

The Mastery

... or Self Regained

Sometime, somewhere I lost myself. Careless, you might think, but no: actually it was deliberate. It seemed like a good idea at the time. I was young, shy, vulnerable and easily hurt, and I wanted to change the agenda (not that we said that in Oldham in the 1950s but you get the picture). I learned not to cry, not to laugh, not to pass any immoderate opinions, reasoning that they can't get you for something you haven't done.

On the surface, it worked like a charm, I gained a reputation for incisiveness, capability, and a biting and mercilessly critical wit. Inside, I was still the same timid person who had burst into tears at every playground taunt, but now I could take it. I learned not to care. No mushy feminine sentimental nonsense for me, thank you very much. I was a coper, a stalwart brick in many a wall, the one who helped at everything (and put the chairs away afterwards).

It was a long time before I realised that I had paid too high a price to the seeming advantage. In shutting out the cruelty and pain from my life, I had erected barriers so effective that few could penetrate them. I was considered humourless, unapproachable and dully dutiful, and was as lonely and miserable as I had ever been. I needed to relearn how to approach the world, and how to rediscover my own needs and wishes which I had been suppressing for so long. A chance remark by someone I had never met before, led me to The Mastery.

The Mastery of Self Expression, as it was originally called, was created 15 years ago in the USA as an actor's workshop by Dan Fauci, to help actors to fulfil their true potential by working on their own creativity and learning how to express their own deeply felt emotions. 10 years ago it came to Britain, and has for many years been known simply as The Mastery. Only about 1% of the participants in Manchester have any connection with the acting world. Many people hear about it through an assortment of personal growth and growth activities, others -- like me -- are most emphatically Not That Type. So what happened? How did I get on?

I began by going to one of the coffee evenings, at which people who have done the workshop talk about their experience of it and answer any questions, to be quite frank, I felt totally out of my depth: these people were speaking a language I didn't understand. They were talking of commitment to oneself, of release and emotion. They spoke of passion and anger, of love -- all things which I had thought were lost to me forever. Yet there was something about their energy and excitement that maybe want some of this too... whatever it was.

Imagine me, a few months later, arriving at the venue in Whalley Range, feeling extremely nervous and at my most prickly and defensive. I sat alone, out of place as I thought, among the talk of therapies, retreats and workshops that seem to be common currency among Everybody Else. (Any parent will recognise Everybody as the one with the leather jacket and £70 trainers who is allowed to go into Manchester on his own.)

We went into the other room, 10 participants and the mysterious body of people called The Back Row. After an introductory talk, during which I gazed surreptitiously around the room and planned my defence the weekend, we were given a few minutes to plan how we wanted to introduce ourselves. Well, that seemed simple enough, non-threatening, non-weirdo even. Perhaps there was less to this than I'd thought. I made notes busily, as if writing down my identity would somehow help me keep control over it... Liz, aged 43, married, 2 teenage kids etc, etc.

I suppose I shall never know why I decided to trust the leader, but that first evening my carefully built defences came down, for the first time in years, and I cannot ever remember having felt so vulnerable. Everything I was asked to do was an agony, an outrage. I had to look people in the eye, I had to stand in front of strangers and bare that inner self which even I had almost forgotten existed, and perhaps the greatest torment of all, I had to face these people again the next day... unless, of course, I decided not to go back. However, I had

invested what seemed to me an enormous sum of money in this course, so the following morning found me back in my place, tense with apprehension and with trying not to cry, because whatever happened, I was not going to disgrace myself again.

As the weekend progressed, I began to look around, to look outside myself and see what was happening for other people. I realised that they too were experiencing emotions which they had almost forgotten in their professional or social need to be calm and controlled and to make 'the right impression'. We were challenged and encouraged at every turn. We roared out our anger, we expressed our need and our love for our friends, and for our families, and we had the luxury of a safe haven in which to give vent to our hatred and rage against all those who had hurt us in the past, and whose power over us was now forever diminished.

And gradually, as the pain subsided, I learned to take pleasure in what I was doing, even to accept and recognise the healing in my earlier tears. I sang with commitment and passion, not caring that I broke down with emotion in the middle of 'Summertime' and therefore 'got it wrong', as I would have thought earlier in the weekend. These 2-minute pieces which everyone has to perform are the most obvious link which The Mastery still retains with the acting profession, and that day I witnessed some of the most moving performances of my life. At the end of our weekend, we had to make a commitment to the future, to OUR future, knowing what we now knew about ourselves. We knew too that we were no longer alone unless we chose to be, for at the end of the Manchester Mastery there are support networks of which one can take advantage.

I don't know how successfully I shall learn to mix my Mastery life with my everyday life, but at least the one gives me the strength to cope with the other, and I feel that I am well on the way to being whole again, instead of being obliged to deny half of myself just in order to survive. For, by accepting my emotions as a necessary and valuable part of my personality, and acknowledging the power I have within me, I can live my life to the full and share the abundance which is the birthright of us all.

By Liz Headon

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