

## Stand at the back and pretend – the experience of learning to sing

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*I was probably 7 or 8 when the teacher told me to stop singing, called me tone deaf. I remember the shame. I got pulled out of the group and told to just stand at the back and pretend. What's interesting is that it led to a lifetime of standing at the back and pretending. I spent a lot of my life making sure no-one could see or hear the real me. That had been the real me you see – that singing boy. (Alan)*

Alan has been learning to sing with a community choir, overturning his former construction of himself as a non-singer. He is one of several people I have met during my own journey of learning to sing who give vivid life to the assertion of George Kelly's Psychology of Personal Constructs [PCP] (1955) that we need not be 'victims of our biography'. Joining a choir or taking lessons has revealed a hidden singing self, and has sometimes been part of a major process of personal reconstrual.

For my part, although I had little confidence or practice, I always knew and believed that I could sing – I was just nervous about doing so when anyone else was listening. But at the first meeting of the group I joined, I was surprised by the number of people who described themselves as completely unable to sing, or as 'tone deaf'. I was impressed by the level of fear and threat they must have overcome to be there. It seemed that they were facing the potential of a repeat invalidation ('it's true, I really can't sing'), or the uneasy surprise of a new validation ('I can sing after all') with its life-story changing implications ('perhaps I always could sing').

This chapter draws on the stories of seven singers I have met in the past few years, and is the result of elaborative interviews and conversations. The emergent themes from these interviews are considered through the lens of Kelly's Personal Construct Psychology. The findings reveal a close connection between singing experiences in childhood and our developing sense of self, and they also highlight aspects of teaching and learning which resonate with Kelly's necessary conditions for psychological change and personal reconstruction.

## Singing at school

From Africa comes a saying: 'If you can walk you can dance, if you can talk you can sing'. Natural voice teachers such as Frankie Armstrong (1985) have noted that it seems to be a unique aspect of our present-day western culture that so many people are told as children that they can't sing. As she says, the label sticks: "Anyone so labelled is bound to get tense and anxious around singing, and this tension makes it difficult to listen and to really hear sounds and pitches: all you hear when you listen with this kind of tension is your own panic".

As Director of Music at the Institute of Education in London, Graham Welch (2003) has spoken of the "lifelong perception of musical disability" resulting from being labelled as unmusical at an early age, and has expressed concern about a "self-perpetuating expectation of musical incompetence" which endures through adult life. He believes it a misconception that some children are not musical and believes that most 'out of tune' singing stems from a mismatch between the child's level of singing competency and the tasks set by their teachers, and from the combination of text and music in many school singing experiences. Research would indicate that singing expertise develops in a sequential way, with musical aspects such as melodic fragments being mastered before complete songs, the text of which can trigger "speech mode" and lead to a perception of being out of tune. "Everyone is musical... Much perceived musical disability is a product of enculturation, including inadequate education and/or inappropriate experience."

The change from uninhibited singing child to withdrawn non-singer is described by Alan and others as happening rapidly in the wake of a shaming experience at school. From a Personal Construct Psychology perspective, Phil Salmon (1970) has talked about children's 'watershed points' – events which may have been trivial to others but which had a tremendous impact and lasting influence on the child's construing of self. The shaming which has accompanied many people's experience of being told they can't sing seems to have been just such a watershed.

*I was told from a very early age that I couldn't sing. Tone deaf, tin ear, flat. Up to age 10 or so it didn't really matter, I just sung anyway, but then the message got through. Public humiliation was the thing – being told to stop singing in front of everyone. Being the only one told to be quiet. (Tess)*

*Being told to 'stop droning' when practising carols for my first Christmas concert. Our teacher said to me ' Well, you can't possibly be a carol singer'. I felt humiliated, disappointed not to be allowed to sing, sad to have confirmation that I really couldn't sing. (Lynda)*

Mildred McCoy (1977) has defined shame in PCP terms as 'the awareness of dislodgement of the self from another's construing of one's role'. We experience shame as

our personal failure in living up to another's expectation of us, within a significant role relationship. The dislodgement is from our core role structure, which is both our frame of reference for social interaction and the basis of our identity. A significant invalidation of self might be likely to occur in incidents such as those described, given the formative vulnerability of children being named by their early teachers.

