

Stand Up and Express Yourself

In the last article, we looked at ways your breathing affects your voice. Now we're on to posture and voice. In Zen Buddhism there's a saying, "Sitting in good posture, that itself is enlightenment." I can't promise enlightenment, but deepening your experience of posture can open up the potential of your voice and help your acting.

Posture is fluid. You don't assume a single posture for long periods of time; you move: sometimes in tiny ways, sometimes in big ways. And whether you feel it or not, there is always internal motion – you are never still.

In Fitzmaurice Voicework, the style of voice training I teach, there are a few key elements of posture: efficient balance without rigidity, flexibility of breathing, a sense of internal flow, and relating with the world. Later in this article, we'll look at a standing posture that incorporates these elements into a "baseline" posture that encourages vibrant relaxation and teaches you about postural habits that may limit you.

Ideally your posture should allow you to feel alive as you move between many different positions. For now, try this: stand up. Now lie down.

Did you hold your breath as you moved? If you did, you did too much work. You made it harder for yourself to move, and to be present during the transition.

Try this: stand up and lock your knees. Now collapse your chest, hunch your shoulders forward and hang your head as though you're depressed. Now try the opposite: stand at attention with your shoulders back.

Did you feel what was happening to your breathing? If you habitually, unconsciously adopt postures in ways that restrict or stop your breathing, you're also limiting your voice in several ways. Here's one way of thinking about how that happens:

If you have easy access to a half-full plastic bottle of water, try this. Take the cap off. Hold the mouth of the bottle with one hand, and bang the middle like a drum with your other. Now, change your grip and hold the middle of the bottle, and bang it again with your free hand. What you'll hear the second time is a flatter sound. By holding the bottle in the middle, you've dampened its resonance. The same principle is true for your body.

If you hold postures rigidly, you dampen the natural resonance of your voice. You literally become less vibrant, and depending on where you're holding tension, your voice may sound flatter or higher or, less frequently, lower than it would otherwise. When you're under stress (say for instance, in an audition), small tensions get magnified, and so can the effect on your voice.

Let's look at a baseline posture now. If it's challenging to feel your way into it, that's good; that means you probably have something to gain from exploring posture. As you do this, keep allowing yourself to feel, or imagine, a sense of comfort and vibrant relaxation. If

sometimes you feel mild discomfort or tension, or even disconnection, that's normal. Allow yourself to breathe with your experience. If it starts to feel like too much, find a way to get more comfortable.

Begin with your feet. Your feet are your contact with the ground. Shift your weight back and forth to feel the center of your feet, and then shift your weight a little forward. The voice teacher Patsy Rodenburg has actors stand a little toward the balls of their feet to have the sense that they are engaging with the world and ready to do anything.

Unlock your ankles, knees, and hips – you might even feel a sense of gentle energy passing through these joints. Locking in these areas prevents the legs from helping you balance. This forces your torso to do extra work to stop you from falling over.

Find a “live” middle place for the pelvis between being tucked in and thrust back. When you feel it, you can feel the connection of your pelvis to your legs more easily. As you release further, you might also feel that the bottom of your spine is alive and connected to the top of your spine.

The belly releases out as you inhale. This helps you breathe and feel. This also affects your voice because when you speak, a part of your lower abdomen naturally pulls in to initiate and manage the exhaled breath flow. Holding your belly in all the time stops that process and stops you from speaking from your core. So let the belly release out, as much as you're willing, as you inhale.

Imagine your spine is like a long piece of flexible seaweed. It's rooted into the (sea) floor through your legs and rises buoyantly to between your ears.

Stand so your chest is neither collapsed nor rigidly held out – think of both the *front* and *back* of your spine buoyantly lifting to between your ears so your whole spine feels alive, not rigid. Can you feel a sense of your ribs easily hanging off your spine? Even while you're upright, can you feel that your back isn't arching so much that you lock your back ribs and cut off your breathing there?

Nod your head up and down, then left to right, and feel your head floating easily on your spine. Take a moment to move your face: brows, eyes, cheeks, lips, nose, chin. As you do that, allow yourself to breathe. Release them and feel the energy there.

Now gently tighten your shoulders. Let yourself breathe gently into your shoulders as you do so. Then release your shoulders. Do the same with your buttocks, jaw, tongue, fingers, and toes. Take a moment now to lightly feel into the base of your spine, around the perineum, and the connection of that area to your tongue and jaw.

If your eyes are closed, slowly and sensitively open them, and take the world in. Take a moment to recognize that you exist and the outside world exists, and you can breathe.

Once you've begun to find this baseline posture you may feel more, see the world more vividly, and be able to talk more expressively. Though you may appear still, there's a lot of movement happening internally as your body keeps finding its balance and breathing.

Once you can find this posture, it's also crucial that you can let it go. Why? So you have the option to live inside postures and movement in the ways that specific characters do – and in ways that keep you open and flexible. When you do, you may feel how profoundly even subtle postural changes affect your experience and your voice.

When you slouch a little, for instance, it's easier to feel depressed. When your chest is open it's easier to feel empathic. It's not always so simplistic, but as your posture changes, you naturally shift what you can readily experience, and if you're open to these changes, that shifts what you can express vocally in the moment.

Your posture also affects how you're heard. When you walk into a casting director's office, for instance, before you say a word, they get an impression of you. Your body (which includes your face) gives them huge clues about who you are, or at least who you appear to be, and that can dramatically affect how they listen to you.

To put it in simplified terms, if you stand rigidly, they may hear you through their *rigid-body-uptight-person* or *rigid-body-disconnected-person* or *rigid-body-frightened-person* filters. If you slouch, it may engage their *slouching-body-depressed-person* filter, and so on. On film and on stage, this effect is magnified. That's a good thing because it means you don't need to limit yourself to "good" acting posture. Instead, exploring posture can become a natural part of your exploration of a character, and it can be helpful to hint at this even as you walk into a casting director's office.

Finally, just like in any other part of acting, at a certain point it's time to trust you have it, let go of thinking about it, and deal with the circumstances you find yourself in.

Various kinds of voice training, and other somatic training systems (including Feldenkrais, Alexander, Yoga, and Pilates) approach posture from different and valuable angles. As you explore posture and movement, find a teacher you can trust. Remember to allow yourself to breathe, feel for a sense of internal flow, and take the world in. And remember this: as an actor, the immediate communication of your experience to others happens through your body and your voice.