

## Some Speech Notes

### MY CLIENTS

I send dialect and accent clients to other coaches who teach that material better than I do. But I still do a lot of speech-related work in my private practice. I work with people who have a hard time being understood and with people who feel there is something wrong with the way their own particular accent or dialect sounds.

When students come to me for speech-related training, it's usually because they've identified, through feedback they've gotten from others, that there is something wrong with or limiting about their voice. Regardless of what is objectively true about how they sound, they often feel some shame about how they speak. The poignant thing about this is that *if something is really limiting their voice or communication--something beyond the simple need to learn a new habit or skill--shame is often the root reason for the limitation.*

### SHAME

Experiencing shame is a natural part of being human, and it's not the same thing as shyness or sensitivity. Shame emerges around experiences in which we feel embarrassment/disgrace/inadequacy along with hurt, anger, and fear, all rolled into one. It can be overwhelming, and it is infused with wanting to hide. Shame can emerge in relation to pleasure as much as it can in relation to something entirely unpleasant. Whether they know it or not, your students have all experienced shame at some point, and many have internalized it quite strongly in ways that affect their voices, their speech, and their ability to relate with others.

The peculiar nature of shame is that it often leads to the forgetting of shame, the hiding of our shame from ourselves. When that happens, we're not even aware we carry shame and how it is stored in our bodies. We're not aware of how it can limit our willingness to experience the connection and intimacy of revealing ourselves. We're not aware of how it can negatively color our experience of receiving others.

Because it's complicated, I rarely deal with shame directly with students; when I do, I try to focus narrowly on what is occurring in the moment rather than on the student's life history. In order for me to address shame in the moment with a student, I have to sense that the student wants to work in a healthy, non-invasive way to access greater creativity and clarity of communication and that it's not just my agenda to *make* the student deal with shame.

Rather than dealing with shame directly, I prefer to support students by asking a few basic questions:

*For students who mumble or are quiet, the first question I may ask is, “Do you want to be heard?”*

*For people who mumble or otherwise lack clarity, I often ask, “Do you want to be understood?”*

*Some people who can’t be heard or understood easily don’t want to reveal that they have feelings. So I may ask, “Do you want your feelings to be perceived?”*

If a student comes to a yes, I’ll ask them to notice whether their wanting is something they feel, in their bodies, or whether it’s more of an idea. The former is much more powerful, but often not available as an experience.

If students don’t find their yes somehow, and I do articulation or other exercises with them, there are some common outcomes:

They have a very hard time with the exercise.

They learn something in the moment, but they don't end up applying what they learn.

They do apply what they learn, but it sticks like a veneer to their existing tendencies of relating with others. The underlying desire to block some kinds of relating stays in place.

## VOICE AND IDENTITY: CODE SWITCHING

Keep in mind that we are talking about voice as specific sounds and sound production on the one hand, and as something much larger on the other. We can speak about an artist finding her voice, and the meanings are many. Voice implies identify, experience, relationship, and so much more.

“Code switching” is one way we experience the relationship of voice and identity. In different communities we exist in, and in different relationships we have, even in different contexts within the same relationship, we have a natural tendency to “code switch.” This means we engage in (often unconsciously agreed upon) ways of identifying our relationship with others: the cadence, tone, pronunciation, pitch, etc.

of our voice and speech all change to signify a specific role or relationship--as does our body language (and even our clothing). This is an ability we have as human beings—to belong or to distance, and to identify our specific place or role in relation to others—by marking ourselves through patterns of communication.

Rather than asserting that one way of speaking--one set of codes--is universally correct or superior, we want to think contextually: “In a specific context, these specific ways of speaking are generally prevalent.” Or, “In this context, this way of speaking is meaningful and effective.”

#### ACCENT AND DIALECT ELIMINATION VS ACQUISITION:

There are movie stars with thick accents, and there are actors who feel they cannot find work because of their accents. Part of what distinguishes the stars is that they seem to celebrate and use their own accents, revealing something of themselves through their speech patterns, rather than being embarrassed by them. Two people with the same accent can sound completely different, and our reaction to them can be completely different, if one hates his voice and the other is comfortable with it.

The project of accent reduction is often shame-inducing, and the motivation to do it is often shame-based. As Catherine and Dudley Knight have emphasized, accent reduction or elimination is fundamentally different from accent or dialect acquisition. The former way of working tends to narrow students. The latter enriches them. Or at least it can, if we are clear about what we are doing.

