

A baby cries and we are riveted by the sound's urgency. Children run, play and laugh and we stand in awe at their creativity and spontaneity. 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 colour 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 after cheering at a football game, giving a lecture or just having a long chat? Perhaps the real answer lies in understanding what has disconnected our voice from who we really are.

A spontaneous process

What 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. Our 'impulse' for sound is fuelled by emotional energy and is reflexive – that is, it is an unconscious, spontaneous response to a sensory stimulus.

Some reflexes are involuntary and controlled by the primitive brain, or brain stem, such as the familiar knee-jerk reflex. Others are 'conditioned' acquired responses, or learned behaviour. The nerves that supply muscles responsible for sound production are controlled by the brain stem; speech is an acquired voluntary motor activity governed by the cerebral cortex. It is the latter which allows us to be thinking, reasoning beings exercising control over our animal instincts.

Sometimes, though, we can become too controlled and obscure our primary, reflexive functioning. When this hap-



JEFF LEEDY/IMAGEBANK

Jean McClelland

Freeing Your Natural Voice

pens, a 'habit' is formed. For our voice to be emotionally responsive it must rely on its reflexive ability. Our first task, then, in finding our real voice is to acknowledge there is nothing we need do to *make* sound – it is a reflexive process we can just *allow to happen*. Unfortunately, acquired beliefs and behavioural habits often interfere with our real voice emerging.

Vocal therapy teaches how to develop unforced breathing, release tensions and enhance the beauty, range and communicative power of your speaking and singing voice

Habits that interfere

Habits take many forms. Some are useful, but those which cause muscular or mental tension interfere with efficient functioning. As much as we would all 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 environment to quiet his mind and guide him to greater awareness. More recently, the psycho-physical work of F.M. Alexander and Moshe Feldenkrais and the vocal work of Kirsten Linklater have focussed on becoming aware of muscular or psychological habits which get in the way of reflexive functioning. These often develop as protective defences against stress; becoming aware of them and being willing to stop their negative interference allows us to regain freedom.

Vocally, both muscular tensions and psychological 'blocks' can sever our voice from its emotional impulse. For instance, most people find the idea of singing or speaking in public very threatening and their feelings manifest in a

panic response of tightened muscles; rapid, shallow breathing; sweaty palms and a weak or otherwise unnatural voice. Of course, many people feel somewhat vulnerable in any public exposure; however, for some this has become a constant response to everyday living.

If we have grown up in an environment where emotions and free self-expression were denied, we become anx-

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ious and apprehensive about displaying our real self. We guard our vulnerability by creating a false, controlling self. Some of us grow up controlling and pacing every word we speak, anticipating effect and response. Concerned about how 'we come across' we manipulate and modu-

late our voices, effectively becoming bad actors with voices 'full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'. Others are not so calculated and a defeated, protected, anxious or denying state may be reflected in a monotonous voice, or one that is unnaturally low or high, too strident, nasal, soft or loud. In any event, it is an artificial voice, devoid of the speaker's real personality.

Finding our real voice

We can reclaim our real voice! To do so is a highly creative process which constructively blends spontaneous impulses with conscious control. Not surprisingly, this is also a path back to our real self and true emotional maturity. Many people are amazed when I tell them freeing their voices is as creative a process as painting, writing or improvisation. In connecting with our real voice, we experience enormous concentration and a quality of being 'in the moment' where we feel unselfconscious and free.

The great singer Luciano Pavarotti once told an interviewer he never tries to 'sing'; sound just flows out of him. Similarly, Mozart wrote 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 natural voice is a deeply intuitive process of rediscovery. 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 restraints may be frightening too, though at the same time it can be liberating. We must approach our work with a sense of discovery and Zen-like patience. Then this wonderful freeing process will cease to be a mystery and never be lost. □



Jean McClelland is widely acclaimed for her voice instruction classes and workshops. Her audio cassette, *Enriching Your Natural Voice*, is available for \$US15 from PO Box 2281, New York, NY 10108, USA.

