

BREATHING MATTERS

by

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Hello, reader. You are breathing, obviously. How are you breathing? Is that something you've ever considered? How has reading these questions just now affected your breathing? Did you catch your breath? Hold it for a moment? Breathe quicker?

Breathing has come of age. I heard recently from an Alexander Technique teacher who came to one of my workshops that F.M. Alexander said that what he taught was breathing, but that if he told people that, nobody would come and study with him. But there was a whole conference at RADA in January 2007 devoted to spirited debate and exploration of breath, and a book about breathing is in your hand.

I became fascinated, some would say obsessed with breathing forty years ago when I first started to teach voice at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London, because I observed the profound connection between student actors restricting their breath and restrictions of the range of their voice and their text work. I believe that work with breathing—work which uncovers free breathing dynamics and a vibrant body, and gives people tools for staying healthy as they use their voices—rather than “doing things with the voice”, is the best foundation for voice work in theatre training. Doing things with the voice can often be pleasurable to experience and to listen to. But a narrow emphasis on voicing can become results-oriented, outwardly directed, appealing to the observer/auditor within us, and perhaps pleasing to others—yet detrimental to the health and/or truth of the voicer. Breathing goes on behind the scenes, as it were, and its efficiency is as necessary to the vocal process as training, rehearsal, and tech are to a final theatrical production. It is a fact that breath is the power source for the voice, and in freeing the breathing so that it can function well, we free not only the voice itself, but also the mind and body and imagination and skills with language. Breathing IS inspiration. “Breathing is Meaning.”

Breathing matters. There are schools of thought and systems of vocal training that effectively or even intentionally ignore it, focusing primarily on sound—resonance, placement, articulation, and language skills—and sometimes a rather metaphysical “connection” to a somewhat mystical, mysterious, and magical self that seeks expression, ignoring how the body may distort itself to achieve an approximation of the desired sound effect. I have found the self to be the living breathing body (and the brain and neurological systems are part of the body) and sound to be a result of what the body is doing as it breathes, or fails to breathe, in free and full response to inner and outer circumstances. But so that I don't appear too materialistic, let me add that I do not objectify the body. We act as our body, not upon it, or even with it. The energy of the body, the life force, the soul, is part of what I count as the body human. Body and breath

are muscles and neuro, yes, but are also “the force that through the green fuse drives” our lives.

We breathe to survive. It is our first independent act when we emerge from our mother’s womb. When the physical and energetic connection through the umbilical cord is cut, we use our voice almost immediately to express need and emotion. As soon as we are born we immediately use our autonomic survival breathing.

Later we also breathe with intention to communicate through learned language, to express ideas and intentions and choices, not just our needs for food or comfort or to express fright or pain. But it takes two years or more after birth for our central nervous systems to learn to coordinate thinking, articulators, and intentional breathing so that we can communicate complex ideas and choices—interestingly, about as long as most theatre schools allow for the training of an actor’s voice.

Thus we breathe one way to survive, and a different way to communicate intentionally with our voices.

The significance of there being two kinds of breathing—what I will call survival breathing and intentional breathing—is huge. There are not only clear differences in purpose—oxygenation and communication—there are concomitant neurological differences; physiological differences, including muscle use, breath capacity and flow, and the rhythms of inhalation and exhalation; and of course, some differences in the problems that may be associated with each kind of breathing.

What are these problems? Poor survival breathing affects our physical and psychological health and our ability to experience life fully, and ultimately it affects our intentional breathing too, so how we breathe (independently of intention) affects all aspects of the voice. If we habitually hold, hinder, or aggressively help our survival breathing, we reduce access to muscles that help us find capacity and support when we need them to communicate effectively. The limitations of compromised breathing include not only a reduction in variability of tone, pitch and inflection, rhythm and rate, and volume, but also reductions in emotional availability, in intellectual curiosity and willingness to listen and learn, and reduction in access to our creative imagination, and in our presence moment to moment. Each breath is a delineation of now, and here, and embodies our reactions to the here and now too, and good performers experience and communicate all of this. This is art, and also simple living.

