

Kristi's Story

Contentment:

A Listening Centre Experience

Attuned, resonant, balanced
As I leave the Listening Centre
The colours of the trees leap out
Sparkling my eyes with their brilliance
Under the clear blue
My breath is deep
I'm solid on both feet
Noticing the smiles of people walking by
Life is a flower
I have found a way to her sweet nectar
And it sustains me

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Who will Listen?

by Kristi Magraw

...When I walk into the pleasant, colourful ambiance of The Listening Centre these days I feel at home. My body begins to relax and I notice other people's positive regard of me. It wasn't always this way. In March, 1996, when I first walked through these doors I was isolated and desperate, not sure that anyone or anything would be able to help me...

My Eustachian tubes were swollen and plugged making the world a far away place. I was used to not hearing through my left ear---a birth defect had prevented normal development---but I couldn't hear from my right ear either. It felt like I was in a giant bubble of cotton batting. No one in the medical profession could advise me on this condition. I went to several and they all said, "We don't have a good solution for Eustachian tube problems." I had difficulty projecting my speaking voice and sang with a shaky strained sound. My promising start as a songwriter was at a standstill. My existence seemed jerky and dissatisfying. I cried too much alone.

One year previously I had acquired a hearing aid implant on the left side of my head into which I could plug a hearing aid. I had done this because I had mistakenly interpreted an increasing sound sensitivity due to aging in my left (non-hearing) ear, for improved hearing. I wanted to hear through my left ear so much that when I went to an ENT specialist. I begged him to try out something--- anything. Though he was sceptical, the doctor gave in to my child like pleading and agreed to the implant. This was after I had tried an ear tube hearing aid and it hadn't worked to my satisfaction. I had planned to go to the Listening Centre after I got my implant thinking that it made sense to go there after achieving as much hearing as possible in my left ear. At that time I didn't know about the bad effects of low range sound. I'm still angry at myself for the lack of research I did. The best way I can explain this to myself is that I intuitively knew the deprivation that my brain and senses had been struggling with for years. I badly wanted relief, but I couldn't think about my ear rationally.

This difficulty in thinking clearly about my trauma was related to my experience with my other disability, acquired when I was nine years old from a medical accident. At that time my parents decided to let me have an experimental operation done on my left ear to put in an ear drum and construct an earlobe. In the first operation the facial nerve was partially severed. As a result the left side of my face had a partial paralysis. Though I had painful physiotherapy for about a year following the operation, not much change in the muscle strength occurred until I received acupuncture and facial re-training. This is another saga.

I am left with these questions: why didn't the doctor guess that what had made me hopeful was sound sensitivity? Why did he give in to what was an obviously uninformed request? Several years and many tests later an audiologist gave me that missing piece of information about sound sensitivity. That same audiologist told me that children with one ear commonly get much more tired in noisy surroundings and should take naps after school. I recognized this being true for me but never acknowledged. I remember crying after this appointment at the consequences of both my parents and my own ignorance. I wish I had been a better parent to myself but like many people, I repeated my parent's treatment of me on myself.

With these two pieces of valuable information and after my Listening Centre experience, I began to protect and pay careful attention to my left ear. I was fitted for a musician's earplug which I wore in noisy environments and I made sure to rest after occasions where there was noise from more than one source or very loud sounds. I refrained from judging myself for being extra tired after parties or performances.

Recognition and Revelation

By the time I went to the Listening Centre I had stopped using the implant. This was after a year of persistently bombarding my ear and brain with amplified low range sound via the hearing aid. I would use the implant in musical situations thinking that it would stimulate my musical abilities but instead they were getting worse. In hindsight I think this was because the overload of low range sounds and deficit of high range stimulated survival system connections in the limbic area of the brain bringing on a nervous state instead of making connections to the musical area of the brain.

I had my preliminary interview with Paul Madaule, director of The Listening Centre. He told me about the physically, mentally and emotionally draining effects of too much low range sound and not enough high range. The list of these effects validated my experience in the world--- musically frustrated, agitated, obsessive, lacking a feeling of contentment, and perceiving myself on the outside of things. He told me I couldn't do the program until my right ear cleared at least fifty percent. After this stunning recognition of my reality, I was able to make headway on my worst symptom, the swollen Eustachian tubes, with homeopathy and emotional release work.

