Speechless
by Tracy Cochran

July 28th, 2018

One morning I woke up with no voice, just a faint, breathy whisper. This would be upsetting anytime, but on this particular day it felt as if I were in a fairy tale. In a matter of hours, I was supposed to tell a story and teach mindfulness meditation at the Rubin Museum of Art in Manhattan. And I couldn't make a sound.

In the middle of the working day, in a softly lit theater in a museum in New York, more than a hundred people of different age, gender, and realities were going to sit down and be still together. The stories and guidance I wanted to offer were simple: I wanted to help them remember that that they were alive.

Sati, the Pali word for mindfulness, literally means to remember the present moment. During meditation, I periodically reminded everyone to return to the sensation of breathing, to notice when they were lost in thought and to come home to the direct experience of being in a body. The Latin root of "conspire" means to breath together. I loved reminding people that we were conspiring. And it did feel as if we were part of a radical movement, peeling ourselves away from our computer screens for a time to return to the roots of being.

Hiding under the covers, I tried talking, whispering, croaking, anything. Nothing came out, just a ghostly whoosh of air. Canceling was an option, but the event was new and it was doubtful that a replacement teacher could be found on such short notice.

Standing up did not help. Neither did stretching or walking or smiling bravely in the bathroom mirror. I padded through a quiet house awash in golden summer light. Terrible images flashed before my eyes: faces looking up at me, uncomprehending, dismayed. People heading for the exits.

Once the Buddha taught without speaking, holding up a single white flower. That wordless gesture must have stunned a crowd who came expecting brilliant stories and answers to their deepest questions. Yet according to legend, nobody threw rocks or heckled the Awakened One, and one man understood that he was embodying the inexpressible suchness of life. But I was not the Buddha. There was no holding up a rose or a carnation purchased at a New York deli somewhere between Grand Central Terminal and the museum on West 17th Street. Someone might think it was a game of Buddhist charades and call out "Flower Sermon," which is what that teaching came to be known. But no one was coming to the museum at lunch hour for an imitation. They were hoping for something real.

I stood on the stone floor of my front porch, looking through the screen door at the

flowers and trees. Everything looked still and serene, as if life were stable and predictable. But everything is subject to change. The flowers and even the blue stone slabs I stood on were not here the year before, when I was not yet teaching at the Rubin Museum and I had not been diagnosed with spasmodic dysphonia, a rare voice disorder that makes my voice softer and huskier than it used to be, trembling and wane at times.

After resisting for a while, I now undergo the standard therapy of injections of botulinum toxin in the vocal chords every three or four months. It helps. But the results can be unpredictable. A low dose that worked well can become ineffective or suddenly too powerful, stealing a voice for many weeks.

“Maybe the universe is trying to tell you something,” someone said to me, when I explained about my voice. This was not kind, but also not wrong. Being without a voice in a wordy world is oppressive, I learned. But not speaking can also help you listen deeply and observe.

Buddha. Rubin Museum of Art. Photograph by Car396

During the difficult stretches, I saw that life rolled along perfectly well without most of my opinions, which are mostly shallow and secondhand, not worth the effort it takes to rasp them out. When it’s hard to be heard, you need to mean what you say. Words need to be rooted in presence, in the real time experience of how it feels to be here.

Life is difficult for everyone, I reminded myself. Even beautiful people with every seeming advantage live like combat soldiers much of the time, fighting for survival, struggling to maintain a positive attitude, wary and weary and scared. The people who were going to be filing into the museum were all fighting battles. They were seeking safety and welcome and company.

For brief periods, when life breaks our way, it can feel as if we are finally getting somewhere. We may feel that we are finally becoming someone who understands this crazy life. With this self-image securely in place, we may decide that we are good and life is good and that we can share this with others. But things change. A voice or relationship or job or health is lost.

Instantly we contract, closing the doors and windows to intruders. We become little fortresses in a world that is suddenly dark and dangerous. I once heard a Buddhist teacher call the ego a defense against pain. I heard another great teacher say there is no point in trying to kill the ego because it was never really alive. It is a set of conditioned responses and thoughts that try to protect us by separating us from the whole. But we don’t like living in these self-enclosed little air locks. We feel cut off from life. We are afraid to step outside. We want the comfort of the known.

I showered and dressed to go, frightened and worried about how I would come across on stage and what people would think about me. But within this feeling of being trapped in the spotlight, there was another discovery: that under this agitated mind there is another mind, vastly more quiet and responsive, seeing without judgment. And within the body that was so quirky and problematic, there was a more subtle body, also receptive and responsive. In times of crisis, I remembered, this body knows what needs to be done. I got in the car and drove to the train.

Meditation and spiritual practice have been called death in life. We die to the hope that our life is taking us somewhere. We let go and allow ourselves to open to a new life, a shared life. I reminded myself that this happens with each breath, the letting go and breathing in. For the space of a few breaths, I escaped the diving bell of ego and looked at the brilliant blue sky.

