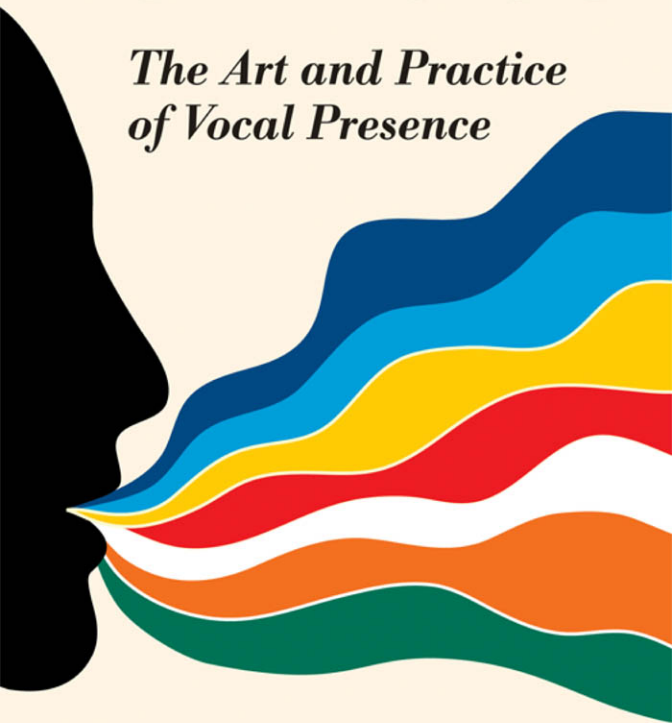


**Barbara McAfee**

# Full Voice

*The Art and Practice  
of Vocal Presence*



Foreword by Peter Block, author of *The Answer to How Is Yes*

An Excerpt From

***Full Voice:  
The Art and Practice of Vocal Presence***

by Barbara McAfee  
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# Foreword

This book makes a large claim. It declares that the quality and meaning of our lives may be dictated by our relationship with our voice. I always thought the voice was God-given. Some can sing; most cannot. Some people are soft-spoken; others can be heard above the crowd. Some are born to speak; others are born to listen. As I get older, my voice gets quieter and I keep asking others to speak more loudly.

This book also says that to find our voice is not about our willingness or ability to find the right words. It is not about speaking even if not spoken to. It is not about being introverted or extroverted. Those frameworks are just stories. When Barbara writes about finding our voice, she means it in the literal sense: the resonance, texture, and subtlety of the sounds that come out of our mouths.

This means that my willingness to inhabit my voice is a major determinant of a fully lived life. This gives new meaning to the phrase “living out loud.” I thought living out loud meant claiming your freedom, converting fate into destiny, fully occupying the space the world has handed you. I can now see that living

out loud has to include finding and shaping the sound of your voice, not just the willingness to be noticed and make a splash.

What would it mean if we believed that the quality of our voice was a key to personal power, presence, and self-discovery? That the sound of our voice is critical to support our intentions, aspirations, and relationships? That leadership and even love may have as much to do with sound as with substance?

This book opens a new door for most of us. Barbara creates an opening for the insight that the quality and consciousness of how we know our voice, play with our voice, respect our voice, and listen to our voice are key to fully inhabiting our bodies and experience. The voice affects our capacity to find meaning, relatedness, and impact.

This idea should not be that surprising. Many spiritual traditions recognize the importance of voice. Every religion has some form of singing, chanting, or humming as part of its ritual. Some traditions take on silence as a spiritual practice. This is another affirmation of the importance of voice. It is so important that it must be avoided to bring the mind and heart to their fullest potential.

This brings us to the question of why we have been so resigned about our voice. We have given some attention to voice in the arena of public speaking. Many programs are available to help us overcome fear and learn to speak with some confidence.

