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Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

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Three Ways to Find the Voice You Never Really Lost

“I’ve lost my voice,” I hear from writers in my community writing workshops as well as at Goddard College, where I teach in areas such as Transformative Language Arts <http://www.goddard.edu/academics/ma/individualized-master-arts/transformative-language-arts-concentration/>, and other interdisciplinary gardens. But here's the thing: our voice, like our heartbeat, isn't ever gone as long as we live. Sometimes we just forget it's there.

Many of us have had moments or decades pained and trained by repeated silencing and marginalization, times it seemed we were wearing an invisibility cloak. I've worked with people living with metastatic cancer who can't remember who they are as writers, let alone as people who used to go places and do things beyond chemotherapy appointments and watching birds at the feeder in their backyards.. I've seen songwriters who, in putting some of their art on the shelf in lieu of enough work to pay the bills, feel locked out of the house of music. I'm witnessed women and men returning to the page after years of intensive parenting when their only down time was drinking coffee in their cars while waiting to pick up kids from piano lessons.

There's also just the normal diversions and doubts for most people who create: dead-ends, serious questions about the value of our art, the tyranny of the inner critics, and the call of the laundry. Life has a way of taking us away from ourselves in its acute and mundane manifestations, but it also can—if we turn our attention to re-engaging our voice—bring us right back to who we are, and what we have to say both on and off the page. Here are three ways to jump-start your voice—think of these as DIY voice lessons:

1. Imitate and Role-Play Your Way Back to Yourself

When I was a sophomore in high school and crushing on my social studies teacher, I asked him if, instead of writing critiques of six philosophers, I could write poems about Marcus Aurelius, Karl

Marx, and the rest of the list. I was 16, and had just begun my life-long road trip of writing and reading poetry. He said yes, so I got to it, and since then, I could played the imitation games with writers like Adrienne Rich, Julia Alvarez, William Stafford, Joy Harjo, and Rainer Maria Rilke (although not in German). Without really knowing what I was doing, I was teaching myself far more than Aurelius's philosophical stance or Rich's conversational lyrics. In imitation, I found just a bit more courage and sass, possibility and potential to expand my range.

I always ask students and workshop participants who they're reading. Young writers, thinking reading and writing like others will unduly influence them, sometimes tell me, "I'm not reading anyone because I'm trying to find my own voice." Actually, the opposite is true: read others, and try writing in their style. Think of it as a day trip away from home that will enable you to return with your arms full of new words, new possibilities for rhythm, image, story, and tone. Role play in the fields of poetry, fiction, non-fiction, songs and other writing to grow your capacity for language, which will give your own voice a wider variety of old cars, new bikes, go-carts, sleds, and scooters to drive onto the page and across the screen.

2. Create Across Genres and Boundaries

My friend Rodney, an astonishing painter, told me that when he's stuck, he'll walk through our local yarn store and look at the the colors of the silk, cool, cotton and other yarns overflowing their wooden bins and shelves. Seeing color in another texture than oil on canvas frees him to go back and make something with oil on canvas. The same is true for writing.

At Brave Voice: Writing and Singing for Your Life, (<http://bravevoice.com>) an annual retreat I lead with singer-songwriter Kelley Hunt, we operate on the premise that writers, singers, storytellers, visual artists and others who create need to cross-pollinate for the betterment of the hive. Long-standing poets, touring musicians, or dancers who dabble in storytelling dip their toes into waters outside their usual swimming holes. Everyone gets to sing, write a song or two, write in various genres,

and if they wish, draw, make sculptures, and make a large group mandala composed of whatever we find on the grounds of the peninsula where we meet in, surrounded by a large lake and the the Flint Hills of Kansas.

“I always thought I was just a folk singer,” Janet Emmons told me after she found herself writing a requiem as a result of the immersion into different ways of engaging with language, image, rhythm, and sound at Brave Voice. Her first choral work was just performed in Santa Fe, and she released two CDs in recent years. Nancy Hubble, a long-time visual artist who occasionally wrote poetry and prose, discovered not only her propensity to put together a volume of strong poetry, but that she needed to record a spoken word album of her work.

Are you a poet? Try writing a short story, a 10-minute play, a song, or tear up some beautiful house decorating or Buddhist magazines for a collage. Stuck on finishing a memoir? Crochet a scarf, color a mandala, or write some limericks. Instead of pathologizing dry spells as impenetrable writers blocks, try something new, trusting that your old ways of using your voice will come home to roost again, this time with lots of new ways to fly.

3. The More You Do It, the More You Can Do It

The more we create, the more we sing ourselves back to ourselves. Poet William Stafford once advised poets to “harness all sled dogs.” Find any way to get moving, then, through the journey, you'll make new paths, unfortunate ruts at times too, but you'll be exercising your voice every in every word you write.

There's a lot to be said to for showing up whether or not the muse has kept his or her end of the bargain. While there's nothing wrong with working from inspiration, anyone who writes on a regular basis knows well we can mix up the potion of our own inspiration. Some days, we're more successful than others, but even in the off-days, showing up helps prime the pump. How to invent inspiration? Here's some ideas:

- Show up: Set up regular time each day, or a few blocks of time each week, or whatever works for you to write. If you don't feel like writing, write anyway. Anne Lamott famously advised us to “write shitty first drafts” in her book *Bird by Bird*, and someday, that may be what meets you on the page. Sometimes, you might feel like writing new material, other days, you're more skilled at revision. Engaging the page regularly makes you ready to catch whatever inspiration lands in your hands.
- Set little goals: One friend tells me she has to write one page at least before quitting; another sets a timer for 15 minutes; yet another has a minimum word count for each writing session. Set small goals, meet them, declare victory, and keep going. Writing one word, one sentence, one paragraph has a way of making you think of the next word, sentence, paragraph.
- Work on different projects at once: If you have several projects going at once, you always have something to jump to when you need a break or hit a wall. When I'm stuck, I often tell myself I'm just not smart enough at the moment to figure out what to write on project A, but that's okay because I can work on something else, which may just make me smart enough to fix project A. By having several things cooking, you keep up your voice lessons.
- Work in the same place everyday, or try new places: “Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes,” Whitman said. The same is true with the multitude of spaces we inhabit and that inhabit us. Sitting in the same chair when I write helps prompt me to write. Then again, sometimes I might do good work sitting in another room, a different coffee shop, or newly-discovered park bench. Change it up, and return to the scene of the crime.
- Keep your hand moving: The key to writing is writing, plus writing is a way of knowing. Writing about a character will show you what she feels. Writing into the inkling of an image will reveal how the image wants to unfold. Simply by writing, we can come to see ourselves

face to face as well as more of the world and the worlds we create.

Find What You Never Actually Lost

The real deal is that our voice never actually left us. Time has a way of shaking all the pieces of together so that we are more than the sum of our parts, but all the parts, voice and all, too. The voice I had when I was six and belting out Barbra Streisand's "People" as I hung upside down on the monkey bars is still part of me, as are the words I wrote yesterday about right livelihood and Transformative Language Arts.

Through risk-taking as a writer, and a whole lot of practice, we can make and maintain paths through the wilderness of language, keeping our voice vital and present. Moreover, finding your voice and using it in your writing cannot help but spill over into the rest of your life.