

THE BRAIN SPEAKS  
OR  
THE ALCHEMY OF BREATHING

by Kristin Linklater

It is a great pleasure to have the opportunity to give something back to the Alexander Technique in a small return for everything I have received from it over the years. It can't have been later than 1964 that I was introduced to the legendary Judy Leibowitz in New York. I brought her to the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis to work with my first teacher-training program in 1966, and I claim to be the one who was instrumental in getting her on the faculty at The Juilliard School in the Acting Program. I have had the hands of many an Alexander teacher upon me over the succeeding years and currently am blessed by having John Nicholls as my essential support in New York.

I inherited the progression of exercises that I teach, which is known as "Freeing the Natural Voice," from a teacher called Iris Warren who was famous in the 1940s and 1950s for the effectiveness of her work among the leading actors of the West End in London. She also taught at The London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (LAMDA) where I trained as an actress and became a pupil teacher with her. She died in 1963. I can't tell you much about her because nobody knows much. She seems to have arrived at her methods through divine intervention. She had the inspired realization that the voice is a human instrument rather than a musical one (though it is that too) and that the key to the freedom of the voice is freedom of emotion. Iris was a very private person; she never wrote about her work and believed that her work would be misunderstood if it were written down. Thus, when I wrote *Freeing the Natural Voice*, which was first published in 1976, the work took on my name. I have developed her work over the past 40 years and, despite my Alexander commitment, I have to say here that I have developed also many "gross, unsubtle doing" exercises that may reveal me to be a wolf in sheep's clothing here in your midst. You will hear much that is different in what I have to say—though I think the fundamental goal of changing habits and releasing true potential is in the same ballpark.

I will be speaking about practice more than ideas, at least new ideas. We have here some really heavy-hitters in the ideas arena and I am learning a lot from them. For a words person, it's hard not to start playing with the brain terminology that comes one's way. I love *hippocampus*—I see two hippotami gamboling on a university campus. *Cingulate*—a silky sash woven with Japanese scenes. *Trans-cranial magnetic stimulation* makes me tingle with excitement. Kevan Martin tells me that my *anterior superior gyrus* will light up if I hit the communicative target here, sort of like a pinball machine, I imagine. I would love my next granddaughter to be called *Amygdala* though some say it's the seat of fear. Google it and you'll find a neuro-explorer (not, I think, a scientist) who says it's the seat of ecstatic bliss, and you can learn to tickle it as with a feather, and transcend.

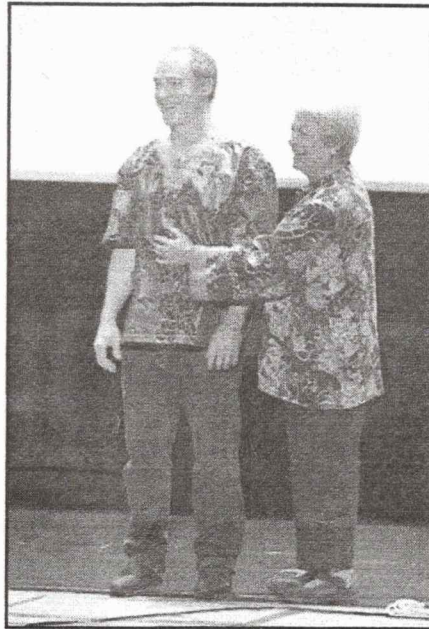
Today I'll stick to what I know from hands-on, ears-on experience. But I can't help expressing this one, large idea to start off with: our daily practice in voice could be described as a

Herculean attempt to roll back the last few centuries of human conditioning, since the tyranny (and enlightenment) of print and technology came to dominate our mode of communication. Certainly when the 21<sup>st</sup> century actor is confronted with Shakespeare's language, he or she must develop techniques to bring the experience of thought and words out of the head and into the body, where the Elizabethans, conditioned by the oral tradition rather than the literary, heard and understood meaning. I must

strenuously avoid the temptation to talk more about that idea—because I'm going to talk about breathing—BUT it's worth bearing in mind that the goal for actor-training and, I would suggest, for human development in general, is *Embodiment*: embodiment of thought and language so that experience may be translated accurately into words. As actors we want the gap between thought and the spoken word to disappear. We want our thought-waves to be picked up as closely as possible by the sound-waves of our voices. We want the inflections of thought to be reflected precisely in the inflections of voice. No mediation or manipulation by interfering middlemen such as jaw or throat muscles, who think they have to negotiate the relationship between breath, blood, soul, and voice. Iris used to say, "I want to hear the person through the voice, not the voice."

