

# Tuning into the cascade of experience

I've written before about the [stirring voice work of Nadine George](#). My introduction to the work last year has turned out not to be an isolated encounter but the beginning of an exploration that I suspect I might pursue for some time. Most recently, I joined a two-day workshop in Glasgow with a group of people with varying levels of experience in the method – from decades to none. Nadine's work continues a tradition begun by [Alfred Wolfsohn](#) and developed by [Roy Hart](#). If voice work conjures for you a technical exercise in projecting one's voice, this is much more than that. It is a journey in giving voice to aspects of one's self that don't easily find expression. It's a form of self-development that takes effect remarkably quickly. If my initial work with Nadine touched me profoundly, the opportunity to practise with a group penetrated to a further level of depth.

It's harder to write about a group experience than about a lesson on my own. My experience is wrapped up with that of everyone else. It's not just mine to share. So this piece is published with the consent of the others.

Nadine's method pitches participants into close connection from the outset. Each day begins with breathing and body work. This involves hands-on contact, synchronised breathing and, ultimately, embracing of random partners. Keep in mind that, while some of the group know each other, for everyone there are strangers in their midst. On the first day, this part of the process amounts to an invitation to push beyond feelings of awkwardness – an invitation to work with a closeness that conventions normally bracket out of everyday interactions with others. On the second day, after a full day's work the day before, we're coming together

with familiarity. It becomes an expression of the warmth and trust that we have established with each other and that creates the safety to pursue deep work.

The next part of the process is focussed on warming up the voice, working through the sounds of the four qualities of voice. Nadine characterises these (depending on from where they emanate in the body) as deep male, high male, deep female and high female. I understand that in some contexts there is resistance to these characterisations, given the turn in our culture towards gender fluidity. My own experience is that working with the four qualities creates an opening to the gender fluidity that is in each of us. This is borne out by the next part of the process, whereby we take it in turns to explore a single quality of voice: deep male on the first day; deep female on the second.

For each sound, we respond to Nadine playing a note which begins in the middle of the keyboard and goes by stages towards the high treble notes and the low bass notes. So, regardless of which quality of voice we are exploring, each participant has the opportunity to find within themselves sounds that are typically associated with male or female. In fact, some of the interesting emotional experiences seem to happen at the transition points between gender associations. The point is not necessarily to match the tone of the note being played, but to allow the vocal energy inside oneself to be released. At the upper and lower reaches, what I experienced was contact with something wild and primal inside myself. I think I observed this in the others too. I'll return to this shortly.

But, to complete the process, the remainder of the day is spent working on a piece of text. In our case, we take it in turns to work in pairs on a dialogue from *Macbeth*. In the scene, Macbeth has just murdered his king and he and Lady Macbeth are facing the enormity of what they have done. Nadine exhorts us to work at top volume, allowing our interpretation to be guided more by the felt experience

of the earlier exercises than by our cognitive sense-making. I am paired with a partner who, like me, is a novice at this. Having been a broadcast reporter in the early part of my career, I have a reasonable facility to make intellectual sense of a text as I give voice to it. But this is entirely different. I spoke from a place that felt Macbeth's despair rising within me while at the same time responding to the energetic, mocking contempt of my partner's voicing of Lady Macbeth, berating her husband for lack of courage. But this is not all. Our performance was not a discrete act but, coming last in the turn-taking, introjected and built upon the earlier interpretations of our co-participants. Since the others were either more experienced in the method or professionally-trained performers or both, they set a high bar. It took some nerve to get up and perform in front of them as peers. But, being part of their community of practice, we felt supported to do so and found within ourselves the spark that set light to our performance.

But let me return to working with the qualities of voice. It was in this part of the process that something shifted in me on the second day. We were working in a large hall and gathered in a semi-circle around a piano on stage for the singing. As it turned out, my turn was to come second to last, as Nadine began the turn-taking at the opposite end of the line from where I was sitting. I had plenty of time to attune to the emotional experience of the others. The sound was deep female (on the vowel sound "Oo"). From the first, there was tangible courage as each of us stepped into the exercise. For instance, my partner in the *Macbeth* dialogue had spoken the previous day of the fear and shame she had felt as a child when trying to sing and been disparaged by her teachers. But here she was stepping into the space and finding her voice – at first, hesitantly, and then with force.

Starting softly seemed to be a pattern with this sound. Two other female participants began in this way and then found more volume as they covered a full range of voice from high feminine, through what seemed an aggressive male to a more

primal and assertive sound in the lowest registers. These were abstract sounds but full of emotional power.

What we began to see was how one person's performance influenced the next. Another of the women, a trained actor, approached the sound with attack and passion, as did the next person but in a softer way. Next up was a man who has been working with the method for quite a number of years. He started soft and explored this softness up through the higher registers. Gradually, he found something more aggressive in the descent. At the end, he was in a fierce, animalistic place. He had clearly reached into the core of his being and we were each touched by it – none more so than the person who was to follow him. She stepped up with raw presence, again bringing a passion to her exploration of the notes, and ended up at the lowest tones simply working into the breath. Sitting just behind her, I observed the transmission of her vocal energy through her body as she worked. She was moved as she sat down – shaken, perhaps, by the power she was finding in herself.

