

## Transitions: A Singer's Journey to Health "The Mirrored Wall"

by Shauna Fallihee

New students are cued to work at the mirrored wall. Sweaty, beet-red, and convulsing with full body muscle confusion, I saw myself. The mirrored wall was like an infinite, not-at-all fun funhouse reflecting disappointment, pain, self-loathing, and deep shame. After class, I politely thanked the studio owner, hustled to my car and sobbed for half an hour.

Often we define our Self by what we do. We are musicians. We are teachers. We are Singers with a capital S! After enough repetition, what we do feels like who we are. Our true identity, however, is found in the motivation behind our actions: the why behind the what.

Why do we sing? We possess a deep love of music and profound desire to share it with those around us. We are empathic, generous, highly intelligent. How lovely for us! Maybe we sing because we enjoy the physical sensations of producing sounds. We are sensual, bodied. Singing is highly complex and elite singing is regarded with awe, sometimes envy. Maybe we like being good at something so challenging and impressive. Maybe we are competitive. Maybe singing makes us feel special.

Identity is the chiaroscuro of self, the ever-present interplay between our darkness and our light.

An identity constructed around one mercurial talent is a tightrope. With our footing, we're on top of the world.

Conditions change and we fall. Like so many, I fell deeply in love with music as a child and that love was reinforced by the praise it engendered. Singing became both armor and tightrope. I quickly backed away from anything else that wasn't easy, out of fear and shame. Learning requires making mistakes in front of other people and I was highly uncomfortable with that. All of my personal value was tied to being "good" at something. Doing anything that I might not be immediately good at would blow me off the tightrope.

Doesn't it break our teacher hearts when we see a student encounter a challenge, back away in fear, and then lament that



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they are "bad" at the thing they didn't even try?

Identity is in large part passed down from our families. My parents modeled independence, humor, intellectual curiosity and emotional expressivity. They unfortunately did not model physical activity or healthy eating habits. My dad is my best friend while my mother was harder to connect to. Sadly, she struggled immensely with self-esteem and used food as an ineffective coping mechanism. I followed her lead.

At conservatory, the light of learning was obscured by darkness. The shame I felt about my body inhibited my development as a performer. I was paralyzed by stage fright. Managing my escalating depression and anxiety hindered my academic work, though my passion for all aspects of music was the North

Star. Moving forward felt impossible but I never doubted that I was walking the right path.

My road to wellness originated in this dark place. I could no longer tolerate the level of self-hatred I felt, nor could I

ignore that I was following in my mother's unhappy footsteps.

The process of becoming healthy was much like voice study. Try, learn, practice, integrate. I learned which foods my body and taste buds liked. I learned that hunger was temporary and safe. Without refined sugar and carbohydrates in my system, I didn't have depression. Anxiety became situational and manageable. I learned that body systems are built to respond to what we put in them and that being overweight or unhappy was a biological response, not a personal punishment. It wasn't a familial curse. It wasn't permanent.

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## continued: A Singer's Journey to Health

I dabbled in exercise but fear and shame still held me back. My career, however, was flourishing. I discovered that I truly loved teaching voice and pursued my M.M. in Voice Pedagogy. That passion drew a full private studio and I built my network of relationships as both singer and voice teacher. I made the permanent leap to full-time musician. I fell in love with a wonderful, supportive man who would eventually become my husband.

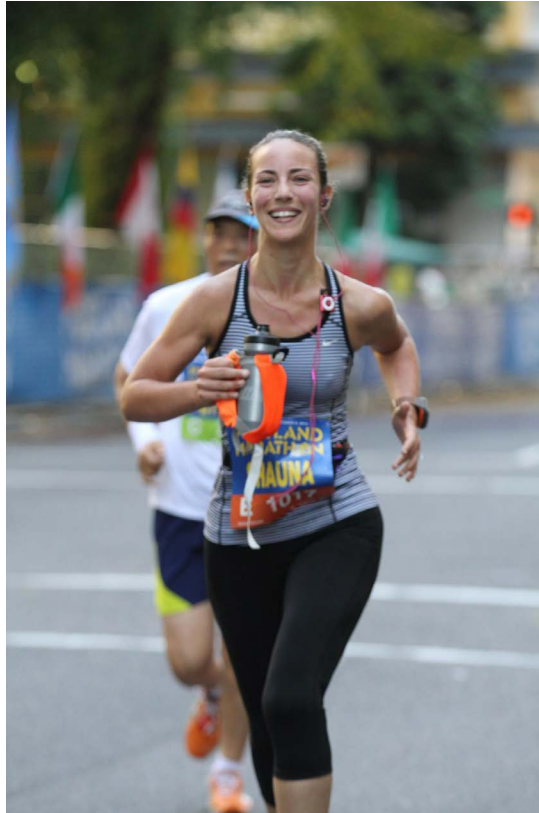
One day, an article about mother/daughter relationships led to an epiphany. In an effort to connect with my mom, I had emulated her. I made my body look like hers and lived in the same painful emotional conditions, hoping that she would see herself in me and we would connect. Years of uncomfortable self-reflection prepared me for this realization: the body shame that eclipsed my identity wasn't truly my identity. It was hers. I stopped binge eating that day and, after losing a considerable amount of weight, have been healthy ever since.

I was free to live authentically in my own body.

And here we are, red-faced and shaking in front of the mirror at The Dailey Method, an alignment-focused barre fitness class. The strong, proud, integrated bodies of the instructors and students were so beautiful and so inspiring. In the mirrored wall, I truly saw my struggle. The experience was terrifying but cathartic and the next day, I went back.

Additionally, I started to run. First a 5k race, then a half marathon on my 30th birthday, and ultimately two full marathons. At mile 11 of my first, the Portland Marathon, I shouted to my beaming dad: "THIS IS THE BEST DAY OF MY LIFE!" Crossing that finish line was beyond expression. 26.2 miles. Each step earned.

At the Dailey Method, learning about my body and focusing on what it could do, rather than what it looked like was a revelation. We were praised for our alignment, our emotional stamina,



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for balancing effort with ease. The educational focus on spinal alignment was very appealing to this voice pedagogy nerd and enhanced my voice teaching. I fell deeply in love with this empowering method and like singing, felt the call to share it with others. The memory of being invited to teach Dailey Method by one of my great mentors still makes my heart skip a beat. I knew in that moment that I was a changed person. Passion and hard work have led to more and more opportunities, including training fellow instructors and studio owners, leading workshops about musicality and voice use, and ultimately a promotion to Master Teacher Trainer for our DaileyCycle program, a role that only a few years prior would have been as inconceivable as singing Tristan.

Initially, I was not "good" at any of this but for the first time in my life, I didn't care. I was so thrilled by the accomplishment of not quitting, thrilled to be someone who worked hard without fear of failure. Wellness is a practice. Your mind and body learn valuable lessons every single time you practice. Whether or not you meet

your goals, all workouts are good workouts, though sometimes the only part that feels good is the shower afterwards.

Our identities are deeply imprinted but not fixed. To be a teacher is to be a lifelong learner of our subject and of our truest selves. In the light and in the dark, the road we walk is the foundation of our empathy.

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