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Thesis/Portfolio

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MY PEDAGOGY ILLUSTRATED: CASE STUDIES FROM CAMP

*“ . . . the limitations of an individual student are not anywhere near as interesting
as the possibilities within her voice”*

Joan Wall & Robert Caldwell

As a voice professional I have always felt a kinship with Lionel Logue [speech therapist to King George VI] in that we both work from a solid base of knowledge but there is an intuitive quality to our work, a creativity as well as a strong sense of mission. During my graduate studies, I have had the opportunity to further explore and develop these areas of my teaching practice at a creative arts camp for adults in Maine. The members of my classes there tend to be individuals who have rarely if ever studied voice and many of them are very intimidated by singing in front of others. They come to challenge themselves, to stretch and break through limitations. I love working alongside them as a witness and advocate, helping them recognize that singing is so natural to them and disabusing them of the misinformation that has held them back. They are always amazed at what becomes possible to them when they allow their thoughts to come into alignment with the ultimately simple principles of singing.

From the very first time I taught at this camp more than a dozen years ago, I learned something about my process which has been a constant to this day. As much as I like to be prepared and to think about things I might do, I find I am unable to strictly script the week or even each day. I always need to wait to see how different elements drop into place in the moment before I am totally sure what form the teaching will take. I found this analogy to describe what it feels like to work the way I do: like in singing where you

need to time your breathing (inspiration) to accommodate the tempo and style of the music, if you breathe too early, then you are holding your breath and it can become “stale” before it’s needed. For me, there is such an inspirational aspect to working with others. New ideas sometimes come at the last minute and I want to be open to acting upon them. It’s not to say that I don’t prepare, but it’s hard for me to describe how I prepare. I do feel very clear that ideas will flow and that I will be receptive to them. I know that my motive is to love and to help, and I trust that this desire leads me in the right direction. There is also a practiced fearlessness and trust that goes into trying new things.

In the summer of 2017, right before the week began, I was reading Kristin Linklater’s book *Freeing the Natural Voice: Imagery and Art in the Practice of Voice and Language* [Drama Publishers, 2006]. A couple of ideas really grabbed me and I immediately incorporated them into my classes. My students found them immensely helpful. The first had to do with how the voice is designed to work as a response to an impulse (13) but that “the voice is prevented from responding with ideal spontaneity because that spontaneity depends on reflex action, and . . . nearly all reflexive vocal behavior is short-circuited by secondary impulses” (19). We had some good conversations about what secondary impulses are and how they constrict vocal freedom, and we were able to recognize them in our work and begin to deconstruct them.

An exercise from Linklater’s book that helped me gain access to the primary impulse or natural reflex of breathing was “feed into your middle the impulse for a gentle ‘sigh of relief.’ . . . Observe how your breathing reacts to the stimulus of a simple easy feeling of relief” (49). I loved the new understanding I got about working with the breath as an impulsive sigh of relief. I had explored reflex breathing with my Alexander teacher in a lesson some time ago but it seemed elusive and hard to recreate when there was any tension at all around the diaphragm (which there frequently is, sadly). I found Linklater’s sigh of relief is very easily done and has a dramatic effect on immediately encouraging

the respiratory muscles not only to release but then to move the breath into a purposeful exhalation. This idea is so refreshing and powerful to me. I have continued to work with it myself and to share it with my students to great results.

Linklater also wrote, “It would take a whole book to chart the deviations the voice can take to prevent its owner from being known” (25). I have long been aware of this phenomenon and have addressed it in various instinctive ways in my teaching. My students and I reflected on this tendency to fear self-revelation that results in so much constriction. One of my colleagues at the camp was Karen Montanaro, a brilliant dancer, mime artist and educator who also understands this fear. We had some generative conversations and in one of them she shared this quote from Polish theatre director and theorist Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999), “Don’t do more, hide less,” a thought very much in line with my central preoccupation. Karen has spoken and written eloquently about arts education. In the course of a presentation she gave at camp about her practice she said, “Art changes the fear of being different into the celebration of being unique.” This profound idea is among the many important themes that came up during this very rich week in Maine.