So if I may take one more step back in time in order to propel us forward, I shall invoke the ancient Greeks for a moment. But I'll save some present time if I let the contemporary Italian philosopher, Adriana

Cavarero, articulate the points I wish to make: she does it infinitely better than I can. In her book *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, Cavarero quotes the pre-Plato philosopher Empedocles: "the heart is nourished in a sea of churning blood where what men call 'thought' is found—for the blood about the heart is thought for men." Cavarero goes on to point out that, for the Greeks, the soft material of the brain is mute and is the primary seat of the psyche (meaning severally: breath, blood, soul, and therefore residing in other parts of the body as well as the head) BUT, she says, "in the archaic period [before the Greeks], psyche denoted a substance with procreative functions totally deprived of intellectual functions. Thought lay in the lungs, not in the head. To think is to speak, and to speak is to breathe. If in the psyche there is no breath, then there is no voice, and thus, there is no thought..." Cavarero then says: "Plato knows this archaic meaning of the psyche and [in the *Timaeus*] Plato says that 'the gods who shaped the human body, made a conduit in order to receive the marrow that runs from the head along the dorsal spine, what we have called *sperma*; and this marrow, because it is animated and breathing, provokes a vital desire for emission in that part where it breathes and thus provokes the desire for procreation.'" Cavarero summarizes: "the cranial box is simply procreative sperm that, as it passes through the bony tube of the dorsal spine, reaches the penis and gets blown by it toward the outside." As a philosopher, and philosophers were in his day the



Kristin Linklater helps Kevan Martin free his natural voice.



equivalent of our scientists, Plato was describing human function empirically—maybe he checked with some other philosophers—but it seems to me he must have been f\*\*king his brains out—and probably talking non-stop at the same time.

That image is rather more fun than that conjured up by the relatively new “neuro gastro-enterological studies of the gut-brain,” though I’m happy we’re coming round to the same picture as the Greeks in our own semantically overloaded way.

One day in my classroom, I was frustrated beyond pedagogical correctness by a young actor incapable of conveying the lascivious sensuality of Edmund in *King Lear* because he was in love with the rich sound of his voice, and I found myself saying: “You’ve wrapped your voice around your penis like a condom. You should be ejaculating these words into our ears and impregnating our imagination with word-seed.” Pretty Platonic.

So, how are we going to re-connect the voice with the elemental forces that express our innermost feelings and thereby our uniqueness? For it is the voice that exhibits the unique nature of

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each one of us within a communal resonance, not the words we say: the vocalic essence, not the semantic description.

We must navigate a tangled path guided by our breathing. After 50 years of teaching a subject rooted in breath, you’d have thought (I’d have thought) I’d have got it clear by now. But somehow the vocabulary of breathing gets more subtle and more rarified year by year, and I become increasingly fascinated, even obsessed, by the connection of breath with emotion and language.

F.M. Alexander found a major clue to more effective breathing from his re-education of the body, and he incontrovertibly demonstrated that the voice worked better when breathing and the body were aligned. Every contemporary voice teacher’s methodology owes its consciousness of the head, neck, jaw relationship to Alexander. He said: “Every voice-user should learn to open the mouth without throwing back the head. Very distinct benefits will accrue to those who succeed in establishing this habit.” Yes, I can attest to the vivid results when a neck is lengthened in the course of delivery of an impassioned speech.

