



## **Courage, Risk and Voice Movement Therapy: An Encounter with Soul, Self and Voice**

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Voice Movement Therapy is fraught with risk. As a discipline, it requires courage to engage with. It is a voice work which allows the expression of the unconscious to be revealed, sculpted and transformed through song.

Through VMT we come to know more of ourselves in sound and movement, encountering the tales of love, loss, misfortune or vulnerabilities which reside within us; addressing and attending to these in breath, wordless sound, exploratory movement and text; and forming these elements into embodied song and theatre.

The risk present in VMT is that of venturing into the unknown, there being no path to follow other than that revealed by the body/psyche in the moment, allowing that which sits below the surface to make itself known and trusting that the present moment brings all that is needed. As the voice resides in the space between the mind and the body, between the cognitive and the felt, many emotions can dwell there. Oftentimes unconscious battles are being fought in this arena as we seek to be known and heard. The voice can reveal us where words, sat on top of and carried by the sound, cannot.

Courage, too, is needed. In VMT; in order to be a practitioner, first it is required that we work the material of our lives through the tools of this discipline, encountering our own voices, bodies, histories and psyches. Venturing into the depths of the self in this way takes strength of character, soul, trust, willingness and the ability to stay present with all that is encountered there. As we voyage into the inner terrain, selves previously sequestered away become exposed and facades foisted upon us early in life by a society which demands our compliance and silence become apparent.

Next, there is the courage needed as practitioners to stay with the process as it unfolds. This is informed not only by work done previously on the self, but also by that which is tangible: breath, voice and its timbre; movement in soma and voice; the air in the room; the words and their formation (the text); and that which is intangible, intuited, received and felt. We also listen for the images the clients employ in their words. We listen inside ourselves for the images which occur within us and are attentive to our deeper knowing which makes clear which images to follow. We utilize our courage to marry the external information-gathering to the inner knowing of the

self, thus ensuring that all work which is produced is collaborative, birthed between the client and the practitioner. As practitioners we endeavor to create a safe container in which the client can be received, met, heard and accepted, regardless of the content of the material which is exposed. We are there as guides, to ensure that the path is safe and without harm.

Through VMT we engage with the process rather than looking for the outcome, honing our trust in the inner knowing. When we dare to follow the psyche's deepest knowing, it may be that we travel down the route of improbability in order to reach the psychic and vocal gold. We may dismiss out of hand the suggestions which originate in us and be directed elsewhere by fear down a seemingly safer path, the route of the more rational.

Each time we follow a suggestion which may seem unusual or perhaps unfathomable to us, we risk.

“Between the idea  
Between the motion  
And the act  
Falls the Shadow.”<sup>(1)</sup>

The shadow is that of ourselves which we unconsciously attempt to secrete away, that which we do not want to own. The less of ourselves we let live, the greater the shadow. What we repress will often need to find a way to emerge, generally in unwanted ways if opportunity is not provided through suitable or creative means. By subduing certain aspects of ourselves, other aspects such as our creativity may also become subdued. The screws tighten, and more and more of the self is dispensed with.

The risks we have taken with ourselves, if we have been present and honest, can increase our ability to facilitate others in their journeys of discovery. Through daring to look at our shadow selves, engaging in the process of integration and transformation, we inform ourselves through our

senses, psyches, and minds, enhancing our self-knowledge and compassion.

I believe risking/daring can be effectively engaged with when dealt with through creative means. I find I often use metaphors in which to site the work, providing a safety container. There is no need to plunge head first into the freezing cold water of old traumas or recent wounds when the approach can be mediated by following the trail through the woods. The risk is contained within the creative metaphor rather than confronted by directly addressing childhood wounds of being unseen, unheard or battered. We journey through vocal and movement landscapes and arrive in song which becomes the vehicle to hold and move the affect. The song grounds the material in a very particular way, harnessing the energy, emotions, content and narrative, finessing it into a new work of art, an artful telling of one's tale, creating an art which resounds still with the original story, yet which has now located the story in pastures new, with a new context and a new relationship.

