A Journey Worth Sharing:  
An Interview With Jason  

dby Jason McCullough and Sandra Shotwell  

Over the years, I've become aware of limitations in voice work, that the discipline has tools, some excellent tools, but for a few people much more is needed in the muscular release which is necessary before the voice can actually vibrate throughout the body. At the end of last school year, I talked for about an hour and a half to Jason about his experience with voice during his three years of training. His vocal development had been particularly difficult, beyond the range of what one might expect. I recorded the session, and have condensed, edited and rearranged the interview a bit, for your reading. Jason had a journey which took him to places he never imagined, to a beginning. I think his journey is worth sharing. I began by talking about how he had become so bound.

"I had bike raced for about six or seven years, and being hunched over on the bike limited my range of motion. But I think one of the biggest things is that once I started bike racing, I had gotten into weightlifting as a form of exercise. I'd always needed some kind of physical release like that, and the weight lifting had shortened the muscles to a point where I had forgotten what the full range was . . . Alexander and Feldenkrais were able to get me short term results and sometimes get me to a place where muscles were releasing, but I think I hadn't developed a sensitivity yet to keep the release.

I got to a point where every time I would open my mouth I would kind of turn off . . . it was almost like having an out of body experience because I wasn't present, and that's what I've understood grounding to be. And I could work on a monologue or I

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could work on a scene, for an infinite amount of time and the progress I would make would be so small because when I would actually try to be the character, and do it, I would check out, because I didn't want to be present with the voice that I had.

There came a point last year where I decided that if I was ever going to make any progress I would have to stop. And I think that was before I went to the O'Neill last summer and that's where it first started to change. I had four or five months for my muscles to be able to relax a little bit but I think I'd also had a habit of tensing my shoulders and a habit of limiting my vocal use just from the time when I was a child. So . . . I hadn't ever known the possibilities of voice. I think that was one of the things that was so hard for me, people telling me, or you helping me find my 'real voice,' which was much deeper and much more resonant than what I was used to . . . that I hadn't ever considered that as a possibility. And I could hear that in other people, but for me to think that could be my voice was so foreign to me. I wasn't used to having any vibration, that wasn't something I was sensitive to at all."

Finally, I suggested that Jason see a physical therapist, one who had helped me a great deal when my muscle tension had come to a place of no return. I first met Elizabeth when she came to me for private voice lessons, later I went to her for therapy. She works with athletes, musicians, dancers and difficult referrals. Through this she has developed her own technique, which involves icing the muscle, before applying deep tissue massage, her magic fingers guided by many years of intimacy with what she calls "unhappy muscles."

"I had gone to her, and you had told me, 'Just tell her that you want to free up your jaw.' And so I told her that and she immediately started working on my ribs. I kind of said, 'Well, I'm looking for release up here,' and she said, 'Oh, yes, yes, yes.' And all of a sudden, I was aware of how much space there is between my arm pits and my hip. And so I got a kinesthetic sense of how big that area was and what it was, and how it moved and what the normal range was.

I had serious muscle restrictions with my shoulders and my pectoral muscles that were pulling my whole shoulder girdle over, and until those were released, and my shoulder girdle dropped, we weren't ever going to get the release in the back of the neck which was going to release the jaw, in the front of the neck, which was where a lot of the tension was which was raising my larynx . . . And so Elizabeth with her ice method, working with her over a period of about six months, finally got the release in those muscles . . . The first time I went with her two weeks, three times a week, but we didn't even get to the neck until the very last two sessions. She gave me exercises which I continued to do. I went back to her just about a month ago, and saw her once a week for about a month, so four or five more sessions. This time we would do about a half hour just to fine tune the shoulder area, and to remind me again what full range of motion is, and then we did a lot of work on the neck, starting on the back neck and working around to the front. And she'd say, 'Oh my goodness! I've never felt that before. We're in some new territory . . . I felt something release there . . . It's softening up here, I've never felt that . . . I've never had to work with somebody with that specific kind of release.' And she could feel my tongue releasing at points, the front, here. One of the things I've noticed . . . you could never see my Adam's Apple . . . and there's a little bump right there. It's dropped down, maybe a half an inch. But that half inch is miles and miles and miles because now I can feel when I'm raising it."