Looking back I can see how important the validation of my reality was to my healing. In his book, *A User's Guide to the Brain*, John Ratey points out the importance of validating one's perception of the world. He says its not enough to ask a person how they feel (emotionally) but also crucial to ask how they perceive and comprehend the world.

Finally the swelling and plugging had receded enough to do for my first fifteen days at The Listening Centre. The Listening Test---a modified version of a standard hearing test-- at the Centre was similar to the ones I had had in many dark and claustrophobic sound cubicles. The beeps, the straining to hear, the embarrassment of knowing I was supposed to be hearing something and not, the frustration of the white noise used to mask the sound in my right ear so the left ear would be hearing on its own were all

familiar. The difference was in the person who administered it and the careful analysis made afterward. Sophie, the listening therapist, was reassuring and informative. After some other coordination tests and careful interviewing about how I perceived different things she showed me the graph she had drawn of my hearing curve and said, “Ideally it should be a smooth curve, lower on the low and high range sounds and higher (meaning better hearing) in the conversational range” Sophie said. “However, many people have irregular curves and we use this picture to help understand how they perceive the world through their ears and what kinds of problems this causes in their lives.” As I looked at the dents in my right ear graph and the deep valleys, even canyons in the graph of my left ear (the non-hearing one) I felt my heart sinking. “Can it ever change?” I asked. “Yes, to some degree” said Sophie, “That is the goal of doing the listening training program---to help the ear and the brain become more coordinated and developed in areas that they haven’t been. That may be reflected in a change in the curve.” My heart jumped up with hope. I visualized a smooth curve and a glorious rescue.

This fantasy was partially disappointed when I had my second interview with Paul. He said that the program would not be able to help my left ear because there was not enough hearing ability in it, but that they would work on my right ear to try to help me feel more balanced. This might result in a smoothing out of the curve in the right ear. He explained that my hearing loss had impaired my listening ability and as a result I had a lack of brain development for certain musical abilities. Referring to Sophie’s notes, he also pointed out that I had vestibular coordination problems. I had not heard of this and asked what that was. He said, “The vestibular system is part of the inner ear and it controls body movement, balance and the position of your body in space. This would explain your difficulty in hand and eye coordination. An undeveloped Vestibular system also makes sports and musical instruments hard to negotiate and can make dancing and social interaction frustrating.” “That’s me” I said, “I always wondered why I couldn’t catch a ball and it explains that jerky feeling I live with as well as my frustrations with playing and singing.” He identified that my listening curve indicated some difficulty in getting what’s inside of me to the outside whether its emotions or creativity. A problem of emotional expression not based in trauma but in listening function. I realized that this blockage was related to my frustration as a song writer. I was overwhelmed by the accuracy of what he was saying about my experience without even knowing me. I was relieved by the realistic approach he was taking to what could improve and eager to try. I noticed that the validation of my reality was making me feel a part of the world again.

Transformation: I’m not a Problem, I’m Unique

It was time to begin. Because I only had normal hearing in one ear I had to have special headphones so that the sound could reach me through a bone conductor on the top of my head as well as through the headphones to my right ear. This arrangement would stimulate both sides of the brain. The way in which I was presented these phones and the general lack of shame in the atmosphere of the place made me feel special, not different---this was a repair experience for my childhood shame around my disability.

The adult listening room had several people already hooked up to audio systems that are designed to filter the sound---selectively cut out various frequencies until just the high range sounds are present. I was told that this high range sound would feed my brain and help balance out my experience of the low range sounds that I had been subjected to with the hearing aid implant. After this “feeding” I would begin the active phase of the program in the second fifteen days. So I hooked up and began to listen. The soothing sounds of Mozart filled my head—resonated in my body---suddenly I felt how truly tired I was. Being in the world with one ear is an experience of strain and struggle. The Listening Centre experience let me admit how exhausted I had become. With headphones the sound was close. I didn’t have to strain

to hear and the listening therapists were attentive to get the volume just right. Just before I closed my eyes in a deep sleep I looked around and saw the art hanging on the walls. There was a whole range of images and many pictures with Listening Centre themes---headphones, reading etc. I thought to myself that I'd like to draw a picture too.

I don't remember much about the first fifteen days except sleeping, sometimes having irrational bouts of irritation and drawing pictures filled with color. Halfway through the program my Eustachian tubes had a major clearing. After a session towards the end of the fifteen days, I had a sensation in my chest of opening and warming. I felt so nurtured that The Listening Centre became like a good parent. The music was like arms holding me and the precise questions they asked me in my interviews regarding my perceptions, were those of a truly listening parent. There was a break before I did my second fifteen days which included the active segments. These segments were a roller coaster of frustration and triumph.