When we vocalize, we enter into intimate relationship with the self. The voice contains our life stories and emotions. Memories can be aroused by our own voice as well as those of others. Sometimes it seems as though all the seeds of identity are contained therein. Often, in VMT, shadow material may arise through the voice as we open up the vocal tract past the restrictions which language, of necessity, imposes upon us. In order to articulate, the cessation of breath occurs, albeit momentarily. Therefore, when we sound without words, the breath keeps flowing, allowing access to parts of ourselves curtailed and shaped by language.

One client I worked with presented with an idealized sense of self, his spirituality having become the most defining thing about him. He had erased all notion of a shadow, did not have an unkind word or thought in his head, yet was unhappy and silenced, some of the silencing having come from his own self, unbeknownst to him. The mantle of 'goodness' under

which he laboured oppressed and did not allow his existence as a multi-faceted human being. By the time he came to VMT, his spirituality had become a mask which was breaking his spirit which initially it had sought to free.

During a session one day, I asked him to introduce swear words into the song he was singing, words from a repertoire long since discarded. After some discussion as to whether he knew any, he began singing them. As the force of the repressed material began breaking through, shaking off shackles, discarding manacles, his body moved with the power of the language; his voice grew louder and stronger, reaching down into the depths and emerging vibrantly: a whole new voice, one in which the strength of the self could clearly be heard, chthonic forces meeting with the heavens, giving birth to a new reality. His language was rich, robust, earthy, a voice which had been suppressed for a long time in order to meet demands long since integrated into his subconscious. Shaking off ideals and ideas which held him prisoner, he was afterwards ruddy-faced, elated, grounded in a whole new way - happy even, down in the mud like the playful little boy he once had been.

“Should I wear my mask too long, when I take it off and try and discard it, I may find I have thrown my face away with it... If I am transparent enough to myself, then I can become less afraid of those hidden selves that my transparency may reveal to others. If I reveal myself without worrying how others will respond, then some will care, though others may not. I am determined to let down, whatever the risks, if it means I may have whatever is there for me.”<sup>(2)</sup>

As humans, we think nothing of insisting on silence for so many parts of ourselves, imposing a soul death for fear of offending society or loved ones. That is the betrayal of the self. Through this work, we seek liberation: liberation of the voice, body, self, psyche, movement into a new way of experiencing ourselves and freedom from old patterns which, often unconsciously, have rendered us so beholden to the

past that we fall asleep to the very notion that it is indeed that past we allow to determine our present moment and cause us to believe that there is no moving beyond what has already occurred. In fact, there is no past when giving voice to ourselves; there is only the moment and what the mind conjures up to stop us.

Each time feelings are released we create the space and opportunity inside for greater peace. We do not sing our song just once. We sing it over and over and over again, until our very existence is written in song until we vibrate to the melody of the universe, until we sing as if the matter of our bodies is one tuning fork and we vibrate and resonate to all that is. Our bodies are nothing other than resonating chambers. We sing our songs until the songs just pour from our open mouths and hearts. We discover we are song, nothing other than song.

Change is often facilitated by moving outside of usual modes of behaviour, that is, by taking a risk which may sometimes be as seemingly simple as saying ‘no,’ singing in a part of the voice not usual or known, raising the voice to a greater or lesser volume - all events which deviate somewhat from the pathways already carved. Through risking our notions of ourselves, we come to find ourselves, enabling discoveries of our own potential.

“Transformations require that we let go of familiar ways of doing things.”<sup>(3)</sup>

Many years ago, I worked for “Mind” (Britain’s leading mental health charity). In the wake of a fatal stabbing carried out by a user of mental health services in the vicinity, I and a group of service users made a video surveying the public’s attitudes toward mental health. Many felt their diagnosis preceded people’s responses to them and experienced themselves as unfairly labelled as dangerous, a ‘risk’ to others. We filmed in the streets of London doing vox-populi interviews, asking members of the public what they believed was the best treatment for those with mental health issues. Invariably, the initial

responses would be that those in the mental health community should be locked up for the safety of the public. The questions compiled by the service users were astute and well sequenced and allowed members of the public the opportunity to explore some of their thoughts.

