also a bio-psycho-spiritual unity. With the rise of scientific thought, that consciousness split, and we became simultaneously aware of both being a body and having a body. This phenomenon is associated with “the rise of a discursive, metatheoretical ‘modernist’ orientation to the self that is secular, self-reflexive, and ironic” (Kleinman, 1988). This split in consciousness interferes with total absorption in lived experience, and it is precisely this absorption that is central to the act of singing.

Singing is a practice and like any other practice, intentionally spiritual or not, playing an instrument, yoga, meditation, prayer, athletics, dance, we improve the more we engage in practice. The obstacles and frustrations along the way are lessons on our journey. Singing practice often mirrors life practice, meaning that the struggles that arise in the context of singing are the same struggles we face in our larger life. Control, letting go, being present, multi-tasking, acceptance, perfectionism; thus, its effectiveness as a method of spiritual and psychological growth.

My hypothesis is that a singer's journey has the potential to be transformational and that singing, when embodied, free, and connected, can be a transcendent, even mystical experience. The study and practice of singing, identifying oneself as a singer, and feeling a deep need to sing are all parts of this pathway to transcendence; the singer, instrument, music, and even the listener share in this sacred experience.

I will begin by telling my own voice story using the framework developed by Marilyn McCarthy of a seven-staged "singer's journey" (Chapman, 2012) to outline my own. I will then incorporate the stories of nine singers with whom I conducted in-depth interviews to exemplify stages along this path. Each of these individuals consider their voice to be an integral part of their personal, psychological, and/or spiritual journey. The subjects range in age from 21-70 years old. 7 female, 2 male. Some are professional singers, some voice and music teachers. Some are avocational voice users. Three are song writers. All were generous with their time and thoughtfulness, even writing to share additional memories and thoughts after the interviews were complete. All names and some identifying details have been changed to protect the singer's privacy.

What I have gleaned is by no means exhaustive, and perhaps raises far more questions than answers. I come away with a profound respect for and awe of the courage and intuitive need each of these individuals feel around their own voices, which many times reflect my own voice journey.

My Journey

1. Once Upon a Time

I have always sung. I have always felt defined and identified by my voice, not just by how it sounds, but how it lives and breathes in my body, moving my innermost thoughts and feelings

into the world. When I was 5 years old, my father gave me a tape recorder. Shortly after receiving this gift, my father died. I used that recorder for years to capture the voices of my family and friends, and to record myself singing and singing and singing. That tape recorder was my connection to my father, my voice reaching him through the ether. When I was about 7, I decided to record myself singing every song I knew, from nursery rhymes to Christmas carols, from Simon and Garfunkel to the Beatles and Burl Ives. When I listened back to that later in my life, I heard a little girl with a pure and sacred song in her heart, expressing her deepest longings through her voice. Singing had already provided me with a spiritual and emotional outlet I intuitively knew I needed.

2. Awakening

I began formal study at the age of 14 with a local voice teacher in suburban New Jersey. I performed throughout high school, working semi-professionally in musical theatre, summer stock and in NYC light opera choruses. I studied dance and acting, won a couple of music scholarships and went on to study voice at New York University. I struggled with whether to pursue a classical route or a career in musical theatre. My voice was most suited for classical singing, and yet the musical theatre world felt more accessible. After my Freshman year, I switched to an independent study major, combining voice, theatre, and modern dance. The feeling of singing, the embodied experience has always been when I feel most alive, most myself and simultaneously the most grounded and uplifted. I knew that in the deepest depths of my soul, I was a singer, I just did not know yet how to live out that knowing.

3. Setting Out

After graduation, I began to find success as a musical theatre performer and actress. I still felt disconnected from what I was singing and wanted to sing more classical music. I applied to graduate school for voice, and was at the same time cast in a high profile first national tour of a Broadway show. I chose to go on the road, and then I went on the road again, traveling and performing throughout the United States and Europe. I was on my way, although I felt unsettled inside. I knew something crucial was missing. Always defined by my voice, I found it hard to find a healthy emotional balance amidst the competition and rejection of a professional career. It felt as if my voice, the deep expression of my soul, had to be branded and sold. How could I be the singer I knew I was without losing my soul?

4. Loss to Self and Voice

This continued until I found myself increasingly disillusioned with the business of performing. I couldn't find the joy in singing anymore. I felt jaded. I was experiencing the modernist orientation to the self described earlier, of both being my voice and having a voice. There were periods when I could not sing. Sometimes days or weeks. Sometimes years. Singing for my father was the ever present undercurrent, as if I could reach him and bring him back to earth. This impossible goal set the stage for increasing anxiety, inertia, lethargy, and depression. These all take their toll on the voice. They are burdens and yet also emotional fuel. The irony (or not) is that the cure for these woes is singing and yet I decided to stop performing. I stopped singing. I went to culinary school. I had children and moved out of NYC.

5. Remembering and Trusting the Self

It wasn't until about 6 years later that I began to have any desire to sing again. I started singing only the material that moved my soul. Mozart, Schubert, Greig, Haydn, Faure. I found a new teacher and began studying again, discovering my voice anew. Now in my 30's, I was able to hold my voice better than I had as a younger woman, both physically and emotionally. I began to sing locally as a soloist with different choruses and orchestras, branching out to a regional level, still always making the process my priority. I was singing in a way like I had as a child again; for release, expression and love. I was performing, yes, but the motivation was arising from a deeper, truer place. One performance in particular stands out. I was the soprano soloist in Handel's Messiah, a work I have sung many times. On this occasion however, I felt completely at one with the music, my fellow musicians, and the audience. It was as if everything I had ever sung, studied, and practiced all came together and I had what can only be described as a unitive experience. I can recount every moment of that performance even now, years later.

6. Accepting and Renewing

Almost 20 years ago, I took on my first voice students. I sought out pedagogy wherever I could realizing that so much of singing had come naturally to me. I had no idea how to explain what felt instinctual to me. I studied Somatic Voicework, Linklater, Fitzmaurice Voicework, and many other methodologies. A pivotal experience was participating in the OperaWorks winter intensive as a teaching artist. This was when I began, finally, to own my knowledge, experience and expertise as both a singer and a teacher. Today I have a full private studio. I teach voice, yoga, and breath, focusing on empowering people to embrace their voices as unique and divine expressions of themselves.