I would have died if I hadn't died. This is a mantra I often share with others. I attribute it to the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, although it isn't an exact quote. It came to light in a college class discussion on Kierkegaard's leap of faith. After all these years, I'm not sure who said it just that way, if Kierkegaard said it or a professor or this was my own paraphrase. But the phrase stuck and I made it my own over the years. Over and over, I verified it, that it is often when the worst happens, when hopes and dreams dashed, that real life pours in.

Buddha teaching. Eight or ninth century, Maha Vihara Mojopahit, East Java. Photograph by Anandajoti Bhikkhu

Iboarded the train. On this morning, it felt like more than a trip down to the city, but rather a journey. But in the uppermost layer of my mind, the part that reasoned and compared, I judged as ridiculous this feeling of questing and yearning. There was no grand story unfolding, and no role for a heroic individual. Things were just happening.

At a level of awareness deeper in my body, however, closer to what the ancient ones called soul or essence, there was a quest. Who was I really? And what kind of life did I want to live? Suddenly, these questions felt essential. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, the Irish poet Seamus Heaney said that we are all hunters and gatherers of values. I longed to live in a world that was bigger than my own little ego, to care about something more vital than sounding good or looking good, because that effort was doomed. It was meaning I was seeking, and for a moment I knew this wasn't a proposition that could be rendered in words. It was a feeling of being alive, part of a greater whole.

"We all have to be the hero of one story—our own," wrote P.L. Travers, the author of the Mary Poppins novels, in the first issue of this magazine, "The Hero." But must we? When I first read this quote, I felt scolded by the magical British nanny for having a bad attitude, especially because Joseph Campbell, who popularized the Hero's Journey, was also a contributor to Parabola.

But now I understood that a hero is someone who can take off the armor, who can be vulnerable and show up anyway, experiencing what is really happening without trying to resist or run away. I saw that an act of heroism can be an action that happens on the inside without anyone else noticing, a movement of availability, a willingness to be seen and heard and touched by life.

All the way down to Grand Central Station, the fear and the sense of contraction that came with it came in waves. I noticed that when I thought about myself and what might happen, I suffered. When I stopped and noticed the people around me, I felt energized and alive. The fear was still present, but I remembered that I was also part of a larger life that contained unknown possibilities.

A hero's journey isn't necessarily a long ordeal. At any given moment, we can leave the

self-enclosed world of our thought and touch down in the present moment, which is always unknown territory. Yet it also feels like coming home. It seems miraculous to move from one state of being to another, from thinking to opening to presence.

I walked down the twenty-five blocks to the Rubin. At times, I felt like Anne Boleyn mounting the steps to her execution. But at the Rubin I was met by kindness. A glass of water and a cup of tea were fetched. A powerful hand microphone was supplied. When I first whispered to the crowd there were a few murmurs of surprise and concern, not unkind. I told people to lean in, as if I was on my deathbed and about to tell them the secret of life, and they did. All but one person stayed.

Afterwards, more than one person assured me they could hear me very clearly. Partly, this was the excellent sound system. But it was also because of the way they listened. Several people told me they were more touched by my willingness to show up and use my voice as it was than by anything I might have said under other circumstances.

That day I spoke about the great myth of the Buddha's journey to awakening, and especially about a time when he is overwhelmed by terrifying projections about what might happen to him. As he sits meditating under the Bodhi tree, the devil Mara sends temptations to scare him into giving up his seat and his deepest search. Mara conjures images of the Buddha as a great leader, as immensely wealthy and powerful, surrounded by beautiful women. But the Buddha will not move.

When temptation doesn't work, Mara resorts to fear, conjuring visions of terrible armies and horrible carnage. Still, the Buddha does not flinch. Slowly and wordlessly, he reaches down and touches the earth. The classical explanation is that he is asking the Earth to bear witness to his right to sit there, affirming his many life times of effort to awaken.

But touching the Earth also symbolizes humility, the act of coming down out of our thoughts to remember the body and the present moment, leaving the frantic control center of ego to join the rest of life. The Latin word humus, the living earth, is related to the word humility. When great difficulty arises, we tend to remember that what really matters are essential, earthy things, giving and receiving a glass of water, a cup of tea, taking the next breath. It is during the hard times that we notice that life is constantly offering itself to us.

The Rubin Museum of Art, 2011. Photograph by Beyond My Ken

The meditation taught at the Rubin is always secular, accessible to all who enter. But on a big screen behind the stage where the meditation teachers sit there are projected images of sacred Buddhist art from the museum's collection. Among them are works featuring Padmasambhava, the "Lotus-Born," a Buddhist master of the eighth century. In Tibetan Buddhism, it is believed that this great guru had the power to foresee the future, hiding teachings to be discovered in years to come. He predicted an age of darkness, a time of great discord and destruction, when people would lose their ability to discern what is precious and what is mere distraction, sweeping them away from what is good and essential.

The great Zen sage Dogen taught that whenever people sit down to practice stillness they sit down with the Buddha and all the ancient ones who have sought to awaken, including Padmasambhava, who is also called "the second Buddha." That day at the Rubin, in the

midst of a dark time, I discovered that a truth was waiting to be found.: When we let go and die to the known, we find the unknown. And when we dare to be still and to touch the earth of our lives, we can find our true voice.♦