What had been going on for me all this time was an opening of the heart. As the sounds everyone was making penetrated my body, I was attentive to the felt experience, the sensations arising in me. I felt this especially powerfully through the turns immediately preceding mine. By the time I stood up, I was in a tender place.

As I went up the scales, I was matching the notes to begin with but also approaching them with curiosity. There was vibration in my voice from the start which was an expression of the vulnerability with which I had entered the space. As we reached the higher notes, I did not switch to the higher register as I might have done. I stayed with the male but let the female break through. When it did, it was usually finding the note we were at. What emerged was a plaintive wail, switching back and forth between the male and female. There was sorrow mixed with force. As we moved down the octaves, I passed through a comfortable home base and reached the lowest notes that I could barely sound. Some of them I did manage to

reach. But then something else broke through: a vibrating through the body and a desperate roar – an insistence on still holding my place as the ability to sing the notes slipped out of reach.

I had reflected the night before that my presence to the work was being constrained by my attachment to following the notes, but here I hadn't been in the grip of that attachment. I found something different: an essence of my inner being, released from a cognitive exercise of voice.

I sat down and Nadine asked, as she asks everyone, whether there was anything I wanted to say. I was deeply affected and conscious of holding a grounded position to contain myself. I couldn't really articulate what I had experienced. I said that I had felt powerful but also tender. I described having been influenced by the "cascade of experience" that had preceded me as each person had taken their turn to reach into themselves. This had created a significantly different context to that of doing the voice work in one-to-one classes. I don't think I could have approached the group without having been inducted into the work in a safe, individual space. Working with the method in a group was a further step outside my comfort zone, but it was propelling me forward at pace.

There was one person left to follow me. Her work was quieter but no less resonant. I thought I detected grappling with death in where she reached. She spoke of a rage and Nadine quoted Dylan Thomas's "rage against the dying of the light." As we went round the circle for reflections, death was present in the discourse. One of the participants spoke of her work in a hospice. She spoke of the responsibility to be present, which landed with me with respect to my rather different work as a coach.

I was noticing the paradoxes that were coursing through me: the vitality that arises in the opening to death; the blending of male and female energy between us and within us (that released in me, as Nadine observed, a male strength); the power to be found in vulnerability.

For me, the workshop represented a coming together of various channels of development that I have been pursuing as a coaching practitioner: the cultivation of [relational presence](#); attunement to [limbic resonance](#); the practice of mindfulness in relationship through [insight dialogue](#); an opening to felt, embodied experience and its intuitive processing by the brain's [right hemisphere](#). All of these, in different ways, tune into our embodied experience and emotional connection to each other. The whole weekend was an object lesson in the rewards of what I have come to think of as the risk of intimacy. Our need for closeness is core to our animal nature and yet closeness is increasingly attenuated in our time-poor, tech obsessed and instrumental culture. It is also fraught with risk given the abuses of intimacy that the MeToo scandals have brought to light.

Nadine's work creates a safe environment in which we can bathe in the affirmatory nurturing of closeness. She never gives feedback that isn't wrapped in a good dose of praise for one's courage and achievement. This mobilises the healthy, resourceful part of oneself to step further into the exploration.

But there's a distinctive aspect to working with voice which also allows the sorrowful and pained part of oneself to find expression in a safe way. In parallel with the voice work, I have also been exploring Julia Vaughan Smith's work on [trauma](#). Julia talks of the implicit memories that are encoded in infancy in response to experiences that, in our absolute vulnerability and dependence on others, we perceive as existentially threatening (and which may actually be so). Our physiology develops defences and survival strategies that we carry through life in ways that cut us off from our embodied feelings. Nadine's method - with its abstract sounds, connection to the body, and the linking of the inner self to the external world - seems to access these implicit memories and literally gives voice to them even though they are beyond language. While I have spoken of the experience as animalistic, there is also something to it that is distinctly human. So far as we know, we are the only species that are conscious of mortality and so can reflect on how our

lives will come to an end. The voice method lets us open to the rage at our mortality, and energises us to use our remaining time wisely. In the interstices of the work there was talk between us about the state of the world and the impact we could have upon it.

Sometimes rage is unhelpfully marginalised in developmental practices. In mindfulness, for instance, there is talk of meeting stress with calm stillness. This clearly has its place and was present in our workshop. But there was also an opening to the violence that is in our human nature and needs to find constructive expression. We were working with *Macbeth*, after all. Amid supportive stillness, we were able to access archetypes within ourselves which channel aggression: warrior, banshee, lion. We come away from the work having contacted aspects of ourselves that are primal and powerful – potentialities that we are not normally conscious of possessing. They are met with affirmation. No wonder it is emotional work. It is deeply healing.

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