7. Beginning again and again...

Age brings wisdom, and changes to the body and voice. I struggled with how to embrace all of it, all of me. How could I ask my students to sing with their whole voices when I was so identified with having a “beautiful” voice? What about the rest of me? In 2019, I participated in a week long retreat at the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, NY led by the renowned master of vocal improvisation, Bobby McFerrin and his international team of teachers. We spent every moment of the week deeply, somatically immersed in the art and craft of improvisational singing, specifically Circlesinging, a form that is malleable enough to be accessible to and fulfilling for people of all levels of musical experience, from the complete novice to the seasoned professional. Each sung improvisation lives only in that moment, unpremeditated, standing in a circle, no division between performer and audience. This was another life changing experience, bringing me into a previously unexplored relationship with my voice.

Discovering the craft of improvisational circle singing changed the trajectory of my voice journey. Struggles with memorization, language, repertoire all disappeared when I began to simply sing for the pleasure of making sound. It wasn't a matter of classical versus musical theatre anymore. Letting the inspiration come in the moment was terrifying and liberating. I had no idea. Making it up in the moment, completely ephemeral, this felt like the ultimate experience of being a channel, being in the flow, allowing and not controlling and letting go.

At an open sing with Moving Star, Carnegie Hall's in residence improvisational singing group, on March 8, 2020, just before the Covid pandemic, I finally let it all pass through me. In a moment of personal liberation and triumph, I led a never to be heard again circle song, with the words and theme of “*What are you waiting for.*” It was riotous, joyous, freeing. When it was

done I laughed and cried and was seen and heard by the other singers in the room. It was all of me, not just my beautiful voice, but all of my fear and sadness and frustration channelled into a song that will never be sung again. No matter, it was my prayer and it remains with me still.

Nine Singers

Claire

“Voice, you are my most complicated relationship.”

Claire is a 24 year old graduate student who works as a Montessori teacher and yoga instructor. She has no professional voice use, but has take lessons a number of times. She professes a long and complicated relationship with her voice, beginning as a child, often feeling like something is blocked, or stuck in her throat, pain and constriction. For as long as she could recall, she has struggled to say things and felt her throat clamping shut. She followed her intuition and sought out voice lessons as a means to help her discover what was holding her voice back.

“I think it is still in the process, but I really believe that when we come down to earth, everybody choses one or two themes they are working through their whole life, and voice and expression is one of my things that it is going to be a life time of unpacking.”

Ellie

“I’ve been singing literally since I was in the womb.”

I met Ellie when she was 10 years old, music directing her in a production for a youth theatre company. She continued studying with me privately throughout high school. Ellie is now a 21 year old singer songwriter who has sung all kinds of music including musical theatre, classical, jazz, and currently folk rock. She began writing songs about 2 years ago, initially writing

for herself and then expanding to write for others as well. I have watched Ellie's journey as she has grown from a child into a young woman and have heard her voice develop and become her own throughout these years. She finds herself to be most comfortable on stage and this is apparent when she performs.

"I think I've been figuring out my own sound by trying lots of different styles."

Kristin

"I highly connect my intrinsic worth with my sound and whether someone approves of it."

Kristin is 30 years old, a reiki practitioner, artist, massage therapist, health coach, and a college student studying to be a LCSW. Although she did not include singer in her list of self identifying activities, singing has played a central role in her life since she was a young child, when she turned to singing as a means of self soothing amidst struggle in her home environment. She has experienced conflict between singing for her own pleasure and comfort and singing in the context of performance. She considers singing a part of her spiritual practice and self care. Self care, for herself and others is central to her work and she even described pretending to be a massage therapist as a 12-year-old, setting up a "cocoon" for her family members as part of a desire to help others feel good and relax. Both self care and singing are elements of her spiritual practice.

"I have always liked the sound of my voice. It has taken me a while to get to where I could say that to someone else."

Leigh

“A lot of my vocal training has been holding back and blending (in choral singing). I think my voice is fairly large and its almost scary sometimes to really sing. I’m still on a journey to fully embody my voice.”

Leigh and I met singing in a church choir together about 12 years ago. She then studied privately with me for approximately one year. She is in her mid 30’s and has taught elementary music for 15 years. She has both undergraduate and Master’s degrees in music education and has extensive experience as a choral singer. She has trained other music teachers in the Feierabend method, and most recently Leigh became certified in *Acutonics*, a type of sound healing that combines Chinese medicine meridians with sound vibration. Much of her career has been focused on other peoples voices, and her own journey has largely been about finding and embodying her own voice in its entirety.

“The medicine you bring to the world is often the medicine you most need for yourself. Some of my most powerful meditation experiences are just me sitting on my cushion and channeling whatever sounds want to come through me because I am so tapped in. It is a way for me to get out of my head and get into my body and let the sounds come through. I am not thinking about lyrics. It is not a song I learned. I guess you could call it improvisation, but I’m not thinking about it in a musical way. I am just letting it flow through. When my mind kicks in, it doesn’t work because I start thinking about it. When I can stay out of my mind and stay present, it sounds better, feels better, and it is not coming from my brain but feels like it is flowing from my heart.”

Thomas

“My big thing now is just let myself be. Let my voice be. It is so so hard for me not to put on or mimic someone else’s voice because I just don’t think it is going to be good enough. There is no truth to it.”

Thomas has been studying with me privately for about 2 years. He is a professional actor in his 40’s. He spoke at length about the conflict and struggle he has felt around his voice from a young age. Much of it a result of the criticism and shame he received from his family, particularly his mother. He had a number of experiences where he felt joy and connection around singing, only to be shot down by his family. This early trauma has had a lasting effect on his ability to trust his voice as being enough.

“People are so mean to singers. They think it is a funny joke and they will be like ‘oh is someone slaughtering a cat?’ just to insult you. It is so hurtful. It just rips you in two when people say things like that.”

Lucille

“Singing to me is just like putting butter on my bread.”

Lucille is a 58 year old woman who has lived her entire life in the intentional Christian Bruderhof Community. She comes from a family of 11 children and has raised 8 of her own, her youngest is now 17. She is a trained music educator with a deep and passionate interest in working with children and the physically disabled. She spoke with admiration of her mother’s beautiful soprano voice and with great love for her sister who had Down’s syndrome and a great love of singing. Her feels her sister was the main influence on her life’s path. Music, and specifically

singing is an important part of daily life in the Bruderhof community and Lucille's lifelong experience with music is deep and multi-faceted.

