

digging the mermaid

January 2009 – learning to love foundation

The man I am falling in love with is a slow moving creature. It is three a.m. and we are in my kitchen dancing to some music, a little drunk and definitely wanting to fuck. Or at least I am. He is hard...and despite this obvious indication that we should be having sex, he says he is not ready. In my muddled state I feel my heart drop gently into my belly. Disappointment. But somehow he manages to tell me this without hurting my feelings or making me question his desire for me...or his virility.

I wake up the next morning and marvel at all of this. I am almost fifty and for the first time in my life I believe I am moving at a pace that is giving me much-needed time to think -- and feel -- my way towards making a choice about sexual engagement. This man is becoming dear to me in mysterious ways that are related to the word "no." And he is teaching me – through his slowness – about the time it takes to build foundation.

I have always valued my ability to be fully present in the moment of lust, and to let that lead me to decision. In the immediacy of the experience I recognize and reclaim myself. Sexual impulse brings me to life. I can organize a military campaign of activity around shared passion. And I can create all the fiction necessary to pitch 'the idea of love' to my inner editor. But in the end neither body nor head feels intact and the drama is exhausting. How nice it is to have the option to back out before chemicals and morality do their wicked dance of entrapment.

I am a singer and what I do with the inside of my body – in order to make sound – is invisible and is not fully processed by my motor-sensory cortex. This makes it hard to feel and difficult to boss around. It is under the purview of my autonomic nervous system and unless something is wrong, this branch of the nervous system does its work without letting me in on it. So within this body I need image and emotion to get to the heart of expressing and communicating my humanity.

I teach voice, too, and do so in my home. The boundaries between the personal and professional blur as I draw on my life experience as a mother, and use the art on the walls of my living-room studio to illustrate ideas and feelings. I love passing on the cathartic and technical expertise that I have accumulated over thirty years of singing in public and while teaching at my piano. My students dream about houses as they strip themselves bare, rewiring and re-plumbing their insides in order to free their voices and build technique.

To sing from the heart, foundation is necessary. The diaphragm needs to give way into the body so that air can come in by itself. This trust within the breath allows for courage. When our base – our pelvic basin – is rigid we armour through the chest. This is a superficial stab at strength and it causes us to force in order to be heard – I call this sound brave. Courage is different. It is open and heart felt. It gives and receives. The chest softens into a sigh and the ribs counter, expanding and protecting through flexible strength.

Ruthlessness and compassion discover how to collaborate as we risk speaking the truth. Within the singing voice this ebb and flow of air, this pulsing of flesh, leads to extraordinary sound that seems to surround the singer rather than being dependent on

the striving of an individual set of vocal cords. Vital, vibrant, vigorous. The body fully alive in vibration.

Nina is almost six feet tall. She has a massive mane of hair and a body modeled after Barbie. She *is* fabulous...she made herself that way as she transitioned from male to female. I want her insides to feel larger than life, as well. I ask her if she would like to get up on my baby grand piano to sing and her first response is: no! But she is a hardcore human being and so she climbs up. She is sitting on top of my baby grand piano, leaning back on the Chinese watercolour hanging on the wall. Her mouth is wide open and she is singing. The piano's vibrations under her ass and perineum help her yield further into her own dark and juicy sound. She is ecstatic; it reminds her of being with a past lover who could make her swoon. I think of Mae West's "a hard man is good to find." I am delighted that my 1920 Hardman, Peck and Co. baby grand, through its size, solidity and warm, grounded sound, can support a student's release into *her own* strength and flexibility. The best of both worlds; we can live expansively when we engage with the wholeness of our voices.

January 2010 – digging out the basement

There are eight or nine men in my basement and I don't know any of their names. It is January the fifth and, apparently, frozen ground does not stop this extended family of Portuguese construction workers from digging.

My daughters and I peek down the stairs at the end of the first day. It looks like small graves have been dug around the perimeter, at four-foot intervals. It is creepy and exciting.

I have owned this house for almost ten years. It is “my” house. I bought it after separating from my husband and moved here with our two daughters. I have survived two more relationships with men within the walls of this place, and during that time, replaced the floors throughout, renovated the kitchen, added Indonesian doors and a stainless steel tub to the bathroom, created a third-floor bedroom with bathroom and balcony and discovered that there are termites underfoot.

Every year of this last decade I have moaned about the state of my basement. It runs the full length of the house and is loaded with all sorts of things that we just don’t need but can’t quite part with. I am tired of its ickyness and it seems that the accumulated junk is always needing to be moved around.