There is a real need for careful and sensitive instruction when working with breathing, distinguishing (survival) breathing for immediate needs from (intentional) breathing to communicate. The expression of our needs and emotions can be inhibited by controlling our breath: we can stop breathing for a while altogether, we can slow it down, speed it up, reduce capacity and flow, and mess with the rhythms and therefore the effectiveness of phrasing and oxygenation of all of our cells including our brain cells. We do all this pretty unconsciously in response to internal and external stimuli that stress us: ingesting unsuitable foods, for instance, and events causing fright or pain. Muscles

get tense and freeze partially or in some cases fully, and in doing so, numb our awareness of and even our memory of these triggers. These breathing holds and habits, when they become our default unconscious response to difficulties real or imagined, cause us to lose access to options of experience and expression, and thereby limit our ability to communicate. Voice teaching which does not address the problems of compromised survival and intentional breathing by helping students learn to self-regulate efficiently and economically misses crucial opportunities to help an actor develop a full range of expression.

Vocal work for theatre that acknowledges breathing as a factor in vocal production but provides only overly-general instruction on breathing can sometimes do more harm than when breathing is ignored. We need to take a lot of care while teaching, or our students' breathing can become forced and technical or guarded, adding tension on top of tension. In my experience, only when inefficiencies and limitations in survival breathing are dealt with in addition to, and preferably before, working on intentional breathing, sound values, and textual meaning can we hope to really help the actor communicate with the full self. It is fascinating to see and hear how, when the actor's breathing function is freed, both the sounds of the voice and imaginative language use reveal individual genius. This individuality is, I believe, generally valued in British and American performance.

In forty plus years of teaching I have found no way that's faster or more effective at assisting my own work with breathing and voice—what I call my “Destructuring” project (described more fully below), which aims to allow full and free spontaneous breath patterns to emerge and change as needed in response to the moment—than some of the bodywork of Wilhelm Reich. Reich was a maverick psychoanalyst who was a student then colleague of Freud's, but who insisted that personal psychology also had a somatic, or body-based component, and that therapy should address that. He had the unique distinction of having been exiled, banned, censored, three times—from the Austrian Psychoanalytical Association because of his interest in physical posture and behaviors, then from Communist Russia as being too individualistic, and then in Europe and America as being too sexual. He was not a conformist! He died in prison in America in November 1957¹. When I was teaching voice at the Central School of Speech and Drama from September 1965 to December 1966 his books were still banned. My initial attempts at Central to build on Cicely Berry's more physical approach to voice training were aided by my under-the-counter reading of Reich's books.

The Tremorwork® I do, which has now become well known in America, was initially explored in a group studying Reich's work in London in the mid-sixties. Our explorations were led by my husband, David Kozubei, with guest instructors such as the co-founder of Bioenergetics, Alexander Lowen. The premise of the Tremorwork® in the context of Fitzmaurice Voicework® is that in allowing a flow of autonomic, uncontrolled vibrations to pass like a wave through the entire body, chronic tension blocks are, first of all, made

¹ The FDA had forbidden Reich to sell his “orgone box” across state lines. One of his young colleagues in Maine sold one to a customer in another state, and Reich was held responsible.

very apparent, and secondly, encouraged to release when the person feels ready to allow that. My specific interest has been not only in the fact of the tremor itself but primarily in how the breathing changes during this work. It is like putting respiratory muscle holds and habits of behavior into a churning crucible, a melting pot, or kaleidoscope, out of which a new order of patterns of ease and efficiency emerge. The personal readiness of individual students or actors is what determines the regulation of how much, and when, and where they release. The work is necessarily self-regulatory: it should be guided but never forced by an experienced teacher.

