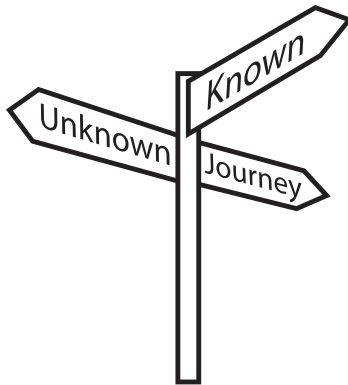


## Natasha's story and migration of identity



### Separation phase

Matthew: When was it that you identified that making an adjustment to your voice was important to you? What was the situation like before you acted to change things?

Natasha: I am more of a visual person so the main focus at the early part of my transition was how I looked, my clothes, my make-up. The voice was never an integral part of those early transformations because there was no voice, there was no communication with anyone else. It was always a voice in my head – my feminine part never had a connection with my voice. So I was in my early 30s when I started to look at my gender issues and I realised my voice was definitely lagging behind.

Matthew: What was it like to realise that your voice was lagging behind?

Natasha: I felt incongruent. The more confident I felt about my looks and the more I eventually started going out and started socialising as a woman, the more aware I became of this incongruence. My voice was never trained; it was the same voice I used throughout my entire life. My voice deepened as a teenager when I went through the wrong puberty and it stayed like that. But three years before I actually did something about my voice I was aware of this incongruence – and the dysphoria that it created made me want to stay mute!

Matthew: Tell me about the incongruence. Did staying mute connect to your values?

Natasha: It was impossible! I was actually contemplating whether I needed to be less chatty and more silent. I felt it was easier to change my personality, the way I related to other people, rather than change my voice! That was scary for me. But when I was 35, when I went full time and was working in my office as a woman, I was acutely aware of the maleness in my voice. That's when I thought 'I need to do something about it'.

Matthew: What was important about the journey that made you embark on doing something about the maleness you sensed in your voice?

Natasha: It was important to me to feel congruent with myself. I explored people's reactions – my counsellor, also my father (my family have been so supportive and with me every step of the way) – but I had the sense that they thought there was incongruence with my voice and my appearance. It is important for me now to realise that, looking back, this is potentially transphobia (and I mean that this can be completely unconscious and unintended, of course). But, who tells us that when I am looking like X that I need to speak like X – whatever X might mean? So I took their reactions with a pinch of salt. But I knew that it was also important to me to explore voice change.

Matthew: So even though you were aware of the discourse about changing voice as being potentially transphobic, it was still important to you to explore your voice?

Natasha: Yes. I was aware of the binary notion that females have a high-pitched voice and speak melodically, or whatever, and males are

more blunt, or whatever. But it was feeling stressed that really drove me to make changes.

Matthew: Tell me about the stresses that made you decide to begin to make voice changes.

Natasha: I was going to Sainsbury's – I thought I was looking fabulous! I was going into town and I stopped to buy chewing gum and I was getting called 'sir' when I opened my mouth – getting misgendered as a result of my voice. Very painful!

Matthew: What were your hopes for the future as you started on your voice journey?

Natasha: I had no specific dream about how I wanted to sound but I knew from observation of others and skills in myself that it was possible to change my voice and I wanted to feel comfortable and congruent with myself.

Matthew: What skills did you already possess that turned out to be helpful as you started?

Natasha: I knew that it was possible to change the sound of my voice. I knew it needed a lot of practice. I was questioning and I knew I could concentrate when I put my mind to things.

### Liminality stage

Matthew: Describe some of the highs and lows, some of the setbacks you experienced along the way.

Natasha: I was very ambivalent about whether I would be able to put in a sufficient level of practice and change my voice as a result or just say 'fuck it!', give up and accept it for what it is!

Matthew: Did you decide to give up?

Natasha: No. I realised that when I concentrated on reading aloud and applying exercise goals I was able to change my voice quite dramatically. So I connected to the hope that I could do this, and that my voice had the skills to be adaptable and that I could concentrate. I also found I had skills to be patient – not to expect miracles and to take it a day at a time, not projecting hugely into the future and not

to be unrealistic about expectations – to try to keep it ‘in the day’. I turned up – that is essentially what I did. I did not miss one session of speech therapy; I didn’t confuse myself by self-sabotage. Yes, I had doubts about how much progress I could make, but at least I turned up and stayed with it.

