

Freeing the Lucid Voice: Music for the Tone-Deaf

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by Neil Douglas-Klotz

"I don't think I've ever really heard myself before. I was always told to mouth the words or stand in the corner and sing."

Kevin closed his eyes and tipped his head from side to side. He said that his ears had been draining all week and that he felt the blockage in his throat had begun to release. He felt that he could now express his feelings more clearly to his roommate and begin to accept his own natural voice both speaking and singing. He looked more shocked by his own newfound abilities than anything.

Fortunately, Kevin found himself in a voice re-education and therapy group with others who formerly believed themselves to be "tone-deaf" or possess "bad voices." Many had experienced changes similar to Kevin's. Like him, they had thought that their voices were like a squeaky valve to be "fixed," but instead had found their whole lives taking on a different note.

As a voice therapist and leader of such groups, I have found that most people, even those joining a voice therapy group, do not realize how central our voices are to our whole way of being in the world. Many people initially report that they feel they are not "speaking with their own voice" or that, in singing, they cannot "hear or feel themselves." For some, this inability to "speak out" leads to a sense that the world does not want to hear them.

Many common expressions point to the voice as a center of creativity, both personally and socially:

"She speaks from the heart."

"We voice our concerns about injustice."

"Word spoken, action done."

"He doesn't sound like he's telling the truth."

Formerly, in many traditional cultures, each person's voice was regarded as a unique gift, not as something to train to sound like someone else's. According to the early 20th century Indian musician and Sufi mystic Hazrat Inayat Khan:

"One must not sacrifice the natural quality of one's voice. For every person must know that there is no other voice like his.... every person is an instrument in the orchestra which is the whole universe."

Western somatic (body-based) research and therapy has begun to echo the East by considering the importance of the internal sensation of the voice and breathing in

re-educating the nervous system and all functions of movement. What were formerly thought to be "involuntary" movements in the body are doorways for change. Among others, Norwegian body therapist Lillemor Johnsen, now in her late 70's, has spent most of her adult life considering the relation between voice, breathing and a healthy psyche. While studying with her, she told me, "There's all this talk about bodies. But sound and breathing are life. The neurotic structure comes from not having given sound to things. The body is much more a tune than anything, more than words."

How do we lose our natural voice? Where does it go? The answer to these questions vary according to each person and his or her life history. Sometimes as children, we get the message "not to be heard." If this happens repeatedly or at one particularly traumatic time, our nervous system attempts to re-create this message in our bodies. We begin to *not* hear ourselves. From this change in hearing, a change in voice occurs almost without one noticing it. Unless we are encouraged to feel our voices from inside, the natural voice becomes covered, and we end up sounding like other, "more acceptable" voices.

In addition, most music education in our schools still traumatizes young voices. Before children even have a chance to find their voices, they are pigeon-holed into choral categories (soprano, alto, tenor, bass) and made to sing music that forces them into an unnaturally narrow range of pitch. To make a long story short, Western music at about the time of the industrial revolution changed from a folk art into a profession and its actual scales were changed (tempered) as well. These tempered scales, while creating beautiful symphonic and choral music, make it difficult for most people to find their natural voices. This was first proven in the late 1800's by the German acoustic researcher Hermann Helmholtz and thereafter by many others in practice.

Most "voice training" in the U.S. still ignores the use of natural, harmonic scales, which are common to non-western music. Such training also lacks respect for the development of the individual voice in favor of popular ideas of what makes a voice "beautiful." Composer Carl Orff, developer of a holistic system of music education for children, once commented, "Three-quarters of mankind needs no written music and knows no written music." Music is built into us: it does not have to be added from the outside. It is not a function of pop culture.

As a checklist, consider the following aspects of holistic voicework if you are thinking of taking a class or working with a particular teacher. The voice can be made to perform and imitate others, but to express one's real purpose and feeling is a different matter. I have also added some suggestions about how to begin to re-discover your own "lucid voice"--the one that allows your truest self to wake up *inside* your sound.

1. **Hearing:** No progressive work with the voice can occur without re-educating hearing. Our hearing habits hold our voices in their present form. To begin to release the muscles of the inner ear, try the following in a safe place (not driving): close your eyes and open your hearing to all the sounds around you. Do not focus on any particular sound, but bathe in the middle of sound, as if under a waterfall. In a minute or so, begin to gently open your eyes without focusing them immediately. Notice whether you feel any difference in your hearing. The tension of certain inner ear muscles will begin to re-balance as one does this "un-focusing" for hearing.

2. **Breathing:** The voice's depth, penetration, expansiveness and connection to one's personality are all echoed in the breathing. In fact, you could say that the voice is just the breathing made audible. The breathing can neither be forced through rigid exercises nor left to drift in its present, mostly unhealthy, patterns. Good voicework strikes a middle ground.

3. **Body Awareness:** The body resonates with the voice, just like a musical instrument resonates with music. If you hold it too tightly, the sound is muffled, too loosely and there is no support. Authentic voicework considers how the body is used -- standing, sitting, walking, and lying. As more of your *soma* (a combination of body, mind and emotions) is freed for sound, the voice expresses more of you.

4. **Feeling and Purpose:** In addition to somatic sensation, voicework should consider the emotional feelings connected with your voice from the past. You may still find the feeling of your unheard "child voice" in your body's memory. Recognize, accept and include the voice that was covered or lost. Consider also your purpose--where you are headed and what you would most deeply like to express. Compare this feeling to the voice of the past and try including both in your voice *now*.

5. **Intoning and Placement of Voice:** Most voicework stops here, either by artificially creating a loud voice through resonating in the head or by becoming lost in the sonic phenomena of overtone chanting. To start, keep it simple: while intoning, pick a note that resonates near the center of yourself, *in the heart*. Keep experimenting until you find one note that feels right. Intone that note slowly on AHH or AHL (more internal sensation). For a minute or two a day, focus on *feeling* the sound rather than hearing it. Focus on expressing your deepest desire. You will have begun a the journey to your own lucid voice. Take heart!

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Neil developed and teaches Lucid Voice Therapy and Lucid Movement through the Abwoon Resource Center (<http://www.abwoon.com>) and the Edinburgh Institute for Advanced Learning, Edinburgh, Scotland (<http://www.eial.org>)