And yet I have seen a production of Wagner’s opera *The Flying Dutchman* in New York in which the Dutchman delivered a mighty aria lying on his back with his head hanging backwards off the edge of a platform—that is, with no length at all to the back of his neck. When the voice is free it doesn’t matter what position you’re in. The voice, ultimately, flies on the air—a moth, a petal, an arrow, a jet plane of sound vibration. So what is this “freedom?”

Alexander emphatically promotes the benefits of respiratory re-education as a means to good psycho-physical health. For those of us in the actor-training field, interested in how emotions and thoughts are transmitted truthfully through the voice, the angle of examination has to widen to include the behavior of breathing according to the human action being undertaken. Today I’ll be mainly talking about that foundational subject of breathing.

So let me approach the subject by saying that while there is an optimum psycho-physical natural arrangement for breathing there is no one correct way to breathe. There is breathing that works for yoga, breathing that works for swimming, there is the proper breathing for martial arts, and the best for playing the trumpet. There is meditation breathing and at least a dozen different “correct” ways of breathing for singing. I can imagine that the

*Flying Dutchman* baritone who sang lying on his back found a great expansion in the front of his body, and while his neck was shortened as it hung back over the platform, his throat was widely open and stretched.

Our breathing muscles are multifarious and adaptable. They can perform both voluntarily and involuntarily. Their primary purpose is, of course, to keep us alive; this they do on the involuntary level. My particular interest in breath is how it helps us either to reveal or hide the truth as we speak. I can almost hear some of you thinking, “What does she mean by ‘the truth’?” Well, that’s a whole other conference. For working purposes here I mean the most accurate transmission of thought and feeling through spoken language.

The role played by breathing in the art of acting is to help the search for the holy grail of truth. We search for truth in the language of extremity and in the most intimate emotional expression. The alchemy of inspired communication is a mix of emotion, intellect, and voice. The *prima materia* is breath. This fundamental element of truthful speaking is accessible, of course, for anyone involved in speaking publicly or, indeed, privately.

How do you experience the alchemy and art of breathing for voice? Start slowly and simply. My starting point is, very simply, to pay attention to the center of the diaphragm and, with the lips slightly apart, to tune in to the rhythm of natural, everyday breathing, allowing the outgoing breath to escape over the lips in a small, loose puff of air, “ff.”

Then, in my teaching, I break down the sophisticated geography of the breathing mechanism to:

- Diaphragm and solar plexus for sensitivity and emotional connection
- Pelvic floor and sacrum for instinct and power
- Intercostals for capacity

Of course all these should act together in a sublime collaboration on the involuntary level. Voluntarily the only contribution we can make is to create fertile conditions for the intricately coordinated activity that makes for the best communication. In other words, we need to get out of the way. But in order to get out of the way we must be able to see the way: we must get to know our breathing process.

The first step toward this experiential knowledge is to be able to train the mind’s eye accurately on the diaphragm, intercostals and pelvic floor. But mere anatomical accuracy isn’t enough to effect the alchemical transformation that makes breath serve the goal of truthful speaking. The senses, imagination, and imagery must be accessories in our breath quest if brain and body are to unite in expressiveness. No neat anatomical diagram of your breathing apparatus will help. Indeed, such a diagram is impossible; there’s nothing neat about either breathing or the art of speaking. Here’s a word picture instead of a diagram:

*The tapestry of the breathing musculature wraps around the inside of the ribcage, billows into the diaphragm (that great elastic dome that forms the floor to the lungs and the ceiling to the stomach), laces down by the lumbar spine, and weaves its way through the webbing of the pelvic floor among the muscles and nerves of its genital neighbors. These interior muscles coordinate in opening the air sacs in the lungs (as the diaphragm drops down) so that breath rushes in, and in closing them (as the diaphragm moves up) so that breath releases out. This is breathing for living.*



*When the impulse to speak sparks the circuitry of nerves that cohabit with the breathing muscles, the interaction between breath and vocal folds creates vibrations of sound. Then sound is molded into words by the lips and the tongue. We find ourselves speaking.*

Breath is the key to restoring the deepest connections with impulse, with emotion, with imagination, and thereby with language. The voice is not just a musical instrument to be played skillfully: it is a human instrument.

