

Awakening Your True Voice

Jean McClelland

A baby cries and we are riveted by the sound's urgency. Children run, play and laugh and we stand in awe at their spontaneity and the richness of their imaginations. We resonate with their joy and yearn for when we, too, experienced such openness. Even a young child's gibberish is filled with inflection and color which communicates eloquently.

What has happened to make so many of us self-conscious about creative self-expression and embarrassed by the sound of our own voice? Why is it a baby can bellow for hours and never get hoarse, but we feel strain and vocal fatigue after a few hours of teaching or even after a long chat? Why is it our voices tend to disappear when we have to express ourselves in a meeting or in front of a group? Perhaps the real answer lies in understanding what has disconnected our voice from who we really are.

A SPONTANEOUS PROCESS

One of the things we love about children is their spontaneity. Physically and emotionally, young children are very open. When a baby cries or a child laughs, their bodies are totally involved. Emotion flows through their muscles and is reflected on their faces. This exquisite mind/body coordination is the result of perfectly timed communication from the brain and spinal cord to nerve endings in the muscles responsible for breathing and sound production. These sounds are fueled by a powerful energy called "impulse." When applied to the voice, impulse may be thought of as a great need or desire to express. It is instinctive and reflexive. We hear impulse in the roar of a lion, we see it in the flight of birds, and we experience it in the raging of King Lear. The word "impulse" is used in the arts and in medicine to refer to life force energy. The great voice teacher, Olga Averino, taught her students to sing "on impulse."

When we say something is reflexive, we mean that it is a spontaneous and automatic response to a stimulus. Some reflexes are involuntary and controlled by the brain stem, or "primi-

tive" brain. Others are "conditioned" reflexes or learned behaviors. The nerves that supply muscles responsible for voice are under the control of the brain stem. Speech is a conditioned reflex, a motor activity under the control of the cerebral cortex. The cerebral cortex is what allows us to be thinking, reasoning beings. Learned behaviors, such as speech, which happen subconsciously and automatically without thinking, are called habits. For our voice to be emotionally responsive it must rely on its reflexive ability, but as we go through life we may find that without realizing it, we interfere with this reflexive function with our psychological and physical habits.

HABITS THAT INTERFERE

Habits take many forms. Some are useful, but those that cause muscular or mental tension interfere with the freedom of our voice and our body. As much as we would like to change less useful habits, it is often difficult to do so because they function subconsciously and we must become aware of them before change can occur. Spiritual disciplines have traditionally recommended removing man from his envi-

ronment to quiet his mind and guide him to greater awareness. The psycho-physical technique of F. M. Alexander (the “Alexander Technique”) focuses on our becoming aware of muscular and psychological habits which get in the way of reflexive functioning. Some habits may have developed as protective defenses against stress, but by observing them without judgment, change is possible. When we observe our habits and patterns with curiosity rather than destructive self-criticism, we are able to say a gentle “no” (what physiologists call inhibition) to our habitual reaction to a stimulus and let a more useful behavior emerge. In this way we find that it is possible to change the habits of a lifetime.

Let’s take a look at how habits manifest in a singing lesson. Almost without exception beginning students “grab” breath with the upper chest before they sing a phrase. This is a very common habit, and it is one manifestation of a certain type of panic or fear around self-expression. It takes time for students to realize that they are breathing in a way that stops the natural flow of breath, voice and music. It’s a turning point in my students’ progress when I hear them say, “I just sensed that I did that.” I realize then that they have started on a path of discovery and that they will continue to grow artistically. They can now be truly present with the music, and not only does their singing become freer and more musical, but also they feel joyous and energized. The neurophysiology of habit is very complex, but when we can recognize how we get in our own way, freedom is a real possibility, not just for our voice but also for our being.

THE JOURNEY TO YOUR TRUE VOICE

Our first task, then, in finding our authentic voice is to acknowledge that there is nothing we need to do to make sound—it is a reflexive process we can just allow to happen. This may be a hard task initially because it is very difficult to leave oneself alone and not try to do something. The starting point in this process

is breath. Voice relies on a steady flow of breath, supported by the diaphragm in exhalation, in order to be produced. Remember our little baby? What makes its cry so robust is its perfect coordination of the respiratory muscles. Most of us tend to lose this coordination by the time we are three or four, but we can regain it. Let’s take a step in the journey with a little experiment.

