The Throat and The Voice: Part 2, Chapter 6: Improper Use of the Voice

Jacob Solis Cohen

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CHAPTER VI.

IMPROPER USE OF THE VOICE.

IMPROPER methods of using the voice lead to certain affections of the throat, the chief one of which is popularly known as clergyman's sore throat, though by no means confined to members of the clerical profession. It occurs in all classes of persons who strain the voice or misuse it. It consists in a congestion of the mucous membrane and muscles of the throat, with enlargements of many of the minute glands which secrete the lubricating fluid that keeps the surface of the throat moist and pliable. These enlarged glands are visible in the form of prominent groups of projections, varying from the bulk of pin-heads to that of small peas or beans, irregularly distributed upon the surface of the mucous membrane. The mouths by which these glands discharge their lubricating material being choked up by swelling, that material becomes pent up in them and unable to escape, and thus accumulates in the glands and distends them. Now the congestion above alluded to, which is the first step in the entire process, is produced in the following manner:—The muscles of the throat, which should be more or less at rest during the use of the voice, are absolutely put into continuous constrained action in improper methods of speaking, as is evinced by uncomfortable sensations during protracted or impassioned speaking, or shortly after it. In the same manner as physical consciousness of the possession of a stomach, or of a tooth, or of a toe, for example, is evidence that something is wrong for the time with the stomach, the tooth, or the toe, so physical consciousness of the possession of a throat during speaking, or shortly afterward, is evidence that something is wrong with the throat. The strain upon the muscles, and the sense of uneasiness following, are cause and effect; both of which may be avoided by proper use of the organs of voice and of speech. In civilized communities, conventional or affected methods of doing things of various kinds are employed by many people instead of natural methods, for various reasons, such as the desire to impress others with a sense of individual importance or originality; and these methods are copied or imitated by others. Hence erroneous and affected methods of speaking become widespread.

To appreciate this point in the subject before us, it will be advisable to consider the factors of natural voice and speech; and then the injurious effects of departures from it can be properly estimated.
The first point to consider is that of respiration. This important function must not be interfered with during speech, and should be so managed as to be performed naturally or without conscious effort. It is painful to see the labored phases of inspiration, or taking breath, which are exhibited by many female vocalists, whose manner of dress makes it more conspicuous; and still more painful to witness it in a preacher, whose dress and surplice, even, do not hide it from the observation of his auditors.

It is well known that the thorax or chest expands somewhat in inspiration, or taking breath in, and contracts again in expiration, or giving breath out. Now a little observation will show that in ordinary tranquil inspiration the soft partitions below the chest become bulged forward, in consequence of the descent of the diaphragm, a soft partition between the chest and the abdomen. In addition to this, the ribs at the lower portion of the chest expand slightly, but the upper ribs remain practically undisturbed. This is what is termed the abdominal or diaphragmatic type of respiration (Fig. XVI.), because the abdomen and the diaphragm are the principal factors of the process. As the abdomen expands, the diaphragm becomes depressed, increasing the capacity of the chest vertically, and the air passes readily into the expanded lungs. In females, the ribs participate more freely in the expansion of the chest than in men, the upper ribs particularly. If a deep inspiration is favored by a voluntary continuance of the action of the abdomen and diaphragm, it is found that the action of the ribs becomes augmented, and that the entire series of ribs enters into the movement progressively from below upwards, still further increasing the capacity of the chest, and thus drawing a larger amount of air into it. This is what is termed the lateral, costal, or rib type of respiration. If a still further effort be made to draw air into the chest, or fill the lungs to their utmost capacity, the collar-bones rise after the ribs have all become expanded, and the upper portion of the breastbone...
rises. (Fig. XVII.) This is the clavicular or collarbone type of respiration. Indeed, if the effort is pushed to its uttermost, then the bones of the spinal column, and, as a matter of course, the skull on top of it, rise also, so as to increase the capacity of the chest to its extreme limit, while at the same time the abdominal wall sinks inward towards the spinal column. If the inspiration begins with the elevation of the clavicle, and the distention of the upper ribs, the retraction of the abdomen is quite marked. The contrast between the outlines of deep abdominal respiration and deep clavicular respiration, in the male subject, is well shown in Fig. XVIII. The forced abdominal inspiration can be maintained for the requisite number of seconds, with comparatively little effort, and utilizes the entire volume of air in the lungs, upon vocal organs in a natural position; while the forced clavicular type requires considerable effort for its maintenance, and utilizes only the upper portion of the volume of air upon vocal organs in a constrained position. The best efforts of elocution and singing are produced from a full chest of air inspired according to the natural or abdominal type.