Similar ideas have been expressed by psychoanalyst Helen Lewis (1989) who described shame as being "directly about the whole self. It is the vicarious experience of the other's scorn of self, so that it is experienced in one's own and others' eyes. The self in the moment of shame is felt to be 'in the eye of a storm' of disapproval". She adds that it is difficult to find a way of releasing this "humiliated fury", and predicts the likelihood that such experiences will be succeeded by more shame.

### **Construing self as a non-singer**

In the wake of these early experiences, the construct of 'being able to sing - not being able to sing' appears to have had a wide ranging influence on identity and life choices:

*I was silenced basically. I became very very quiet, and rather afraid of what might come out of my mouth. I hid effectively for years. (Tess)*

*I learned it was better to keep quiet. I withdrew and detached myself from the experience so it did not touch me. (Lynda)*

*I've never felt like I could have a view about music – what was any good, what wasn't, because of being tone deaf. I couldn't know could I? I couldn't have an opinion. I think I projected my creativity onto other people, going out with arty types and being a bit in awe of them, admiring them like they had this great gift that was completely out of my reach. (Beth)*

*Not being a singer or performer I identified myself as more serious, more academic in contrast to them. I was very serious and studious growing up. (Eva)*

*In all areas of life I have been at pains to hide my deficiencies. 'Standing at the back and pretending' has been part of that. I think it influenced my professional life a lot. Becoming a teacher, you take on a role, a persona. The boys have no interest in who you really are, you are just 'sir'. You stand at the front and pretend. The real you is not the issue. Or that's how it seemed for many years. (Alan)*

PCP would suggest that in construing themselves as non-singers, this group would be likely to have developed an elaborated opposite pole about singers – the 'not-me' dimension. The change towards becoming a singer would mean not only leaving behind

familiar aspects of self, but potentially taking on a new set of self-constructs with similarly core implications. So what was implied by being a singer?

*Good singers for me are people in their power, strong people. And they are creative people. From my background that's not who we were. And being powerful can be scary.* (Debbie)

*Being a singer would be about being confident, very confident, having a big personality. Creative, expressive, a bit arty. None of that was anything like me.* (Beth)

*Singers? Strong, confident, powerful, visible, noisy, there! And a bit bohemian, flowing scarves...* (Tess)

*Being a singer would mean being a performer, front of stage, being outgoing and flamboyant, confident, expressive, not afraid to let your hair down. And powerful, in control, commanding. A bit frightening really!* (Eva)

*Singing for me would imply extraversion, power, knowing who you are and demanding your place in the world, 'here I am!'.* (Polly)

Several clusters of constructs appear here: strength, power, and confidence, (also connected with being rather scary or frightening); creativity, expressiveness and being artistic; and having 'big' personalities, being extraverted and 'being there' (in contrast perhaps to 'standing at the back and pretending').

As people told their stories it was clear how little they identified themselves with these qualities before learning to sing. This was reflected in a multitude of comments about being quiet, silenced, hidden, afraid, more academic, studious and so on.

While the self-descriptions of the former 'non-singers' seemed in tune with the label they had been confronted with in those early shaming experiences, it seems that an echo of the small singing child still survived. Paul Kotmann (2000) has suggested that the pain we experience when we are negatively labelled is not total invalidation of the self, but includes the feeling that "who one is is not being addressed and indeed has no place in the name-calling scene at all" As Alan told us earlier, "that was the real me, you see, that singing boy". Kotmann, introducing the work of Adriana Cavarero (1997), draws on her ideas that our 'linguistic vulnerability' can be re-cast as a constitutive feature of our uniqueness, that "opening to be hurt or affected by what we are called might even be that which gives us the sense, through the pain or shock we feel, that what we are called does not correspond to who we feel ourselves to be".