The desire to speak *correctly* or *perfectly* or in a *superior way* is fundamentally different from the desire to be intelligible and effective in a specific context, to be able to feel pleasure in speaking, to be healthy and efficient in speaking, to use one's voice and speech in an embodied way, and to be able to distinguish and reproduce relevant sonic/felt distinctions in speech.

#### SHAME AND PERFORMANCE

In a way, revealing who we are through code switching is the essence of what we as actors do. And excessive internalized shame can really limit our ability to do this.

Shame casts a large shadow. Shame doesn't only affect speech, but also singing and text work, posture and movement of all kinds, and basic communication.

What lurks in our shadow? Much of the gold that we can access as performers. The shadow offers just as much as what we routinely offer to the sun.

## ADDRESSING SHAME IN A TEACHER TRAINING

Shame can have many effects on us as teachers. It can lead us to hold up standards for voice and speech that assert that some kinds of sounds are inherently better than others on aesthetic grounds; standards that narrow rather than enrich students' vocal lives. It can lead to unconscious shame-based teaching; to motivational tactics that reinforce students' already existing shame. It can also lead teachers to *talk at or recede from* their students rather than *being with* them.

Because students learn so much from us through our unconscious or conscious modeling, we can be saying one thing, and actually be teaching the opposite.

Shame is an important issue for us as teachers. But how relevant is addressing it in a teacher training? How relevant do you believe it is for you?

So I ask you, as teachers, how might shame affect you as you're walking into the classroom? How might shame affect what you do with your voice, your speech, your movement, and the other ways you communicate with (and receive) your students and colleagues?

## THE PERSONAL WORK OF THE VOICE TEACHER — ONE PERSPECTIVE

Take a moment to recall a character, or a piece, in which there is a struggle with the voice, with communication, with identity. Then take a moment to recognize how these struggles are a natural part of being human. Great stories are often told that involve these struggles.

Now take a moment to bring to mind the hopes and joys that are also a natural part of being human and the stories we tell.

In some ways, our task as voice teachers is a big one: helping our students claim and use the different aspects of their voice effectively, efficiently, in enjoyable and empowering ways. That hints at a need for us to do the same. Being too quick to hide or erase our own shame in relation to our voice and speech can sometimes erase aspects of our humanity that are deeply meaningful and valuable. In addition to discovering which aspects of our voice and speech we really enjoy leading with, part of our work as voice teachers is to gracefully open to the parts of our voice and speech, to the parts of ourselves, that we may have denied or left unexplored, so that we can help our students do the same in service of their creative work. In doing our own work, we become less like blind teachers trying to lead our students towards the promise of sight.

## SOME EXERCISES TO SUPPORT TEACHERS' EXPLORATION

### EXERCISE IN PAIRS:

Is bringing up the question of shame, and shame in teachers, appropriate or helpful in a teaching course? Talk with each other for 10 minutes.

Afterwards, popcorn style, offer the group some pithy part of what you believe, what you are discovering, or a question you have about this.

### EXERCISE ALONE:

Move for a while for your own enjoyment and pleasure. Now imagine everyone around you turns to you while you are moving. Can you let in that charge? What happens to you?

*EXERCISE IN PAIRS: For students who mumble or are quiet, the first question I may ask is, "Do you want to be heard?"*

Take a moment to move in any way that really feels good to you. Let yourself feel the physical sensations you associate with feeling good. Then let your eyes look around the room and find what it is they like to see.

Consider your own voice and speech. What do you like and not like about it (e.g., what are you embarrassed about in your voice and speech, what do you want to improve, what is pleasurable, etc.).

In Pairs: 5-minute conversation: talk about your voice, what you like and don't like.

Cultivate this awareness as you are speaking: do you want to be heard? And do you want to receive the other person as you speak?

Even though you're close to each other, what happens if you do the essence of structuring as you speak to support the communication?

As you finish, allow yourself to breathe and to see what your eyes want/like to see.

EXERCISE IN PAIRS: *For people who lack clarity, I often ask, "Do you want to be understood?"*

In pairs (new pairing, standing up with a little distance between you): a 5-minute conversation about something embarrassing that happened to you *that isn't too painful or private to reveal*.

As you are speaking, get curious about whether you want to be understood and whether you want to receive the other person.

Even though you're close to each other, what happens if you do the essence of structuring as you speak to support the communication?