Now, I have a secret desire. My slow-moving man is the kind of guy who makes me feel like it would be safe to get cancer....that he’d take care of me. I don’t have any symptoms of an undiagnosed illness but I do feel that dis-ease lives deep inside me and that I could use some support within my world of single parenting and one-woman shows. I can imagine him cherishing me beyond my breeding years. He already has two little boys and I have two teenaged girls – two thirds of the Brady Bunch but alas, no maid. I think that if I dig out the basement there might be enough room to have us all live together...and if not, I can always rent out the space. I try to act casual when I explain to him the size of reno I am taking on for no really clear reason. I am verbally back-flipping and all I can see are his clear grey eyes and his patience. Much as he accepts my indirectness, I see a little worry cross his brow.

As our relationship grows he gifts me with “lingerings.” They are sketches he makes with my intimate foundation garments. Each morning as I head to the kitchen to put the kettle

on, he makes the bed, and on top of the duvet he creates a mermaid, a mandala, a sailboat, the Wicked Witch of the West, my undies a heart with a real feather placed on them...just so.

I want to sink into love.

So I am dealing with foundations – digging, underpinning, trying to provide space for a relationship I think I can trust.

The house is old – almost 130 years. The digging out of the basement is halfway done and it looks like something Edward Burtynsky would photograph. It is epic, raw, undone. Seeing the underneath of the house look so savage is inspiring. It seems to echo how my students feel as they engage with the release of their pelvises when first inviting breath into their bodies and again when making uncensored sound. So I take my voice class on a fieldtrip down the stairs. Steve is seventy-two and a philosopher king, Kazumi has CP and sings without a safety net, Jen is a wonderful performer and vocalist, Jeremy - who cleared out my basement - now has a b and b, Lesley is a versatile, expert body worker and beautiful mover...a mixed bag of six or seven adults looking more in this moment like the Seven Dwarves on their way to work. We are filled with a kind of awe as we trespass on the uneven earth, wending our way past wheelbarrows and shovels right to the back, to the bowels of the house. I feel the weight of my civilized Victorian house above us and I imagine that this is what the basement looked like during its infancy, in the late 1800s.

February 2010 – who owns this cunt anyway

My dad is an immigrant – he moved to Montreal from Switzerland when he was twenty-one – he needed a breather from his family, was a bit of a risk-taker and wanted to make money. Looking at a photo of him walking on the beach in Florida, some time in his early sixties, I am struck by how pulled up he looks in the arches of his feet. I can feel that same pull in my body. It reaches right up from the soles of my feet through my knees and inner thighs and back around to my sacrum and lower ribs. It is driving me nuts right now. I can't start the car without my inner thighs yanking up as I press into the gas pedal. I can't sit at the piano or at my desk without feeling tightness in my lower body. Going places and getting things done practically lifts me up out of myself.

I may be used to picking up but I am not used to settling. My family moved relentlessly; by grade twelve I had been to twelve schools. And I walked really early...at about nine months. My mother says I was always pulling myself up in the crib and onto pieces of furniture. She is proud that I never needed to crawl but I am a little horrified as I have heard it is crucial to the development of left brain/right brain connectivity.

When a student first comes for a lesson we start by lying on the ground to begin to learn how to breathe freely...like someone who has not yet been toilet trained, or has not been made to sit still in school before the age of eight or nine. We reacquaint ourselves with gravity, lose a sense of our socialized bodies, and if this happens in a group, we rediscover tribe and family.

A class of eight students is standing around the piano. We have connected to open breath by releasing into the pelvic bowl and we are now singing long tones. I love it that they are sinking into themselves right above a basement full of men digging down into the earth below my house.

The crew is respectful of our work. No loud talk – but occasionally a fragment of what sounds like a Portuguese folksong sneaks up through the floorboards.

I wonder what they make of the big broken sounds they have been hearing over the months: the deep animal grunts and groans which - through release - begin to lay the floorboards of self-expression and then self-possession; identity and core rising out of a tangible love of gravity; the peals of laughter as we celebrate one another's vocal transgressions. We risk being seen and heard in our true, animal states. We risk showing desire and we learn to sing the word “no.”

Renovating the voice starts by stripping it of social convention. This means reclaiming our genitals, diaphragms, sinuses, the space inside our mouths and the masks on our faces. We need to become the empty house – lots of room inside and no moulding or trim to decorate our truth. This cathartic vocal work is like gutting the house.

Roselie has just finished playing Jackie Kennedy in a theatre piece and she is not yet free of Jackie's body and mindset. The week before her lesson as she was waiting for a physio appointment she heard some really raucous laughter from a woman seated just around the corner. The size and freedom of the sound coming so unbridled from the woman's belly was truly offensive to her. As we work with her discomfort she has an “aha”...this is not what Roselie *believes* but what her Jackie self *feels* in her socially restricted body. We start to loosen things up in her back....working especially on her lower ribs and in her diaphragm. As her voice drops more easily into chest resonance I have her sing an “ah” on a long tone, and then a word on that tone and then ask her to speak the word without losing the beautiful warmth and depth that has been developing in her singing sound.