Matthew: So you turned up, you concentrated and you were patient. What would you call these ways of stepping into therapy?

Natasha: I would call these ways ‘fear melted by hope and perseverance’. I was connecting to positive change and I liked it.

Matthew: Were there any other ups and downs with voice practice or using your new voice in your life?

Natasha: It was challenging getting into a routine and practising on a daily basis because of my lack of self-belief and self-worth. If I put everything in that I knew would bring positive change, it went against that belief and I struggled with that – a part of me shoots myself in the foot seeing this practice as homework that I am obliged to do and I don’t want to do. But realising that doing things in my life that are good for me, that I know cognitively will make me relate better to myself and others, spiritually and psychologically, helped me. Telephone voice was hard and a big source of stress, as that’s where a lot of misgendering took place.

Matthew: How did you avoid abandoning your journey? What sustained you moving forward?

Natasha: I persevered. I connected to my hopes, my commitment to myself and being true to myself. Not quitting is very important to me. I learned I could go out into the world and attempt things, that I did not have to disclose my trans status. I knew I had to choose my battles – hiding or disclosing.

Matthew: Were there significant people on your voice journey who assisted you?

Natasha: Yes, my parents and my partner – I was using my feminine voice when I was answering the phone to them and they helped me with feedback. I received practical help and encouragement from my counsellor. They are all on the journey with me. It was good to know this.

## Re-assimilation stage

Matthew: Was it clear to you that you had reached your target voice and how long did that take?

Natasha: It took a year or so. But it wasn't an 'ah-ha' moment. It was like when you have a headache and take an aspirin, there is no particular moment in time when you say 'boom, the headache is gone', but at some point in your day you do your things and then you notice, oh wait, my headache is gone! It was like that for my voice. I started to notice the headache was not in the forefront, so to speak. I realised that around the middle of my time with the voice group and being with others. I realised I was so much happier. I was sounding more feminine and other people were making similar challenges and I realised that I am not supposed to be perfect, I am not trying to be Rihanna – I don't need to sound like that – it just needs to be good enough...and I was happy with my progress and living my life.

Matthew: Are there any other things you have learned that your voice journey made possible?

Natasha: I learned that it was not so much about discarding my old voice, but expanding the possibilities of my voice – the sphere that can grow. If my voice changed dramatically from one day to another that would affect my identity, so it needed to be a journey of voice and identity at the same time in parallel. I knew I had reached a new place because I became more self-accepting – though this is a lifelong journey. As my self-acceptance grew, my self-acceptance of my voice at any particular point in my training grew. I stayed with where it was today. I accepted that I am trans and I don't need to hide it, or necessarily sound a particular way in order to be okay. We are all examining our biases and I am looking at my internalised transphobia. Every voice is okay, isn't it?

Matthew: How did the journey to find, use and accept your voice as it is now influence how you see yourself?

Natasha: I realised for me there were two things – one is accepting myself for who I am, and the other is changing myself enough to be congruent with myself. And when these two came enough together this is when the magic happened.

Matthew: Is there anything else you would like to share with others in mapping this journey?

Natasha: Everyone’s voice is unique and we can accept difference, even if the voice is not characterised as traditional and if you are watching out for your implicit biases and really feeling more congruent and comfortable with your own sound. Be gentle with yourself, take one day at a time, stay in the present, don’t try to project into the future, keep an eye on your goal and try to visualise it, vocalise and hear your voice in your head how you want to sound, but don’t get too compulsive about it. Practise, practise, practise, and reflect, and you will get there! Absolutely! I have seen and heard change in people – changing your voice is entirely possible, even if you want to sound like Rihanna!

Matthew: Finally, can you say what has it been like to have this conversation?

Natasha: It has been so, so important to remember what I have achieved, and how I got through it, and important to share and collaborate with other people. We all learn from each other.

Table 6.1 Natasha’s migration through voice exploration to feeling vocally congruent. You can create your own migration of vocal identity map