As you finish, allow yourself to breathe and to see what your eyes want/like to see.

#### A BASIC SPEECH EXERCISE PART ONE:

Lie down on your back, and take your time to release into the support of the floor. Allow yourself to breathe. For the rest of this exercise, explore allowing yourself to breathe, inviting the whole breath reflex to open.

Sense your jaw. Begin to open and close it slowly, more slowly, staying with your own pleasure. Spend a minute or two exploring, allowing yourself to breathe. Rest for a few breaths whenever you want to.

Think of your tongue as an extraordinary limb [thanks to Noah Drew for that image]. Spend a couple of minutes moving it for pleasure, and discover what it can do. Go slow. Go slower. Slower still. Allow yourself to breathe as you move. Anytime you need to rest for a moment, do so.

As you progress further in this exercise, the tongue and jaw will lightly come in and out of your awareness.

Get into a tremor position on your back that you can hold for a while, easily. You can always switch positions or rest as you continue this exercise.

Tongue tremor: spend a few minutes very, very slowly moving the tongue from rest toward a fully extended position. Hang out in any tremor that may emerge.

Add in some slow movement of your tailbone. More slowly. Allowing yourself to breathe... Now do the same with your feet.

Begin to move other muscles of the mouth and face. Slowly. More slowly. Keep allowing yourself to breathe freely. Lean toward what feels good rather than what is painful. Keep playing with ease.

Sense the occipital ridge; then begin slow, pleasurable movements there.

Become aware of your eyes and eye sockets. Gently invite them to soften.

Become aware of your tailbone; begin slow movements there. Allowing the breathing.

Explore fluffy sound.

Follow other impulses to move, giving special attention to very slow movement.

Let go of the sounding.

Be still for a moment, with eyes closed. Sense the floor. Sense the space around you. Sense inside. Sense your spine. Sense how you are changing shape with the breathing [thanks to Leslie Kaminoff for that language of "changing shape"]. Add in an awareness of what you hear. Be aware that both the outside world and you exist.

Slowly let your eyes open. With a light awareness of your tongue (oscillating between stillness and slow, pleasurable movement), let your eyes see what they want to see [thanks to Somatic Experiencing work for their highlighting of the importance of the eyes orienting after doing internal work]. Notice that you can breathe. Take in the space around you while exploring a mobile tongue.

Now begin to very lightly structure any sounds that come to you that are easy, clear, pleasurable; let the throat release open; encourage an awareness of vibrations in the face. Take the time to let yourself play.

Choose an animal you like a lot. Take the time to recognize how you feel about this animal. Then imagine you have a superpower [thanks to Heidi Dippold for the "super power" idea]. You can soothe and heal with your vibrations. Place a (small version of) your animal next to you. Go ahead and soothe the animal with the sounds/vibrations you make through this light structuring. The animal takes

particular pleasure in the changes of structured, open sound that you easily produce with your articulators.

#### EXERCISE IN PAIRS:

Talk about what you liked and didn't like about the last exercise. Explore structuring. Explore receiving your partner even as you talk with them. You don't need to work hard at receiving them. They are already there.

*EXERCISE IN PAIRS: Some people who can't be heard or understood easily don't want to reveal to others that they have feelings. So I may ask, "Do you want your feelings to be perceived?"*

In pairs: (new pairing, standing up with a little distance between you): another 5-minute conversation about what you like and don't like about your voice.

During the conversation, what feelings come up in you? When you notice feelings or sensations that you are open to sharing, say, "I want you to know..." and give voice to those feelings.

As you do this, get curious about whether you want your feelings to be received—or whether you prefer your partner only receives conceptual information about your feelings—and whether you want to receive your partner as you talk.

Even though you're close to each other, what happens if you do the essence of structuring as you speak to support the communication?

As you finish, allow yourself to breathe and to see what your eyes want/like to see.

#### A BASIC SPEECH EXERCISE PART II

Keep your partner. Your partner will cradle your head while you explore releasing and allowing yourself to breathe.

Begin to add in a butterfly tremor.

Then explore moving the tongue. Allow yourself to breathe, feeling the whole breath reflex. Slowly, easily, for your pleasure.

Add in other articulators.

Go to sound, to vibration, without needing to push.

Now explore an easy oral posture and share lightly structured vibrations with your cradlers in order to help them with the lovely work of holding your head. Take your time, let yourself enjoy the *Somenish*... Switch...