Aside from the moments of public speaking, our resigned relationship to our voice may have something to do with our relationship to singing. Most of us were told early in the game that we couldn't carry a tune—if not in school, then by family and friends. We have decided to believe this. We might sing “Happy Birthday” or sing when others are singing or when no

one is listening, but often we relegate singing to those who have the gift. In this way we have specialized singing and outsourced it to professionals or talented amateurs. We relegate ourselves to the role of listeners.

The effect is we become passive consumers of music, especially in the United States. Go to Europe or Africa and it seems most people will lift their voices with the thinnest of invitations. But in the United States we have lost touch with our own song and have instead plugged into our headphones and stereos to listen to the voices of others.

It is significant that Barbara takes us on in this complex realm of singing. She goes to the heart of the matter where we are anxious and doubtful. She uses this special place that we have ignored to move us into our capacity to live more fully.

The genius of this approach is that it is a visceral, kinesthetic, physical methodology. Barbara demonstrates that if we have the courage to begin with our sounds and singing, more of ourselves will be enlivened. We engage our breath in a new way. Our movement, stance, and posture all can be rediscovered. This approach directly uncovers deeper levels of emotion and self-expression. Confronting our connection to voice and song opens all of these channels. It becomes a means for us to embody fully our presence on the earth.

I must admit some insider information here. Until recently I refused every invitation to sing. I have found my voice in speaking, but singing appeared only in nightmares: the curtain opens and there I am on stage without a clue about the song or how I got into this mess. The nightmare became real a few years ago in Northern Ireland. The Irish were singing solos in the pub when a good friend and lovely woman invited me to come

up and sing with her. I, of course, refused, claiming I had a bad knee (a lie), I had a bad cold (a lie), others were more deserving (a lie), the hour was late and I had to get up in the morning and milk the cows (a lie). She gave up and the evening went on.

For months I was bothered by my cowardice. I had wanted to sing like the others, had the perfect invitation, and was among friends. It was late enough in the evening that no one was listening anyway. I had been friends with Barbara for some time, so the next time I saw her I asked her to give me a voice lesson. It was pure pleasure. It took me about two minutes to realize that the issue wasn't my singing voice at all. What shifted was my story about my singing. I still didn't sing that well, but I understood how my doubts about my voice and my unwillingness to be more visible in the world were just bad habits.

Happy ending. The following year I was in Northern Ireland again at another after-dinner party. There was singing, and the same friend who asked me the year before invited me again. I stood with her, confessed publicly to my sins of the previous year, and sang with her. It did not sound that good, but something had shifted in me—something much more significant than singing. Thank you, Barbara.

So enjoy this book. Appreciate the wisdom of the writer and the proof of the exercises. If we all decided to find our voice in this way, our lives would be more expressed and our communities would be stronger.

PETER BLOCK



# Welcome

This book is not just about voice.

It's about life.

It poses some big questions:

Are you willing to be alive?

How alive?

And in service to what?

The words “voice,” “vocation,” and “avocation” all share the common Latin root. *Vocare* literally means “to call, invoke, or name.” The people who first made these etymological links recognized the deep connection between voice and calling.

Here's what they knew. The voice emerges from the mysterious intersection of your body, mind, emotions, and spirit. For anything to get created, it must make the treacherous journey from the world of imagination to the physical world.

Your voice is the primary vehicle for making that journey.

If your vehicle breaks down on the way from the inside out, your gifts will remain locked inside you. If *what* you are saying is at odds with *how* you are saying it, your listeners may miss

your message altogether. And without a connection with other human beings, your work can't come alive in the world.

Your voice says a lot about you. Did you know that just by hearing you speak, a listener is able to determine your physical stature, sex, and age? That the sound of your voice reveals detailed information about your health, mood, fatigue level, social class, race, and education level? Long before they process the meaning of your words, your listeners are busy making up their minds about you based on the clues your voice reveals. And you're doing the same thing whenever you listen to someone else, whether you realize it or not.