“Free, self-regulated behavior” Reich wrote in “The Function of the Orgasm”, “fills people with enthusiasm but at the same time terrifies them.” Certainly the Tremorwork® can be bewildering for students at first as their patterns of holding are revealed, but then it can also become exhilarating as students begin to gain more direct access to themselves. It was really my students’ desire to go deeper and to share their learning, their exhilaration, with others that encouraged me to train teachers².

As indicated earlier, my adaptations of Reich’s work are grounded in his use of involuntary tremors. The neuro-scientists that I have spoken to consider this physiologic tremor that I work with to be unlike, of a different frequency to, the pathological tremor in, for instance, Parkinson’s disease. The tremor we induce, primarily by angling the knee joint, is, apparently, based in a response—via the basal ganglia in the brain and the Golgi organs in the tendons—that assists in dopamine production and helps reduce stress. The primary physiological benefits of this tremor that I have observed and that have been corroborated by neuro-knowledgeable colleagues, are: it releases muscle tension (and therefore reduces stress and limitations on movement and circulation); it sensitizes the body to vibration (and therefore resonance); it stimulates autonomic (survival) breathing (and therefore cellular oxygenation) without causing hyper-ventilation; it creates a relaxed state of awareness (and therefore creativity) by allowing the brain to slow down into alpha and theta brainwave frequencies; and it feels pleasurable as energy flows through the entire body—muscles, skin, and also smooth muscle and mucosal surfaces, and even inner organs. Shall I mention that I consider it a panacea?

Viewed in a broader cultural context, I believe we are doing what the Quakers and Shakers were doing spontaneously, and also what some shamans do in trance dances. It is of course also what the body naturally does to warm up, to reduce stress which can cause a response of muscle-tightening, and to allow the release of held emotion. In the context of the voicework we add “fluffy sound” (made with vocal folds that are only semi-approximated with a minimum of effort) to encourage the engagement of the vocal folds to coordinate with the exhalation, and to develop a kinesthetic rather than auditory relationship with one’s own voice. Sometimes there is expressive sound because, as you free the breathing, there may be a release of repressed emotion. Emotion is not an essential element of the work, but is sometimes a by-product. We also explore articulation, impromptu speaking, and text work as we tremor, to allow spontaneous

² See www.fitzmauricevoice.com for training opportunities.

aspects of the breathing and voice to shake up old and tired “readings” and vocal patterns.

It is important to know the parameters of the tremor we use. For instance, it is totally involuntary, but the student has control over when and how it is induced by finding or moving away from a particular angle at the knee or elbow. Not every tremor is useful for breathing. Unlike most systems of exercise, even yoga, we only use tremors in positions in which the torso and neck can be fully relaxed so as much of the body as possible can be free to breathe. I call this work I do with breathing and tremors and other kinds of release work “Destructuring”.

After moving to America in 1968, I studied and practiced yoga every day for ten years. At home I played around with the postures and significantly adapted some of them for my voice students, combining them with Tremorwork® in various ways.

Since I found touch extremely helpful in many cases I have also worked extensively since the seventies with my own adaptations of shiatsu and several other energy healing techniques, including Reiki. My only desired result in all of this exploration has been to find freedom for the particular breath pattern and body and creative soul that I am dealing with in the moment—my own, or a student’s or actor’s. With free breathing comes freedom of expression. It is muscle tension, often mirroring psychological habits and mental perspectives, that compromises these freedoms.

Because every person has individual habits of holding, there is no exact, prescribed, regimen of exercises to be followed in this work. I like to imagine myself to be in the long oral tradition of training the eyes and ears and perceptiveness of teachers, not requiring them to learn and reproduce a rigid system. Of course, especially in group work, some exercises are repeated, but responses to them, and the follow-up work, are unique to each individual person, moment, and circumstance. This individual focus is a large aspect of Reich’s work, and it is he who has influenced my work the most.