"There is a wonderful aria by Bach, one I love very much because the essence of it is saying that even with our incomplete, or disabled bodies, the spirit can praise. You could say she (my sister) was physically disabled, but I have never met anyone who radiated such a profound spiritual purity as her and as people like her."

Michelle

"Wouldn't it be SO fun if life were a big musical, and you couldn't speak? And you'd have to sing EVERYTHING to each other?!"

Michelle is a 58 year old retired mother of 3 grown sons. She has been married twice, losing her second husband suddenly two years ago. She shared many memories of her parents singing when she was a child as well as her singing with her own children. Several years ago, she came to me for voice lessons to help her better sing the many songs she had written. An avid song writer for many years, she does not read music and professes that she has tried and simply cannot. She is a writer and a poet and singing and her voice have played an important role all her life. Her voice has acted as a barometer of her emotional state, as well as an expression of the same. Michelle shared generously with me even after our interview, writing thoughts that continued to arise in response to our conversation. A self-proclaimed atheist, she does not feel that her voice connects her to anything "higher or other, but rather to a soulfulness."

“The songs, the words...they have choked through grief the last two years, the well of creative flow replaced with tears and I was drowning in it. Sometimes you don't notice even that you're struggling. Or that you're slipping away. Or that you've lost your voice.”

Anthony

“I don't feel like I have my voice anymore.”

Anthony is 60 years old, a voice teacher and former professional operatic baritone. His career included study at well known conservatories and winning some prestigious competitions. He felt he had a late start professionally, but was fortunate to have some excellent teachers who supported his education. Anthony was raised in a large Catholic family, and although his father was a singer, he says singing was definitely not a part of his family life growing up. He spoke lovingly of his father and his beautiful voice, and with great sadness at his current inability to sing after illness and an accident. He owns a landscaping business and teaches private voice lessons.

“Just when I was becoming a big boy and singing and doing the things teachers were trying to teach me, just when I was starting to get it, now I can't do it. I can't sing anymore. I try to be positive and say 'for now', but...”

Sylvie

“My life is my art. I have always strived for congruence, congruence between my life and my art.”

Sylvie declined to share her exact age, but admitted to being a “senior citizen”. She has had a long international career as an actress, jazz singer, and movement instructor and is still actively singing and teaching. Her lifelong love of jazz and improvisation began with hearing Peg-

gy Lee at age 8 and a fascination with the interplay of the cymbals, sticks, hands on the keys, and the strings of the bass. While pursuing a career as an actress, jazz became a sort of secret love for her, until she made the decision to change career paths and become a jazz singer. Collaboration, connection, and improvisation along with the harmonies of the jazz chords became a central part of her life long journey of healing and self discovery.

“It was my soul’s calling. We have to do what we have to do. My soul, my deepest inner self directed this journey for me which became a path for my own healing and wholeness. One of the reasons my soul chose that (jazz) I am sure is because jazz said, ‘just stand there and connect’. That was my vehicle to get there.”

As unique as each person’s voice, so is each singer’s path, as illustrated by these nine individuals. Some set out with musical goals, some with personal, some both. Some discover their voices as a spiritual path and consciously choose to deepen that exploration while others focus on musical and performative goals, uncovering the deeper layers as they go. Spiritual journeys are often described as peeling layers of an onion, or ascending a spiral staircase. The memes of Spiral Dynamics are an example of this, and can be compared to the Singer’s Journey outlined above (Beck & Cowan, 2006). Neither ascends in a straight line, but spirals on, revisiting and rediscovering. In Thomas' words, “Every realization I have as an adult, I feel like I had as a teenager, but... music is just a way to express things that you can’t just say to someone.”

Practice and technique, emotion and the voice, singing for personal, shared, or performative purposes, and trauma and the nervous system are all themes that recurred among the singers I spoke with. How each of these topics relate to singing as a means of personal growth and spiri-

tual connection will be my focus. I will not attempt to fit each singer neatly into a chapter of the singer's journey. Rather, I will look to their stories to exemplify why and how singing is an ever unfolding process of self-discovery, revealing, if we choose to look, our deepest nature and connection with the sacred.

Transformative Practice and Technique

“Realization isn't something we can do, it's only something we can be ready for. Practice isn't the cause of realization, but it helps you to be more open and ready to receive what the universe has to offer.” —Zenkie Blanche Hartman (2003)

All transformative practices include four basic elements. These are intention, attention, repetition, and guidance. (Schlitz, Marilyn, et al., 2008) These are the same basic elements necessary for building technique as a singer.

As the youngest participant in this project, Ellie described how she “doesn't really practice. That is something I have always struggled with.” She says she just sings around the house all the time and listens to many singers and types of music and feels her voice changing depending on what and who she is listening to at the time. “I think I've been figuring out my own sound by trying lots of different styles.”

Anthony, at the other end of his voice journey also struggles with practice. “I had and have a very difficult time making a disconnect from music and doing my landscaping. Doing physical work all day long and to sit down and practice at the end of the day was just hard. Hard to do for me. If it weren't for my teaching, I probably wouldn't do anything which is very sad.”

As both a singer and a voice teacher, I have drawn from many schools and pedagogies. David Wilson's description of the act of singing sums up most concisely the foundation for my

teaching: We sing to support (not the other way around). Singing is an instinct first, a skill second.

1. In your brain, you have the impulse to sing, you hear a note or melody inside.
2. As this internal hearing occurs, your breath, vocal tract and physical support system immediately engage in the optimal manner in order to sing this melody.
3. Your mind, body and breath are now fully "supporting" your impulse to express through song.

This simple, miraculous, deep-seated impulse arising from a need to move emotions that cannot be expressed through speech, creates the perfect physical/vocal environment to sing beautifully (Wilson, 2020, p 8).

If this impulse is the seed, it is cultivated by the elements of intention, attention, repetition, and guidance which make up deliberate practice. Why practice? Is technical mastery necessary in order for one's voice use to have the potential to be transformative? The act of singing is simple and natural, yet learning to sing is far from easy (Wilson, 2020). The misconceptions about singing are vast and the level of skill unrecognized and often taken for granted. Singers inhale at irregular intervals, irregularly interrupting their internal pacemakers (Doscher, 1994). They make continual adjustments of lung, rib cage, and abdominal volume, while also making in the moment resonance, articulation, and musical decisions, while allowing emotions to pass through them to be carried on the song.