Identical words spoken in different tones can express a diversity of meanings. The answer to the ubiquitous question, How are you? can be answered with the word "fine" in a way that indicates joy, boredom, rage, uncertainty, lust, or impatience. How many exasperated parents have told their rebellious adolescents, "Don't use that tone with me!" Tone is so powerful that it often trumps the meanings of the words themselves. If there's a jarring disparity between your words and the sound of your voice, you can be certain that your listeners will give more credence to the sound than the actual content of your speech.

Given the pivotal role of the voice in our lives, work, and relationships, it's astounding that we devote so little time and attention to it. We don't get training in how to use it well and lack a shared language for talking about it. We walk around unconscious about the messages our voices are spilling into the world. At the same time, we hold strong opinions about the voices we like and dislike.

Voice is at the heart of your personal relationships as well. It is a kind of miracle that your voice has the power to connect your inner world to that of another person. And it can shut someone out just as easily. Our voices create a soundtrack for the lives of those closest to us. The beautiful baritone singing voice of my grandpa Fred is still vivid in my mind's ear, even though it fell silent in 1996. I hear my mother's voice in my mind every day, sometimes imparting words of love and wisdom, sometimes saying things that irritate me to no end. I recall in detail the sound of the blessing I received from a wise therapist in 1985, the scathing sarcasm of my dad at his worst, and the warm, resonant tone of the teacher who helped me find my voice. Whose voices are ringing in your memory right now? How do you think the people around you will hear your voice in their memories?

The voice you have right now is not your fate. It's not fixed and permanent. Voices change all the time. You've changed yours over and over during your lifetime—sometimes on purpose, sometimes unconsciously.

Some aspects of how you sound are determined by physiology, gender, culture, language, and history. Those vocal qualities aren't open to significant change.

Other aspects of your voice, though, were cobbled together by a series of unconscious decisions you made along the way. (Picture something made of duct tape, pipe cleaners, and Popsicle sticks.)

Some of those decisions served you well; still others suppressed parts of your voice that could be useful to you. Aspects of your voice that were shut down can be reawakened and

integrated back into your full voice. They aren't gone. They're just rusty.

Here's another truth that's woven through these pages: you don't have one voice; you have many. You vary the sound of your voice many times a day, whether you realize it or not.

Do you use the same voice at an intimate dinner and a sporting event?

With a prospective client and a smiling baby?

Do you talk to your boss the same way you talk to your pets?

You've got all the voice you'll ever need in there—a veritable wealth of sound just waiting to be set free.

Every color in your voice is worth reclaiming.

Each one carries a piece of your humanness.

Reclaiming your full voice makes for a fuller life.

For what did we trade our raw, messy, human voices?

When did we start to believe that becoming less of ourselves would keep us safe?

What is the long-term cost of suppressing the wisdom of our instincts and emotions?

What is so frightening about the possibility of authentic expression?

This book asks you to consider what might be more interesting and important than your fear. To shake off the lies that keep you tight, silent, "nice," or scared. To take off that muzzle and speak. To drop your chains and dance.

Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "Most of us go to our graves with our music still inside us." The thought of all those wasted gifts is what calls me to this work. Your gifts are not yours alone; they are your part of our shared destiny. I hope you will use your voice in service to your vision. I hope your loved ones

will recognize your love for them by the sound of your voice. I hope your “music” will find its way out where it belongs and that your “song” will inspire other songs. I hope your resonant and wise listening will invite the silenced ones to speak out.

May you experience the pleasure of your voice rising up from your deepest center, opening through your heart, flying unimpeded from your mouth, lighting up your eyes. I haven’t found a feeling more wonderful than that. It’s sheer joy even when it’s terrifying. It’s what kept me going through the swamps of fear and self-doubt.

It’s the sound of a body fully alive.

It’s the shortest distance between your gifts and the world that is so hungry for them.

It’s your part in the great song that all of life is singing.

Full voice.

Full life.

Come, let’s begin.

## — What Is Vocal Presence?

Vocal presence is the state where your words, facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, emotions, imagination, and spirit are all fully engaged and congruent in conveying your message. It’s vocal hokey-pokey: you put your whole self in. *What* you are saying is fully aligned with *how* you are saying it.