Learning to Like my Voice

The first active session was humming. To do this activity I was taken upstairs and plugged in with the addition of a microphone set in front of me. I was instructed to take a well balanced posture, similar to an Alexander posture, where each body part is aligned and supporting the part above it. Then I listened to a monk humming a few notes of a Gregorian chant and in the space following I would repeat what he had sung. Both my own voice and that of the monk were filtered to achieve high frequency tuning. Shortly after I began, I realized I had always hated the sound of my voice, especially my singing voice. When Paul told me that this was a normal experience for someone with my ear/brain pattern, I had an insight--- this hatred had blocked me all the years I had been studying voice. I hated to tape record and listen to myself even though I had been instructed to do it by my teachers. This reluctance to listen and my fear that I sounded as awful to everyone else as I did to myself had stopped my development as a musician. The humming aspect of the program was filled with emotion---despair, anger and hope (on a good day). Several times I left the Centre crying. Luckily I knew my own emotional process and knew I was working out past musical traumas.

Further into the active sessions I began to notice that my voice lessons were getting easier. I could also hear more instruments when I listened to music. Before the program I had mainly listened to the vocals or just the rhythm. Now I could hear the bass and keyboards as well. My experience of music became broader. Before I went to the Listening Centre art did not seem interesting. Now I was drawing pictures and began to notice other people's drawings in a new way. The colors seemed more vivid. I began to enjoy art of all kinds. My senses were opening up. My speaking voice softened and friends noticed that it was more resonant and friendly sounding. "You seem more relaxed" they would say. I slept better and my menopausal symptoms got less.

At that time I didn't know that the good effects could erode because of the ongoing stress of my impaired hearing so I just followed the normal boost schedule. A boost is a five day listening program designed to remind my listening ability and my brain to stay on the new track. As I found out later, listening curves and brain patterns have considerable inertia.

The next big shift I experienced was that fall at a song writing festival where I was performing. Though the conditions were bad---I was disappointed that I had not won the contest, I was alone and I had spent more money than I should have---I felt a new level of confidence while performing one evening. Suddenly it was fun. My fingers knew where to go, my voice stayed strong and I could focus on the

audience and my playing at the same time. My shoulder which had been hurting a lot on the trip there stopped hurting. I had succeeded in getting what was inside of me expressed outside.

There are no Miracles, Just Solutions

Before the next scheduled boost I noticed that my symptoms got worse. I was nervous and mildly depressed. Musically I was going downhill. Paul mentioned when he saw my face that it had “fallen”. He surmised that this might be caused by the effort of straining to hear--an activity that has impact on the stirrup muscle which is stimulated by a branch of the facial nerve (the one that was cut). He said there might be a negative feedback loop between my ear and face. I took this as a cue and began to let sound come to me. It created a whole new perspective on the world of sound and was much less effort.

Once again after the boost I got better on all fronts. This surprised me. I had done no biographical or emotional therapeutic work yet felt happy and connected. I realized how much my listening problem had contributed to my isolation. It wasn't just my operation and losing my smile combined with the parental neglect of my trauma, that had created my isolation but also an inner disconnection. As Paul put it, “The problem is the faulty wiring that goes to your right brain. It lacks development because of the lack of stimulation through your left ear. The emotional and musical functions of your brain are there but you have had only an intermittent access to them.” This accurately described my experience of my voice, both spoken and sung, and the pattern of my relationships which was manifested as difficulty in bonding. I often felt on the outside or as if no one was noticing me. The best explanation for this came from John Ratey in his book, *A User's Guide to the Brain*.

“Research shows that 80 percent of mothers cradle their babies on the left regardless of whether right or left handed. This may be an evolutionary trait that allows sound to enter the infant's left ear which means it will then be processed by the right hemisphere of the brain, the center for the emotional part of the language. The earliest communications may be pure emotion with no literal meaning—the right hemisphere, which develops first, is stronger at interpreting the melodic tones of baby talk that mothers and fathers use when holding newborns. If the baby is held on the left, then the mother's and baby's right hemispheres will be in contact. Thus cradling of the baby activates, stimulates and nurtures his right hemisphere while ensuring emotional feedback to the mother's own right hemisphere. This right-to-right communication begins the emotional bond and ensures the importance of first nonverbal and then later verbal interchanges to the bonding process.” (Ratey, John, *A User's Guide to the Brain*, First Vintage Books Edition, 2001, p. 263)

I could see how my perceptual disability had affected my consciousness, my emotional and social functions and my personality. I knew it was a tough road but I was determined to learn how to bond and to enjoy music.