The unique experience of the singer is that we are our instrument. We do not have a voice separate from us. The vocal systems complex of respiration, phonation, and resonance is dependent on the full functioning of our skeletal, muscular, and nervous systems (Gilman, 2014). Our

somatic experience includes a vocal self-image which is uniquely formed as our self-image develops.

Claire: "The voice, there is no way to separate it from yourself and it is such a vulnerable thing."

Thomas: "Technique definitely helps for me. If it doesn't sound good it is gonna trip me up. Some random people just have a gift, but that's not me. I have always had to figure out how to sing."

Leigh: "One of my challenges is that having taught elementary music for so long, I was living in this very pure head voice world where I was just singing only in this upper range because I thought if I used my whole voice the kids would imitate my vibrato and that was a problem. I tried to sing with support, but ended up using a light head voice. So doing the sound healing, I have been rediscovering my whole voice."

Leigh's challenges echo my own in over-identifying with the 'beautiful' sound of my voice at the expense of developing my whole voice.

"A lot of my vocal training has been holding back and blending (in choral singing). I think my voice is fairly large and its almost scary sometimes to really sing. I'm still on a journey to fully embody my voice."

In choral singing, the issue of blend, especially of women's voices has long been an issue. Much of our choral literature is from a time period when women were not permitted to participate, and so the women's parts today are actually written for unchanged boy's voices. This aesthetic has carried over into other repertoire as well, creating a stressful and frustrating situation for many female singers. Striving for a light, pure, sound without vibrato is fatiguing and

potentially damaging to the voice (Valverde, 2016). As Leigh describes, using the voice in this incomplete way did not enable her to fully embody her voice. It wasn't until study that strengthened the entire voice that she began to experience her own voice in a transformative way.

“I started taking some lessons with a teacher who has been helping me re-engage my thyroid arytenoid muscle, doing a lot of belting things, a lot of hideous sounding chest voice exercises just to strengthen those muscles because I hadn't used them in so long.”

Sylvie and Anthony, both looking back on their professional singing careers reflected on the years of work they put into mastering their craft. Anthony spoke of his training as a musician as being quite difficult, something he did not begin in earnest until after high school. He felt he was so focused on “learning the notes and repertoire and piano” that he did not feel a greater or more meaningful connection to his voice. It wasn't until in his 50's when he felt he was finally singing his best ever, and yet not working or pursuing a career.

“Despite that my voice was not at its peak technically and practice wise, I feel like spiritually the times I did sing, that when I was younger it was learning the notes, learning the words and making it happen. There was a little bit of something missing there.”

Sylvie describes her experience as, “I just have an instrument that is not afraid to go anywhere when I sing. The reason for that is because I have tons of experience surviving as a singer, all over the world in every space and circumstance you can possibly imagine. I have figured out how to keep going and make something happen.”

For myself, technical mastery allows for freedom. Years of practice lead to embodied technique, and yet, it wasn't until I let go completely of all I thought I knew that I allowed my entire voice to come forth.

The experience of singing, and practice of singing is often beyond words. As so much of the anatomy we use in singing has no felt sense ie, no nerve endings in the larynx, or the diaphragm, we rely on imagination, visual imagery to access control of these mechanisms. Feeling the 'head shaped like an elephant' or the singing on the breath as if 'drinking in the sound' are metaphors that when effective, stimulate a physiological response. The same applies to spiritual practice. There is not one book of instructions to follow, there are many, and each person needs to find their own way. Our own personal histories, personalities, likes, and dislikes contribute to how we touch God. Dedicated practice of singing is, or can be, a form of spiritual practice. One becomes skilled at moving in an indescribable place, at being in a suspended state, of letting emotions pass through the body, as fuel for the breath, and not lodging in the muscles as tension and holding. In the Christian tradition this is called kenosis, a self-emptying of one's own will in order to be entirely receptive to God. In the words of Bobby McFerrin, "We enter the stage empty, but we leave full" (McFerrin, 2019).

Excise and Release: Emotion and the Voice

A theme that surfaced again and again among the participants was that of what Michelle called, *excise and release*.

"Perhaps there is something to this—talking to people about their voice—as a therapeutic in itself. It makes sense that if the voice is one of the most authentic, primeval expressions, serving as a direct connection to letting out our deepest emotions, then it would similarly be the most excising path in as well."

"This goes beyond what we might more easily expel from outer layers with our voice. Sure, we sing when we're happy; we sing when we're sad, but what about much deeper? To

things we don't even understand ourselves. How does one get there and tap in? This is where I believe that voice therapy could potentially be more useful than I would have thought two days ago. Excising. It deserves repeating. Perhaps one layer—the more easily accessed one—is expression, while the other is release. Wouldn't that be a therapeutic goal?"

Claire's voice class was based in the work of Kristin Linklater (Linklater, 2006).

"We'd have to do things like breathing exercises and make these different sounds and if you are not used to that kind of work it is embarrassing. I felt so self conscious. After the first class I think I cried because I was just like, this is so much! As we went through the semester it was one of those things I really looked forward to and we all got really close and you could cry." Claire's knowing that there was "something there I needed to work through" led to powerful release.

Sylvie expressed that with her voice as with her life, she wants to expose, and uncover everything.

"It is all about release, getting rid of everything that is not authentic you."

And Ellie's straightforward description of the experience of singing: "You know, like when you want to scream and you scream and it just feels so good? That's what singing is like. It is a release."

Leigh had experienced a lack of release and the frustration of her choral training holding her back.

Kristin also felt that frustration. "Speaking up is one of my biggest challenges. And singing. I have stayed so neutral in my life, trying not to make waves. It is like a call for safety, to be quiet. At this point in my life I am trying to take up space in every way. Deserving of taking

up space. Do I deserve to feel this comfortable. Growing up what does it mean to be proud of how you sound and how you look? Where is the line of being cocky? As a woman are we supposed to be that confident? I grew up with very insecure women in my family? It is always like cover up, stay neutral, you don't want to be standing out too much."