Vocal presence does more than change the way you speak. It also changes the way you listen. As you become more aware of your own voice, you’re able to listen more accurately for what people are saying beneath and between their words. You become a student of voices—how they sound as well as what

they're saying. This kind of deep listening is a rare and precious skill, one that transforms both speaker and listener.

Most important of all, vocal presence changes the way you live. You access all of the power and wisdom available to you. Your body comes alive with energy. Your face is lit up with passion. Your words echo true. Speaking feels good, and people are inspired to listen.

I began my vocal presence coaching practice when I was an organizational development consultant. During those twelve years, my colleagues and I specialized in improving team performance, so communication was always a significant part of our work with clients. At the time, I was working on finding my own voice, so I couldn't help noticing the ways my clients' voices were negatively impacting their work and relationships:

- Leaders with unconscious vocal habits sent confusing messages to their employees and colleagues.
- Great ideas—poorly expressed—were never realized.
- Deadly monotones put group potential straight to sleep.
- Irritating voices limited the career options of brilliant, capable people.
- Conflicts arose and persisted between well-intentioned people who couldn't "hear" each other accurately.

As I addressed issues like these with my first vocal presence clients, I witnessed real and lasting change in their voices. They were easier to listen to, spoke with more fluency, and knew how to shift their voices in specific situations. They also discovered that changing their voices sparked other positive changes in their lives. Their voices opened new doors for self-awareness,

purpose, joy, and wisdom. Those clients began talking with their colleagues and friends about the changes they were noticing. The phone began ringing, and my voice coaching practice started growing.

If you're looking for an ironclad, step-by-step guidebook for getting a perfect voice, you've got the wrong book. Cultivating your vocal presence involves far more than making minor cosmetic improvements to your presentations. It's not just a list of handy tips for "talking good." To make vocal changes go deeper, last longer, and produce great results requires awareness, practice, and experimentation over time. The Five Elements Framework, explained in part II of this book, is the primary tool we will use to unleash your full voice. The framework will show you how to access and practice the full range and color of your voice. You'll learn how to expand your vocal choices to include a broader palette of sound: low to high, soft to loud, dark to bright. Then you'll discover which sounds are best suited to specific situations—how to choose the right voice for the job. This framework is at the heart of vocal presence and has been tested by hundreds of diverse clients over twenty years of coaching.

I didn't study voice at a conservatory. Though I have studied various types of voice work over the years, I am not steeped in one particular methodology. The human voice itself has been my teacher. I brought a beginner's mind full of questions, a compassionate heart, and wide-open ears to each voice I encountered in my coaching practice. The approach outlined in this book was crafted in partnership with real people facing real vocal challenges. Their questions, courage, insights, vulnerability, and stories have created a strong and growing foundation for this work.

My own voice has taught me many lessons as well. I came to voice work from a wounded place. I didn't have my voice for a long time and made a clear decision that I wasn't willing to live without it. I'll tell more of that story later in these pages. The more I learn about the voice, the more I respect its wisdom, generosity, beauty, and tenacity. Roy Hart, a pioneer in the exploration of the voice, said, "The voice is the muscle of the soul." Every single voice I have heard in the past twenty years has confirmed that assertion.

When I began writing this book, I realized that words on a page could carry you only so far in your vocal explorations. *Changing your voice* requires *using* your voice. That's why I've developed online practice videos to supplement this text. In these videos, I'll show you how to access five distinct colors in your voice and demonstrate specific ways to strengthen each one. These practices are simple to do, but they will challenge you to step outside your comfort zone—and your dignity. Trust me, the payoff will be well worth the risk. You'll be directed to these online resources as you read along.