McCoy emphasised that the partial invalidation of core structure resulting from a shaming experience "does not involve the abandonment of the constructs involved". The child who

was happily joining in the carols or nursery rhymes before labels such as 'tone-deaf' forced their way in to colonise their construct systems was evident perhaps in the continuing desire to sing.

*From about 15 I got into the folk scene and there were excellent singers. I remember once starting to join in, really wanting to sing, But then someone looked right at me and said 'Someone's singing out of tune'. I never joined in again. (Debbie)*

*The desire to sing was strong. Two girls in the 6th form set our A level poetry to music and I desperately wished to be them; at a student party a young woman spontaneously sang Summertime and I so wanted to be her; friends in the states sang together and I was too scared to join in for fear of 'droning' and ruining the sound. (Lynda)*

*I've always loved music, lived for music in many ways – my CD collection is phenomenal – and I dreamed, really dreamed of being able to perform those pieces I loved so much. But it was crazy dreaming, like being a millionaire. (Alan)*

*I think I did have this yearning to sing, every time I heard the singing side of the family together – it was frustrating sometimes not to feel able to join in but I wouldn't have dared. (Eva)*

## **The decision to sing again**

Kelly's emphasis on enactment and behavioural experimentation continually reminds us that personal reconstruction is not located in an internal linguistic change, but in a relational and performative process. This resonates with the ideas of Fred Newman and Lois Holzman (1997) who describe learning and development in terms of 'revolutionary activity' which is not "expressed in our actions as thinkers, perceivers, conceivers, constructors, or interpreters (even if relational and situated), but completed in our creative performance as collective developers of our lives". Singing is most particularly an embodied construct, an action to be performed.

The decision to embark on the great experimental activity of learning to sing in adult life seemed to be triggered by another watershed point. This may have been a consequence of finding oneself in a new set of relationships or an unfamiliar geographical area, stimulating a need to consider who we might be in that changed context. Alternatively the decision had sometimes grown out of a personal crisis which had shaken and disrupted the paths along which life was lived to the point where re-construal became possible, and a revised construction of self became essential.

*It was after my divorce I went to the singing class. I had promised myself life would be different, I would start doing more, trying new things. (Beth)*

*My husband had died after a long illness. There had been a long period of stress and tension, and 18 months on part of me was ready to begin something new. And I thought singing would be refreshing, get me out of my head, stop me wallowing. (Polly)*

*Post-divorce, new town, not knowing anyone, wondering if this could be a way of getting to know them. Beneath that, being 50, realising I had nothing left to lose, wanting to be different, realising I was so sick of who I was. Some part of me thought singing, finding my real voice, might be a key to that. (Alan)*

*Being too much alone, and too often silent after my husband died. I needed to be with people and be doing something. And not talking, not bloody therapy, nothing to do with P's death. (Tess)*

PCP contrasts the deterministic idea that we remain the same through life with an elaborated belief in development and choice. These adult watershed moments perhaps highlighted a contradiction between our sense of ourselves as beings in motion with potential to reinvent ourselves, and the old negatively phrased labels and self-categorisations such as 'non-singer'. Additionally, it may be a reflection of the close connection between core self and singing self that singing was the alternative therapeutic choice at these times of transition.

The scale of these reconstructive experiments is very well articulated in stories of the first lesson. Making the phone call or filling in a booking form was quite a leap, but the day of the class brought an extraordinary level of anxiety and threat.

Kelly suggested that we are likely to be threatened "by hauntingly familiar things" about which we have developed fairly comprehensive constructs. He describes us as feeling at risk of regression when our "perceptual field is flooded with material which is familiar to childhood's eyes". And even when our experiment is successful, we may be equally alarmed by the mounting proportions of an alternative interpretation of our self. Having moved far enough to feel able to approach singing again, some people still carried the fear that they wouldn't be able to do it and that their teachers were right all along. They also acknowledged a potentially greater fear that a new previously unknown self, with well-elaborated 'scary' aspects, might be about to emerge.