Reconditioning the way the voice works means reconditioning breathing processes on deep levels of involuntary neuro-physiological, psycho-physical, brain-body functioning. Any serious practice of breath and voice must bring to the level of consciousness activities that normally belong in the unconscious sector of daily being.

Hard as that may seem, guidance is very much at hand. Look long at a small baby's breathing and observe how biological impulses govern the movements of breath. A baby's breathing is arrhythmic. When a hungry baby approaches the breast you may see a thrill ripple through the almost transparent body while the anticipation of assuagement excites the breath into panting. As the warm milk enters the body, the baby's breathing settles into calmness. These first biological experiences imprint the infant organism. As the baby matures, the organism absorbs increasingly complex sensory impressions and eventually registers emotions varying through the graduated degrees of all the passions.

And then nurture takes nature in hand. Spontaneous emotional expression must be suppressed for a well-ordered society to be maintained. In the family from the age of about three or earlier and later in school we unconsciously impose controls that subvert the involuntary breathing process. The baby's primary neuro-physiological experience is: "I breathe, I live; I wail, I survive." Then it transforms to: "If I wail, I'll die; if I hold my breath and suppress what I feel, I'll survive." From "my voice is survival" we go to "my voice is my enemy."

We can learn from babies and we can learn from actors—good ones! Audiences love actors who are believable, untrammelled by convention, emotionally and imaginatively daring and—let's say transparent, as transparent as babies, but with the knowledge and life experience of adults.

If we are born with feelings and the voice to convey them, then the question arises as to when, how, and why we have modified the direct expression of emotion. When, how, and why did our mode of speaking evolve? Do we remember being told to "be quiet; speak nicely" when we were four or five years old? Do we recall being told not to giggle in church (a hilarious place for children) or shout in the classroom? Do any men remember "big boys don't cry" as an admonition? Do you remember being sent out of the room when you erupted in rage at your parents? Many of us developed a mode of speaking in our teens when we wanted to speak in the same way as the "in" crowd. Does the way you speak reflect your family, your region, your profession, your favorite celebrity? We learned how to modify, even to manipulate our vocal expression. It could be said we learned how to prevaricate. And the final questions may be: "Is this really my voice? Can I find my real voice?"

Very recently a man e-mailed me saying he wanted to talk about his experience of voice-body-mind. He had a sense that the voice issue takes him into the whole subject of how he lives, moves,

and has his being. He was the popular minister of a large church until a few years ago. He has now retired and has become a professional writer of some repute—a very intelligent man. He knows his voice is not expressing who he really is and I will tell you the outline of his voice story because it illustrates graphically what happens to many people. No great trauma, just a gradual separating of self from voice. When Tom was a baby he was very ill with pneumonia and almost died. His mother nursed him devotedly and fearfully. They lived in a big city during the war and often his mother would have to take her sickly baby down to the cellar during air raids. An only child, he was exhorted throughout his childhood by his mother to "be careful," "don't do this; don't do that," "don't play those dangerous games in the rain and the wind," and "remember all I did to keep you alive, don't risk that." He was skinny and nervous and the inevitable object of bullying at school, taking refuge in books. In his 20s he became interested in religion. By the time he was a successful minister of the church he had developed a voice that was a perfect shield, a carapace within which the delicate child he still was could hide. His voice reached out to his parishioners who loved him. He was a witty and erudite preacher. He had found a perfect and successful persona. When he retired he gave up all public speaking and found that in his writing he could express himself freely and personally, no longer in the service of others (and, perhaps, God.) But his voice bothers him. It catches in his throat. It's monotone. Words come easily to him but not feelings. He feels moribund emotionally, though he's not unhappy, I hasten to say. He's curious. Before I start work with him

I've asked him to find poems for all the passions and read them out loud. Sometimes you have to exercise the expression of an emotion in order to begin to feel it. I'd like him to get some sense of how his emotions *demand* his breath and his voice before I do any

exercises with him.