When people decide to seek out voice training, they usually end up with teachers who are trained in classical singing or acting. The approaches used by these teachers can offer good ideas for improving breath control and understanding how voices work, but they usually don't include ways to put these new skills to work in your day-to-day life. You can also get good training in public speaking. The approaches commonly focus on how to vary the pitch and pace of speaking, gesture naturally, and use PowerPoint—all perfectly good and useful tools. What this kind of training rarely does is help you access and practice the deeper



gifts that reside in your voice. As you read this book, you may decide to seek out some additional training with a voice coach. I'll give you some pointers on how to find one in chapter 11.

Everyone's got a story about his or her voice. I've heard a million of them. Each one is fascinating, heroic, heartbreaking, and complicated. Voices get formed in a rich stew of personal history, culture, family dynamics, gender, physiology, region, character, and plain old habit. Opening up those stories for closer examination—and possible change—is a grand adventure. It requires stretching beyond what's familiar and comfortable much like a physical exercise program does.

What do you do for exercise? Jogging? Weight lifting? Yoga? Pilates? Biking? Walking? In the context of a health club, running path, or yoga studio, these intense activities look perfectly natural. You'd never dream of jogging in place during a client meeting. Or doing sit-ups while leading a training session for coworkers. Or pumping iron at your place of worship.

The voice exercises described in this book and demonstrated on the Full Voice website are a lot like your physical workouts. They take your voice to more extreme states just like your exercise program engages your body. They stretch your range just like yoga stretches your muscles. They improve your capacity to access different sounds at will—your vocal coordination.

Your vocal workouts—like your physical ones—offer some other wonderful benefits:

- You feel more alive and energized.
- You have oxygen and endorphins zooming around your body.

- You bravely stretch into new territories, accessing resources and strength you never knew you had.
- You take a risk and live to tell the tale.

## — Who Benefits from Vocal Presence?

Our work in the world comes to life through our relationships with other people. So no matter what you do for a living, your voice plays a crucial role in your success. Powerful communication is at the heart of peak performance whether you work in leadership, sales, teaching, coaching, health care, air traffic control, information technology, customer service, social work, politics, law, journalism, ministry, or entrepreneurship. Learning to express your ideas clearly and powerfully in front of a group has become a necessity for many professions. The client stories I tell in this book will illustrate how vocal presence has been applied to a broad diversity of professions and situations.

The breakneck pace of life in these times requires deliberate and powerful communication. Getting—and keeping—people's attention in the midst of the whirlwind is harder and harder. Countless situations call for skillful and eloquent conversation, both in person and through the filters of technology. Our increasingly complex, global work environment is demanding new levels of flexibility, sensitivity, and awareness in how we speak and listen to each other.

The work you do to open up your speaking voice often transfers to other areas of your life. My clients tell me about surprising side benefits to their vocal presence work, including

- Courage to speak the truth
- Renewed creativity
- Increased ability to access and trust inner wisdom
- Enlivened physical vitality
- Stronger and clearer writing “voice”
- Emotional and spiritual healing

You have no way of knowing what will shift in your life when you access your full voice. That is a mystery that your voice holds in store for you. Let’s begin your vocal adventure with the Full Voice Assessment.

## 🌀 Full Voice Assessment

I always begin a coaching relationship with the following questions: What is your story about your voice? and What qualities do you appreciate about your voice? The answers come easily to the first question, but a surprising number of people can’t think of one thing they appreciate about their voices. (It’s a small wonder we are so critical of our voices. If someone tells you that you “love the sound of your own voice,” it’s not meant as a compliment!) My clients are eager to tell me what they *don’t* like. If you’re one of those people, I encourage you to investigate the things you appreciate about your voice for a day or two before completing this assessment.

You can also benefit from inviting people who know you well to tell you what they notice about your voice. I highly recommend this option for several reasons:

- It's hard to hear your own voice accurately. What you hear in your own ears is not the same as what others hear.
- Conversations about voice offer rich territory for exploration. I assure you they will deepen your work immeasurably.
- You may enlist some allies to support or join you as you cultivate your vocal presence.

When you're finished with the book, you can revisit the Full Voice assessment to see how your voice—and the way you think about it—has changed over time.



