

Why We Focus on Breathing in Fitzmaurice Voicework

Part one: *Destructuring*

Working with your experience of breathing can help you create deeper connections with your voice and with the world, and it provides a foundation for greater vocal freedom, flexibility and strength. The relationship between breathing and voice is rich and complex. Here I'll briefly describe some of the aspects of that relationship which you'll encounter in the first part of Fitzmaurice Voicework, *Destructuring*.

The basic process of *Destructuring* involves putting yourself into various physical positions and then inviting your experience, your breathing, and your voice to unfold spontaneously. As you do this, your breathing begins to open in places where it has been inflexible. At the same time, parts of your body, feelings, imagination, voice, and awareness of the outside world that have been chronically limited, for any number of reasons, also begin to open.

Throughout this process of *Destructuring*, the breathing is central. Here's why:

1. **Breath is the energy for voice:**

EXERCISE: hold your breath and speak or sing at the same time.

Did you make any sound? If so, you weren't really holding your breath. Breath pressure is required to make sound; it is the energy source for your voice. No breath, no voice. Simple.

2. **Restricted breathing constricts the throat and the voice:**

When the breathing in the torso is restricted, and there is too little air to sustain sound easily, the throat constricts in order to prolong the exhaled airflow, *to help you keep on speaking or singing*. For some people this restriction is chronic and for some it happens only in specific contexts. When the breathing is freer and there is more range of capacity, the throat and voice do not need to constrict to prolong airflow.

EXERCISE: without inhaling first, express the following thought WITH GLEE five times without stopping to inhale: "I am the greatest performer of all time." Don't push too hard and hurt yourself! Notice what happens. Does your throat constrict? Some of you may notice that your pitch rises like it does for some people when they are emotional. It isn't so much a "pitch problem": it is the direct result of constricted breathing and the tightening that is a part of that. Likewise, some of you will notice that you are rushing to get the words out. In this case, it's not really a "speeding" problem; it's a lack of air.

3. **Excessive force of breath constricts the throat and the voice:**

Here we have the opposite problem – too much force rather than too little – but the results are the same. When the breath is forced out too quickly, the throat constricts to prolong airflow so you can sustain sound. When the breathing is more free and easy, the throat and voice do not need to constrict to prolong airflow.

EXERCISE: blow air out and talk or sing at the same time. Don't hurt yourself! You will notice either that it is impossible to sustain sound or that you need to limit the airflow to sustain sound.

4. We can limit what we experience, and our sense of being present, by controlling and restricting our breathing:

We can control our breathing to reduce the impact of difficult feelings and experiences. That's not a bad thing. It's an important ability we have.

For performers, a problem arises when our ability to manage our difficult experience by controlling our breathing becomes an instant, habitual, and largely unconscious response. Over time, many aspects of our experience can become unconsciously locked away and unavailable. It is very hard to express vocally what you cannot experience, and performers often push the voice to compensate. In addition to causing the voice to be disassociated from the truth of the moment, this can also cause vocal strain or fatigue.

EXERCISE: close your eyes and imagine that the experience you are having right now is extremely pleasurable... Take your time. There's no need to be perfect with this... Notice your breathing.

Now imagine that you really don't want to be where you are now, that it feels wrong, perhaps a little unsafe. Don't push this. Just touch in with it... Notice your breathing again. How has it changed?

90% of the time, people's breathing will become easier in the first scenario and harder in the second. I used to think that that was a very simple response. If I am comfortable my breathing would be easy, and if I am uncomfortable, my breathing would become more restricted or otherwise controlled. But I think something more interesting is happening: *If I am willing to have the experience I am having, my breathing will help me by becoming more free; if I am not willing to have the experience I am having, my breathing will help me by becoming more restricted such that it limits my access to my experience.*

It isn't only internal experience that we can limit by controlling or restricting our breathing. We can also avoid the outside world. Learning to be with our experience fluidly, internal and external, while allowing ourselves to breathe, is a big step toward learning to be more present.