Emotion is what brings these components of breath, body, and voice together to create music. As a voice teacher, I have countless times told students that in the end, it doesn't matter how beautifully you sing if you do not move your listener. As singers, we need to allow our voices to be the vehicle for the story and the feeling of what we are singing. We do this by infusing our voices with emotion. Humans are the only mammals that can voluntarily inhibit emotional expression. Additionally, we are able to recall an emotional experience and bring that to our voices in the present (Chapman & Davis, 1998). We do this via the emotional motor system known as the periaqueductal grey matter which organizes motor and neural processes to enable emotionally expressive vocalization. The coordination of diaphragmatic, abdominal, laryngeal, pharyngeal, and facial muscles are involved, coupled with certain autonomic responses. When we spontaneously laugh or cry, we are experiencing this system at work (Davis, Zhang, Winkworth, & Bandler, 1996). Truly embodied singing also engages this system. In my experience, when I am fully present and deeply connected to what I am singing, all the necessary coordination seems to just happen and I sing with ease and joy. On the other hand, the inhibition of embodied and emotionally expressive singing is not always voluntary and may be the result of many influences, including trauma, fear, and performance anxiety. The work of any performing artist is identifying and releasing these blockages in order to access one's true nature. Eliminating excess muscular tension and activity, releasing emotional and traumatic restrictions, cultivating a

sense of being a clear channel for inspiration.

Sylvie has worked extensively with Skinner Releasing, a method of body work that involves what is referred to as an unfolding triggered by one's availability to letting go of both bones and tissues, as well as preconceived ideas, judgements, and expectations, especially about oneself. The process of releasing leads to a more fully realized potential (Metcalf, 2004).

Similarly, Fitzmaurice Voicework, developed by Catherine Fitzmaurice is a voice training method that utilizes 'Deconstructing and Restructuring' as the process of release and then building of the actor's voice. Deconstructing work involves deep exploration of the autonomic nervous system functions through induced tremoring. Once the autonomic movements of the muscles are deconstructed, breathing becomes uninhibited and restructuring, by incorporating traditional breathing techniques can begin (Fitzmaurice, 1996). There is, in Fitzmaurice Voicework, a recognition of the spiritual and transformative potential, but the process is firmly grounded in pragmatic exercises practicable by anyone regardless of training or aspirations.

Thomas and I have often reflected on how so much of singing is about getting out of one's own way. Eliminating excess muscular tension and activity, releasing emotional and traumatic restrictions, cultivating a sense of being a clear channel for inspiration; like Michaelangelo removing the part of the stone that is not David, until finally, David emerges.

Private, Communal, or Performative Sharing

Singing for Self

Each of these singers described a unique and highly personal journey of finding their own voice, both metaphorically and literally. Of note is the difference between those

who set out on a career path, studying music and singing professionally and those who felt an intuitive need to sing for personal reasons, self healing, and perhaps a sense of facing their own dragon.

“Voice, you have been my most complicated relationship,” wrote Claire in a poem to her voice. She admitted to struggling with her voice for as long as she could remember. She described a feeling of something being blocked, or stuck in her throat, pain, and constriction. She wondered if it was related that as a young girl she had ongoing bouts of strep throat, leading to having her tonsils removed.

“For as long as I can remember, I’ve tried to say things, I can feel it so physically like my throat is I don’t know, like clamping shut.”

“In my last year of college, I don’t know what it was, but there was something in me that thought it would be really powerful to take a couple of singing lessons. “ I asked her about that experience.

“My teacher was the perfect first singing teacher I could have had. She was so spiritually inclined. And I went in really nervous. I don’t think I sang at all my first lesson I was so scared. She was so understanding. We did guided meditations and she said, maybe there is an energy block and she was totally speaking my language. She was so much more holistic than I thought it would be. It wasn’t just singing drills. I just knew there was something that needed to be unblocked there.”

In describing an experience she had during a voice and speech class in college:

“It was truly one of the most powerful experiences I have ever had. I felt my voice expand. Usually when I try to get louder, it is so much force in my throat, but I felt my voice taking up the whole room but I didn’t feel like I was yelling or forcing at all. It was just such a power-

ful experience.”

Claire had an intuitive knowing that, despite her fear, her voice needed to be found, and released.

Michelle recognized how her voice use ebbs and flows according to her emotional state. She wrote the following:

“Started songwriting then and never stopped.

I would spend time alone, winding through the woods, songs spilling out of me, and stopping to lean against a tree to write them down quickly.

I have boxes and books full of lyric and coffee-stained napkins and sheets of paper full of cross-outs.

I'd make up tunes to sing to my boys when they were babies, one for every circumstance...from diaper changes to bedtime.

Along the way, I noticed I wasn't singing much, and that my songwriting was filled with painful escape. Where had my voice gone? Where had I gone?

I ended my marriage.

I moved with my three sons about an hour away, extending my commute to work from ten minutes to closer to an hour. Life was hard, but I was happy.

That commute was my only solitude each day, and I was passing the time by singing and composing, writing on my steering wheel or console—sometimes at red lights and sometimes not.

I made an observation over the next years—about how my voice came and went with life's circumstances. Not a profound discovery when you think about it. The thing that is really interest-

ing, though, is that you don't know you've lost it...until it returns."

"It occurred to me the other day that I've actually been singing almost every thought out loud—to myself, to the cat, taking out my garbage in the dark of night, reciting my to-do list, for some time recently.

This morning, I walked in the kitchen...

(Singing) What should I make for breakfast TODAY?!

My heart swelled as I recognized it.

I am living my musical."

The evident joy in both finding and expressing her voice and using it as her own personal soundtrack is deeply touching. Michelle has no performative goal, but a profound recognition of the sacred nature of her own voice. Her story makes me wish I had realized long ago that to be a singer did not necessarily mean I had to be a performer. My journey might have taken a different trajectory and rather than allowing the deep identification with my voice set the stage for feelings of inadequacy and soul-loss, I might have been able to sooner integrate the discoveries I made through singing.

Singing in Community

Musician and neuroscientist Daniel J. Levitin posits that in Western culture, two categories of musical personalities have emerged: those who perform and those who listen. In Western countries, listeners "do not sing." Levitin points to the imbedded value of singing in other non-Western cultures, like the Sotho villagers in South Africa, where singing is considered a natural, everyday activity performed by everyone, young and old, men and women, and not only

those who have a special talent. Sotho villagers find the statement "I don't sing" inexplicable.