What is your story about your voice?

What qualities do you appreciate about your voice? (Check all that apply.)

- |                                     |                                    |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Loud       | <input type="checkbox"/> Soft      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Strong     | <input type="checkbox"/> High      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Expressive | <input type="checkbox"/> Low       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Warm       | <input type="checkbox"/> Flexible  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rich       | <input type="checkbox"/> Husky     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Soothing   | <input type="checkbox"/> Gravelly  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gentle     | <input type="checkbox"/> Masculine |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Deep       | <input type="checkbox"/> Feminine  |

Other qualities:

What qualities hinder your voice? (Check all that apply.)

- |                                   |                                    |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Nasal    | <input type="checkbox"/> Loud      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Harsh    | <input type="checkbox"/> Too high  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hoarse   | <input type="checkbox"/> Too low   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grating  | <input type="checkbox"/> Inaudible |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gravelly | <input type="checkbox"/> Breathy   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Monotone | <input type="checkbox"/> Weak      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dull     | <input type="checkbox"/> Masculine |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Soft     | <input type="checkbox"/> Feminine  |

Other qualities:

What have people told you about your voice at different times in your life? Have the comments changed over time?

What decisions did you make, if any, as a result of those comments?

Describe a time when you felt very connected to your full voice: What do you remember most about that experience—physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually?

What happened as a result?

Describe a time when you wanted to access your full voice and couldn't do so. What do you remember most about that experience—physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually?

What happened as a result?

If you had access to your full voice, what would be different about your life? Your work? Your relationships? Your connection to yourself?

## ~ How to Use This Book

This book is divided into three parts. The first opens up a broader understanding of the human voice—its history, function, connection to identity, and possible pitfalls. The second introduces the Five Elements Framework as a method for making real and lasting changes in your voice. The third shows you how to integrate the new sounds in your voice into your everyday life through song, poetry, and other practices.

Now let's take a look at the specific chapters.

Chapter 1 will open a broad context in which to consider voice, including its role in human evolution, the oral tradition, and the first weeks of your life on earth.

Chapter 2 will consider the relationship between your voice and your identity, how the two are intertwined with your personal history, hidden shadows, and shifting circumstances.

Chapter 3 is about fear. I tell the story of how I moved through my own paralyzing fear and offer six steps you can take to move through your own (if you've got any, that is).

In chapter 4 we review the basics of vocal production, including some useful exercises to increase breath support. It's Voice 101. We also discuss common vocal problems and review how to take care of your vocal health.

Chapters 5 through 10 are devoted to the Five Elements Framework that is at the heart of vocal presence. I'll describe each voice in detail, including where it is sourced in the body and how it can be used to strengthen your everyday communication. I'll also introduce the gifts inherent in each sound and tell stories about how other people have put them to work in their lives. You'll learn specific practices for opening each voice

with support from online video examples. Each of these chapters closes with reflection questions to deepen your inquiry and a list of people whose voices exemplify each element.

Chapter 11 offers a plethora of ideas for how and where to practice vocal presence in your daily life and offers suggestions for how to choose a voice coach.

Chapter 12 shows you how to use singing and poetry to integrate your new vocal colors into your day-to-day communication. I'll give you lots of ideas for how to revive singing as part of your ongoing practice and introduce the power of poetry to bring your speaking voice alive.

Chapter 13 tells some stories of voices lost and found—how specific people have discovered powerful aspects of their literal and metaphorical voices through calamity.

In chapter 14 you'll have a chance to reflect on everything you've learned along the way. We'll explore new questions to guide you on your continuing vocal adventure.

I'll close the book with some resources for enriching and deepening your vocal explorations.

As a supplement to the material in this book, I have created a series of short online video exercises to help you open up your full voice. One video demonstrates the breathing exercises I describe in chapter 4. The other five guide you through simple (and playful) exercises for opening up each of the distinct vocal colors described in chapters 5 through 10. Practicing along with the videos will help you increase the range and flexibility of your voice over time.

