

Donald Woodburn Workshop – Breathing and Voice

Head of WAAPA and actor's club in the area of speaking

2 main areas –

Fundamentals of breathing + Vocal Dynamic (Pitch, pace, variations)

Vocal dynamic:

Most people deliberately try to do these things and Donald looks for when people are 'trying' to sound interesting. We become more aware of how they are trying to sound rather than what it is that they are talking about.

Donald's approach is about '*situational dynamic*', e.g. talking to someone at the back of the room is different to talking to someone sitting closer – **the body makes natural adjustments and Donald believes that vocal dynamic comes out of these natural adjustments than out of deliberate vocal manipulation. *Voice is a by-product not a product.*** What stimulus before the moment of speech can you integrate that results in 'vocal dynamic' rather than a deliberate application of interesting sound.

Breathing:

Misconceptions of breathing. Normally the first person that told you to 'take a deep breath' was a doctor. From that experience, most of us hold the idea that taking a deep breath is breathing into the chest area. Mechanism that does the breathing is below the lungs, hence breathing into the chest is not a 'deep' breath.

Donald gave example: what happens when you take a chest breath and observe what happens to larynx, throat and vocal cords. These things actually *tighten* when breathing in this way. The things that you are actually needing to make sound is sitting in tension the moment you being to start to use it. Equivalent to a tennis player bracing before hitting a return shot and not being able to get to that shot instead of having fluidity and flexibility.

Identify how we breathe is the most important.

Breath out before breath in. The best way to learn how to get breath into the body is to get breath out first. Get carbon dioxide out of the lungs. We can blow it out, speak, cough, sneeze, etc.

Diaphragm is an involuntary muscle and trying to tell the diaphragm what to do, it leads to tightening of muscles around it.

When we vomit, how do we get contents out of the stomach? Abdominal muscles tighten. Muscles in the lower body tighten, putting pressure on viscera which then pushes it upwards. We can do the same thing to get breath out of the body.

Babies breathe from their bellies.

We have to reactivate this part of the body. In society, we have been conditioned to 'suck it (our bellies) in', e.g. magazines. Primates all have bigger bellies than their chest.

Activate transverse abdominal muscles (slow twitch muscles). When they activate, they slowly squeeze in through entire core of body, which then moves the viscera either up or down. Your lower body muscles (butt, pelvic floor) then activate leading to the viscera going up into the lungs.

Breathe out and feel the belly button moving into your spine. Same thing with coughing.

To get breath into the body, it is simply about relaxing.

Active part of breathing is breath out, and passive part is breath in.

Surrender to gravity

Gravity comes from 'gravitas'. If you want to have vocal gravitas, you need to understand your own body's relationship to gravity and also every single object that you talk about, your understanding of those objects is related to their relationship to gravity.

Stop thinking about breathing in. Think breathe out first.

Homework:

30 times a day 10-15 seconds of outward breath, then learning how to release.

Once you let your tummy go, your lungs become instantly full of breath again. ***For public speaking, every time you get to a comma, full stop and change in thought, that split second let your tummy go and you will instantly have the right amount of breath for the next thought.***

Hard to do because it goes against the 'suck it in' teaching that we have been given. Goes against the fight or flight mechanism, panic and fear kick in and your abdominal musculature does what it is supposed to do to protect your internal organs from physical harm which is to suck them in and hide them behind the bones.

If an animal is running towards you, you position yourself for protection by putting as much bone in front of skin and organs as you possibly can. Standing up in front of an audience, your body does not know the difference between a knife, a horn or tusk, or someone's opinion of you. Exactly the same response. You suck your tummy in.

If you want to sound present, vulnerable, immediate, honest, it can only happen when this type of breathing is happening.

Watch news footage after a tragic event, e.g. tsunami, earthquake. No one stands up straight to talk to the camera. They are released into gravity and trying to ground themselves to learn how to cope with crisis that is going on around them.

More interesting watching a rugby / footy player talking after the match than before the match. Before the match they are 'pulling-up' and looking tough, and afterwards they are battered and bruised and they don't have energy to waste to hold the body up against gravity.

When one releases to gravity, you get a richer, warmer, freer sound (to your voice)

When body is in a relaxed position, the varied muscles that you use to support speech are released and the higher chance of dynamic variety in your voice.

If you held and managed, your voice is going to start from the same muscle group every time you begin to speak, so you will be set in one vocal pattern.