Now, the trouble with many public speakers and singers is that, under a mistaken conviction that it is important to fill the lungs as much as possible at the commencement of a sentence or phrase, they habitually adopt the clavicular type of respiration instead of the abdominal type, which is the natural one for ordinary use, to be supplemented by the costal and clavicular types only under rare occasions for momentary use in the production of certain effects, or under the influence of certain emotions. The consequence of this vicious mode of respiration is that, by a powerful muscular effort of the auxiliary muscles of respiration, the thorax becomes fixed in a constrained position, and likewise the organ of the voice itself; and the muscles of the throat, which should be in a relaxed condition, become more or less fixed also; so that additional muscular effort is requisite to produce the necessary vocal sounds. This is not only fatiguing to the individual, but it produces a constrained voice, disagreeable to the ear of a cultivated hearer; while the effort necessary to keep speaking, diverts the powers of the speaker from gliding into many natural embellishments germane to the occasion or to the subject.

Another effect of taking too deep and strained an
inspiration, is that some of the breath is often given out again before the voice is produced, and thus absolutely rendered ineffective. The voice is produced only during an expiration, and every particle of expired air should be utilized, in order to accomplish the best effect with least effort. But if a strained inspiration has been made, there is either a painful stop before speaking, or else some of the air is allowed to escape, to relieve the uncomfortable sensation in the chest, before the vocal muscles can be brought into proper position. In this manner, the whole of the air painfully inspired is not used after all. The escape of air without utilization in voice renders frequent inspirations necessary, and thus the pernicious process is repeated.

In addition to this, the constrained position of the vocal organs prevents due play of the muscles of the vocal bands, alters their physical relation to the impact of the escaping currents of expired air, and thus enfeebles the natural tone of the voice, and renders it less sonorous and less susceptible of modulations. In consequence of this, the sounds are proportionately weak, shrill, and monotonous. In taking breath, then, during exercise of the voice, the habit should be cultivated of breathing by the abdominal method instead of elevating the upper ribs, collar-bone, and breast-bone. This supplemental method will follow the other naturally, and without visible effort, when required in the emotion of a special and appropriate occasion.

In public speaking and in singing it is requisite that a supply of breath be taken in, rather quickly, at certain intervals, determined either by the character of the passage, or the nature of the effect to be executed; and that this supply be husbanded by controlling the expiration in such a manner that the breath shall be allowed to escape from the chest as slowly as is compatible with efficient utterance. Inspirations, therefore, have to be taken at irregular intervals, varying with the sense of the passage, phrase, or sentence; and consequently no special rules can be given, applicable to all occasions. All attempts to formulate such rules have been failures. It is proper, however, to take an inspiration quietly, at every convenient pause in utterance, and to utilize every portion of the expiration following, in the production of sound. The voice should begin at the very instant of expiration,—at the very moment of impact of the air against the vocal bands; but the expiration should not be prolonged unnecessarily, for that will deprive the sounds of due volume and fulness towards the close of the expiratory effort. Care should be exercised not to take breath too often. This produces a disagreeable effect. Practice is the only criterion in this respect, and, to be most effective, the practice
should be at first under the supervision of a competent critic or instructor.

In order that respiration be properly performed during vocal exercise, it is essential that there should be no constriction at the waist. The waistcoat of the male and the corsage of the female should be sufficiently loose to permit of free abdominal respiration. Close-fitting or tight corsets, therefore, interfere mechanically with efficient respiration, and impair the vocal powers accordingly.

An easy position of the body should be assumed during public use of the voice or during vocal practice. The erect position is the best, with the book, manuscript, or score at an easy reading distance, at about the level of the neck or chin, so that the head need not be depressed, and thus interfere with easy utterance and intonation. The body must not be turned too much to the right or left of the middle line, as that prevents distinct hearing by the audience at the opposite side of the room. There is hardly any public hall which permits equal facility of hearing in every part of it. It is proper, therefore, to address the central portion of the audience; by which plan those at the two sides are placed under equal advantages. Addresses first to one side of the room and then to the other deprive those at each side, successively, of the remarks which are being made to the people at the opposite side of the house.

CHAPTER VII.

VOCAL GYMNASTICS.

The value of systematic gymnastic exercises, in developing the capacity of the muscles in general, is universally conceded. There are a number of exercises of this kind which develop the flexibility and control of the muscles which are employed in the production and use of the voice. These are the muscles of the diaphragm, of the chest, of the larynx, of the pharynx, palate, tongue, mouth, and jaw. The gain to the individual in prosecuting appropriate exercises of these muscles is being appreciated by instructors in elocution and in singing; and certain forms of exercises have been adopted with success by some professional cultivators of the voice. The methods employed vary with different teachers.

The muscles of the diaphragm may be exercised by forcible distention or expansion of the abdomen, followed by a quick recession of its walls, as if shrinking from a threatened blow. These movements are repeated a number of times, with varying degrees of force, extent, and rapidity, until they begin to become uncom-