*You are at the edge of danger (Polly)*

*It could be worse than you fear, it could be as bad as you remember, it could, just perhaps, be better than you imagine. A major step? Oh yes. (Beth)*

*Who would I be? (Tess)*

Anticipation of the experiment caused anxiety and threat, the risk of further invalidation at core level:

*Very apprehensive, for the first time in ages really not knowing what would happen to me.* (Polly)

*I didn't want my voice to be heard, it was the real me. All these new people and my voice would be heard and I would be judged.* (Debbie)

*Terrified and convinced I would be the only one who really, really couldn't sing and would feel worse afterwards.* (Lynda)

It may have been awareness of that mismatch between the labelled non-singer self, and the self we feel ourselves to be, that finally prompted the experimental leap:

*Another part of me, a tiny rebellious bit, that said after all these years, 'Fuck that teacher, you can sing'.* (Alan)

The moment of arrival in the group was remembered with great vividness:

*When I joined the singing group it was terrifying – like exposing a shameful secret I'd had for years – who I was. Sick with nerves, really throwing up sick, didn't think I'd be able to make a sound.* (Alan)

*I have no idea how I got there. I mean I saw the poster, applied, turned up, but at another level I have no sense of how I made the connection between that and me. It was like being someone else. And it wasn't till I was there and realised I'd have to sing in front of these 30 people. I don't know how to describe to you the terror, absolute blinding terror.* (Tess)

*The morning of going there I felt really ill, I nearly backed off. I walked up and down the street outside, I thought about going home. In the group, everyone looked young and confident. I was so scared I kept telling myself 'we're all in the same boat, starting from scratch'. then we were asked to get in a circle, and the man next to me turned to the woman on the other side and said 'I recognise you, aren't you in the Bach choir?'. I had a kind of panic attack, I could hear my heart beating. I thought I am so in the wrong place.* (Beth)

## **Teaching and learning – with a difference**

One of the most important features of these groups seems to have been instant and unconditional validation from the teachers, unexpectedly including validation as singers.

This assumption seemed to surprise people into a provisional re-construing of self which allowed change to happen.

*The first thing [the teacher] said was 'Everyone can sing'. I remember I felt like crying because suddenly after all those years, I believed her. The whole day was very emotional, the whole experience was. (Alan)*

*The teacher said two really important things. She asked if anyone had ever been told they couldn't sing. Loads of people put their hands up and one woman was crying. I felt really OK then about myself, about being there. And she said, 'Just sing what I sing, and if you find you are singing something else, that's called a 'harmony''. Everyone laughed, but it felt great. It felt like there wasn't a right way to sing. You could all just sing. And the sound we made was great, we sounded like a choir. It was unbelievable. (Tess)*

All the teachers mentioned used a varied repertoire of songs from all over the world. There is sometimes criticism of the appropriation of music from other cultures, but in these situations it seems that the choice of world music was a great leveller. Firstly, the repertoire reduced threat levels by being unfamiliar to childhood's memory, avoiding a flooding in of past experience. Equally importantly, those more experienced singers in the group who may have been confident working through the usual choral repertoire were as nonplussed as the novices by the pronunciation of a Gaelic chorus or the open-throated sound of a Bulgarian folk-song. In some cases it would seem that the unfamiliar rhythms and unlikely harmonies posed bigger challenges for those with musical experience, as they had better elaborated constructs of what sounded right or wrong which they would have to unlearn.

*It helped that we started with just noises really, and breathing. It was more like yoga. I calmed down a bit. And the things we sang were kind of talky. Not really singing melodies but calling stuff. It helped a lot that we didn't have to 'sing'. We built up to that quite slowly and by the time we were singing you hadn't noticed it happening, you were just singing. (Beth)*

*The technique was to build up from making sounds based on shouting, to 'call' as if to a friend on the street....It was an atmosphere of support and encouragement, small steps to build confidence and experiment without judgement and any sound is interesting, not right or wrong. (Lynda)*

Kelly described three conditions favourable to re-construal:

- the provision of 'fresh' sets of elements from which new constructs might emerge;
- an atmosphere of experimentation, where we can 'try things on for size';
- and the availability of validating data.

