

# Trauma-Informed Voice Pedagogy

## A Report from the Front Lines

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"Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

—Rainer Maria Rilke

I cannot believe I am here: losing it, crying into a mic, telling my story full of questions, disbelief, anger and pain. I am standing in front of three cohorts of fellow doctoral candidates and all my professors in a huge conference room, with a simultaneous panel of experts in education from all around the world on Zoom. I am shaking. I am falling apart. I am living my truth, and I am asking "Why?"

George Fox University, where I pursue a Doctorate in Educational Leadership, chose "Self-care for the Educator" as the topic of our 2021 summer scholar/practitioner colloquium. This is a cutting-edge discussion in a field with a shockingly high attrition rate in first- to third-year teachers. We ask: how can we give ourselves fully to teaching, but not be literally consumed by our work? We discover deep truths about our calling to teach in a world that makes it harder and harder to feel we are following the call. It is liberating to explore answers to real and deep questions. I feel seen and heard, and I am testing the strength of the acceptance and challenge I feel from this doctoral program by throwing my whole life at the system, to see if it can handle my story. I need to know if I am safe. My breakdown, in front of everyone, is an honest, raw, cry from the soul. Not to my surprise, the room full of trauma-informed educators, and the panel dedicated to self-care, handles my story with grace, gentleness, academic prowess and, most importantly, mindfulness.

By the time I am done, everyone knows I had a hell of a year. Barely two months after lockdown began, my husband, Jon, could not get out of bed. That began a 21-day slide into his transition from this life. It was unexpected, heartbreaking. We didn't have our honeymoon. It was scheduled for the month he died.

Jon did not have a will. I lose the home we had lived in together, and the life we had started to build, including a new voice studio in a beautiful, dream Victorian parlor. I lose a step-daughter, and in Jon, an unconditional lover, an advocate and protector. I leave the community we shared, finding a soft, sad landing; coming full circle, at a small cottage in a forest where I was brought home as a baby, on my parents' property. I heal a little, in this unexpected place, and with time I am able to look at my life with the unflinching eyes of deep grief.

Three days after Jon dies, George Fox University admissions calls to ask if I would start my doctoral program. I deferred the year before because we wanted to enjoy our first married year together. I know I need an anchor to the present as I come down from shock. I begin my studies with a broken heart, a numb body, and a fuzzy mind. I do it because Jon's spirit tells me to believe in my voice and myself, regardless of how they manifest.

I take enticing courses: philosophy and ethics, leadership and purpose. I wake up, little-by-little, with the help of caring colleagues and big-hearted, inquiring, and compassionate professors. My teaching, also an anchor in the turmoil, is going well. In many ways, my private students say, our work is more focused than ever. It is like "there is no filter; losing Jon has made everything more real."

I heal from losing Jon like peeling an onion, in layers. We can't have a funeral, so we have Zoom remembrances and I attend his cremation in person with my pastor, who is also my boss at my church choir gig. During covid lockdown, two people are allowed in the crematorium with the technician and the body. I sing Strauss' *Zueignung*, a cappella. Jon especially loves when I sing in German. I start referring to him in the present. So many things about him are still alive to me. I remember my singing teachers telling me there are some songs we keep learning the meaning of, over and over, as we live life. I thank God, as I watch Jon's earthly body turn to dust, I've chosen a path of voice that encompasses all of life's experiences.

Not long after the cremation, I take a course on race, class and equity in education. Jon died just four days before George Floyd was killed. I am aware, through my own fog of loss, that the world is going through its greater turmoil, and my tornado of pain feels perfectly in tune with the simultaneous

pandemics of covid and social injustices. I am struck with a reality that's tickled the back of my mind and plagued my heart for years: private voice teaching is not equitable. If Jon and I disagree about anything in our first year of marriage, it is about my teaching free classes to anyone who wanted to sing, along with my paying students. "It's unsustainable" Jon says. My heart wants to give voice to everyone who wants it. So I pull myself up by my bootstraps and write a grant to teach singers from my area school district, one without a music program, with a formal food insecurity level of 40%, but according to teachers here, in reality closer to 60%, this summer. I'm serving singers who might not otherwise have the means, and I'm also meeting my needs.

Stripped raw by grief and loss, yet fueled by new clarity of conviction, my life completely shifts again. I choose to add another Masters degree to my Doctorate, and start a path to become certified to teach K-12 music. This way, I can continue to answer my heart to teach all school students for whom music is a language, and have the benefit of a steady income. I discover my true *"why"* we are taught to identify in our teaching: I teach voice, and music, for equity.

This is not the life I dreamed of as a young student. My plan at first was to be a "great singer." As this youngster, I wanted a career, and I had one. When I reach a point where I think "I arrived," with agents in Europe and more and more frequent gigs, I feel progressively more empty. A singing career is not all I want.

When I meet Jon, I know a life with him, a life of love, peace and mutual support, is all I want. I never think I'd marry—I feel I'm too broken. Yet here's this man who sweeps me off my feet. He's a rock. He lets me take pressure off my private teaching. He lets me relax into the relationship. He is my safety.

