

To Breathe Or Not To Breathe

Why should actors in Los Angeles give a damn about voice training? If you have problems with your voice, the answer may be obvious, but for most actors it's not so clear. So I'm going to begin by looking at two benefits of voice training that may not be obvious: the ability to be emotionally available and the ability to communicate when you're experiencing heightened states of emotion.

While many factors can affect these two things, the linchpin of both is breathing. Simply put, developing a free and easily managed breathing system expands your emotional life and your ability to communicate when you're experiencing powerful emotions.

You've probably noticed that sometimes when you're stressed - from fear or anxiety or frustration or sadness or the stress du jour - your body responds by getting tense. In addition to any physical protection tightening your muscles might offer, its main function is to protect you from the intensity of your experience. Tightening allows you to numb out, to create a sort of physical and psychological shield. This isn't a bad thing. It's a crucially important ability you have. Without it, life would sometimes be overwhelming.

For the actor, however, this great ability to numb out in your life can become a great problem in your acting. If tightening becomes a habitual, unconscious process, it can stop you from being emotionally available at the most inopportune times: in auditions, or when playing a character who vividly feels emotions that you habitually avoid.

Over time the unconscious habit of tightening your muscles can turn into a permanent tightening in some parts of your body, creating a kind of body armor that keeps protecting you even after the cause of the stress is gone. This is fine for some people, but it's bad for you as an actor who needs to be emotionally available on cue.

If, like most people, you habitually avoid many kinds of discomfort, as part of your acting training you need to learn safe ways to embrace uncomfortable or unfamiliar parts of your experience, including those in your emotional life. A big part of that process is learning that you have a choice to tighten or to stay open.

In many ways, being open and breathing are the same thing. When you're breathing freely, it's hard to be tight. When you're tight, it's hard to breathe freely. Try this: tighten your abdomen and then try to take a deep breath. It's difficult, right?

In the simplest terms, the more you breathe (or the more free your breathing is) the more you feel; the less you breathe (or the more unconsciously tightened your breathing is) the less you feel.

Think about the last time you played a character whose experience made you uncomfortable. Do you know if you were tensing your jaw, your neck, your shoulders, your chest, your stomach, your groin, your knees? Do you know if you were breathing? If you were breathing, do you know if you were controlling your breathing to minimize the

experience?

An unconscious habit of tightening your muscles and your breathing doesn't only limit your experience, it also limits your voice. That's true for a lot of reasons. Perhaps the most central reason is this: breath is the energy source for your voice. No breath, no voice. Period.

Try this: hold your breath and keep holding it while you talk about what you had for dinner yesterday. Go ahead.

Did you make any sound at all? If so, you weren't holding your breath. The gentle pressure from your *breathing* vibrates your vocal folds -- they vibrate only about as loudly as a bee's wings and the vibration becomes louder by resonating, amplifying in your body -- so naturally voice teachers are interested in breathing.

In order for you to have a free, flexible, and powerful voice, your breathing needs to be both free and efficiently managed. Consequently, in many kinds of voice training, freeing the breathing and developing the ability to manage the breathing are both fundamental. And as a bonus, as you learn to free your breathing, you can also slowly learn to increase your capacity to feel a range of emotions (rather than unconsciously avoiding your feelings).

But feeling isn't everything - you've got words to speak, and often your characters can't afford to be overwhelmed by feeling because they've got important things to communicate. Once again, a flexible breathing system comes to the rescue. Here's how.

When you get emotional, you may have experienced your body tightening in response to the intensity of your experience. That tightness almost always constricts your breathing. If it's hard to speak when you're very emotional it's usually because you've tightened your breathing too much to speak or in your intensity you've forced too much breath out too quickly. The pitch of your voice might go up as a result of the tightening and lack of breath; just like a guitar string goes up in pitch when it's pulled tighter, when you have excess tension in your neck, your vocal folds and areas that typically resonate can tighten, making your pitch go up. You might also start to rush your words because you literally don't have enough breath to sustain your spoken thought.

Having a trained breathing system can help you get the words out, literally, and get them out with relative ease. If that sounds good, it's important to recognize that it's only half the story.

Tightening is human. Characters might tighten sometimes or all of the time. An actor needs to be free to tighten whenever it's appropriate. It's just that you don't want to tighten habitually, unconsciously, always in the same way. You need to have the option to be responsive to the situation you're in. By helping you free and then manage your breathing, good voice training helps you increase the options available to you: to feel more, or to feel less; to speak more easily when stressed or to speak with more difficulty -

all are useful to you, and all should be available to you.

Different approaches to voice training treat breathing in different ways. The approach that I teach, Fitzmaurice Voicework (developed by my mother, Catherine Fitzmaurice), has a strong emphasis on freeing the breathing in healthy ways through specific adaptations of yoga, Shiatsu, and Reichian bodywork combined with classical voice training techniques. To simplify the process a little, you begin Fitzmaurice Voicework by learning a sequence of physical positions that helps your body breathe freely while encouraging a deep release of old patterns of tension. Once your breathing is more free, you learn how to use your breath in a highly efficient and organic way for speaking.

Other major teachers of voice training, for instance Kristin Linklater, Arthur Lessac, Cicely Berry, Patsy Rodenburg and Roy Hart, have all addressed freeing and using the breath in different and helpful ways.

The process and benefits of voice training are individual, and it's important that you find an approach that suits you. There are many benefits beyond emotional availability and communicating when emotional. I'll address some of them in the next article.