Both by chosen style and technique, and by intuitive gift, the singing group leaders met these conditions by:

- the provision of unfamiliar song and rhythm styles, of which few people had any previous experience;
- emphasising process over performance, and offering a wide variety of songs and exercises in each session. They described themselves as experimenting, regularly trying things which they weren't sure would 'work';
- and by finding individual contributions and unexpected outcomes interesting, delightful or amusing, but never problematic. *'I sang one line really wrong twice and the teacher said 'I like that, we'll all learn that'* (Tess)

Similarly, Kelly highlighted conditions unfavourable to change:

- the presence of threat;
- a preoccupation with old material, as our existing habits inhibit our finding new ways to deal with events;
- and the lack of a suitable social 'laboratory' for our experiments.

To avoid these conditions, the group leaders were:

- keeping threat levels to a minimum, not least by recognising these feelings as normal from the start, and by offering validation without evaluation;
- avoiding preoccupation with old material by using world unfamiliar repertoire and the oral teaching style. Even those with experience in music weren't given the music to read but required to learn by ear in the group;
- and a rich social laboratory was provided by working primarily with quite large groups, typically 20-40 people, thereby offering a diverse range of validation evidence.

The choice of music from other cultures provided an additional stimulus to change, by enabling a reconstruction of the purpose of singing in life. Singing is a universal human activity and, in most cultures, is a natural component of many everyday activities and communications as well as being central to celebrations and rituals. It is the exception rather than the norm to reject most singing that doesn't conform to a narrow interpretation of what is beautiful and technically correct.

This social-cultural connection between singing and critically evaluated 'correct' performance was evident in the comments which drove many of the voices featured here into silence. Singing in our culture seems to have been largely removed from the everyday, and given special status. Installed on a stage in a concert hall, or perfected in a professional recording, we have a special category of people who sing, and to have singers, there must necessarily be non-singers.

*Half the family, my mother's side, were singers and performers, and the other side were definitely not singers, they couldn't hold a note. I identified with the non-singing side very*

*early because I couldn't sing like my mum, couldn't perform, and I can remember being told to 'stop that noise' by the ones who could sing. (Eva)*

The requirement to stand at the back and pretend, rather than add whatever your voice brings to the group, privileges severely constricted understandings of what is a good sound over an activity which has its original purpose in everyday human connection. As Gergen and Gergen ((1986) have noted, we are limited to a vocabulary of action that has currency in our own culture, and we cannot compose an autobiography of cultural nonsense. Being a non-singer seems to be well-established cultural construct. For this reason, the content and meaning of the songs learned in the singing groups was of prime importance in beginning to reconstrue oneself as a singer.

*I managed to inhabit the spirit of the songs very quickly – they were important songs with good things to say, and I wanted to be part of saying them..'. (Tess)*

(Tess)

*I have had the experience of being so completely in the meaning and expression of the song that the sound has taken care of itself and (I'm told) been note perfect and sounded 'musical'. (Lynda)*

Where we have become used to performances by paid professionals in a concert setting, the idea of performing in public would provoke anxiety and threat in many of us, but where the song is to heal a sick child or protest an injustice, we are likely to want to add our voice. Few people are inhibited about joining the chants in the football stadium to spur on a winning team, or praising the 'jolly good fellow' when they truly appreciate a job well done. The repertoire of the singing groups has usefully extended the range of convenience of singing, embracing situations where some heartfelt (as opposed to expert) singing might be both possible and appropriate.

*It totally changed my framework of what music was, what it could be, and what it was for. (Eva)*

(Eva)

What became apparent was that for the sick child or the oppressed neighbour it was your familiar and loved voice that would be wanted, and a professional singer however skilful would be no substitute. The performance measures would be true comfort and real solidarity, not technical brilliance, and this was a major re-construal after years of not being 'good enough' to perform.

