

## Just Think It – 9/8/2011

There's a marvelous Alexander Technique book, called How You Stand, How You Move, How You Live (Da Capo Press, 2007), by Missy Vineyard. It describes clearly the mind-body relationship as it relates to *learning* and is especially applicable in the study of the relationship between breath and voice.

She describes a human as functioning like a *black box*, in which a command is entered at one end and a result comes out at the other end. The command is generated by the mind and the result is an action of or a change in the body. If the result is what you want, then you move on. If the result is not what you want, then you could re-phrase or change your command to bring about the desired result. For instance, I can "think" a pitch, inhale and sing the pitch. If the pitch is not accurate, then I need to re-think the pitch and try again. Or, I can "think" a breath that moves downward as I inhale and then notice how my body responds to my thought. If the response is what I and/or my teacher is looking for (a little guidance is usually needed in this process), then I move on. If not, then then I try "thinking" my breathing thought differently.

The part of the mind that is the *command center* and generates the initial command is located in the frontal lobes of the brain, and sometimes referred to as "consciousness." The part of the mind that interacts with the body to execute the command is closer to the brain core. Thus, the command goes from one part of the brain to another part of the brain, which then guides the process to create the result. Because the command does not go directly from the frontal lobes to the body, there can be a curious sense of detachment to the process.

Without understanding this process, we sometimes try to directly manipulate the body to achieve the desired result by kinesthetically trying to "feel" what we want to accomplish. While an approximate result can be accomplished, usually it is much more effortful and involves activating muscle systems for the task that aren't normally involved. This is especially common in breathing, because the natural breathing structures are internal to our bodies and not easily "felt". If we try to manipulate the body without understanding the body structures involved, chances are we will make a mess of things, like trying to fix a piece of equipment without the manual. This is where the role of a good teacher comes in; someone who can be a more objective set of trained eyes and ears and give helpful feedback during the learning moment. By design, we can only be subjective about ourselves.

Let's go back to our pitch analogy. Let's say I want pitch accuracy and I don't have an understanding of how the vocal folds work – I only know their general location in my throat. Even with no knowledge of how the vocal folds work, I can still "think" my pitch, start my air and sing. If the pitch is not accurate, I can think my pitch higher or lower

and/or think my sound a different color and, with a little trial and error and a sense of easy-ness as a guiding factor, I can accomplish my goal. If I try to “make” my pitch accurate directly, I will likely “do” something in my throat to help, either tightening or pulling to “control” the pitch. Since this is not how the vocal folds change pitch, it only makes the pitch more off-key or adds tension to the vocal sound.

The *black box* concept of Missy Vineyard’s book also implies a beautiful and necessary respect for our bodies and how they work. Our bodies like to function with ease. Often, all that is needed to effect a change toward an easier coordination is an “aha!” moment of the mind. That moment of comprehension becomes the command for the new coordination. The action follows the thought. The new coordination becomes integrated into the natural movement of the body through gentle, playful, respectful movement exploration.