The socio-political and cultural implications of Reich’s work are huge. The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote in the early nineteenth century: “All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed, second it is violently opposed, and third, it is accepted as self-evident.” Early on in my career I experienced a little of both those first two reactions in my own adoption and adaptation of Reichian work and the eastern systems of yoga, shiatsu, meditation, and healing techniques. So it seemed essential to me for many years to fly beneath the radar until interest in breathing and holistic methods became more widespread. They seem now to be almost main-stream. Perhaps Reich’s work will finally take the stage as being both self-evident and widely helpful, rather than being accessible only to those seeking psychological counseling.

I married the bookseller, David Kozubei, who gave me my first Reich book to read. I gained from this gift a family, a point of view more sophisticated and more compassionate than the stance of rebel that I embraced as I grew up, and a specialty within my chosen profession.

Reich set out to free the body from constraints imposed by self or others. He, and I as a voice teacher focusing on breathing, want to empower others to express themselves fully and appropriately, to make clear, rational, and brilliant choices, and to work collaboratively—good projects for theatre and also for life.

The work is about self-regulation: the chemical self-regulation of carbon dioxide and oxygen levels in the blood stream (tremoring doesn't cause hyperventilation), and psychophysical self-regulation, since one frees up just as much as one can physically and emotionally stand, or understand. It is perhaps ironic that in teaching my adaptations of this work, as the bearer of information to others, I become the authority. But it is only for a moment. As soon as students embody the information about their own autonomic nervous system fully, they literally find autonomy and are free to use whatever part of the information they find valuable in any way they please. Teaching it requires such prior embodiment, and that takes time.

In our consumer society, and especially now with the Internet, many people just want information fast. They want to know about things, not know them deeply. But those who are drawn to the work that I do usually enjoy exploring it deeply. It is apparent from some of the reactions my teachers and I receive that many people are hungry for such work. And some are made afraid by it, and it's ok if some people would rather not do it. It isn't right for everyone in every circumstance. What is? So Deconstructing is not the only work on breathing or the voice that I do. But it is the foundation that seems to allow the rest of the work to become more fruitful.

The first prong of my approach to the problems of an inhibited body and voice—working with the primary or survival breathing function of oxygenation and simple expression—is exciting, beautiful, and profound. Humanity gasps to be heard.

While exploring many other breathing techniques, I have found many styles of breathing that have nothing to do with the act of speaking. These approaches can in fact interfere with speaking, because they don't harmonize with the autonomic breath—the wonderful self-regulatory system that is the process of simple re-oxygenation and release of carbon dioxide in a constant inter-relationship with one's environment. Chief of these stylized forms is disciplined and slow breathing, generally “into the belly”, which I do not teach. In fact I tell my students there's no air in the belly unless one has eaten beans. This stylized form of breathing is frequently taught in yoga classes, which do not claim voice as an objective, and also passes in some voice classes as “correct” breathing, rather than one approach that has specific ramifications. I have also explored, and chosen not to adapt for voice training purposes, fast forcing methods such as holotropic breathing, transformational breath, and rebirthing, as well as some methods that bear the name of their proponents. But I do believe breath management needs to be addressed. It is required for speaking.

Hello again, reader. Have you noticed your breathing at all as you have been reading? How are you breathing now? How has reading these questions just now affected your

breathing? Did you catch your breath? Hold it for a moment? Or did you breathe quicker? Allow it.

Now try reading the short paragraph above aloud. What has happened to the rhythm of your breathing?

The second prong in my work with breathing is necessarily working with choice, i.e. breath management during the act of speaking. I address speaking rather than singing because it is my primary interest, and because many singing teachers already teach breath management. Though some patterns for singing are not useful for the speaking voice, a version of *bel canto*, what I call “Structured Breathing”, is virtually the same pattern as the skill Elsie Fogerty introduced to actors just over one hundred years ago at the Central School of Speech and Drama, but with a very modified version of rib-reserve.