One day last spring, Jason came to school after having a session with Elizabeth, and upon seeing him, I said, "You have a neck!" And he did, where he had not had one before. It seemed miraculous. "I could not stop looking at myself in the mirror because I looked so different. I went to a party last night and I was wearing a tuxedo, and you could see my neck, sticking out from above the shirt line, and normally my collar would go right up to my chin. My face has changed slightly. I swallow differently—I drink water differently. So many things. It's changed how I chew. I think that's been the biggest difference, is with Elizabeth's release, I've actually been able to feel what it's like to be relaxed, rather than to always be tight. I think we could have worked forever on that without actually me realizing it, and once I started realizing that physically, everything opened up . . . because I've known it and worked so long intellectually, that once my body finally realized it, then so many more things were possible. 'Oh, that's what it feels to vibrate in your stomach or at the back of your head.' And as I did more, more, more voice work, I noticed that sitting and having coffee somewhere, sitting up against a chair I could feel my back vibrating against the chair or that I could feel the cup vibrating in my hand.

My sister called me the other day on the phone and she said, 'Well, it doesn't sound like you.' And I said, 'Well, it's me.' And my parents have all remarked about how my voice has changed and you know, I read, if I go out to breakfast with somebody, I'll read the paper, I'll read little stories out of the paper to them. I think of the voice now as something physical, and the voice and the vibrations are things that change the world.
And I've come to think that we may have thoughts and we may have ideas, but that they don't exist until we manifest them somehow, in writing, in words, and words are so powerful because we're actually creating them through breath. You've always said how important breath is and I never understood that until that point, that I breathe in this air, and what comes out are these thoughts. My thoughts, with my voice. And that was a big moment where I claimed my voice as my own. I'm a very emotional person and I think one of the things that I have is a great emotional well to draw from. But I never knew how to get to that, I never knew how to get to that. And now I don't have to work at it, it's there... and that was all part of hooking up the mind and the voice and realizing that this is how you get what you want in the world. This is how you get things done, how you express your greatest joys and your greatest hurts. Now it's so much more about, 'What's the breath behind this sentence or this thought?' How do I breathe this in? And breathing it in is how I think you get in touch. You breathe into the character's soul, really. I think. The immediacy of breathing brings me to the immediacy of the moment.

And so through that process of me becoming very frustrated and getting to a place where I thought that I would never, never be able to work through it, coming to a place where, little things like at the coffee shop, day to day, giving me new awareness and new pleasure out of my voice, I started using my voice in a fun way. As a tool to be expressive, and that, I think, was also a key mental breakthrough."

"I watch Jason progress from an extremely vocally limited actor, to one who could be expressive and affective, knowing that this was just a beginning. For me, his last performance, in SOMEONE WHO'LL WATCH OVER ME, was his most alive, his poetry unforgettable."

"You know the first time I read that poem, I cried, it was so beautiful. And I was thinking, you know, 'I don't like poetry!' It's what I thought... that made me understand things differently, because he, Michael, found joy in the world through words, spoken words, and at Edward's greatest moment of need, he comforts him with a poem. And being able to be Michael, made me understand different things about how important language can be. So, my process... it's changed my life. Because it's so, it's so integral to who you are, that it has affected every part of my life. And now I'm fascinated with poetry, and when I read plays now, I read all my plays out loud because that's the only way I understand them.

"I've been so surprised this last year in all the things that I thought I knew, understanding things in a new way... things shifting. The ability I have now to change my mind about what I think something is, based on my experience, because of understanding, thinking I understood what vibration was and then... having you say, 'Just relax with the language and let it affect you,' and thinking I was doing that. Then in SOMEONE WHO'LL WATCH OVER ME, having the poem after Adam's death and just doing, being able to do that and realizing what a different experience that was, and saying, 'Okay so I guess I didn't know.' Voice has gone from something I avoid to something that's like my hobby now, something I play with constantly. It's changed me as a person, and as an artist it's changed me."

Jason and I wish to thank all of Jason's trainers, especially Dawn McCaugherty and Julie Boyd.

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