

TRANSITIONS: Learning to Fly

By Nancy Bos

I've been teaching for over 20 years now - this is not exceptional. If one lives long enough and has career stability, teaching for over 20 or 30 years is not so much a bragging right as it is a fact of life. One benefit of age is the chance to look back and see what my journey has been so far, and what I see is not, "Gosh, I've been doing the SAME thing for over 20 years! - Ugh." When I look back, I actually see a **Modes of Transportation** diagram.

Teaching Singers How to Walk



I became a voice teacher thanks to my teacher and mentor, Dr. Candace Magner. I can't say enough about the importance of having a mentor for any newish teacher trying to figure this business out. Find and use a mentor as much as you can. Mentorship increases the integrity of our field and offers a fast track to

wisdom and knowledge.

I was 27 years old and had not yet found my way when I told my voice teacher (I was studying for fun) that I would like to be a teacher. I specifically remember what she said as if it were a recording in my head. Her exact words were, "Oh, thank God! We'll have you going in six weeks!" Sure enough, six weeks later I was teaching eight students at the high school during their lunch breaks. Each week I would touch base with Candace. That went on for over a year.

But even after that first year — perhaps for the first five years — I was walking with my students. Usually a step ahead but not always. Sometimes the student and I were asking the same questions; what does that warm-up do, how do I solve this problem, how do I pronounce this word, should I sing this song....? Being able to walk with and hopefully slightly ahead is a gift that only newer teachers have. Newer teachers get to experience the fascination, joy, and frustration through a student in an exciting way they will not experience again. For the student who struggles to match pitch, sing in foreign languages, and give a quality interpretation, the enthusiasm from a newer teacher who is thrilled to be walking with them is such a gift. A more experienced teacher might know the most efficient route to success, but the thrill of discovery can never be the same.

Teaching Singers How to Ride a Bike



The first time I needed to teach a student how to ride a bike — that is, get on a vehicle that goes faster and further than I could keep up with — was my first graduating senior who wanted to major in music. I didn't know the first thing about what he should do, say, and know for an audition for a University of

California music school. Thank goodness for my mentor!

That student showed me that I needed to work hard to give them the skills they need to get on and stay on that metaphorical bike. It wasn't enough to know some art songs, music theater songs, and scales. I needed to know about auditioning, professional expectations, and so much more. I think it is fair to say that I spent the next five to ten years working on being the best "bike" teacher I could be. But at some point I had those lessons figured out and was completely solid and comfortable working with intermediate singers. I don't like being comfortable — do you? I like to grow and be challenged.

Teaching Singers How to Drive a Car



During my "bike" phase I wrote a business plan. The mission statement for my business plan was "to be the best teacher I can be." That meant that when I had taken in many lessons from my mentors (by now I had had three different mentors), my local NATS chapter events, *Journal of Singing*, and

NATS conferences, I was really good at helping a student launch on a "bike" with a reasonably high skill level. But I wouldn't be the best I could be until I had the knowledge to help every single singer who came my way. I wanted to have the knowledge to help the advanced beltters, advanced classical singers, world music singers — anyone. I wanted to teach any singer to drive a car. Driving a car means you give them freedom. They have the freedom to go anywhere, at any speed, with any number of passengers. They can explore unknown places with the tools that we give them. They can also get into big trouble. There is risk.

continued: Learning to Fly

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The singer needs to have a car with every feature they might need - or be willing to come in for an upgrade. For me, that meant digging deep in areas that I felt were most important and would apply to every singer; physiology and acoustics. To that end I participated in the NATS Internship Program (I applied for three years before being accepted), took all of the NYSTA courses, attended conferences for Otolaryngologists (really, I attended two!), vocology classes in Salt Lake City, Voice Foundation events, went to a week of Ken Bozeman’s acoustics summer camp, took classes in anatomy, acoustics, and algebra, and sang in every master class I could (including one by our editor, Cynthia Vaughn).

During this period I wrote a book and exercises, called *Singing 101*. The act of writing a book can be an occasion to learn. The book was a chance for me to study the heck out of the seemingly simple act of singing, and to put the lessons in words that someone learning how to “walk” would be able to take in. The exercises were an opportunity for me to learn the why and how of vocal exercises; to build tone, strength, and stamina for any voice without doing harm.

But at some point, probably around year 18, that massive intake and application of knowledge began to plateau. I no longer found it enjoyable to teach a student how to drive a car. I felt like I understood pretty much any challenge a typical, healthy independent studio student could bring, and needed to wait, sometimes impatiently, for the student to catch up. Does that sound arrogant? I hope not. I think it sounds like mastery. But to me, at the time, it also looked like the end of a career — I was losing enjoyment in my work. Plus, I’d driven my own car pretty much everywhere I wanted to go; professional CCM, bluegrass, musical theater, and classical performances were all in my rear-view mirror. I stopped going to conferences, resigned from the NW Voice Foundation Board, and started to look around for different careers. In my 21st year of teaching, I took a near-sabbatical by dropping the studio to my four most interesting students. I learned how to do voice over work (which is still a lucrative side hustle

for me) and I took up Project Management, tested for it, and passed certification. I was looking for a job in the corporate world — something stimulating and new. But the funny thing is, the corporate world wasn’t looking for me.

Taking Flight



And then there was this niggling suspicion that the car isn’t the final mode of transportation — that one could actually take flight. So, I’m learning to fly. Frankly I’m not even sure what that means right now — ask me in five years — but I think it has something to do with taking a larger number of singers where they want to go. Singers I might not even meet, just as a pilot doesn’t meet his passengers.

In less metaphorical terms, I have entered the “Content Creation” phase of my career. This is the phase where experienced teachers write books, start music schools, create methods, travel the world teaching and singing, and generally try to change the lives of more than one singer at a time. Honestly, I never pictured myself getting to this phase. I didn’t realize it was a legitimate destination. In fact, all along I’ve joked that I’m climbing a ladder of my own creation. But truthfully, I’m not. Many, many other teachers have had the opportunity to go before me on this ladder, but how exciting to get to do it in this new Knowledge Age.

Perhaps you can see yourself in this journey. Maybe you’ve tried different modes of transportation, or done them in a different order. I imagine it would be very scary to go from walking straight to flying, but I know it has been done. I hope this view of the journey gives you a positive perspective on what the possibilities are and relieves some frustration. If you’d like to share your Modes of Transportation with me, I’d love to hear them; email or catch me at the next conference and tell me your story.



Nancy Bos is an independent teacher in the Puget Sound Region of Washington State. On her website, she offers the Singing 101 Vocal Exercises for free as well as links to her Every Sing podcast and her blog. Nancy is the author of Singing 101: Beginning Voice Lessons and The Teen Girl’s Singing Guide. She is the NATS NW Regional Governor. www.nancybos.net