You will find these video resources at the Full Voice website: <http://www.fullvoice.net>.




part one

# Understanding Voice



The voice is the  
muscle of the soul.

Roy Hart



What is life? It is the flash  
of a firefly in the night. It is  
the breath of a buffalo in the  
wintertime. It is the little  
shadow which runs across  
the grass and loses itself  
in the sunset.

Crowfoot, Blackfoot  
warrior and orator

# Voice, Instinct, and the Oral Tradition

a context for voice

Our voices carry a rich legacy. How we speak and listen today has emerged from the long unfolding story of human history. In her book *The Four-Fold Way*, cultural anthropologist and author Angeles Arrien suggests that indigenous wisdom and practices have an essential role to play in restoring our balance with each other and the earth. She discovered that voice—as expressed in song, sound, breath, story, and even silence—is a vital element in indigenous societies around the world. In many of these cultures, the voice is directly linked to the soul or spirit of a person.<sup>1</sup>

The oral tradition is an enormous area of study, as is language development in individuals and societies. I must, however, make brief mention of these subjects as a way to root this exploration of voice in a deeper appreciation for our individual and collective vocal heritage. Let's begin with your own vocal genesis.

You were paying attention to voices long before you were born. Your ability to hear was fully formed by the time you

were a three-month-old fetus. You floated in a rich world of sound as well as in amniotic fluid. Your mother's voice and heart-beat were most familiar, but you also discerned the voices of family members and other muffled sounds from the outside world.

At the moment of your birth, your first act as a distinct individual was a vocal one: you cried. That sound marked the doorway between your prenatal and postnatal worlds and announced your arrival on earth in no uncertain terms. The sound of your brand-new voice making itself audible in the world for the first time was the initial step on a vocal adventure that continues today.

Next you used your voice to communicate your hunger, discomfort, and frustration with distinct cries. If the adults around you were paying attention, they learned to interpret them accurately and respond to what you needed. Within the first days of your life, you also got busy decoding and echoing the complex world of sound around you. You began interpreting vocal sounds, facial expressions, and gestures long before you understood the exact words being spoken. Within a matter of a few months, your ears, eyes, brain, mouth, lungs, tongue, teeth, and lips performed a monumental task—transforming observations, random noises, coos, babbles, and squeals into your first words. Your voice was literally formed by “reading” the voices around you. Your ability to pay keen attention to vocal nuances and inflections is innately and fundamentally human.<sup>2</sup>

Your ancestors passed these skills along to you. You are a direct descendant of good communicators. Being able to read voices accurately was a fundamental part of our human evolution. Those who got it wrong didn't survive long enough to pass along their DNA. Spoken language is a relatively new

invention—approximately 100,000 years old. No one can be sure how language actually emerged, but it most certainly was preceded by some system of expressive vocalization. Through eons of time our voices, ears, and brains coevolved increasingly complex linguistic systems for conveying information, establishing dominance, forging affection, organizing projects, and solving problems. Our deep heritage as oral communicators is still active in how we relate to each other today, whether or not we are consciously aware of it.

Most of us in the modern world live in cultures so immersed in the written word that it's hard for us to imagine how vitally important the voice is in an oral tradition culture. Long before the written word emerged, the collective memory of a people was kept alive through time primarily through the power of voice. Each subsequent generation was responsible for carrying on the legends, mythology, history, genealogy, and social mores that defined a particular culture. This vast and detailed body of information had to be assimilated through a lengthy process of deep listening, vocal repetition, and correction that took many painstaking years to perfect. In the oral tradition, words and sounds carry powerful magic that can bring the rains, appease the gods, invoke healing, access mysterious realms, call the animals in for a hunt, and communicate with the ancestors.