Although I enjoyed all of my students and had great experiences with each of them, I will discuss here the work I did with the Butlers. Bill and Phoebe are a married couple from Cape Cod. They have 6 grown children and several grandchildren. They are an utterly charming couple. I had worked with Phoebe before at camp and also in private lessons. I’d never met Bill before but I was aware that in addition to running a substantial construction business, he plays trombone professionally and that Phoebe plays the cello. Before heading to camp, I’d had an impulse to bring along a book of duets by Robert Schumann, a

19th-century German composer of some of the loveliest song literature ever written. I asked the Butlers to look at one in particular that I thought might suit their vocal ranges and musical sensibilities and be simple enough to learn quickly. They embraced the assignment and came to class the next day prepared to read through the piece. We talked about vocal concepts (stillness and focus for Phoebe, opening the throat and providing more energy for Bill, flow of breath for both of them) as well as interpretive ideas of phrasing and listening to each other. Because of their many years' experience playing in their local symphony orchestra, I knew they could respond to conducting. I ran through it once with me conducting (breaking up their straight, habitual phrasing and challenging them to follow some unexpected tempos and dynamics) and then I had each of them conduct the other. My purpose in these exercises was first to get them more aware of the musicality of the piece but also to make them aware that they could bring the skills they already possessed to this work—in essence to remind them that they were both professional musicians and could own their ability at a higher level.

One delightful event occurred when I asked them to play the mirror game to get them to be attentive to each other's movements. The purpose behind the game from my point of view was to get them to stay in tune with each other, to begin to sense each other's intentions and movements and to respond with fluid agreement. At first I asked them to take turns as initiator of the movement and eventually I asked them to let go of needing to choose who was leading in a given moment and to yield to an organic flow between leading and following. I prompted them once to watch the speed of their movements so that they each had enough time to respond without being caught off guard. This kind of awareness and willingness to meld with others is vital to ensemble singing. I wanted them to practice these skills in game form without my explaining them verbally. It was a lovely surprise when they concluded the exercise in an embrace and began to dance. Once they'd had this opportunity to experiment and embody the quality of thought I was pointing them toward, they sang together again. They both reflected afterward that they

were listening in a different way to the pianist and to each other. This was a particularly fun example of a spontaneous exercise that yielded rich results.

The Mirror Game

<https://youtu.be/XVQGWG9F8-Y>

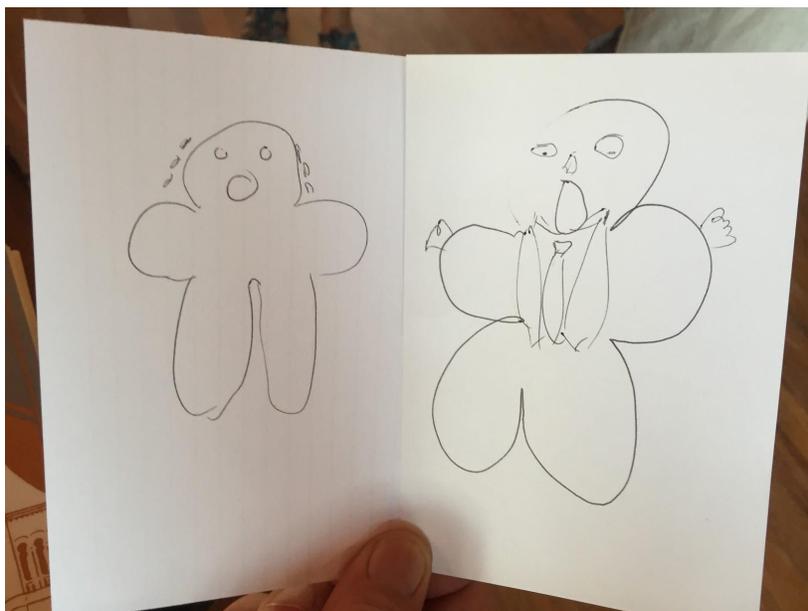


They sang the duet at the week's final "presentation" (which was an informal sharing of the process from each of the classes) and it was a huge hit with everyone at camp. Everyone had to agree that they were just very cute, but it was also beautiful unified singing.