Recovery of voice begins with awareness of the need and continues with recovery of breathing. If I am interested in rediscovering the authenticity of my voice and thereby a deeper authentic self, I must start with an awareness of my breathing habits. You all have seen diagrams of the diaphragm and you know its shape and its position in the body. You also know that the diaphragm cannot be moved voluntarily, and yet we must activate change in the behavior of this involuntary breathing muscle if it is to be restored to its natural function. The diaphragm and the solar plexus are housed together in the center of the torso. When we learned to suppress our emotional expression it was as though something bad occurred early in our lives and the solar plexus said to the diaphragm, "Ouch! It hurts! I've such a pang just here!" The diaphragm responded, "I'll give you a hug, let me hold you tight!" Then the solar plexus felt better because it felt nothing while the diaphragm stopped breathing, and nothing dangerous was expressed. But now we are all grown-up and brave, and perhaps we would like to see what it would be like to feel, breathe, and speak at the same time. To do this we must arouse both the visual and the tactile senses: the kinaesthetic and/or the proprioceptive sensibility. I like *kinaesthetic* because it suggests aesthetics and I really like *proprioceptive* because etymologically it means "seeing itself."

To effect change in the involuntary musculature we have to influence the way those muscles *see* themselves. And we can influence the way the diaphragm sees itself through the impulses generated by imagery. For any speaker who wishes to explore the rich inner realm of breathing, imagery is the key to the adventure

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and the art. Our autonomic organism is governed by sensory imagery. This I know empirically. It would be exciting to have the neuro-scientists map the experience.

Sensory imagery has set up unconscious breathing behavior—the pneumonia squeezing Tom's lungs as a baby; his mother's suffocating fear. New, conscious imagery can dissolve those patterned habits.

This is how I introduce the awareness of natural breathing: Do you want to close your eyes as you sit there? Do it. Consciously drop your body-mind's eye down into your belly. Don't sit up in your head looking down into your body; let your brain inhabit your belly. Perhaps imagine that your ears are on either side of your navel and you can hear me centrally.

First comes physical awareness: Pay particular attention to the spine as the two-way message channel between brain and body, then the essential support for the three main areas of breathing musculature: diaphragm, inner abdominals (or crura/psoas, those lacy connections from diaphragm to pelvic floor), and intercostals. Then, observe the diaphragm. Pay attention to your natural breathing rhythm without organizing it. The mouth is a little bit open so that the outgoing breath arrives in the front of the mouth forming a small "ff." Picture the center of the diaphragm; it drops as the breath enters, then the breath immediately escapes out, a small "ff," then there is a tiny pause, a moment of nothing (not a holding), then you feel breath wanting to enter again and all you do is *yield* to that need. You don't have to breathe in, breath will enter. Let it happen, let the air breathe you. When we're relaxed our bodies only need a very small exchange of air in order to stay alive. A long breath is a controlled breath.

The small "ff," clearly different from Alexander's whispered "ah," is designed to program a pathway for thought and words to travel from inside the body to the very front of the mouth and out into the world, by-passing the throat. It is a blueprint for free speaking.

The words inhale and exhale are banished. They are active verbs and the diaphragm is a passive (reactive) muscle. The language of breath awareness replaces control verbs with release messages. "Allow the breath to enter," "Let the breath drop in," "Feed in a sigh impulse and let it release," "Open inside for the breath to come in, then let it escape." This vocabulary gradually builds mental freedom, dissolving protective habits in the mind and the body. We are getting out of the way and beginning to see the way.

As you know, one cannot assume that internal imaging is easy. Many people feel faint when first asked to close their eyes and picture their skeletons. Gradually the inner eye learns to see, as it were, in the dark, and gradually the inner landscape is illuminated so that diaphragm, spine, ribs, pelvis, sacrum, tailbone, and organs become familiar, visible territory. As long as the physical breathing experience is dominated by the obvious out and in, forward and back movement of the abdominal wall, the true movement of the diaphragm remains invisible. Two messages must be given:

- Relax the abdominal wall.
- Picture the vertical movement of the diaphragm.

The first instruction is executed consciously; the second is conveyed through the body-mind's eye.