Usually, through the course of the interview, people would disclose that family members, friends, even themselves, had, in fact, faced situations or conditions which would fall under diagnostic criteria for mental health problems. At the conclusion, the interviewer would reveal his or her own mental health diagnosis. Upon being asked whether they would have agreed to the interview had they known, most participants from the general public responded they would not have. It was a powerful exercise for the service users who were able to discover that the fear which was palpating the air in our locale had nothing to do with them and that they did not have to bear 'risk' for others; they did not have to take on and carry their projections. This film was shown in a number of venues and situations, with discourse invited.

There have been times when I, as a practitioner, have felt the thrill of fear, plain worry, and anticipation deep within me as I made suggestions to clients and students which I worried might be too provocative or too revealing and wondered whether I had gone too far. However, after nearly twenty years of working as a VMT practitioner and thirty years in total in therapeutic work environments, I trust myself enough now to listen to the signals inside me which are, 'yes,' 'no,' 'maybe' or 'later,' reaching down, once again and resonating with the information provided by the body and by the profound acquaintance I have made over the decades of investigative coming to know my self.

Twenty-odd years ago, I worked at a newly opened Day Centre for homeless young people in Central London. Government policies cutting housing benefit for them had brought a sudden and huge increase in the numbers of young people sleeping 'rough.' As

with any population, there are always those who seek to exploit. In the early days of this organization, there were some who sought to test the boundaries to show us that they ruled the streets and the young homeless. We faced violence on a daily basis, as the 'taxmen' and pimps tried to carry on regardless, considering our remit to provide a safe environment a threat to their earning power and dominance of the street homeless youth.

Two strapping young men, with previous employment as butchers, would force entry into the Centre to demand money, terrorise or beat up the youth. Despite our close proximity to a police station, they, and others, perpetrated violence frequently. We daily tried to negotiate with them, to keep the young people and ourselves safe, often not succeeding due to small numbers of staff and hundreds of young people. Through time, I found strategies which worked when reasoning, threats, cajolings, police and physical strength did not. I would dance up to them and sing opera to them, made up operas where I would sing of their loveliness, or some such, and dance around them, as if each of their movements were a dance, their vocal utterances song, and I were merely responding, so that we were engaged in a song and dance together. They found these antics demeaning to their perception of themselves and, over time, when they saw me approach, they would leave. These tactics were successful and, of course, it was risky.

In VMT, skillful enactment by some practitioners may also be employed as a means of working through trauma by addressing in the present moment material from the past with consciousness, awareness and creativity in order to transform an old issue and experience a different outcome. Again, risk is present, as with any foray into bringing the past into the room in order to address its contents with the hope of meeting it in kindness, empathy and understanding, ultimately seeking resolution and freedom.

A client in London was relatively successful as a singer, yet raged at each day. His feelings tore at him. Among other things, he was frustrated and angry with women. His girlfriend was tiny and he professed himself so daunted by her femininity and delicacy that he did not and could not feel met by her. This was an ongoing source of distress for him; if ever he challenged or confronted her, she would weep and he would feel like his father, a bully whom he despised and wanted nothing to do with. His feelings tormented him, yet his desire to be met by a female with whom he could just be himself, with all that entailed, drove him.

I felt he could benefit from meeting a real flesh-and-blood woman who could attempt to match him for strength which might allow him to encounter the fear which surrounded the introjected figure which he carried of himself as a brute. I knew that psychically I could more than meet him; physically, I was not so sure, yet I had always considered myself strong and quite sturdy. I offered to meet him in sound and movement in wrestling, using wrestling as a metaphor for that which he wrestled with on a psychological level. We wrestled, we wrestled seriously; he took me at my word.

Meeting in the physical realm in this session impacted on his personal life, serving to sever an internal notion of who women are. His daring to be involved without having to be wary of 'breaking' his girlfriend because of her delicacy proved to be a turning point in his relationship. When issues came up between them, he noticed his girlfriend had her responses which she had formulated in her trajectory through life. Having his self-experience validated, he no longer felt he needed to rein in the essence of himself and he felt able to meet his girlfriend wherever she went. If tears marked their route, then he just allowed their flow rather than becoming silenced or wronged by them.