One of the primary learnings for me through this week had to do with my initial insecurity about working with Bill. Because he is not my typical student, I was worried that he might be there because Phoebe "made him come" and that he might be bored or resistant to our exercises. But even though he was outwardly pretty reserved and undemonstrative, he was absolutely receptive and game to try everything I asked of him. He was utterly delightful to work with and made great progress. At the beginning of class, I used an idea I got from Linklater's book (26) and asked each of them to draw a gingerbread man/woman outline and to represent a picture of their voices, including anything they saw as keeping them from having the voices they might wish for. Then at

the end of the week, I asked them to do the same thing again. Below are Bill's before and after drawings.

Bill Butler - August 22 and 28



Note the beads of sweat have disappeared and now Bill's man is wearing a sharp tuxedo! He also has hands and a nose—these are not insignificant additions to his original self conception. Incidentally, Bill had come into the week believing that his range topped out at a B or C (a very limited range for a bass-baritone), but during the week I had him able to vocalise to E's and F's. In his duet with Phoebe he sang Eb's comfortably.

TECHNICAL MASTERY AS CHILDLIKENESS

“Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.”

“It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child.”

Pablo Picasso

“. . . the disciples came to Jesus with the question, ‘Who is really greatest in the kingdom of Heaven?’ Jesus called a little child to his side and set him on his feet in the middle of them all. ‘Believe me,’ he said, ‘unless you change your whole outlook and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven.’”

Matthew

For a large majority of adults, the thought “I will sing” (at least in front of others) results in a physical response to that thought that in fact makes the possibility of singing less, not more, possible. The knees lock, the legs shorten and draw up into the pelvis, the respiratory muscles tighten, the throat constricts around the larynx. Whether these reactions might be readily visible to the casual observer or not, they are there. In most cases, they have been widely accepted as inevitable, even carefully cultivated preparations for what in the minds of too many is believed to be the labored, often uncomfortable, act of singing.

Well-meaning choral directors and voice teachers often unwittingly perpetuate this false idea of what it means to sing if they direct a singer’s thought toward an end to be gained (i.e. what their voices should sound like) rather than educating them into a simple, free and spontaneous process of vocal production. Useful methods for tapping into this vocal freedom include calling up the impulses to sigh, laugh, moan, or squeal with delight. Games like imitating animals—hooting like owls, barking like dogs or monkeys—can also aid would-be singers to recognize the power and freedom their voices naturally contain when they give themselves permission to play.

Children play.

Children also have an amazing sense of balance. Toddlers learning to walk fall frequently. (Fortunately, they bounce back up just as frequently.) That which is most exquisitely balanced is most apt to come slightly out of balance, and these new walkers are achieving true balance—not creating complicated tensions to hold themselves in place (as the vast majority of adults do).

If one observes a toddler's posture (seated or standing), there is a sense that the head is virtually floating above the torso. The neck is effortlessly lengthened. "Up" might be considered the most striking structural feature. The force at work that most facilitates this upness is, in fact, gravity. The child's body maintains its natural relationship to gravity by being relaxed and elastic, while the intention to remain upright gives the muscles the needed direction for this balancing activity to occur. Very few adults manage to achieve this kind of effortless direction without a deliberate commitment to relearning the kind of mental presence it requires.

Two of the main qualities that characterize healthily produced, pleasant sounding singing are a sense of freedom (mental and physical) and good posture. It follows, then, that a very direct path to achieving those desirable qualities is to cultivate within oneself (or one's students) an ability to be childlike.

How ironic, of course, that it is this very childlikeness that is most discouraged in a majority of educational models. Arts training so often consists of "serious" attention to detail, to history and studied performance practice. Any tendency to experiment and play is conditioned out of singers who are expected to perform a wide repertoire of music and to master its stylistic complexities, and this before they have consciously developed an ability to tap into their natural breathing reflexes on demand. By the time the maturing singer realizes the importance of reclaiming her childlike freedom, she has been completely trained away from it. In order to reconnect with that dulled but vital naturalness, she now must consciously put aside the musical concerns that were held up by her professors as so important. This sets the artist up for an arduous and ongoing inner battle.

Giving myself permission to play has been an integral ingredient in my artistic growth. This has involved a bold and deliberate step away from the superficial perfectionism that was indirectly but unmistakably drilled into me as an emerging professional singer—both by some well-meaning coaches and by my own desire to do things “right.” I’ve applied this better understanding about the importance of being childlike to my work with students of all ages and have seen its value reaffirmed time and again.

