

Lift Up Your Voice

Ingo R. Titze



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A FIRST RESPONSE TO THE PHRASE “lift up your voice” in today’s society is likely to be interpreted as “speak up,” or “voice your opinion more forcefully.” This is then often executed without vocalization, mainly by texting. Voices can be “heard” without making any sound. In nature, vitality is expressed vocally by many species. Living in Iowa City for many years, I often took walks through City Park. In the fall, Canadian geese made a stopover on their journey south. The collective vocalization of more than 100 birds was an incredible chorus. The purpose of loud vocalization was not entirely clear to me. Animal biologists would probably know. The geese all seemed to be accounted for, so they were not calling a lost bird to join them. There also appeared to be no predators in the neighborhood, so the calls were not warning calls. Furthermore, the birds were resting to preserve energy for another long segment of flight, so why did they expend energy vocalizing loudly and continuously for long periods of time? I don’t know the answer, but I can use this as an example of some of my personal needs for vocalization.

I gauge my happiness and general vitality on the basis of a balance between four regular activities: (1) intellectual, (2) physical, (3) spiritual, and (4) emotional. I think of them as a basis of self-support, like a four-legged chair. With three legs, I am still fairly balanced. If two are missing, the chair is unbalanced and some external support is needed to keep the balance. A chair with only one leg provides little self-support. It would require much external assistance for balance.

Let me talk about leg number four, the emotional leg. This has always been vocal expression for me. I sang with my mother and aunt as a child, cheered with friends at games, argued loudly with my brothers, later gave speeches and taught classes, sang in choirs, and performed as a soloist. Vocalization has been as much a daily activity as walking and running. Much of it is emotional, an expression of joy, strength, disapproval, love, or sadness. As a result, when I am not asked to speak or sing for a period of time, a cloud of unhappiness sets in. It always takes a while for the body and soul to recognize this missing leg.

Is this a need to communicate with others, or simply a need to vocalize? Can texting and exchanging ideas on social media fill the void? For me, never! In fact, I get crankier and more frustrated with every additional text message I receive or send every day. An angry shout is often the unavoidable reflex and release. It is the loss of the physical sensations of sound-making that causes the imbalance in my soul. Spirit and body long for vibrations in the head and neck, heightened respiratory activity, internal sensations of muscle contrac-

tion, and motor organization in the form of melody, harmony, and rhythm. I often wonder, if I were alone on an island where no human could hear me, how often and in what way would I vocalize?

Coming back to animal vocalization, we are being robbed of a fundamental health benefit by not “lifting up our voices” regularly, individually and collectively. When I compare the sound I hear today in congregational church singing to the sound I heard 50 years ago in churches and community choirs, I would say that a chorus of “human geese” is anemic. It would hardly turn heads in City Park. Even many of today’s choir arrangements are drifting toward less vocal vitality. The vocal lines are often in unison, while instrumental accompaniments provide the bravado. To the contrary, I heard an amateur choir in New Zealand that aroused my soul. It

was made up of people mostly over 70 years of age. The voices were wobbly and inconsistent. The choir had little blend, which meant that I could hear nearly each voice individually. But the freedom the director gave the choir members to “let it all hang out” gave me an incredible experience of joy. Luckily, we still have sports events where primal vocalizations are permitted. Aside from that, the joy of sound-making has been lost for many with ever growing electronic replacement of natural vocalization. Perhaps it will never be realized by some. The good news is that we as singers and singing teachers can reverse the trend. We can replace or augment video games with vocal play, structured or unstructured, in homes and schools. Once the kids experience the joy of sound-making, not judged as good or bad, the body will ask for it, again and again.

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