



## Uncovering our possible selves: a lyrical interview with Jean Houston

By Gina Mazza

If ever I doubted the power of believing in what psychologist, scholar and human potential guru Jean Houston calls "a passion for the possible," she disavowed me at once of such doubt with a simple request.

"Run a scale for me," she asks in response to my divulging a secret dream to have a lovely singing voice.

"If we all have unlimited potential," I query her, "then it's possible for me to wake up one day and sing like Maria Callas, right?"

"Let's see. Run a scale," she repeats, insistent on eschewing talk in lieu of the experiential. I suck it up and stumble through LA, LA, LA, LA, LA, LA, LA, LA, laughing at my musical ineptitude.

"I'm doing serious work here," she commands. "Now—sing any song, let's go."

With no time to feel mortified, I squeak out: I-can't-give-you-anything-but-love-baby!

"Okay, so you can follow a melody," Houston critiques. "You're not melodically obtuse. The basic voice is there. It's not hopeless. With a basic voice

you can reconstruct the vocal chords in about 18 months. A lot of great singing is having a constructed throat—and a very good teacher.”

“So it’s possible to reconstruct ourselves?” asks this magazine’s publisher, Sven Hosford, who, for the record, has never been expected to break into tune while conducting an interview.

“To an extent,” she explains. “We all have multiple personas. I wouldn’t be as radical to say we can change who we are. We can EXPAND who we are so we have more of a crew to draw upon when we need it. Now, our core reality is very different—that’s the diamante, that’s the entelechy, that’s the essence of. It’s very different from the persona. Knowing the difference is important.”

To illustrate, Houston doesn’t just share a story about Katherine Hepburn, who she knew personally, she launches into a spot-on impersonation of the renowned actress.

“Katherine would say to me, ‘Everybody thinks I’m Katherine Hepburn, I’m not Katherine Hepburn, I’m Kate, I’m New England Kate, I know how to polish floors, I cook my own food, I do the gardening, I scrub, I’m Kate. I have sitting on my shoulder, however, this creature called Katherine Hepburn and she’s not me, she’s somebody I have to spend all my time supporting and presenting like a joke in front of the public and they think that’s who I am but that’s Katherine Hepburn, not me.’

“She knew the difference,” Houston says. “Most celebrities don’t.”

### **Wisdom of the ages through a puppet’s mouth**

Something about being in the presence of this accomplished woman (whose been likened to Zeus hurling

thunderbolts) – with all of her sparkling repartee, intellectual parlance, frequent namedropping and theatricality – makes one believe that we humans are, indeed, fascinatingly complex archetypal composites of potentiality waiting to be realized, if only we'd wake up and stop living the inhibited versions of who and what we really are. The daughter of a Hollywood comedy writer (her father penned "Who's on First?" for Abbot and Costello) and protégé of anthropologist Margaret Mead, Houston seems to live large. She's served as advisor to the United Nations, UNICEF, the Clinton White House, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Mother Theresa and Robert Kennedy Jr., among others. She's worked tirelessly in 100 countries and 40 cultures as a mythologist, philosopher, global midwife and pioneer in the exploration of human potential and human consciousness.

The largesse of Houston's philosophy that "we all have the extraordinary coded within us" may have begun to formulate at a tender age. While she rebuffs the suggestion that her childhood around luminaries of the entertainment world was anything exceptional, it's clear that certain instances in her young life had a great impact on her. Houston's childhood tales of meeting the likes of Albert Einstein, Helen Keller and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin while living in New York City are told with a flair for the dramatic that they deserve.

For instance, she recounts with astonishing detail when she was eight years old and her father took her backstage to meet Edgar Bergen and his puppet, Charlie McCarthy.

"We walked in the theatre to find Bergen asking Charlie ultimate questions: What's the nature of life? What does it mean to truly love? What's the difference between the mind and the body? And these incredible

answers were pouring out, as if the deepest crafted wisdom of the millennia was coming from this puppet's mouth.

"Suddenly, Bergen became aware of the presence of me and my father, and he stopped. My dad, an agnostic Baptist, said, 'What the heck are you doing?' Bergen answered, 'I'm talking to Charlie. He's the smartest person I know. When I ask him these things I haven't the faintest idea what he's going to say'."

Shortly thereafter, Houston and her schoolmates were taken to meet Helen Keller. When the teacher asked who'd like to ask Keller a question, Houston's hand shot up.