"Like the butterfly or moth after which she is named, Psyche is drawn from darkness to light."<sup>(4)</sup>

We can come to know more of ourselves by journeying vocally into the forgotten landscapes and languages of our voices, exposing truths hitherto hidden away. In this way we increase our inspiration, literally that of the breath and the imagination, and our choices expand as our connection to our selves, inner and outer, grows. Our presence and life force increase as we, finally, start to listen to all those parts of the self previously silenced.

"We cannot reach the center of ourselves without seeking the innermost edge of our longings and exploring the outermost edge of our imaginations."<sup>(5)</sup>

We are asked, over and over, to descend into the patience of the inner world, that knowing whose cartography is invisible to all of us other than those blessed with seer's eyes. If you are called to the work of psyche, there is no way out. This journey, despised and shunned by many, takes courage - courage to live, to dare to enter the risk. Sometimes the times of greatest transformation in the client, or personally, have occurred for me in the risk, in entering the world of risk, and of not keeping everything as cosily contained as possible. I am not advocating risk for the sake of it; I am suggesting, once again, that by knowing ourselves we have the greatest potential for understanding where our possible responses come from and thus can know that we are not in the way of the suggestion we are making; instead, it is from the intuited, or divinely led, that the course of action is suggested.

"Some men, as soon as they receive the first impulses to riskiness and recognize its link with what we've called the Wild Man, become frightened, stop all wildness, and recommend timidity and collective behavior to others."<sup>(6)</sup>

This work, in many respects, is still uncharted waters. The guiding lights are the present moment, the attentiveness to what is occurring simultaneously with your client's voice, physical presence, the surrounding atmosphere and what is going on within

your psyche and self so that, as a practitioner, there is clarity as to where directions are coming from.

“Think with your body. There is an intelligence in there that is clear, focused, and impersonal. It is direct, orderly, and multidimensional. It knows what goes on in the spaces between the visible action.”<sup>(7)</sup>

We seek to work from a welcoming, compassionate and accepting heart - a place of love, positive regard and encouragement - cultivating the ability to hold others psychically as they dare to take the steps into the next place of growth. We may try to safeguard against the eventualities in life, yet we cannot inure ourselves to its perils and dramas. Herein often lie the greatest lessons. In my experience, where the psyche is involved, where spirit needs to manifest, where the soul's desire to be born supersedes the illusion of safety, comfort and the known, the way is full of risk. There is no way of protecting oneself from the pitfalls that the soul knows are the only way that growth will occur. The way of growth is not comfortable; it is riven with discomfort, often accompanied by the falling away of everything that was known, the illusion of safety to which we would like to cling. It takes courage to meet ourselves anew, to voice ourselves and to discard that which no longer serves us.

There is risk in being alive, in being true to the impulses which arise from deep within, in allowing rather than subduing and silencing ourselves. We ache to be known, to be seen, to be heard, to be welcomed, to be loved; yet, at the same time, we recoil from these. As practitioners, our role is to create more choices, more freedom for the individual. Our task is not to dismantle strategies that may have been created to maintain an illusion of safety; it is to highlight awareness so that choice can be employed.

Having worked as a VMT practitioner for a long time with individuals and groups, and teaching practitioner trainings, it seems to me it requires substantial

amounts of courage and risk to be most effective in this work - not least the risk and daring of remaining in the present moment with whatever is occurring. Working towards an ever increased presence and awareness takes courage: courage to meet others where they are, to walk with people through their stories and songs.

I believe VMT to be audacious, a daring discipline. As a practitioner there is no room to hide; we match the vocal sounds clients make, we engage with them, we move with them. It is not a discipline for those who dare not allow their own transparency. As the clients reveal, so we, too, reveal. We encourage, elicit, suggest, 'join with' in song and movement. There is no seeing without also being seen, no hearing without also being heard, no eliciting without also being elicited. We risk revealing ourselves in order to be the best practitioners, and human beings, we can be. We bring the knowledge of the journeys on which we have been and we bring the echo of all that we have witnessed, been burnt by, and heard, by all that has touched us and the ways in which we have had to transform to meet our new reality, our new selves. We have met, and continue to meet, ourselves vocally, physically, psychologically, emotionally, psychically; and through this process, when it is time, we say that we are ready to accompany others through the lighted and dark areas of the psyche. This is the courage we bring as practitioners to this work.

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