Consciously giving up habitual breath control can be a frightening mind-body moment. Habits of holding and controlling the breath are often set in moments of terror, in moments when the body knew it was dangerous to feel and express emotion. Sadly, many of these habits are set in childhood under traumatic circumstances.

Here is what a student, Louisa, who is in her 40s, wrote:

*You invited me to relax my breathing and my jaw...and the fact of allowing the breath just to "be" revived emotions that had been suffocated, that all these muscles had learned to repress. I heard something like a new voice. It wasn't my habitual voice, it was more alive, the sound more extroverted, easy, much more in contact with my desire to communicate. My heart felt opened. Paying attention to my breath was a medicine for fear.*

Very often when someone relaxes and the breath drops deeper in the body, tears will flow. There may be no apparent reason for the tears, no story to tell, it's just a relief for the body to let go of its habitual protection and allow emotion and breath to reconnect as they are designed to do.

Observing one's breathing habits during an ordinary day can reveal significant glimpses of one's psycho-emotional habits. Where do you hold your breath? Why? Fear? Anxiety? Boredom? Insecurity? The body-mind may unconsciously be trying not to "fall apart" saying, "You've got to keep yourself together"—quite

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unnecessarily! What happens when you relax and let yourself breathe in difficult circumstances? Almost always, contrary to the body's expectation, relaxed breathing results not in tears, not in falling apart, but in a feeling of confidence and intelligence. And you can support your breathing awareness with imaginative input. Picture your solar plexus in the center of your diaphragm, your own solar system, an inner sun bringing warmth and light, unifying the experience of emotion and breath and thought, as though your brain were in your belly.

From the small "ff" of the natural breathing rhythm a sigh will inevitably be born. We need to sigh. When we sigh we satisfy an organic impulse that needs *more*. The body signals its need for more oxygen. And now our breathing exercises embrace sighing. A sigh is a bigger impulse. A sigh is usually pleasurable. Even when a sigh is filled with sorrow, it is also filled with relief that the sorrow can be expressed, and that is a kind of pleasure. Introducing the sigh to different parts of the body begins the exploration of instinct, power and capacity.

When we continue the exploration of breathing while lying on the floor, we can start to stimulate the diaphragmatic *crura* connections through the *psoas* muscles by way of the lumbar vertebrae to the pelvic floor. These *crura* are muscles deep inside the torso that form part of the *psoas* system, which is that great triangular core of support muscles for the lower spine, pelvis, and hips. If we think of feeding a sigh impulse way down into the hip sockets and the pelvic basin, breath of course does not actually go there, but the impulse galvanizes the *crura* muscles that run from the diaphragm along the lumbar spine and the sacrum to the pelvic musculature. The beautiful triangular sacrum bone is threaded with nerves that weave their way throughout the pelvic region, sparking the sacral and sexual nerve centers. This is the bodily dwelling place of instinct, intuition, and, dare I suggest, creative impulse.



sigh impulse that travels through these nether regions brings a larger volume of breath to the lungs and releases energies throughout the body that otherwise lie dormant. Imagery will trigger this breathing experience rather than sheer anatomical persuasion.

Haerry, a talented Korean actress, described her discovery of the deeper realm of her breathing thus:

*I remember the first time I felt the rush of air coming into my body. Up to that point, my idea of picturing my body was very literal. I always saw my body as dense, filled with organs, muscles, and so on. After we spent about an hour on the floor, you led us through the image of an open throat going all the way down through the body. With that picture, I suddenly emptied out my thought and my literal picture of the inside of my body. I released a huge breath, and a weight in my chest lifted. Right then, like a fresh waterfall, a rush of air dropped in and it was something I had never felt before. I know if I had tried to rationalize how I was going to take in a bigger breath, it would never have happened. Once my body was introduced to that experience, I knew my breath was not something that was controlled by my intellect only.*

These connections are primal. They plug us into our instincts and our power.