5. We can limit what we express by restricting our breathing:

Restricting or limiting our expression at times is a normal and helpful ability. However, most of us have internalized so completely a belief that certain kinds of expression (such as joy, sadness, power, vulnerability, etc.) are not okay that we chronically inhibit our breathing to stop the expression. This inhibition of the breathing is achieved by tightening muscles and by limiting muscular movement. This not only limits our expression in the moment, but over time it also chronically "armors" the body in a protective tightness.

This armoring, in turn, reduces access to our experience, to our impulses, which then further limits our ability to express and communicate.

An analogous process happens with bodily injury. If you sprain an ankle, your body very intelligently swells to prevent movement. If after the sprain is healed you don't begin to move your ankle, it will become chronically stiff. In this way temporary tightness can become chronic armoring

that limits the healthy functioning of the body. So in some sense *Destructuring* is a gentle invitation to experience movement where there has been holding.

6. Places we have chronically inhibited breathing limit resonance:

In order to produce a sound, you need three things: an energy source, something that vibrates, and a resonator (a place for the vibrations to multiply).

For our voices, the energy source is the exhaled breath, what vibrates are the vocal folds, and the resonator is the whole body. When parts of the body are chronically tight, our resonance is diminished:

- a. The entire torso can be involved in breathing, and chronic inhibitions in the breathing tighten and lock the torso. This in turn limits resonance and the feeling of the whole body vibrating, experiencing a sonic massage, as we make sound.
- b. Sometimes the trapping of experience, expression and breathing happens in vocal tract, making a kind of bottleneck. This creates a sense of being disembodied, of the head and body being separate. Since much of what we experience as acoustic resonance happens in the vocal tract, this tightening can also profoundly limit the ease and resonance of the voice. It can also lead to “from the neck up” acting and singing. Inhibitions of experience, expression and breathing enabled by tightening or becoming frozen in the face can also significantly limit resonance.

When you free areas of the body that are part of the *breath reflex* (the wavelike movement of the torso as it breathes), as well as other areas through which breathing moves both literally and experientially, then natural resonance is freed as well.

EXERCISE: hold a half-full, uncapped bottle of water by the mouth, and imagine the bottle is a drum. Your hand hitting the bottle will be the energy source for the sound. The place you hit the bottle will be the place that vibrates. The whole bottle will be the resonant chamber.

Hit the middle of the bottle with your palm so it makes a sound. Now hold the bottle around the middle with one hand (to inhibit the resonance). Hit it again and compare the quality of the sound. You will notice that the second sound is flattened considerably.

7. Inspiration = Inhale = Idea:

The word inspiration means both having an idea and taking a breath. Our thoughts and our breathing are linked. Your body is wired to take in exactly the right amount of breath for each thought you want to express and to do so instantly. In this way your body reflects moment by moment, through the breathing, what is happening in your experience.

The amount of breath you take in before expressing a thought is determined by the length and intensity of your thought as well as acoustic considerations related to the space you are in and the distance your voice needs to travel. Taking in that breath happens instinctually and instantly. Restricted breathing can distort this simple connection.

A lack of connection between our impulses and the words we use to express ourselves (which can be exacerbated when the words we use are not originally our own, (e.g., acting and singing)) also

distorts the connection of breath and thought. Good acting or singing technique that enables you to make the words your own, in the context of the story, is crucial. So is freeing the breathing so that it can respond instantly and accurately to your thought.

EXERCISE: respond to the question, “Would you like some pie?” by saying a casual, “No.” Notice how much breath you took in before saying, “No.”

In response to the same question, say this with a fair amount of intensity, “I’ve told you a hundred times that I don’t ever want any of that horrible pie that you keep trying to give to me.” Notice that you instinctually take in more breath for that thought. Notice also that if you create different scenarios in which to say these same words, the breathing also changes.

