

My Voice

I sat in the chair with a pillow resting behind my lower back. The taste of disgusting banana flavored numbing spray coated my throat while sweat collected on my palms, anxious to hear the results. As the doctor slid the 4-inch silver rod down my throat I gagged. “More numbing spray?” she asked me. I nodded. Hundreds of thoughts filled my head as I waited for the results. I felt nauseous, weak. Almost immediately she took the rod out. She looked over at my voice teacher and they shared a look of concern. The concerned look translated into words I had never thought I would hear: “You have a severe vocal hemorrhage and a small polyp on your left vocal cord.” She showed me the picture on the screen. Essentially, I had bruised my vocal fold so severely that it caused bleeding and intense swelling- resulting in hemorrhage. The polyp, a small blister caused by overuse, was the cause of the voice loss and hoarseness I had been experiencing for the past two months. I sat there in shock. Vocal rest for a whole week, and not just some half-assed ‘I’m sort of on vocal rest, but I can talk every now and then.’ No. Complete and utter silence. I sat in the chair listening to my teacher and the doctor discuss the next steps. I had a show in a week in a half, I had finals, my 21st birthday was the following week—I *had* a life. But my voice, my instrument, is my life and it was being taken away from me. I began to cry, embarrassed and ashamed. The doctor and my teacher assured me this was a completely normal reaction. I was so overwhelmed with feeling, my chest felt tight and I was ready to have a full on panic attack, but I knew that would not help my situation. So I just listened as tears silently rolled down my cheeks.

I asked the doctor some questions, and she told me to make my final phone calls to my family to explain to them that I would be mute for the next seven days. I asked more questions, called my family, and went home. I hopped in the shower and cried silently, as any audible noise would affect my cords. I made the decision during that shower that I would keep this private, and to only tell my most intimate friends. I attend AMDA college and conservatory of the performing arts. A rigorous school with an even more rigorous social circle. I couldn’t deal with the AMDA bubble: gossiping, questions, and the ridiculous rumors that come about. People, who I thought were my friends began discussing my vocal health in public, a few times I even overheard them talking about me in the school’s cafe. “I heard her voice teacher ruined her voice.” “Oh, well hopefully she’s able to do the show, do you think she will?” News travels fast in a school of 800 students. Everyone knows each other and no rumors go unsaid. To say the least, I was bombarded by questions. I was a principal character in the school musical, a senior getting ready to graduate... would I be okay for the show? I replied to their questions on my little whiteboard with my red pen, “I’m on vocal rest. That’s all I want to share for now.” I was disgusted. People had no idea how much this was affecting me, how much I longed to scream and throw my little whiteboard on the ground and make them shut up. I wanted them to stop spreading awful rumors about me, about my wonderful teacher who has only helped me get through this trying time,

about my work ethic, and about my technique. But, I knew I couldn't, I knew I had to follow my doctor's orders in order to heal. Throughout all of this craziness the one thought that kept me going was "you're going to heal." I kept having to remind myself that this was just like a professional dancer or even a football player hurting their ankle. It was a valid injury and not something that should be taken lightly, or that I should be ashamed of... but that was easier said than done.

I cried a lot that first day. Silently, of course, but as the days went on my tears subsided and silence took over my life. It was difficult, but not impossible. My friends were supportive and my family checked in on me everyday. But one of the biggest things that helped me was my boyfriend Charles. He stayed with me through everything. We met at school, so he understood how difficult this was for me. He never made me feel like my injury wasn't valid, but he never pitied me. He was the perfect mix of comfort and hope throughout this difficult time. He helped rebuild my spirit, and helped mend my soul like the silence helped mend my cords. I cannot thank him enough for all he did for me, and I am still in awe of how much love someone can show you even in complete silence. Throughout my week of silence he sat with me, watched Shark Tank and gave me time to write my comments on the contestants on my whiteboard. He was patient, and he allowed me to feel everything I needed to, but also rely on him for comfort and support when I needed it.

Five days into my silence, I turned 21. Prior to discovering my vocal injury I was so excited for my birthday, my friends and I had planned a party for me that I cancelled. I felt sad, ungrateful, and out of place. My issue was so minuscule- there are people with cancer or with terminal diseases and this is what I'm complaining about? Yet, I felt helpless. For the past 2 years my life was school. My life had been my art. Working countless hours on songs, vocal technique, saying no to nights out to rest, working two jobs, managing my time... and still this happens. I felt angry, angry at the students who don't work as hard as me. Angry at those who can smoke pot, drink alcohol, and scream at the top of their lungs without any damage to their cords. Why are my cords so sensitive? Why me? Why me? I felt like such a brat, but also so full of rage and sadness. I just wanted to get better. The one thing that brings me so much joy, music, is causing me so much pain. I knew that this would pass, and it was just going to take time. But there was also no guarantee that I would make a full recovery, and that my voice would be back to the condition it would be at before I hurt myself. Regardless of my multitude of feelings, all I could do was stay silent, so I did.