An unvoiced sigh is all feeling: relief. A voiced sigh starts to engage thought. A sigh with words is equal parts feeling and thought. It can be said that voice picks up emotion and speech picks up thoughts. If thoughts are to be freely expressed, emotion must be freely expressible because the desire to communicate comes first from a feeling state. But habits of repression often block that initial desire to communicate. A sigh of relief undoes both physical and mental restrictions.

We can sigh a story out and communicate not only information, but also the emotional colors of the story. Sometimes these colors are in rich oils, sometimes in pastels, sometimes there's a wash of color/emotion, and sometimes it's just in black and white. The words in one's head are full of the inflections of color.

In my first description of the breathing apparatus I invoked the image of a tapestry woven around the inner walls of the body. It can help to know that the root of the word text (as in the text of a story) is the same as the root of the word tapestry: both words originate in the Latin *tessere*, which means to weave. Now, therefore, you can let the words (the stitches?) of your story be sewn into the fiber of your breathing, and your voice will be filled with living pictures.

At first, a sigh may result in a somewhat collapsing physique: the ribs sink and there is a downward feeling. But once the experience has become familiar we can pay attention to the fact that despite the collapse of the ribs the diaphragm "whooshes" upward through the ribcage on the out-sigh.

Then we practice sighing while standing up with hands on head, ribs floating wide, with a clear picture of the sigh/whoosh fountaining up and out. This immediately results in a feeling of dynamism and energy. The unvoiced, voiced, and verbalized sigh/whoosh let go upward and outward. The letting-go is akin to archery: the ingoing thought-feeling-breath impulse is the bowstring drawing back, the brain lets go of the impulse (the fingers let go of

the bowstring), and the words (the arrow) fly to the listener (the target).

Sighing is a device for letting go and not controlling the manner of communication. Once you let go of physical control your job is to think and feel clearly. This works as well for singing as for speaking.

Here again is Louisa:

*It was a long exercise with arpeggios, lying on the floor, changing positions, going up and down on pitches...and I absolutely didn't like my voice. I felt it stuck; there was so much tension. I felt miserable because I was failing. But I decided to focus all my attention on breathing, trying not to make a more beautiful sound but to sigh it from me, from my inside without caring about the resultant sound. I let the sound of the piano drop down into my belly and sighed it out easily while following your instructions. And I slowly started enjoying the exercise. As long as I was focused on sighing, my voice found different paths, new resonances. Being focused on breath instead of on the final result of sound was extraordinarily helpful, especially when we reached higher pitches. Usually I can't reach them and they were just there.*

For singers I strongly recommend singing while lying face down on the floor: hands under the forehead, sighing from the lower back. Sighing arpeggios in many adapted yoga positions, on all-fours, hanging upside down, with arm-swings, gradually makes the whole respiratory event elastic. Small sighs, medium sighs, big sighs condition the breathing apparatus to experience short thoughts sparking short breaths, medium-length thoughts for medium breaths, and big, long thoughts inspiring deep big breaths.

Once respiratory action has been fully exercised with big sighs of pleasurable relief it can respond to huge impulses of rage, grief, and terror and still operate on the principle of release. For actors this is an essential extension of the philosophy of the sigh. What a relief for Lear to bellow at the storm! What a relief for Oedipus to roar his pain! What a relief for Constance to mourn her son!

My next breathing exploration is, it seems, where Alexander begins. We now pay specific attention to the ribs, the whole chest, the intercostals—to capacity. When the emotion is big and the thought is long there is a greater demand on lung capacity. The diaphragm drops deeper, the ribcage opens more palpably, and, because the lungs go down further in the back than in the front, the opening of the back ribs is the most important part of ribcage response. Capacity is natural and built-in to the anatomy. The Alexander Technique brilliantly reveals how habit can immobilize the back muscles, severely restricting the flexibility of the intercostals and diminishing lung capacity.