I’d like to ask you to hiss out an “sss” sound. Just go ahead and hiss without thinking too much about it. Now, hiss again and observe what you do. Did you feel that you had to take in a large breath before you started? Did you push the air out with your mouth and jaw? Did you worry about getting it right? This is a great way to become aware of your habits around breath and voice. Hiss again, but this time, try to use less tension. Instead of thinking that you need to take a big breath before you start, just go ahead and hiss and then let your body inhale naturally at the end of the hiss.

Let’s go a bit farther and discover how your imagination can stimulate all the right muscles associated with breathing. This time I would like you to imagine that there is a constant stream of air that rises up in you from the pit of your abdomen to your lips. Place your hand on your belly and imagine that there is a little motor underneath your hand that stimulates the movement of breath through your body and out through your lips so that a hiss results. Imagine that it is the same feeling as accelerating a car with your foot on the gas pedal. You can even mimic this by having your hand keep a constant gentle pressure on your belly. Keep the hiss going as a result of the “gas pedal” but not so long that you feel any tension or strain. Have a sense of play about this and it will be even better. It should feel very pleasurable. Did you notice how the body naturally inhales at the end of the hiss? You have just had a taste of how our imagination, which is the greatest gift we have, can help return us to our reflexive functioning.

AWAKENING OUR TRUE VOICE

We can awaken our true voice! To do so is a highly creative process that uses our imagination and powers of observation. Not surprisingly, this is also a path back to our real self and true emotional maturity. Many people are amazed when I tell them that uncovering their true voice is as creative a process as painting, writing or musical improvisation. In connecting with our real voice, we experience enormous concentration and a quality of being “in the moment,” feel unselfconscious, free and filled with energy.

The great singer Luciano Pavarotti once told an interviewer that he never tries to “sing”—sound just flows out of him. Similarly, Mozart wrote that he really had no idea how he composed music, it just seemed to “flow.” Painters talk about losing all sense of time when working, and my students tell me when they first experience their real voice they feel “out of control,” as if somebody else’s voice is coming out of them. All these examples have one thing in common: the creative process.

The search for one’s true voice is a deeply intuitive process of rediscovery. Sometimes, though, it can be difficult to let go of preconceptions about how our true voice should sound and just allow it to emerge. To free our voice from life’s constraints may make us feel somewhat vulnerable, though at the same time it can be liberating. We must approach our work with a sense of curiosity and discovery and Zen-like patience. Then this wonderful freeing process will cease to be a mystery and never be lost.

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ABOUT JEAN McCLELLAND

Jean McClelland is a renowned teacher of voice and the Alexander Technique. She received her B.A. from Vassar College, did graduate study at Boston University in opera and voice performance, and is certified by AmSAT and ACAT as a teacher of the Alexander Technique. She has studied extensively at the Carl Stough Institute for Breathing Coordination, Psychosynthesis Institute of New York, and the Michael Chekhov Studio. As a performer, she has appeared in the Broadway production of Camelot and has played leading roles in numerous musicals and operas including The Music Man, Guys and Dolls, My Fair Lady, Show Boat, The Marriage of Figaro, A Little Night Music, The Pirates of Penzance, Silk Stockings, The Boy Friend, and The Gondoliers. Jean continues to perform in concert with her husband, pianist and composer William McClelland.



In addition to private teaching, Jean has been a member of the faculty of the New York Open Center since 1986. She has given workshops at drama and music schools, universities, and holistic learning centers throughout the country including New York University, Vassar College, Rutgers University, William Paterson University, Stevens Institute, Rowe Conference Center, Cambridge Center for Adult Education, the Community Music Center of Boston, and the Association of Voice Pathologists. Her students have included leading performers of the Broadway and off-Broadway stage as well as opera, film and television.

Jean is one of a small group of teachers personally approved by Carl Stough to incorporate his principles of breathing coordination into their work.

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