Post Listening Centre I noticed several things that proved to me that the program was improving my ability to bond. One was that I was able to ask for help and attention in a much more direct way from friends and family. One of the people I bonded with was an old family friend who had babysat me when I was a child. I allowed myself to become attached to her during the time that my mother was declining with Parkinson's disease and becoming less emotionally accessible. With Mary I was able to feel comforted in my grieving processes. I also had more calm and patience when I was working with clients and my friends said I was more open. I felt love coming towards me and mine going out to them on a much more regular basis. I was able to bond with the children of several of my friends. It was a whole new world of relating.

After consistently letting myself go too long before I had a boost and re-experiencing some of the pre-Listening Centre discomfort---anxiety, depression, vocal frustration, and feeling isolated---I made the decision to go twice a year because I consistently felt better afterwards then around five to six months later symptoms would return. They were never as bad as pre- Listening Centre, but felt uncomfortable enough to affect my well being. At first I was critical towards myself for this relapse. I had to come to terms with the fact that my listening experience would be different than others. Most people who go through a training program did not come back as much as I did, if at all. Then I realized that having to come back was a result of stress from my hearing disability on the left ear and I could admit that it was ok to need special care for my listening problems. "If something works," I told myself, "use it!"

The Power of Knowledge

I continued to make progress with my music, feeling competent as a guitarist and gradually improving with my voice. As my singing teacher said, "Now you can hear when it becomes uncoordinated and fix it. That was not the case before" Performing alone and with others became fun instead of a struggle. I could tell when I was becoming overloaded with low frequency sounds and knew what to do about it. I could feel my voice in my body. I became comfortable in social situations and didn't try to force myself to hear if conditions were bad. Allowing the sound to come to me, I was much less anxious. I often felt that heart warming sensation that told me I was emotionally unified.

There is still room for improvement. I am not always able to hear or compose melodies as readily as I would like to. This is because melody is a function of the right brain and there is still that tenuousness of connection. I compare myself with my friend Suzie, a professional singer, whose melodies flow out constantly. What is interesting is that she has a hard time finding the words. This difference makes us good song writing partners and we have learned many things from each other.

I can fall into periods of feeling isolated. I sometimes feel blocked from my creative flow. However, the therapy I have been receiving combined with regular listening boosts has helped to strengthen the gains I have made. It is a therapeutic method employing alternate stimulation of the left and right brain called EMDR (Eye Movement, Desensitization and re-programming). I feel body sensations and emotions during sessions that are similar to those I feel at the Listening Centre. Afterwards I feel calmer and more open as well as liking my voice. Liking my voice has become important both as a symbol of emotional health and also physical well being. When it is stable I feel stable. When it is shaky I know some part of me is also shaky. It might be a situation that is bothering me, a symptom of listening deterioration, my Liver being tight or a sign of over tiredness. It is a wonderful feeling to know I can solve the problem with the selection techniques and approaches I have learned.

In my latest boost session at the Listening Centre I was struck with how quickly I could feel the positive results. The poem at the top of this testimonial expresses what I felt. This quick shift was the result of two things. In my EMDR sessions I had been focusing on my voice specifically---the sensation of singing and its symbolic weight in my life. Also my relationship context had shifted to a healthier situation. I think relationships have a profound effect on brain development as well as vice versa. I felt a deepening and calming of my interactions with others after the boost. As I was discussing with Paul my struggles with my voice he said something that struck a chord. "It amazes me how persistent you are with something as difficult as your voice. Maybe you have an innate sense that working with your voice is what keeps the rest of you healthy. As if somewhere you know that if you did not pursue satisfaction with your voice that your listening would deteriorate and narrow your experience down to a place where you

would become trapped in yourself. I admire your persistence.” My deepest heartfelt thanks to The Listening Centre and all the people there who helped me learn that neither my brain, my ear, nor the world was my enemy. Thank you for teaching me that I can be a part of things.

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