On the eve of my 21st birthday, I had rehearsals. Class from 9am-5pm, work from 5pm-7:30pm, then straight to rehearsals -- a normal day for me. At rehearsals, I did my blocking and my understudy sang my songs and said my lines while I mouthed them on stage. At 11pm Charles was going to pick me up, I would sleep over, and go to school the next day. A Tuesday. I had class at 1:30pm, so at least I had the morning to celebrate being 21. I was less than excited, I was still very disheartened as five days into silence not much seemed to be getting better. My throat still felt weak, and coarse. It still felt dry, no matter how much water I drank. The minute

ticked by at rehearsals and 11pm finally came. I walked to his car and he greeted me with a big kiss and asked me if I was hungry. I nodded enthusiastically and he drove to our favorite “unhealthy place,” Wendy’s. As we sat at home munching on our frostys and watching Shark Tank, an odd sense of calm came over me. I started to feel better, feel more at peace. He kissed me and I accidentally uttered, “I love you.” The only three words I let slip out in my week of silence.

The following morning we woke up, and I was greeted to kisses, cuddles, and a sweet card. He handed me gummy bears, my favorite, and yellow sticky pads and a pen. He explained he was going to take me to breakfast and to get a manicure and a pedicure. The notepads were so I could quickly jot down notes so I didn’t have to lug around my big whiteboard. I smiled and the day went on. After my first legal drink, a mimosa, and perfectly manicured nails and feet, I went to class... a little tipsy and very full of life and hope. Much more than I had had before. I was smiling, and not a fake smile; the first genuine smile that I had in days.

I was optimistic- my voice was going to heal. I could do the show, everything was on my side. The pain deep in my throat was beginning to subside. Then I got the news that the directors were worried about my follow up appointment being too late. I scrambled to get an earlier appointment, and with luck I managed to get an appointment for the following morning.

Walking into the Laryngologists’ office once again was odd. I felt calm, yet terrified at the same time. If I hadn’t shown some progress of healing, my chances of being able to perform were slim to none. I texted my best friend from back home and my mom and they sent their love and prayers. An hour and a half passed before I was seen. It felt like the longest hour and a half of my life. The doctor had a patient longer than expected, so I waited. And waited... and waited, for what seemed like a lifetime. Finally my name was called and I was seen. The same process followed, only this time in silence. She sat me down, put the pillow behind my lower back, numbed me, and stuck the rod down my throat. It was almost instantaneous. She took the rod out and showed me what the results were. I was healing! The blood had gone down, and I was halfway down the road to recovery. I teared up with joy. I was finally able to talk to her, I was taken aback by the foreign sound of my voice. It felt delicate, and it was. I was only to talk for a maximum of ten minutes each hour and monitor my voice with the utmost care. But I was healing, I was going to be okay. And with the proper after-care I would make a full recovery.

The days that followed were challenging. A mixture of hope and doubt filled my brain. The school musical opened in a week. I could hardly talk, let alone sing. Tech was approaching and at this point I had to perform. I babied my voice, I slept early, drank even more water than I usually did and I centered my thoughts on only the show. At that moment all that mattered was getting through the show. I got through tech, and began making sound. My voice teacher worked with me on very specific and targeted exercises to help get my cords used to making the sound I needed in the show. During the run of the show I was to stay completely silent unless I was onstage, and right before I would do glottal clicking to help reset my voice so it would be ready

to go before I performed. Three days after my checkup I was able to lightly mark, and by opening night I was able to sing the show in its entirety, but not to the caliber that I hold myself.

Looking back, I still wish I sounded better. I still wish my voice was at 100%. But that's not the gift I was given. I was given a voice that was at 85%, but I sure as hell acted the crap out of that role, and for that I am proud. I am proud that I got through it and was able to manage my time and take care of myself to the best of my ability.

I know that this experience has ultimately helped shape me into not only a better vocalist and performer but a better person. I can reflect on every tear, thought, nasty thing said about me and realize that I got through it. It might not have been instantaneous but I did it. Patience is something I struggle with, and I've learned that I push too hard sometimes. I skip the baby steps to get to the end result, and ultimately that, and a combination of other things, is what happened to my voice. Learning to slow down, listen more, and just take a step back and evaluate how precious something as simple as saying hello, is eye opening. Mindfulness is everything, and this whole experience has really given me a new appreciation and outlook on how I view my voice. It made me think about how often I use my voice, how I use it, and when I shouldn't. I now have a better understanding of how *my* voice needs to be taken care of, which is unique to anyone else. Overall I am thankful I went through this, it's something I would never wish upon anyone, but I hope that someone can learn from my experience. To understand that vocal health is something serious, and something that shouldn't be made fun of, or be made out to be the singer's fault. Sometimes unfortunate things happen, and at the end of the day it's all about how you choose to handle them, and trying to make the best of the situation at hand. I am proud of my voice, and I am proud of the singer that I was, that I am, and that I am continuing to become. I love my voice, no matter the circumstance, that will never change.