Going to school in my early 40s, with all the implications of study at this time of life, my classes tend to burrow deep under my skin. A trauma-informed education course gets me thinking about how and why safety has been so important to me as a singer, as a learner, and as a human being. My singing teachers, diva warriors each of them, taught, and still teach me, via my memory and countless recorded lessons, to create safety for my singing heart. Jon teaches me to be safe in my body. When he dies, I realize I've lost my crutch, my helper on my way to full embodiment. I have to look at the truth of my story more deeply so I can find a foundation in life that's mine to stand on, fully integrated, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. I have to know how to stand alone on this Earth; Jon's gone—at least, in body.

The language of trauma-informed education brings back the main, ever-present thread of my path to voice: learning, through mindfulness and compassion, to be fully embodied and present, even, and especially, when things get tough. What I had not acknowledged back in the days when I sang in Europe, not having the language to articulate it, is that I was fully dissociated for much of my life. My childhood, adolescence, undergrad years, and even the beginning of my singing career, I spent about two feet above my right shoulder. At 27, I had fleeting experiences, brought on my severe panic attacks, of full embodiment. I did not give this the weight and importance then, which I do now. I did not know, in living dissociated and subsequently coming back home to my body, that I experienced something noteworthy. At the time, my coming home to my body felt like a side-effect to finding voice. Now, I know it was much closer to "the main event." Or, maybe, finding voice and finding my body were and are one and the same. I did not know how my own experiences living out of, and then learning to live in, my body, would cause me to be a more trauma-informed singing teacher and person.

As I acknowledge the truth of childhood trauma and sexual abuse in my past, the onion layers of distress and disembodiment in my life continue to fall away. Jon died of high-functioning, end-stage alcohol dependency that was accelerated by a pre-existing liver condition. An extrovert needing his tribe, Jon's well-hidden illness was exacerbated by the forced social isolation brought on by the pandemic. In owning my own life, I have to acknowledge all the things I denied in our relationship. I see how I avoided important truths. I avoided my passion for teaching because I thought others would see it as me failing at performing. I avoided financial intimacy with Jon and financial independence for myself, because I needed safety and security, at any cost. Uncomfortable conversations put that safety at risk. I didn't believe I could create safety and security for myself. I married Jon, who made me feel safe physically. With him I would not have to acknowledge the truth of my past. The biggest gift of losing him is I am forced to find my own strength, in and as me.

Now, when I tell a singing student their voice is theirs to discover, the voice I am talking about is one and the same with the truth of their story. I have a lot of space, unconditional space, to hold their stories, in light of my own. I learn enough from asking my own questions and letting go of rote answers to life to know the magic of life and voice lives in the questions we have, themselves, just like Rilke so eloquently teaches us.

Inquiry-based study is at the core of my current learning. It is also what has brought me to this point in my life, where things look so different than I had ever imagined, and where life feels

more true and real than ever. It seems any time I think I have an answer, I lose it—only to discover a deeper layer of truth as the old answers falls away.

Jon loves me unconditionally, and I, him, even as life itself, our mere survival, can seem conditional. I think voice, like life, can feel as fleeting as love when we are in the process of teaching and learning it—especially in the midst of a pandemic where everyone may be struggling with trauma and its aftermath.

As I cry in front of my colleagues and professors, I feel my heart burning and my mind clear. I observe I am more present in my pelvis, my core and my torso that I have ever been. These educators, struggling to be real and to create true safety for themselves and their students in a world in flux, are my solace. I find my adult and childhood trauma, my loss, my grief for my husband and the child I never was, has made me a more complete human being and academic, a more honest and open teacher, and a more comprehensive master of my singing instrument. I learn, as my great teacher in Vienna, Kammersaengerin Hilde Zadek, still teaches me in spirit: “to sing, even when silent.” I learn to be safe in my heart, my mind, and my body, by living, and telling, my truth. I learn to trust I can live my story, even, and especially, beyond words. Becoming more trauma-informed for myself, I become more alive, more present and available to others.

This feels like just a beginning. The part of me that once wants to grasp at solutions, that wants an answer to heal every pain, is no longer fooled. I know in teaching and in learning, we are living *life*. When we sing and teach, we are living. Teacher and student alike, we are walking paths to more and more understanding, even as we ask life’s deepest questions, and find confounding silence as life’s only response.

As our love grows, so does our grief and our fear. As life becomes more full, it also can feel more empty. We get to choose to be honest, to live our true stories, and to come together with others who are wanting to do the same.

This is why I’m a member of NATS: a desire to connect, in true authenticity, with colleagues who are committed to doing the same. If I knew it would take a year from hell to get me to be honest, I don’t know if I would have chosen it. But Madame Zadek always says, resonant in my memory: “You don’t sing voice. It sings you.” And so, I continue to live, and I continue, like, and with, all of you, to teach, to be, and to sing.

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