*I was able to sing at a friend's wife's funeral and it felt so important, such a good thing to do. Enriching. You had to take a risk, but it was beautiful. The risk was acknowledged there, people knew you were doing a big thing. the risk was acknowledged by accepting the gift. (Debbie)*

The most critical difference in the teaching and learning experienced here is the absence of shame or the risk of shaming. The school teachers described had pre-formed standards of competence against which children were judged. They seem to have construed their role as developing the best and weeding out those who couldn't reach the standard – a process typical of many people's educational experience. Graham Welch suggests that many children have been "misunderstood and compared (wrongly) to adult notions of what it is to be musical". The singing group teachers described here started from an entirely different assumption – that everyone could sing. There was no weeding out to be done. Newman and Holzman have described truly creative and reconstructive activity as "created through (and simultaneous with) practicing method rather than being an appraisal generated from hypotheses prior to, or interpretations after, practice"

When my own singing teacher formed a small choir, she invited those people who had had individual lessons with her and who were regular attenders at the larger group. I remember how impressed and surprised I felt that she had selected those with a commitment to developing their voices rather than those with the most 'talent' or 'best voices'. I was still using the old school-based constructs; she construed her role quite differently – here were people who really wanted to sing and would put time and energy into it. Her role would be to work with us to have us sound our best and create a new musical experience together.

### **A new singing self**

During the process of these interviews, the stories of not being able to sing and of early singing experiences, were told as anecdotes familiar to the teller. My questions about the impact of becoming a singer on self identity, life, and the imagined future were rather different as several people declared themselves surprised by their own answers – these were newer stories, many being told for the first time.

Interestingly, the worries about needing to be extraverted and a flamboyant personality seemed unfounded and these aspects of being a singer had been reconstrued by some:

*We share something incredibly deep, and that's an important thing to do with other people, and yet we don't really know each other at the everyday level – I couldn't tell you what people do as jobs, or how they live. (Alan)*

*There's a privacy and anonymity about it. I can just be me sharing something rich with others, but we don't need to small talk or get to know each other. We really don't know one another except at the level of singing. (Polly)*

Alternatively, some people had embraced a new rather more performative self:

*Singing and performing gives me a chance to have a show-off side – the part that you would be slapped down for as a child. (Debbie)*

*We do perform now and I really enjoy the stage and spotlight. We laugh about it in the group, say that we've released our inner Liza Minnelli! (Beth)*

The emphasis on the community of the singing group, on working well together and helping each other, seems to have been emphasised continually by the teachers and to have “*kept in check the potential to become a scary prima donna*” Beth). It seemed that singing was not really about that after all.

So what has resulted from these bold experiments in singing and change? The level of personal reconstruction was evident in many comments. We might simply listen as these voices, no longer standing at the back and pretending, speak for themselves:

*The personal confidence has been wonderful. I relate quite differently to people now, more relaxed, more myself. And I go to concerts now and I'm quite opinionated – I can have an opinion now, I'm a singer! (Beth)*

*I'm much less self-judgemental. I think 'blow it, I'll have a go!'. It's helped me let go and have a social, fun side. (Eva)*

*Singing has given me confidence to find my voice in other arenas. Speaking to people, raising things with people, speaking up on issues, saying what I think and feel. Less afraid of my own power and strength. (Debbie)*

*It got to that part of me to do with emotions, feelings beyond words, but you don't need to find words to express it all. It's access to a new self, enriching, life-enhancing, a new beginning. (Polly)*

*To be honest I think I was quite lost for years. Singing has been the key for me. I found myself. I heard myself. And to my amazement I liked myself. (Tess)*

*I have always thought of myself as a rather boring person, a bit dull, but that's changed a good deal. Learning to sing at my age makes me wonder what else I can do. I might try stuff I've shied away from. Finding I'm not tone deaf has led me to question other aspects of myself. I wasn't tone deaf after all. I'm a singer, with the gift of music. My life story has changed. (Alan)*

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