

# VOICEWORK AS THERAPY

## A Personal View

by Laura Cherry Botha

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I had left Ireland, a good teaching job and, temporarily, a husband to come to London to train as a counsellor. I was starting to open up to lost possibilities - the most important being a time when I used to sing contemporary folk songs which I had 'forgotten' about for many years. I decided to sing again and I suppose there must have been an element of synchronicity at work when I found a singing teacher who also turned out to be a therapist.

Although I had a reasonably good voice I knew I had a few problems. I had a lot of performance anxiety; my voice wasn't strong enough to be heard over a large distance and I was no longer able to sing to audiences as I had in the past. My voice was very uneven in tone and had too much vibrato. I hadn't the confidence to sing the notes as written in a straight forward manner; I felt the need to embellish the notes by 'wriggling' around on them. By this I mean that I would slide slightly on and off the notes rather than singing definite grace notes, the usual practice in folk music. Rather than enhancing the note, for the listener, this sounded as if I went slightly out of tune.

So when I went for my first singing lesson I had expected to do some scales and breathing exercises and to be taught to sing 'properly'. Imagine my surprise when I asked to shout loud enough to attract someone's attention down the street! And my embarrassment at only being able to produce a squawk! My early lessons were spent primarily trying to make clear, strong sounds - singing would come later.

Since my teacher's method is therapeutic rather than traditionally didactic, she is concerned to bring out what is already there rather than making me conform to an externally imposed standard. She is particularly interested in whatever interferes with this process. Therefore the work consists in using the voice in many ways, noting what constrictions or blocks there are in the body, mind or emotions and then gradually easing them. This is done by using body movements, imaging, making different sounds with the voice, breathing exercises, allowing feelings to emerge, or whatever seems appropriate at the time to help free the natural voice.

One of the surprising things for me is how much the work has centred on my body. I find that I have to pay much closer attention to my way of holding myself and acting as physical presence in the world.

I lacked awareness of certain parts of my body which hold a great deal of tension. In fact, my jaw was practically locked solid since my teeth were clenched so tightly that it's surprising any sound could emerge. As the work has progressed, however, my jaw and throat are gradually opening, at times producing a gagging reflex that is both involuntary and so powerful that I have been close to vomiting. It would seem that concentrating on this area provides a way of working with physical and emotional defences that have been built over my lifetime.



It feels as if these tensions stem from the earliest years of my life when language had not yet developed to help me make sense of my emotions and the atmosphere of my environment. Making small changes in these muscles has the effect of preventing my characteristic habits from occurring, and I am able to experience the feelings underlying them. In my case, these are predominantly anxiety and the desire to vomit.

Forgotten memories also emerge - an accident skipping at the age of 4 when I tripped and bit right through my extended tongue would seem to explain both my difficulty in keeping the tip of my tongue close to my bottom teeth and its tendency to pull back constantly, with the effect of strangling the sound.

The process of working on the voice by this method is very much a confrontation with my own way of being in the world - often painful, sometimes anxiety-provoking, but rewarding, as my continued engagement with the work proves. The support of my teacher has helped enormously. Indeed, when I have been doing such demanding, at times uncomfortable work, requiring bursts of the most intense concentration I have ever sustained, her patience has been crucial.

My voice is now strong - when I started I would never sing without a microphone, and now no longer need one. The tone is also more even and I feel much more confident. My performance anxiety is just enough to ensure a good performance. Moreover, there have been other gains.

Through the work, I have learnt that in order to allow the voice to soar, the whole body and being of the singer must come into play. Previously my voice emerged from my throat, more or less cut off from the rest of my body. This may have been the result in part of a childhood in which free expression of sound or feelings was frowned upon and in which the prevailing atmosphere was one of tension.

I now realise that everything is connected - the tensions of my body, my inner psychological attitude, my thoughts and feelings about myself - all determine whether my voice is able to soar freely or be constricted. To work on the voice in a holistic and therapeutic way is to work on the whole person. As I move between focusing on the mind to the body, to the emotions, to the spirit, I feel that it is my voice that connects all of these. Indeed, my voice is all of these.

So my 'lessons', in addition to being a way of improving my singing, have also proved to be an ongoing personal journey. I feel they have often been a deeper therapeutic experience than periods of more conventional counselling. Little did I realise that I was embarking on a process of self-exploration and increasing self-awareness that would gradually involve all aspects of myself. Freeing my voice has been the guide.