



## THE DAY MY VOICE BROKE

*Wayne Enright*

We all think we know how bad it would be to be blind, or deaf, or crippled. But try to imagine what it would be like to lose control of your voice. Imagine what it would be like trying to transact business or respond to a client enquiry on the telephone, to present a seminar in front of an audience, run a business meeting or simply order a sandwich in a busy lunch bar. Even the deaf and blind can communicate with words, a physically disabled person can explain what happened. How do you explain a condition that even most doctors have never heard of, can't diagnose and certainly cannot treat.

Spasmodic Dysphonia is a neurological condition which results in an involuntary spasm of the vocal chords, causing tight, squeezed and strangled speech or the voice dropping out in the middle of words and sentences.

I first noticed my voice becoming weaker back in 1999 when I was working fulltime as a health consultant. After some speech therapy my voice quality improved and I decided to launch into the world of self-employment. I was following my passion for public speaking and facilitating experiential learning programs. Business was booming and I was presenting seminars, workshops and programs almost on a daily basis. Then in late 2001 my ability to vocalise some words became more and more difficult. After 6 months of frustration I eventually relented and went back to a speech pathologist who told me that I had Spasmodic Dysphonia, that it was incurable and that I should seriously think about changing my career.

Having Spasmodic Dysphonia in the prime of your life and being told there is no cure, requires a radical re-thinking of your life prospects and career options. The sudden loss in voice quality transforms the way you are perceived by others. It makes you silent where you were once vocal, tentative rather than confident and anxious about whether you'll be able to articulate what you want to say. Because most of us take our voice for granted, it is difficult to imagine how disabling it is not to be able to speak clearly and fluently. ***The voice is our main instrument of communication, a powerful tool of self-representation, crucial in both our private relationships and work-related interactions.*** Without a voice, we are less able to modify the first impressions others get from our physical appearance, body language and dress. We can't state an opinion or defend it forcefully, we can't break into a group conversation so readily, or modify the way others interpret our silence, embarrassment or apparent anxiety. For me it resulted in an enormous sense of grief at losing what I considered to be one of my most valuable assets – the ability to communicate. I felt I had lost the person that was me. I was used to getting out of my comfort zone by choice but this seemed out of my control.

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It took me about two years of researching, exploring options, ways of working around the disability and soul searching for answers to the question of why this had happened to me. During this time I learnt many valuable lessons, some of which I'd like to share with you.

.....I learnt that we have two ears and one mouth for a reason – ***listening is infinitely more powerful in the long run, than talking.*** Nothing can empower a situation, a moment or a person more than focused listening. Active listening requires us to listen, not just with our ears but with our eyes and our hearts. In fact listening really starts from the heart, in that we need to have a heart felt attitude of really caring about what another person has to say; tuning into the feelings behind their words and body language; if we are going to genuinely 'hear' them. Most great leaders are great listeners, and learn from it. Any study of leadership should, in my opinion include a study of their listening habits.

As for talking, I've been forced to think about what I want to communicate and how to do this as briefly, simply and as impact fully as possible before engaging my mouth. The real art is to do this as I'm talking and thinking; something I used to take for granted. Now I'm like a duck that appears calm and fluent on the surface but is paddling like hell underneath. I've learnt to choose my words wisely and I've become sensitive to the nuances of non-verbal communication and the subtle differences that the choice of a particular word can make to our communication. Sometimes this frustrates me when I have to substitute a less 'well-fitting' word because the one I want to say won't come out. I've discovered that ***influence is less dependent on what we say and more about the way we are being.*** I've learnt to listen within too. What does my gut tell me when I'm making a crucial decision? Is my self-talk empowering or sabotaging my success and quality of life?

I've been reluctant to share this story for fear of appearing like a hypocritical victim. In almost every seminar or workshop I facilitate, a discussion on self-responsibility ensues. 'Response-ability' I emphasise, is our ability to respond in every situation. We can respond as a 'Master' or a 'Victim'. ***The 'Master' is the one who looks within his/her circumstances to find the lesson and chooses a proactive response.*** The 'Victim' is the one who uses circumstances as an excuse and allows him/herself to be defeated by them. This philosophy is a hard one to remain faithful to when you are going through grief and depression but I recall that ***the Chinese characters for 'Crisis' represent the words 'Danger' and 'Opportunity'.*** For me, this experience has been an opportunity to master my fear and to learn some valuable lessons about communication. I hope that there are some lessons here that are of value to you too.

***“Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing”***

Helen Keller