In our voice work, the movement of the back-ribs and side-ribs can be most vividly appreciated when one is lying on one's belly on the floor, head turned to one side, arms down by the sides, sighing. On the in-breath the lumbar spine can be felt to lengthen while the tailbone moves toward the floor and the lower back-ribs widen. The injunction: "Back-belly-side-ribs" on each big, new, ingoing breath-thought, restores respiratory vigor. So long as the instigating thought is clear, the outgoing breath can still be trusted to perform

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its task with the encouragement of: "Let go, sigh it out; don't hold on; open up for the breath to come in; let the thought drop deep inside; release the thought." The thought might be one arpeggio, then two, then three, then six big lines of Shakespeare.

It is the content of the thought that controls the breath and makes it last as long as necessary. With a developing mentality of freedom, the involuntary breath processes re-establish themselves in unity with sensory feeling and emotional impulse. All you have to say to yourself is "Open." You will open in your body and your mind. This becomes the new natural breathing experience. You have a choice in what you want to express, you are no longer under the dictatorship of habit, and, according to your impulse and your choice, your breath will tell your truth. You are the alchemist in charge of the *prima materia* that transmutes thought into words.

Counter-productive terms for alchemical breathing include: breath **control**, breath **support**, breath **management**. Advancing science has shown (with the use, for instance, of ultrasound imaging) many muscle levels that engage in the respiratory event. They are engaged naturally from the intrinsic involuntary activity, if the integrity of the psycho-physical approach is maintained. Using such anatomical knowledge to control breathing and voice is counter-productive because it interferes with the sensory-emotional connection.

Susan, who is training to be a voice teacher, observed in written feedback on her own practice teaching, in a class covering expanded breath capacity:

*I wanted my students to think of themselves as "pulmonary athletes," a phrase I had borrowed from someone who teaches vocal anatomy for singers. You invited me to think about "pulmonary artist" as an adjustment. I think that phrase conjures a much better picture of the work of the involuntary breathing musculature. The word artist by one definition is, "somebody who does something with great skill and creativity." Certainly honing our ability to use our imagination in order to stimulate the intercostals is a creative skill. From golf umbrellas and trampolines to trolls living under the bridges of the rib bones, imagistic thought really works. Maybe to be a pulmonary artist is to be stimulated into creative thought, which in turn activates our involuntary breathing system.*

Capacity, I must emphasize, is built in. It isn't *extra*. It is there to respond to large impulses. At the beginning of this talk I said that the breathing muscles were "multifarious and adaptable." When one starts to stimulate the intercostal breathing muscles they can sometimes take over from the diaphragm as primary response muscles. I myself, if I find myself crying at a counter-productive moment (which I do more and more as I get older), breathe consciously and deliberately in my intercostals and my back in order to control the emotional response. I am, by now, definitely conditioned to think in my lungs, in the churning blood around my heart and primarily in my solar plexus. My intercostals are my

tranquillizer, my safe harbor, when I am tempest-tossed, but I need my solar connection for sudden joys and empathy: my granddaughter, my students, my life.

I will end with a caveat: images are powerful, imagination even more so. Images and imagination have equal creative and destructive power. There are creative images, there are inspiring images, and there are shocking, counter-productive images; there are utilitarian images which deaden the impulse connection (pistons; and, prevalent in the voice science field, the image of a turkey baster—aesthetically offensive on many levels), and there are images that enliven the sense of self that should come with all breath work—let's call that "breath play." Play

with the way the small "ff" picks up your thought, listen to its music, let your breath turn to sound, and ask your voice to be faithful to the music of your thoughts.

Images, imagination, organic breathing are exercised to serve both everyday speaking and public performance.

Shakespeare gives us the incentive and the necessity. Here is Edgar at the end of *King Lear*: (Act V, scene 3)

*Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.*

And Emilia toward the end of *Othello*: (Act V, scene 2)

*I will speak as liberal as the north.  
Let heaven, and men, and devils, let them all,  
All, all cry shame upon me, yet I'll speak.*

And, in response to an injunction to hold her peace, Constance in *King John* says: (Act III, scene 4)

*No, no, I will not, having breath to cry.  
O that my tongue were in the thunder's mouth,  
Then with a passion would I shake the world.*

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*Much of the material in this talk will be included in the chapter titled "The Alchemy of Breathing" which will appear in the book Breath in Action.*