Levitin believes Western culture has indeed split into those who sing and those who do not sing.

Yet, singing is available to all. Singing along with the radio, karaoke, and singing camp fire songs are activities that most people deeply enjoy and are integrated parts of our lives (Levitin, 2008).

The Bruderhof community where Lucille grew up and lives is an exception to this unfortunate cultural leaning. I have sung and taught in this community and it is indeed a very different approach to singing than exists outside in our post-modern world. Another Messiah experience I had was with a Bruderhof community in New York. There was no separation between audience and musicians. All were seated together, singing together, offering it up as a communal sharing for God.

"You see, In our community, (Pre-covid, and I look forward to the day when we can do this again) we get together every day for a communal meal and at the meal we always sing. We always begin with a song and frequently have another song of two at the end. Now that follows the year. If it is winter, we have a whole collection of winter songs. Both folk songs and many home made songs that have become beloved over the years. If it is somebody's birthday, we have birthday songs. A new baby, we have just dozens of lullabies. And we have a big fat section in our songbook also called Fun! Fun songs! And they are much loved. These are things like folk songs, or plays on words, or canons. We have a whole panorama of songs of living. Of the daily life. Absolutely there are sacred songs, not only hymns and also secular songs. For me, there is not too big a difference between them because you know, it is interesting. My whole life whether it be in concentrated worship, or singing about about sleds going down a hill, it is all part of the

same package.”

Collective song has been the backbone of the civil rights movement, demonstrations, protests, as well as a unifying force among workers and the enslaved (Van der Kolk, 2014). Fans in a stadium and birthday celebrations involve group singing. Voices raised together can take the form of shared worship and camaraderie, or can have a competitive nature. Either way, it is shown to connect with an evolutionary mechanism of social bonding that facilitates strong connections among large numbers of people throughout the world (Pearce, 2019).

Singing together may be especially effective at strengthening social ties through the release of endorphins. Singing, drumming, and dancing all result in higher pain thresholds than simply listening to music does. In addition, the performance of music leads to greater experience of positive emotion. This suggests that the bonding and a sense of unity that is integral to protests and demonstrations is strengthened by the act of singing together, due to the increased endorphin release. Collective singing can bring people together despite apparent differences in backgrounds and world views (Suttie, 2016).

Song leader Ben Kramarz (2016) cites Pete Seeger extensively, as the renowned father of community and folk singing in the United States. Pete speaks about our ancestral singing past, when shared song was a part of everyday life, and people sang while working, traveling, and worshipping. Communal singing is a powerful tool for building connection, awakening the sacred, and cultivating love.

When singing together as a group, communication reaches a level beyond conversation. We are in unison, or harmony, simultaneously creating and experiencing an emotional experience (Kramarz, 2016). Moving and linking our bodies takes this even a step further. Katherine Young

calls this “intercorporeity”; inter – together, corp – body. Holding hands, linking elbows, or otherwise physically connecting while singing creates a deep spiritual sense of oneness (Kramarz, 2016). My experience with circle singing was a complete embodiment of what Kramarz describes. Through this immersion, I felt intimately connected to my self and the people around me. I touched my own musicality in a new way and wept at witnessing and being a part of others willing vulnerability and self-exploration. I first met Sylvie here and in her words, “I remember leaving that week feeling like every cell in my body was completely open.” I completely concur.

Lucille says, “There really isn't a big difference between the songs that express the deeper experiences of the heart and the songs that express the joys of life, which you could call secular songs. As an expression of life, to me, it is actually all prayer. It really is all a form of worship, a form of prayer, or expressing something out of one's heart.”

Singing in Performance

Polyvagal theory interprets singing as a neural exercise of the social engagement system. In addition to slow exhalations, singing involves the entire integrated physiology of this system. Singing in effect turns the ‘vagal brake’ on and off, while simultaneously exercising muscles of the head, neck, and face, the middle ear for listening, and the larynx and pharynx for vocal intonation (Porges, 2017). Porges' research indicates that a special combination of sympathetic and parasympathetic activity is required for interpersonal communication. The parasympathetic component, along with both our emotional states and our laryngeal muscle activity, are mediated by the vagus nerve. Thus, one can see how singing is both dependent upon a well regulated internal visceral state, and also how it influences the same. Our core ability to communicate depends, in

part, on the parasympathetic aspect of the vagus (Cazden, 2017). Singing is innately communicative, and when done in performance elevates that communication to level beyond day to day spoken words.

In general, we think of performative singing as a one-way communication. The performer is on stage, giving to an audience who is receiving. However, any performer will report that the energy that comes back from the audience is palpable and vital to the performance. One could interpret this as what P.D. Freinkel (2015) calls a *multilocal participatory knowing*. When everybody is present, performers and audience alike share in something deep and transformative. There is a felt reverence and awe that is difficult to put into words, but is sometimes referred to as theatre magic.

As mentioned, Stephen Porges' Polyvagal theory has many correlations to singing, performance, and consciousness. The ever-balancing relationship of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems creates "dual excitation" (Porges, 2017) or the "Calm Buzz" (Cazden, 2017). Csikszentmihalyi (2009) calls this psychological concept "Flow", a unique state of energized focus and enjoyment when deeply and fully engaged in an activity. Open Focus is a method of attentional training developed by Lester Fehmi (2003). His work has identified four general attentional states based on EEG biofeedback. These are as follows: 1) objective with a narrow focus. 2) objective with an open focus. 3) unitive / immersed with a narrow focus. 4) unitive / immersed with an open focus. Flow, according to Fehmi, occurs in the combination of a unitive / immersed self and the narrow focus of number 3. What is most interesting and relevant to the study of singing and transformation is that in addition, Fehmi has used EEG measurements to demonstrate how accomplished artists, athletes, and meditators have mastered flexible control

over the dimensions of attention, becoming able to merge with many sensory experiences simultaneously. This immersed or unitive consciousness together with open focus is a very different, possibly mystical experience: a state of selflessness with a wide-open beam of awareness. My own experience is consistent with this paradigm. Flow state is more common, achieved in productive and focused practice sessions and rehearsals. The more transcendent, non-dual feeling of connection has been less frequent, and in my experience has occurred only in rehearsals and performance and not in my private practice. I have a sense of my voice, coming from within and through my body connecting and merging with the larger space, other performers, musicians, and audience members, as if we are all co-creating and simultaneously participating in an expression of divinity.