She does this fantastically and immediately exclaims, “I sound like a man!” while giggling like a young girl. She does not. She sounds like a woman and she knows this. But in the conversation that follows she confesses that given her relationship to her mother she feels there is not enough room on the planet for two full-blown women.

It is really hard for us to get out from under the roof of our mothers. And it is hard for us to believe that we own our own bodies. That our vaginas/mouths, our wombs/creativity are not owned by our fathers or husbands or partners or mothers or churches or cultures or countries.

I ran my father’s business, an industrial bakery, when I was twenty. It grew from ten employees to eighty during my tenure. It was hard and I did it to his high standards. The only way I knew how to get out of the job was by getting married at twenty-two. That marriage also meant that from my mother’s point of view, I could now have legitimate sex.

January 2011 – mine

I am a woman with tight hips. I never thought I was prudish; I could jump into a one-night stand with the best of them and I have not been sexually abused beyond the attitudes embedded in our society. My hip joints really are terrified of turning outwards though my mum’s do beautifully. My brothers, my father and I typically tickle our ears with our kneecaps and wince not-quite-cheerfully as we try to sit cross-legged...she is at ease.

Since September something has been slowly changing in my pelvis...all the postures in yoga have felt different. There is more external rotation deep in the hip joints and a

release towards the earth through my sacrum...even a gentle strength - when standing in triangle or half moon - is coming into play. It is just happening...not because I am trying hard or willing it. Even the pain and stiffness I normally feel during a class is easing. When I sit cross-legged after corpse pose I can imagine my anus sweetly opening to kiss the ground. I am beginning to truly settle in that most basic seated asana...unforced, at home. And I suspect that the increased release has benefited from a growing commitment to nurturing the strength in my legs.

Lee is checking in at the beginning of class and she tells us that something I said last week had stayed with her in a paradigm shifting way. She is a petite, robust, bleach blonde and has some gorgeous tattoos. When I first met her – a good decade ago – she had a fierceness which was really attractive to me. Her voice is polite, soft and a little stuck behind the nose...careful. The week before I had been talking about the level of stress that can be felt by 8 a.m. in the kitchen on any given day. That morning I had said to my partner, “I won’t let the fuckers get us!” meaning that even a low grade stress response without there being any immediate, life-threatening situation was a thing I wanted to let go of. A kind of activism I would like to engage with. What Lee remembers me saying is, “nothing will get between me and my anus.” She is right. It is such an intimate reality check for me to know how my bowels are doing. The animal functioning of my body is the thing I want to advocate for. The foundation I feel I can partner best from, mother best from, in order to discern and handle the real stresses of life.

Lee starts to sing. She digs out the basement of her sound through low raucous tones – she sits in the shit of saying No and protecting her turf. She explores her rights around having a proprietary relationship to herself. She finds the “mine” in her voice – tunnels into her core and her foundation and owns the sound she makes. She practices. *Mine! Mine! Mine!* She sings the most

glorious, full-blooded screams - pitch by ascending pitch - to the top of her range. A soul singer would recognize her as kin.

From the word No comes the word Yes. If I can say No my Yes is of value. If it is *mine* I can share it. If I know it is mine I can make decisions about it. I can offer. You can say No. I will be able to stand this. And I will be able to rise to Yes as well as saying it myself, with heart.

Each of my daughters spontaneously discovered the phrase, "You are not the boss of me!" as they entered kindergarten. The oldest had her first boyfriend last year, at seventeen. A really nice and talented young man, a few years older but not right for her. She could feel limitations and was afraid she would not have room to grow. She broke up with him brilliantly – with respect, kindness and a firm No. He refused to accept it and haunted her high school for weeks but she stood her ground. I was full of admiration and joy at what she could do.

February 2011 – into my wilderness

The mermaid is utterly undomesticated – and she expresses a range of feeling that I wish there was room for in everyday life. She is not domiciled either. She inhabits the ocean, she lives beyond of my idea of 'house'. I am thinking about her because I have to use this house, my body, to make her available to others through my voice.

I am working on developing this character for a hybrid piece of theatre. The writer, the composer (who is also my partner) and I have had hours of conversation – I keep reminding the two men that mermaids aren't real...that they are from the male imagination. But mermaids have not been drawn out of thin air. As the guys slip back into talking about Lighea as if she really existed, I think how powerful and necessary the feminine must be for lonely and frightened sailors to create the call of the siren. How extraordinary women are - we give life and we threaten death. I think of wombs and of graves. Roots. The basement.