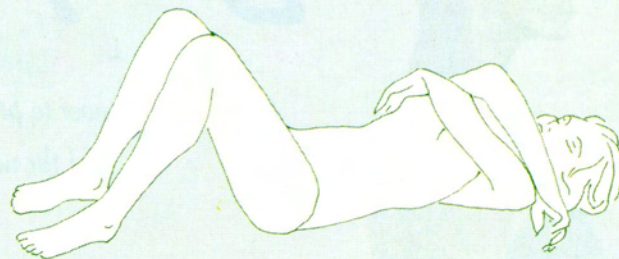
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**PREPARING
 BODY AND MIND**

This exercise will relax and revitalise you. Find a comfortable spot on the floor and stretch out. (Not a bed – a hard surface is necessary to judge body changes.) Take a moment to notice how your body feels. Are there tight, tension-filled areas? How does your lower back feel? Your shoulders? Is your head too far back? What is your breathing like? Is your mind easy and quiet? Don't change anything, just observe yourself. If you feel any discomfort in your head or neck, place a small paperback book under your head to relax muscles at the base of your head and maintain good alignment of your head and trunk.

Now bring the soles of your feet onto the floor so your knees are bent and feet about 15 cm (six inches) apart. Allow your toes to point forward and cross your arms over your upper chest, as if you were hugging yourself. Your hands should be resting on your upper arm or shoulder area. If there is any tension in your arms or hands, don't hug quite so hard.

This is a wonderful rest position – it opens the shoulder girdle, reduces muscle strain and relaxes muscles throughout the body. If you rest in this position 10 to 15 minutes each day you will feel more energy, in addition to gradual changes in your body alignment.

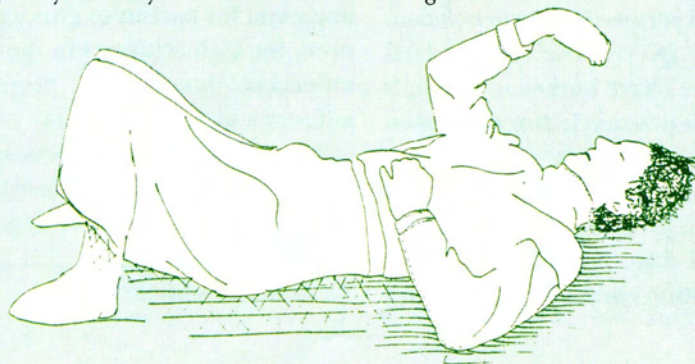
After you have rested in this position, get up slowly, walk around and sense any changes in your body.



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**STIMULATING YOUR
 REFLEXIVE BREATH**

This exercise works to free your breathing and, ultimately, your voice of any muscular constraints while developing easy, deep breathing. Assume a resting position on the floor with knees bent, as before. Rest one hand on your upper chest and one on your lower torso. To begin with, just hiss out an 'sss' sound. Don't think too much about it – just go ahead and hiss. Now. Hiss again and observe what you do. Do you take a big breath before you start? Are you pushing the breath out with mouth, lips, tongue or jaw? Are you straining to get that last bit of air out? What happened under your hands – did your upper chest sink as you hissed?

This is a good way to become aware of unconscious 'habits'. Hiss again, but this time, do less 'work'. It may be helpful to pause and then consciously decide to hiss. Make sure when you pause you are not holding your breath. Play with this for a while and see what you discover. You will learn a lot about the process of *allowing* as opposed to *doing*.



Next, take your hand from your upper chest and bring it to your lips. Instead of pushing your breath out, imagine your hand is actively pulling it away from you. Imagine there is a connection between your lower hand and the one at your lips. Stay connected in thought to your lower hand as the one at your lips 'pulls' the hiss from your body. You may feel you are pulling chewing gum or some elastic. Look at your pulling hand and really imagine you are pulling something away.

After you have 'pulled' the hiss out of your body, close your lips and wait for a new breath to come through your nose. Resist the urge to gasp or suck in new breath. Really wait and let the breath come on its own. Re-establishing this natural way of breathing will take time. You may think you are not getting enough air because you are not taking a 'big' breath. You are, however, getting all the air you need – trust your body to do the work and the more relaxed and easy your breathing will be.

When we resist making sound or doing something with our muscles we allow more efficient mind-body coordination and take a step towards more spontaneous functioning. This work requires patience and a spirit of exploration. Do not be frustrated if you don't 'get it' at first. You will, eventually. It is already in your body and just needs to be acknowledged. Remember, it takes time to quiet the mind so it listens to the body. By just beginning this work, though, you will begin to get a sense of the true freedom and authority of your natural voice.