"I blurted out, 'Why are you so happy?' and Helen said in her syncopated voice, 'My child! IT IS BECAUSE I LIVE EACH DAY AS IF IT WERE MY LAST! Life is so full of glory!' Was she damaged? Of course. Was she damaged? Not at all. She had rewoven what remained of her senses and put her tremendous heart into a net in which she could catch reality and become so extraordinarily vulnerable and available. She went on to be a great enabler of disabled and marginalized people, and one of the great inspirations of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

"As a child, when you have these two experiences weeks apart - first, Charlie the dummy, the vehicle through which the universal mind is known, then Helen Keller, this person who by all accounts had vanished then transcended into a very different perspective not just on human nature but what we're capable of as a human society - well, you don't forget it."

### **Drawing on many personas**

Now the bestselling author of 23 books, including *The Possible Human*, *A Mythic Life: Learning to Live Our Greater Story* and *The Search for the Beloved: Journeys*

in Sacred Psychology, and an world-renowned conference speaker and teacher, Houston believes that we all possess incredible energies and powers that can only be accessed from within.

"We have a terrible, ecologically gross overuse of the outer world and a terrible under-use of the inner world. In my work with some of the most highly creative people in North America – my research subjects included Linus Pauling, Joseph Campbell, Jonas Salk and Buckminster Fuller – we discovered that not only were these people fascinated with their own inner process, they were able to access it and teach it. They were archeologists of their own minds, spelunkers in the caves of their own creativity. They had tremendous contact with the realms of the sensory as well as non-sensory. Ideas would drop into their minds and they'd constellate into multiple images, out of which would come creative greatness."

As co-director of the Foundation for Mind Research in Pomona, New York and founder of the Mystery School (dedicated to teaching history, philosophy, new physics, psychology, anthropology, myth and human potential), Houston teaches others how to expand their sensory perception through the experiential.

"The Mystery School, now in its 23<sup>rd</sup> year, is 60 to 70 percent experiential. I now have a program in social artistry that brings the same order of passion, focus, commitment and intentionality that a fine artist brings to his materials—only our materials are the social canvas. I train people in sensory, psychological, symbolic and spiritual development in the light of social forms so they can cross cultures and work between cultures, so they have access to a great variety of inward capacities that allow them to learn things very rapidly, so they can cross the great divide of otherness.

"I've applied these practices in Palestine and Israel, North and South Ireland, the Baltics, places that are hot spots of thousands of years of antipathy between people. [Our goal] is to make economics a satellite of the soul of culture instead of the soul of culture being a satellite of economics."

Inherent in the Mystery School's social artistry program is the ability to try on different personas.

"We have such complexity going on beneath the surface of our consciousness," Houston says. "Of the psychological genres we have within us, the ego is but one image of multiple images of the psyche. We have many, many personas.

"For example, I have 22 published books and about 70,000 unpublished pages mouldering on my shelves. But the thing is, I can't write. I can't write at all. When I begin to write a book, I call on my muse which happens to be a cook. I'm a VERY good cook." Houston's "chef persona" enables her to sauté, bake and stir fry her written material into publishable content.

Calling on various personas is increasingly necessary in today's global world, Houston notes.

"If you're working in different cultures, I tell you, it's absolutely essential. I cannot go into many cultures as a middle-aged, American woman. I go in as a liminal person who is very much interested in their culture and assuming their persona. I learn 500 to 1,000 words of their language. I learn their songs and dances. I share dances from my culture. We tell jokes.

"We are now living in a time when whole systems are trying to shift. Part of my work is training people to be available to these new paradigms that are trying to emerge and to tell the greater story of the world. We have become planetary citizens."

**Now is the time, we are the people**

The reset button in history has been hit and the world's been rearranged, Houston asserts. As such, many of us have felt called to take initiatives that until recently would have seemed unlikely if not impossible.

"This is the time and we are the people," Houston states. "Our task is to understand our role as social evocateurs in this most critical period of human history. It's often in places like this [southwestern PA] region where crisis and complexity and consciousness and confoundedness come together in such a way that it generates a sufficiency of despair that initiates new ways of being."

With such an overarching task, we ask Houston what the average person can do right now to start making a difference in the world.

"There's no such thing as an average person, by the way" she interjects. "A 'normal' person is someone you don't know very well! But to answer your question, nothing beats ongoing teaching in the community—whether it's circles of people who gather once a month and decide to grow together, to expand each other's capacities, to use the tremendous amount of practice books that are out there—mine or someone else's. Then on the basis of that, going out in the community, taking on projects and effecting change.

