

# **From Dispirited to Re-Spirited**

## **Update from NVN President Frankie Armstrong, July 2020**

Singing has been my "life blood" since, at the age of 16, I sensed something important, nay crucial, happened when communicating to others by singing. And then, in lockdown, by April 2020, something had gone missing. All my fine intentions to use the self-isolating time to learn and write new material somehow slipped through my fingers. Time seemed to slip, stretch and squeeze, and day after day passed without the life blood flowing.

As May approached, I decided on disciplined voice exercises and song learning. I get out the exercise tape from the wonderful voice coach I went to for 6 or 7 years some time ago. My voice was in trouble at the time due to the distress at my brother having terminal cancer and my mother clearly developing dementia. With his help I learned to free up the tensions that had developed and to regain confidence in my voice. His range of exercises were always perfect for my needs, so I could do no better than to go back over these systematically, knowing they had been so valuable.

So what was happening? I was finding myself dissatisfied and dispirited. I even found myself feeling that this lovely teacher, saying such things as "Remember it's fun Frankie", or "Relax and let your abdomen do the work" were taking on a judgemental tone. I knew perfectly well that this never happened - he was totally supportive, encouraging and all his suggestions carried not one iota of criticism. So what was going on? I was projecting my own loss of confidence and my self-criticism unfairly onto him.

Time to stop and try something different. Darien and I were going for a walk each day and drove some 30 mins to and back from the parklands, so I used this time to open my mouth and just make sounds without planning. And, somehow, instead of unsatisfactory tight and restricted sounds, they started to flow more freely, resonantly, flexibly, and what's more, they were enjoyable! So my new decision was to only make sounds and sing songs I could fully enjoy. I found that I could trust my voice to know what to do and where to go to. I could simply have fun with a regained sense of power, resonance, range and expression.

Over these months, I had many phone chats and zoom calls with voice-teaching and singing friends. It became clear that nearly all of us went through loss of self-confidence at some stage, however experienced and capable we were normally. But "normally" had disappeared from the vocabulary. Darien and I had some zoom sessions where we played with friends around freeing up our voices. And, lo and behold, if we agreed just to play, let loose, throw out the notions of "right" or "correct" etc. (we all know this but..), we found that those wagging fingers disappeared and we simply had a good time together.

And now I feel free enough to go back to "proper" exercises in addition to playing. And, as long as I go on with the attitude of "play" when doing these, I'm fine. I'm loving using my voice again. Much to my surprise, I'm really enjoying running workshops with Darien on zoom and doing some individual coaching. And as our self-isolating looks as if it will be for some considerable time to come, this makes me feel more hopeful, resourceful and energised in these stressful and tragic times.

I've often said over the decades that the voice has been a great teacher. Working/playing with my own and others' voices has taught me so many lessons about life and how to try and live it. So I find myself led back to trust, and as trust has been one of the central aspects of my life, especially over the 45 years of running workshops, this is a re-spiriting lesson. I really trust that each of us is born with a unique, potentially thrilling and energising voice if we can help unlock it. I hope I've learned my lesson - at least for now.