When I heard West African wisdom teacher Malidoma Somé speak several years ago, he offered his firsthand experience in the contrast between oral and written cultures. Somé has earned multiple advanced degrees from prestigious universities in both Europe and the United States. As a young adult, he also went through a traditional initiation rite under the guidance of the elders in his village. Whenever Somé returned to his home

village in Burkina Faso, he was struck by his “uneducated” brother’s ability to recite hour upon hour of story, song, and ritual from memory. Somé suggested that the increased reliance on the written word has radically diminished our ability to retain and recall large amounts of information<sup>3</sup>—a skill your ancestors probably took for granted wherever they came from.

One of the oldest cultures on earth—the Australian aboriginal people—offers another vivid example of how powerful the voice is in an oral tradition culture. Aboriginal people believe that their ancestors literally sang the world into being. Their song leaders memorized long and complex songs—the “songlines”—that passed in an unbroken line from generation to generation for 40,000 years. They relied on these songlines for many things in their society. Travelers who knew these songs were able to literally sing their way safely through the vast outback by following the songlines. Embedded in the songlines was the physical geography of the land, including sources of food and water. The songlines also related the spiritual stories and sacred sites reflected in each place.<sup>4</sup> From a Western perspective it is difficult to comprehend just how essential these songs—and the voices in which they were sung—were to the spiritual, social, and physical survival of the people over such a long period of time.

I recently saw an example of how the oral tradition might have been expressed in England during the Middle Ages. Actor Benjamin Bagby is featured in a film where he performs the epic saga *Beowulf* in Middle English while accompanying himself on an Anglo-Saxon harp.<sup>5</sup>

Without the benefit of stage sets, other actors, dramatic lighting, or other theatrical conventions, the actor painted the terror

and triumph of the tale through the power of his voice, facial expressions, and gestures alone. Witnessing this astounding performance reconnected me to the oral tradition that thrived in indigenous Europe for centuries. Many of these sagas, legends, and mythologies have been captured and preserved in written form. Nowadays you can find them in abundance at any bookstore or library and silently read them at your leisure. Imagine, though, what it would have been like to hear them from a powerful traveling storyteller who arrived in your small, isolated village once a year. Can you feel the wonder, terror, and excitement of being awash in fantastic tales dramatically spoken and sung into the breathless silence around the community hearth? Can you sense how profoundly those tales would impact you in the absence of books, television, radio, film, and the Internet?

Though the oral tradition cultures have been seriously diminished by modern life, remnants still survive in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas.

In many of the world's religious and spiritual traditions, the spoken word is still a source of great power. All of the sacred texts from the world's major religions were passed along through the oral tradition long before they were written down. These texts are still memorized and recited from generation to generation, usually with precise vocal inflections and nuances. Creation stories frequently begin with the divine speaking or singing the world into existence. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, God says, "Let there be light," and light appears. In the Christian New Testament, the gospel of John begins, "In the beginning was the Word." Prayers are repeated in the exact same way for centuries. Mantras are chanted to invoke powerful deities

and access deep meditation. Jews recite the many names of the divine, and Muslims answer the call to prayer five times a day. Sacred words and songs are employed to declare intentions, offer blessings, and mark transitions. At any given moment throughout human history, this world has been wrapped in the sacred sounds of many peoples.

By contrast, we live our modern lives in a barrage of trivial language. Open your ears in any public place and you're likely to hear yammering televisions, public service announcements, droning background music, and the incessant blabbering of people on their cell phones. Our voices grow louder in order to penetrate the din and drone of machines all around us. In a given week, we say more words to more people in more ways than our ancestors could ever imagine. Talk has become very cheap indeed, and our words, though plentiful, are often flimsy in meaning and inflection.

Cultivating vocal presence helps you reclaim the powerful legacy of the oral tradition in your life. As you rediscover the color and subtlety in your voice, it becomes a vehicle for your eloquence to enter the world. You take your place at the end of a long line of ancestors who sang their songs, spoke their stories, struggled to stay alive, and prevailed so you could add your voice to the chorus of humanity.

Let's shift our attention from the lessons of our collective vocal heritage to the ways your voice is connected to your identity.



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