"People have got to have a sense, especially Americans, that there is some kind of purpose that can be practiced in making up their world. Now more than ever, it can't just be practice-based practice for the sake of practice. You really have to be like a concert pianist who practices for a concert but in this case the concert is the "concerted" effort of the group working together to ensure, for example, that there's a new stoplight at the corner where kids have been getting killed, that there is a hospice center in the

community, that there are ways of working politically together, as the case may be. So, I say, get together with a few friends and recommend any number of study books.

Again, Houston stresses the importance of experiential learning.

"It's about seeing it, touching it, tasting it, feeling it, living it out, incarnating it, making it an internal virtual reality that gets so strong that it creates a probability wave that overrides the negative, toxic, same-old-same-old probability wave. That way, you can also stop boring God!

"I doesn't matter how large or small your contribution is," Houston continues. "Everything profoundly makes a difference. At this time in history, we're so interwoven that what seem like small things have strange sort-of tipping points. But I feel that people making covenants with each other and committing to really growing together, say, twice a month, is key. Stick with it. Don't allow entropy to creep in and stop you. Hone your pluck and cunning, and make a real commitment to hanging in there."

We want to know, what if you're a soccer mom or traveling executive who cannot commit to regular gatherings?

"Then do something physical, like yoga, and reflect on it," Houston suggests. "It can't be 'ugh, I've got to do my exercises' -there's no consciousness to that. No, you reflect on it, you bring consciousness TO it. I cannot say enough about how important the inward system is."

### **A futurist envisions the future**

"What does the future look like to you?" I can't resist asking Houston, who coined the phrase Jump Time

(to refer to quantum leaps in our human evolution) in her 2000 book of the same name.

"Obviously we're in a big kind of trouble. We have the rising of just about every kind of crisis that you can think of. But at the same time, there is another world type emerging. I can say this with a certain amount of galloping chutzpah because I'm probably one of the most traveled human beings who's ever lived. There are factors that are unique in human history, not just the Internet and an interconnected world but the intra-netic world. High tech brings out a high touch. The feminine is becoming equal to the masculine—you see it at all levels, from street sweepers in Bangladesh to presidents of countries. This [rising of the feminine] is required if the planet is going to survive. Women's ways of knowing about process rather than product is necessary right now.

"So we do have a future," Sven offers.

"I'm optimistic. You cannot have a human experiment that has 13.7 billion years behind it just wiped out like that [snaps fingers]. That would be very bad cosmic ecology! And there's a spiritual activism arising now. People of spirit from all over the world are now bringing the depth of what they know and believe to the activist agenda. This is happening all over the world [but] we hear only about North America in our media. The rest of the world gets different news. We get the awful news. What used to be nice news at six o'clock is now pornography: who's doing what to whom and where. American is now the best entertained and least informed country in the world. You go to other media around the world - the British, Swiss, German or Thai media - and you get a portrait of the world in addition to local news. Here, we get infotainment. So much of it is corporate bought, and so much of our government is corp-ocracy. It's a terrible

tragedy, the media's colonization of the minds and hearts of Americans."

"That's why I started this magazine," Sven adds.

"And that is why I'm ultimately hopeful because do I see other people, other worlds, other agendas. Do I think America is going to dip for a while? Yes, but this allows other countries to come up. America is being demythologized because of the present administration. This is allowing the minds of hearts of whole countries to deepen and recover their own culture. When America comes back again, which we will, the world will have shifted and we'll have more of a movement by the end of the century toward a planetary civilization with high individuation of culture."

As Sven and I end our chat with Houston, she reaffirms that this business of peacemaking, "this green-growing, sap-rising concept of the creation of a new society" begins within individual communities. In other words, the possible human is the possible society.

"We're experiencing the breakdown of the membrane not just between cultures but between levels of ourselves, almost as if the collective psyche is awakening," she concludes. "At the same time, we have this tremendous backlash that always happens at great turning points that we look at as pathology. I prefer to mythologize rather than pathologize because there's a very deep story that's trying to happen in our times. The 'zeit' is getting 'geistier'!"

And with Houston-esque flourish, she quotes the great English playwright and poet Christopher Frey: "Thank God our time is now, when wrong comes up to meet us everywhere, never to leave us until we take the longest stride of soul men ever took!"

Even as I write this, Houston's got me pondering my possible human self, what whole systems I'm crashing

through in my life, ways in which I can expand (if not reconstruct) myself, which emerging personas I can draw upon. Sing like Maria Callas? Sure, there's hope for me yet.

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