8. Breath = Life Force:

The Latin word for spirit, *spiritus*, is derived from the word for *breathe*, *spiro*. The Chinese word *chi* (or *qi*) means both *breath* and *life force*. In Sanskrit *prana* means both *breath* and *life force*.

This connection is true in a great number of languages. It needn’t be just a metaphor. By opening up the breathing and becoming aware of a felt sense of the breath traveling throughout the body (which it literally does in the form of red blood cells), we can develop a greater life force, a greater presence, which in turn can be communicated vocally.

9. Breathing is both involuntary and voluntary:

Breathing is one of the only systems of the body that is both voluntary and involuntary. It is a nexus of the conscious and unconscious, of the central and autonomic nervous systems. It both reveals what is happening moment by moment, and it manages what is happening. Exploring that connection – between impulse and action, reflex and choice – is gold for the performer.

Most of us are adept at managing the breath consciously and unconsciously. It is often much harder to let the breath respond freely to each moment, especially under difficult circumstances (such as those that are encountered by performers).

Destructuring is about uncovering that freedom, about consciously releasing the breath and voice. In that sense it is also about uncovering a greater sense of wholeness, of opening to the full spectrum of experience and expression.

EXERCISE: Try controlling your breathing and then try letting it go. When you are aware of your breathing, what is your experience of letting it go?

10. Breathing can change moment by moment as it responds to and affects your experience. So can the experience of Destructuring. The process is fluid:

People have very different experiences while destructuring, and the experiences can change often. There isn’t a single right response, there is just moving toward easier flow as well as greater openness to what is actually happening, whether it is comfortable or uncomfortable. Here’s a brief account of a workshop I taught in San Francisco a few years ago to illustrate the point.

We were a couple days into the introduction, and in one of the rows there were four students. The first student cried the whole morning. The second one laughed the whole morning. The third one seemed to be having a mellow, pleasurable experience. I couldn't tell what was happening with the fourth student.

At the end of the morning, we talked over what had happened. The first student gestured toward the second student and said, "I was so jealous of you. I was miserable the whole day and you were having such a great time." The second student said, "I was jealous of you! Here I was only able to laugh while you were having the deep experience that I longed for." The third student said, "I wanted to laugh or to cry. My experience was pleasant but so lacking in powerful emotion. I wasn't able to get what you two were getting."

We talked for a bit about how there wasn't a single correct response, and how funny it was that each of them had wanted the other's experience and not accepted their own experience as valid, and that paradoxically, in not accepting their specific experiences they probably also prolonged them.

At that point, the fourth student spoke up. "Nothing happened for me at all!" As she spoke, she seemed angry. When I asked her about it, at first she said she wasn't angry. Then she said she thought that maybe she had been angry the whole morning because nothing had been happening for her the whole morning. Later she realized that during the morning she had distanced herself from her anger and decided that she wasn't having any experience, when in fact she was having an experience: she was angry.

As you explore destructuring, practice gently opening up to what is happening rather than trying to make something happen that you think ought to be happening. Be an explorer who is curious about your experience rather than a dictator who has decided in advance what the experience should look like.

Sometimes you might access challenging aspects of your experience during *Destructuring*. Part of the practice when you encounter such experience is not to push it away too strongly or to hyper focus on it. So long as your experience doesn't feel like too much (and you're not injuring yourself!) it's possible to learn to release into your experience, to let yourself breathe with it, to become the experience rather than being the watcher of your experience, and let it change into the next experience. This can release energy that has been used for a long time to shut down or hold onto an experience. The release of that energy, when not forced or hindered—truly respecting your own rhythms—gives you greater access to your experience and your ability to express it.

11. The Pleasure of Free Breathing:

Sometimes it just feels good!

*This handout is informed by talks given by Catherine Fitzmaurice as well as her article, *Breathing is Meaning*, available in the book *Vocal Visions* (published by Applause) and on the Fitzmaurice Voicework website, www.FitzmauriceVoice.com.