One student, a PhD with a long list of accomplishments and abilities including training as a concert pianist, came to my camp workshop wanting “to be able to just sing and have it be awful and for that to be okay.” What I heard that to mean was a desire for mental and physical freedom. She was someone who was used to showing up and having her act together. Giving herself permission to appear less than perfect would be hard but she earnestly wanted to go there. I observed the ways she pushed her voice and her humor out into the world, and I recognized this behavior all too well since I have tended to respond in similar ways to my own fear of being thought ridiculous. My work with her addressed her limited use of her body/self by encouraging her to bring her pelvis and legs more fully into her thought. We did some rudimentary floorwork, exploring alignment and breath. I employed a lot of imagery (like walking with duck/webbed feet to feel more contact with the floor and letting the head float above the body like a spaceship). I also introduced plenty of technical vocal information which she absorbed and processed with relish.

Even while she solicited my input, I saw the ways she needed to be allowed to synthesize new ideas for herself. Her eyes lit up every time she made a new discovery, and she was actually very childlike despite her bent toward an adult-like perfectionism. The very first day of class we were doing some initial vocal explorations where I asked for simple sounds. She announced that she had had an amazing insight into Jesus’ words, “The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light” (Matthew). She noticed that when she went to make the sounds her

“eye was double.” I was so grateful for her perspicacity and stated that, yes, she was likely trying to express something and judge it at the same time. I encouraged her to do it again with a single thought and she did with dramatically different results. She was elated and continued to make huge connections throughout our week together.

At one juncture, I knew instinctively that she needed to experience a freer use of her body in the act of singing. We had discussed the principles of natural, reflexive breathing, but in this moment, talking wasn't going to help her reverse the habit of holding her breath that had been conditioned into her use of herself. Her sense of threat, manifested in a “fight/flight/freeze response,” wouldn't allow for the physical release that was needed: to free the pelvis to softly widen and allow the tailbone to drop, leading the spine into length and activating a reflexive movement of the respiratory muscles (i.e. a nice big, unforced breath). She was good at intellectualizing concepts, but I knew that verbal demands would be ineffective in this moment. I mentally searched for a way to invite her into bending her knees while she sang—to set off the gentle chain reaction that would instantly make its way to the delicate relationship between a free diaphragm, an open throat, and a relaxed larynx (i.e. a happy voice).

Freshly inspired by a recent rereading of Eloise Ristad's teaching classic *A Soprano on Her Head: Right-side-up reflections on life and other performances* [Real People Press, Moab UT, 1982], an image of a carousel popped into my mind and I instantly told my student we would go on a ride together. She let herself become one of the horses with me and found herself singing an entire verse of a challenging hymn, able to breathe deeply enough to “hit the high notes” that had so intimidated her the moment before. She was astounded at how exhilarating and easy it was.

She will always be able to recall that visceral experience and, if needed, she has a new “technique,” the carousel game, readily available to her whenever she needs a refresher

to combat ingrained holding patterns. This was the first time I had ever worked with that image, but when I reached inside for inspiration, it was right there. I never cease to be amazed by and grateful for the unlimited source of good ideas we all have at our disposal.

One night in the dinner buffet line she said she couldn't look at me or she would burst into tears for her deep gratitude for all that she was learning in our class. She later reflected to the rest of the camp that when she was two years old her father had thrown her into the pool in a misguided attempt to "teach" her to swim. She had a memory of floundering under the water in terror and looking up to see him standing on the deck. She said this new experience of my standing by her side as she faced her fears about public singing was healing her of years of trauma. This was an unexpected outcome of this process for me, but it reminded me again that the stakes are always high. She later shared the following with me, "Having been injured by a severe abuse attack as a child, I had no recall of self confidence. Your intervention, musical in nature, showed that life is not compartmental. A musical intervention relates to the whole self. A musical intervention can unlock the full potential of one's being—releasing the inner and outer voice of good" (Shepard). I always feel privileged to have opportunities to participate in this work.

My Goddard studies have reinforced my understanding that fun is serious business when creative freedom is involved. The more fun I'm having, the more impactful my teaching and performances become. I've reached the conclusion that allowing one's light-hearted but deeply authentic, empathetic nature to be released into the world is creativity of the highest order. It is playing our part in bringing heaven to earth.



<https://youtu.be/kb2lhUWJchI>

The Carousel Game