In my work I have explored how a managed pattern can complement rather than contend with an actor’s free breathing. I am also very specific about the muscular actions involved which connect neurologically with the language centers in the brain involving imagination and intention. Briefly, the specifics of this managed pattern are: the use of the external intercostals and release of the abdomen for a fast inhalation responsive to thought, and then, for a sustainable exhalation with sound, active use of the deepest, most internal abdominal muscle, the *transversus abdominis* (which lifts the ribcage), but not of the rectus or obliques nor the internal intercostals (all of which squeeze the ribcage).³

Structured Breathing, or Structuring, or Restructuring, when combined with Destructuring, invites a combination of freedom and focus, or choice. The interesting thing about teaching Destructuring before Structuring is that a student or actor with a released body, when unafraid and speaking from her own memory or imagination (rather than merely uttering memorized words) uses this pattern. This breath pattern shows up spontaneously when actors or students find their own economy of effort and natural ease and grace in active voicing. It is physical, even mechanical efficiency—with flow, with soul.

Because of widespread, deeply-ingrained poor habits of breathing and the time factors associated with the realities of most teaching situations, it is generally helpful to approach the problems of ineffective breathing and ineffective communication by teaching Destructuring and Structuring at the same time. Our goal is not just to create a skills set, but to help actors find the infinite options available to them that they can tap into to express the whole range of their humanity as needed, and to help them do it in healthy, efficient, economical ways as they meet the specific needs of the text and the spaces in which they perform, as well as the exigencies of their relationships with fellow actors and directors (and audiences). Only when the transverse muscle of the abdomen is fully active during speaking can other tensions that negatively impact vocal use, such

³ See my article “Structured Breathing”, VASTA Newsletter, Spring 2003, Vol. 17, #1.

as in the shoulders, neck, jaw, and articulators (including the glottis), release safely and easily. Good technique is really just healthy and efficient self-use, not a new system to be laboriously learned.

Good text technique—intelligent and engaged phrasing—requires a coordination of the autonomic (survival) nervous system and the central (intentional) nervous system, and a coordination of the life rhythms of a speaker’s heart, breathing, and brain with the outer demands of written text, space, real and imagined circumstances, and moment to moment listening and awareness of listeners. It is living rhythm, not a rigid meter: felt and thought and breathed, not prescribed.

The fine differences between these two prongs of voicework and the exercises that I use for them can’t be adequately explored in a written article. Embodied learning is just that. It needs to be experienced, and can be fully experienced only if the body is willing and the imagination is curious.

Curiosity is desire of the mind, and curiosity leads to learning. A stance of irony, on the other hand, doesn’t help deep learning because it is a partial, conditional response, in which the perspective of the critic/observer is privileged over that of the artist/doer—the intellectual mind valued above the instinctual body. This binary-driven elitism, prevalent in academia and the sciences, is perhaps finally receding enough to allow a rediscovery of the full integration of body and mind. At its best, voicework explodes the binary of the body-mind split, empowering each individual in a holistic drive towards personal agency. Through working on the voice, cultural and political isolationism and hegemonic attitudes can be seen to be less useful than humanity’s desire for community and communication. To voice is personal; it’s both physical and intellectual; it’s social; and it’s an important political act—one that inspires compassionate connection.

Breathing, as the energetic source for voice, obviously matters. It is essentially important. It bridges and unites the mind and the body and the spirit. It is hair-trigger sensitive to inner and outer circumstances, and it defines our autonomy. Reich’s foundational writings, while not specifically talking about breathing but rather about the energy flow he called *orgone*—known in the east as *chi* or *prana*—testify to the importance of self-regulation and the damage done by forcing of all kinds. Repression and prohibition and rigid commands simply do not support a full experience of life. Our central nervous systems can learn too easily to conform to outer imperatives and then to completely override our own autonomic essence, creating in us a prison of chronic tension and limitation. By recovering our birthright, i.e. breathing, which is free to be both spontaneous and easily managed, we relearn both freedom and focus, we learn to trust ourselves to make healthy and appropriate and unafraid and brilliant and our very own choices—and we can learn to truly listen. That is, we can learn to communicate.

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