Some singers have an innate sense of comfort while performing. Others struggle to find this comfort and flow. Ellie has felt the most peaceful and calm when performing while Kristin feels pulled out of herself and experiences being torn between the enjoyable, expressive, comfort of her voice and feelings of inadequacy, comparison, and self-judgement.

Therein lies the conundrum of the performer. How to remain open and vulnerable and yet protect ones self from harm. It can take performers years of repetition with trusted guidance to achieve this balance. While some people have sudden spiritual awakenings, some are gradual. Students of singing may have moments of profound understanding, but they do not become reliably embodied without the consistent practice described earlier. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), William James identified two different forms of change. The first is a slow transformation like the opening of a flower. The second is abrupt, sometimes associated with what James calls *mystical states of consciousness* (Schlitz, et al, 2008). As a teacher, I have wit-

nessed both types of awakenings in my students. The sudden insight will inevitably disappear unless it is followed by attention, repetition, and guidance until it becomes integrated into a somatic default pattern.

Breathing, Trauma, and the Nervous System

A central component of the Polyvagal theory is the idea of safety. The theory assumes that it is important to keep the nervous system out of a defensive state, and that is achieved by feeling safe (Porges, 2017). There are deep and intricate connections between the voice and how people deal with trauma. Polyvagal theory states that our social-engagement system depends on nerves that originate in the brain stem regulatory centers. These include the vagus together with adjoining nerves that activate the muscles of the face, throat, middle ear, and larynx. When the Ventral Vagal Complex (VVC) is operating, we have positive and recognizable social interactions; smiling, nodding in agreement, listening, and responding. It also sends signals down to our heart and lungs, slowing down our heart rate and deepening our breathing (Van der Kolk, 2014). Threats to our safety or social connections activate the Dorsal Vagal Complex (DVC). This system extends beneath the diaphragm to the organs of digestion and elimination. Our metabolism is reduced leading to digestive symptoms like diarrhea and nausea. This primitive or reptilian part of the parasympathetic nervous system also induces shallow breathing and slows down the heart rate. When this system is in charge, both ourselves and others cease to matter. Awareness vanishes, and we may no longer even register physical pain. Polyvagal theory asserts that the voice may be especially sensitive to vagal tone (Young et al, 2010). The voice is an indicator of our overall physiological and psychological states, and as such we are able to hear a person's presence in

their voice (Cazden, 2017).

Thomas: "It is amazing how much you can affect someone's soul and whole state of mind with your voice. That is why it has to be real. It has to come from you. You can't trick people with that. If you are being vulnerable and really giving yourself over to the song that's going to reach people. It is a vibration that comes from within your body and goes into someone else's."

Both Kristin and Thomas experienced the pain of having a parent criticize and even demean their voice. Rather than feeling free to use their voice as a natural vehicle for expression, they each struggled with anxiety around their voice, who they are, and where singing fit in. Thomas talked at length about the trauma he experienced through the outright lack of support from his mother and how that has impacted his struggle in finding his own voice. "As a kid I tried to sing but did not get a lot of support from my family. They said I was terrible and laughed at me. So I thought I had a terrible voice. I just always thought I couldn't sing." Now at age 40, "I don't need my mother's approval. She just doesn't get it. It has been a big obstacle with my voice. My big thing now is just let myself be. Let my voice be. It is so so hard for me not to put on or mimic someone else's voice because I just don't think it is going to be good enough. There is no truth to it." We have been working together in private lessons for about two years.

"So I gave up singing for a while. As a younger adult, I sabotaged myself and didn't do things that I enjoyed. Then I met you and I had been thinking about and talking about how I wanted to take singing lessons again. Since working with you I feel like I have really found a voice that is my own and that I like."

Judith Miller tells a story about a young woman who shared a spiritual vision with a trusted teacher who proceeded to ridicule and shame her, telling her that her vision was "non-

sense” (Miller, 2015). In our current distrustful post-modern culture, I suspect this may be a common occurrence with a similar effect to the voice shaming and resultant trauma as experienced by Thomas.

Kristin recounted how as a young child she would sing to self soothe. The youngest of five children, her earliest memories of singing were to calm and soothe herself while her parents were fighting. As early as age 7 she would go in the bathroom and sing to herself and make up songs. At some point she realized that other people liked her voice, and she began singing at open mics and performing. That brought up a lot of issues around being ‘good enough’. “It got me too into my head, what am I doing? What am I trying to do with this?” She went back to singing for herself, privately as a sort of nervous system soothing mechanism.

Kristin talked about her struggles with performing and how it takes her outside of herself and brings up issues of perfectionism and being not good enough. She repeatedly put herself in performing situations, and then retreated into singing for her own pleasure and comfort when performing would change the nature of why she sang. She talked about hearing someone out in a public place, just singing without a care and thinking, “I want that freedom. And I could have that freedom. Practicing singing more in front of people is helpful.” I asked if singing for others has the same self soothing quality as singing for herself. She answered, “the first 10 seconds are not that soothing, but seeing it as sharing is. That is how I have to see it, as sharing, rather than ego. I can touch into that deep place of spirituality. That is how I connect, big time, to my higher power, through sound and words. When other people are there, it kind of pulls me out of it. Then when I am done singing it is like I have opened and I’m like ‘aallll riiiiight....’ My heart is wide open.”

Michelle told a story that demonstrated her voice's intuitive sense of safety. She told of a time driving in a car with someone she dated after her divorce. She would sing, but never fully, and never facing him. She would turn and face the window. "I don't know why," she said. I asked if she sang with Mike, her second husband, and by her account the love of her life. "Oh yes!" She beamed. "We sang all the time!"