Through our many meetings we arrive at some ideas for vocal improvisation and so I sing with wolves and with whales. I imitate their sounds and I let myself be wild...I ululate, howl and shriek. When I listen back to the recordings made of my voice I hear that I have equated elemental with aggressive. This is not enough. Walking out of the kitchen one day I have a thought that feels radical. I realize I have been using my own life experience with men to calibrate the mermaid's emotions but in fact she is beyond this...she is not of the 20th century – no neuroses, no feminist struggle, no separation agreement to determine who owns what. No apology or backtracking. No fear around No or Mine. Oh god, I wish I had crawled!

I sing the mermaid. Standing in a rehearsal hall in front of my colleagues, script in hand, I soften into my viscera and let my pelvis feel heavy, like a bowl. I grab a chair and lift one leg up onto it to reinforce how soft and open my insides have become. As each breath drops into my torso, my diaphragm expands to its outer limits – watery – oceanic – limitless. I connect to the in-the-mouth pleasure of the Greek text.

I sink further into the mermaid's desire to have her mortal lover follow her into the waters. I engage with tangible, fleshy pleasure in my sound – I do not censor. I improvise melodically and look for the divine and the animal in tone and pitch, and when I realize that my earthly man cannot come with me I let sorrow fill my chest – shredding its way expansively through my mouth and into the space behind my eyes.

I sustain a many-stranded sob and lean into the beautiful sounds the composer offers on the tape part – making a song out of what is broken and ecstatic. I pound the sound down into my chest and let it chord into rage and regret. My composer's accompaniment melds with my foundation, spurs on my feelings. Witnesses, composer and singer become elemental. We are ancient.

march 2011 - inhabiting the reno...or not yet ready for moulding

I am lying naked on Dr.Chen's table. He is using acupuncture needles on my upper back and tuina – deep tissue massage – to dig really far into a muscle he calls the gluteus minor. This muscle is on either side of my buttocks, more or less behind the hip flexor. As he works on me there is some woodwork being done in a room just above us and I explain to Dr.Chen that the pain I am feeling is like the sound of the drill. It twists on the inside somewhere between nausea and fear. I would prefer a direct hammer blow. This squeamish pain makes me want him to stop.

Last week when he worked on this area I went home so discombobulated that I could not speak properly at dinner and finally just had to drag myself into bed. There was no sense in trying to be productive.

In Bhutan they don't measure Gross National Product, rather, they have an index for Gross National Happiness. The idea slipped out their king's mouth and became a guiding force as they moved from monarchy to democracy...such a moving belief to build a nation on.

I have not been feeling very happy lately. My frozen shoulder is in extreme pain and I feel beleaguered and cranky. I am working too hard and don't feel like I have time to live as freely as I would like, in my own home. I am trying to keep up with bills and schedules, two daughters, two boys and a man – a really full house. It is taking me time to feel okay about owning up to owning my house within this newly establishing family, and it feels like I am taking a crash course on how to share it.

I start waking at five a.m., fretting about the cracks that have been appearing in the walls on the second and third floors. They are horizontal and vertical and diagonal. I beg the contractor to send me engineers' papers to certify that the work they did under permit is really solid enough to guarantee that the house will not fall in on itself, now that the basement is deeper and more open.

The weekend is stormy – rain, then snow and ice outside and then rain and snow and ice between my partner and me. Inside my being, I feel the foundation of our relationship slip away. I want to abandon the house...flee to some far-away land. But instead we climb into a hot bath together.

We can't even make eye contact. The anger is that great. And then we start to painstakingly express what we each have felt through the course of the weekend. The conversation does not resolve – we apologize for our tough positions but do not change

our tone. The bath ends and we go to bed; the conversation still does not resolve but some little shift in mood brings enough peace for sleep to come.

The next day over our morning ritual of coffee in bed, my partner says that a comment I made about the foundation of our relationship completely slipping away really struck him. He doesn't feel this way when we are in conflict. I can just barely admit that trusting foundation doesn't come easily to me. When I feel threatened in my home I feel completely undone. What I know through my voice when singing the mermaid is not something I have practiced much in real life. I am just learning to live inside my body.

I remember the uncomplicated feelings of falling in love in slow motion two years ago – before the basement became a place we would start to inhabit. And I remind myself of my partner's ability to build and trust foundation. To say No. His sense of time helped me own Mine. As I settle into gravity, my old beliefs are getting hairline fractures and much as I know this is good, it reminds me of the sound of the drill in Dr. Chen's office. Squeamish. Shattering. Ecstatic and broken as I keep falling.