

# Finding My Voice

by Jessica Mink

*First Parish in Plymouth, Unitarian Universalist*

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I grew up in a house with some music, but not too much. We owned a Fireside Book of Songs which I remember singing out of occasionally, and we sang appropriate songs together at Christmas and Thanksgiving around dinner. Both parents had played musical instruments when they were younger, but not with us, and neither of them sang seriously. We went to church every Sunday and sang hymns with the congregation, and I had vocal music in school until eighth grade when when I was only allowed to sing in our mass choir, which in Dundee Junior High School included all of the student body except those ninth graders whose voices couldn't make the cut at all. I became one of them the following year. I always wanted to do something musical, so I started playing drums in my school band when I was 9. I liked playing, but hated practicing, so I never got a whole lot better than I did at singing, though it turned out that enthusiasm helped more in drumming. And so my life went for years, listening more than singing because I couldn't find my voice.

As for speaking in public, I was really shy until well after college. In ninth grade speech class, I dreaded standing in front of people I had known since kindergarten! When I was in my mid-twenties at Cornell, I joined the Film Club committee because members were entitled to free passes to all of the movies shown at Cornell: seven a week, a great boon for this film buff. The volunteer task I chose was standing in front of 500 people and delaying each week's movie by telling them what was showing and what was coming next week. Decades later, I remember how scared I was, and I was reminded of this time in my life last month when I visited a friend who is a professor at Cornell and watched her give a lecture in that same auditorium. When I developed an identity as a bike activist, I found myself able to talk in front of any crowd, but in each

case, I was speaking as parts of myself: the film buff and the activist.

I started to regain a singing voice started after my daughter was born, when I started making up and singing diaper-changing shantys several times a day, a small step, but for an appreciative audience--at least she didn't criticize me then. I continued to gain my voice as a parent telling stories to Sarah as she grew up; she loved getting read to so much that she felt in no rush to learn to read herself. As a story teller, I got to play with my voice to match the characters, and found that connecting to some of those characters was easier than connecting to others.

As a scientist, I have to present papers at conference, and I have to admit that for the first 40 years of my career, I was always in fear of standing in front of a critical audience, not trusting that identity to carry me the way my stronger identities did.

All this time, I had a big secret: I was not quite twwho I appeared to be. I could hide behind some of my identities, but I was not a well-integrated person. For most people gender is something one is simply born with, but some of us are not comfortable with the gender which people assumed that we had when we were born. I found it possible to live on the boundary between genders for a pretty long time. I passed pretty well as a male and preferred women as partners, so it didn't take much effort to live the way people saw me, getting married twice and not lacking for relationships over the years between those marriages. I was lucky to have a body type which made it fairly easy to be the woman I felt I was whenever I had a chance, shopping and going out to movies, concerts, and plays. In those days, I was genderfluid, switching back and forth between male and female. This worked for *me*, but it didn't help me integrate myself into a single person I could present to the world. As for my voice, I was able to change it enough in one on one conversations that people assumed that I was the gender I wanted to be, but I couldn't use it with groups or singing.

In the summer before I turned 52, I finally had an entire week by myself, and after spending most of that time working long hours and going to meetings, I realized that it was then or never: I took all of Friday off work to spend 24 hours as I saw myself, for the first time ever! It felt so wonderful to be out in the world that I realized that I really needed to change. Over the next eight years, I gradually changed, knowing that when I transitioned, my marriage would be over, and all of my other relationships would become problematic. As I moved toward changing, I spent a lot more time working on myself in therapy, to try to tie all of my identities back together, and gradually got more comfortable in the world. After seven years, I decided to work with a voice coach to work on my voice for singing, speaking on the phone, and addressing groups.

Over the next few years, I got more comfortable with my voice, not quite reaching the one I really wanted, but making it passable everywhere. I started singing along in mass events, like the Charles RiverSing every fall and anywhere else I could sing with other people. I'm treated as a woman on the phone and now comfortable getting up in front of large groups of fellow astronomers: I was the only, woman and first out of eight authors on a paper resulting from a workshop I chaired last fall.

And finally, there is religion. I grew up in a church-going (and committee-staffing) Protestant family in the Midwest. Going to church, learning the bible (though never really believing the details), singing hymns, and going to pot-luck dinners were so much a part of my life that when I came east to college, I spent some time every week for my entire freshman year helping put on interdenominational services in the MIT Chapel, still one of my favorite buildings in the world. While I liked the experience of religion, my disbelief in a god and most of the events in the bible eventually kept me away from the kind of space where I grew up except when I was visiting my family. I have been lucky that my family has always held tolerant religious beliefs; they all have been fantastically accepting, if not always as supportive as I might like. This is a great gift as

many of my friends have been rejected by families which have more closed ideas about what their god can tolerate. I've accepted my position as a successful trans woman to work as an ally with minority groups in the LGBT world, in bicycle activism, in astronomy, and in the arts.

After I really was clear about who I was, I realized that I really needed to reconnect to a spiritual community, and my friend Andrea suggested that I check out Theodore Parker UU Church, a welcoming congregation. Soon I was singing hymns with words I could believe, reverently and enthusiastically reciting Theodore Parker's description of his church--"Its temple, all space", being welcomed at candlelight dinners, and co-hosting coffee hour. As I got to know people in the congregation, they encouraged me to get involved, and since I was so enthusiastic about singing, join the choir. We sing every other week, and I am happy that this is our week off, so I can be here today.

I still wanted to improve my singing voice, though not quite in the range where my vocal chords wanted me to be. Last fall, I found out about a transgender chorus being started in metro Boston, and I immediately wanted to join in. In December, I went to a practice and connected. Here was a group of people with different problems related to their voices as they moved, like me, through gender space, where their physical voices didn't match the voices they wanted to have or were changing in ways which weren't always easy to predict. And a director, Sandi Hammond, who wanted to work with us and the medical community to help us produce the sounds that we wanted to. I'm still not as good a singer as I want to be, but I sing in **my** voice,