There exists a dance of sorts between the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and the parasympathetic nervous systems (PNS) that is choreographed by the breath. When we inhale, we stimulate the SNS, which increases the heart rate. When we exhale, we stimulate the PNS, which decreases the heart rate. The balance between these is called heart rate variability. Good heart rate variability is a measure of general overall health (Van der Kolk, 2014). It is also of note that these two systems are not opposite ends of a spectrum, but operate alongside one another in ever varying proportions (Porges, 2017). The act of singing is an exercise of heart rate variability, whether intentional or not, in that the exhale is necessarily longer than the inhale as the singer sustains notes, words, and phrases. In addition to improving heart rate variability, singing is known to reduce blood pressure, decrease stress, boost the immune system, and stimulate endorphin release, leading to improved mood. Singing has also been shown to activate the areas of the brain responsible for releasing dopamine and other euphoria-inducing opioids (Austin, 2009).

The breath is the power source for the voice and singing both relies upon and facilitates deep diaphragmatic breathing. The singer must take in more air than the speaker, and then exhale on a long slow controlled outbreath. This process repeated over and over again is the very foundation of singing (Austin, 2009). The process of breathing is both voluntary and involuntary. We breathe without having to think about it, but we have the capacity to control our breathing and

thus affect the body and mind. Breath can be thought of as a bridge between the energy body and the emotional body (Cope, 1999). Again we see how spiritual traditions around the globe incorporate breath and voice understanding through a heart-centered cognition this bridge to the divine.

Claire: "I love chanting, an OM sound or an AH sound to fully exhale and just draw out a sound is one of the most powerful ways I can meditate."

Kristin: "My singing is definitely a spiritual practice. A movement through my body, getting out stagnation, I think that self care is a way of being spiritual. By taking care of myself and my spirit I am honoring my higher power."

Leigh: "Some of my most powerful meditation experiences are just me sitting on my cushion and channeling whatever sounds want to come through me because I am so tapped in. It is a way for me to get out of my head and get into my body and let the sounds come through."

Richard Brown has developed a system of breathing exercises that parallel both yogic pranayama and breathing exercises used by singers. What he calls Resistance Breathing is similar to yogic *Ujayi* breath. One creates an "ocean sound" by gently constricting in the back of the throat. This resistance is also achieved by singing or chanting as the vocal folds are engaged, creating turbulence in the vocal tract. This slows down the rate of respiration and increases lung pressure, thus stimulating the vagus nerve. The slow exhale, which is emphasized through resistance breathing, stimulates the PNS, thus leading to "rest and digest," and a relaxed and calm state (Brown & Gerbarg, 2012).

Semi-occluded vocal tract postures, such as lip trills, tongue trills, humming and the straw phonation developed by Dr. Ingo Titze, are another form of resistance breathing which

have tremendous healthful benefits for the singer. By adding phonation to the breath, the resistance breathing becomes resistance phonation (Titze & Verdolini Abbott, 2012). Sympathetic vibrations are felt in the face, head, neck and chest, stimulating vagal tone. Energy can become blocked in the body and the resonating of internal vibrations can help to release it. In turn, this helps feelings come to the surface and the body to return to a state of equilibrium and vitality. Individuals who have experienced trauma often feel disconnected from their bodies. Singing provides a unique opportunity to access and express difficult and often deeply buried emotions (Austin, 2009).

According to the ancient Jewish tradition of mystical biblical interpretation, the *Kabbalah*, each voice is unique and is representative of the highest form of the soul. The Hebrew prophets used specialized techniques of singing to open their awareness and cultivate a state of inner directed being and prophecy (Kaplan, 1998). Looking through the lens of physics, we see that sound waves cause particles to vibrate. If we look through the lens of spirituality, chanting and singing connect the individual to the universe. Studies on the effect of chanting on the brain show that sound induced vibrations have an impact on emotional regulation (Brown & Gerbarg, 2012). “The voice is the instrument that guides us to the Larger self that lurks inside us” (Linklater, 2003, p 25).

The breathing practices used in singing, just like pranayama in yoga, aim to cultivate the meditative consciousness called *Samadhi*. Samadhi is an intensified concentration, that rather than being focused on one point, encompasses an expanded awareness. My experience of a Samadhi-like state in performance is felt as having all my senses turned up, while maintaining a central groundedness and calm. I am alert, tuned in, aware of every detail around me, yet at a dis-

tance at the same time; an observer and a player. This is what I experienced during that Messiah performance. From a Polyvagal perspective, I was in a unique state of optimal autonomic balance between the SNS and PNS, together with an active social engagement system, and regulation of the sub-diaphragmatic organs, culminating in a feeling of safety that allowed for deep connection and I would say, transcendence.

Conclusion

Singing has been a central part of my path of psycho-spiritual growth as well as a barometer of my internal emotional life and sense of safety in the world. From my earliest childhood, it has connected me to the sacred as well as grounded me in my body. Like Abraham Maslow's peak experiences, singers report feeling simultaneously more powerful and also more helpless while singing, and of feeling great ecstasy, wonder, and awe. Unity, harmony, and interconnectedness are attainable.

Sylvie: "What I remember is the cymbals, the stick, the hands on the piano, and the strings on the bass and the interchange of those things. And then her voice interacting with that dance. And so that's been my whole journey. The collaboration, the connection, the improvisation." What else is life but these?

Contemplative teachers speak of 'dropping the mind into the heart' and heart-centered cognition, as opposed to the linear, binary, analytical cognition which is the domain of the brain. Neuroscience, along with the mystics, tell us that heart-centered cognition is an operating system of sorts, a way to organize the perceptual field so that we perceive holographically rather than through the subject/object differentiation central to brain centered cognition. "Heart-centered

cognition is the foundational physiological prerequisite for the emergence of a stable non-dual consciousness” (Bourgeault, 2016). This has been my experience of singing. When I am truly singing with all of my self, it is heart-centered cognition that takes over and transports me.

Kristin: "When I sing, I feel like my heart is being hugged."

Leigh: "When I can stay out of my mind and stay present, it sounds better, feels better, and it is not coming from my brain but feels like it is flowing from my heart."

Lucille: "It is an expression of life, to me, it is actually all prayer. It really is all a form of worship, a form of prayer, or expressing something out of one's heart."

My path began with a trauma, the death of my father, whose gift to me, unbeknownst to me, was also the path of my healing. That little tape recorder began my journey of healing and self-discovery, through my voice, to my Self.

Saint Benedict, when asked, "What do you monks do in the monastery all day?" answered, "Fall down and get up. Fall down and get up. Fall down and get up" (Finley, 2017). This, with intention, attention, repetition, and guidance is the singer's journey to integration, embodiment, and transformation.

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