As one turns to speak, because the muscles were not 'held', there is some dynamic variety in the voice related specifically to those muscles being available to that movement and that engagement. Whereas if they are in the process of holding, they are not available to your speech moment. *We use the same muscles for alignment as we use for speech.*

Movement coach talks about 'stacking' your bones. Don't hold them up, stack them. *Muscles are needed for movement and speech*, not for holding yourself up. All about balance and gravity.

Look at speakers you find compelling and find the moments that they are the MOST compelling. Example, Julia Gillard's misogyny speech. The difference between the public managed presentation style and when being amongst colleagues and feeling in that moment that she had permission to have a go at Tony Abbott.

This takes you 'into your centre'. Same reason people go to the pub on a Friday night. Because we have spent the whole week holding our body together and we need something to get us back into feeling like us.

When someone gets drunk, they begin to find gravity. They rely on *immediate sphere of influence* – what they can hold and what they can stand on. The body starts to activate when this happens, i.e. rock climbing, climbing a steep staircase. You forget about 'the world out there'.

Work out what the relationship is between you and the space right in front of you. The problem with performers including public speakers, singers, actors is that everyone wants to play 'out there' whilst giving up relationship to gravity and getting

breath and body to function properly. **Great performers are prepared to stand as if the spot they are standing on is actually the centre of the universe. From there, it radiates out in equal and all directions.**

Do breathing exercise of 10-15 seconds breathing out in ALL positions. Standing, sitting, lying down. We breathe in all different positions. Discover how you breathe in each position and bring that knowledge into standing in front of an audience to see you can keep repeating that breath experience so that you have your hold breath behind your sound.

Breathing like this releases stress, and is also taught as a form of breathing in meditation.

Why do you normally need to sit or lie down when laughing or crying?
Because your body needs those muscles to express the grief or the joy. Eventually the muscles holding onto skeleton are getting in the way of the expression of the emotion and eventually we surrender to it.

Donald trains his professional presenters, when there is a countdown from 10, they start breathing out from about 5 and on 1, release muscles and get into their talking.

You are not better than your audience, you are simply reiterating opinions that your audience already has. You are not teaching them something, if you were you would be inventing language and teaching them new words. You are using language that you assume they already know. Always a sharing.

Language in and of itself is a sharing experience, rather than a teaching experience.

Sit in a non-confrontational zone and be witnessed.

When a gorilla wants to pretend that it is strong and angry, it stands on its back legs and beats its chest. When it wants to 'get on with it / hurt you' it drops back down and that's when you are in trouble. Same with performers. Some do it for 'show'.

When public speaking, '*lose an inch*'. Use the 3 hinges; ankles, knees and hips. Drop down, relax your spine and let your gut go. Let your whole body lose an inch. From that position you are ready to physically do something.

Speech is a physical activity; you have to move breath out your body, move muscles in your mouth, you have to shape things. You have to get some muscles out of the way and some muscles in the way, you have to get them active.

As you prepare to speak, before you get up, from the sitting position, by all means 'suck it in' and create the tension, so that you have something to let go of when you turn around to look at the audience. So that moment of tension before gives you the *opportunity* to release. Experience the moment of letting go before you speak. You need to experience the feeling of letting go. If you can feel into your hips / pelvic

floor, let those muscles release. Whatever awareness you have through that part of the body, if you can find a muscle 'down there' that you know how to engage and release, that begins to give you access to release that breath system.

Tighten that muscle that you know. Walk with it (to the stage / to speak) and just the moment that you are about to speak, release that muscle and let speech happen. *Effort first, release second. We speak out of release, not out of effort.* Speech itself is the coming onto tension. In the process of speaking, the body slowly begins to engage around the thought and to tighten.

So when you get to a full stop or a comma, all those muscles have tightened, therefore the full stop or comma is not an instruction to you to breathe but an instruction to you to let go. If you let go every time you get to a full stop or comma, you will have the whole of you present for the remainder of that thought or the next idea.

In broadcasting, it is useful to hear people doing 'packages'. They do their research, put it together then go into a booth and tell their story to a microphone. This would never sound as good as when they have to do something live at the scene. If you played those two voices back, they would be barely recognizable.

What are they are doing in a live crossing? When they are at the scene, there are multiple stimuli going on. The world behind them, e.g. a building has just collapsed, an earthquake zone. *The body of the presenter starts working in the 360 degrees.* It's listening, looking, smelling.

All your senses come alive. And this is more important than speaking. And because they are feeding into the system in an excited manner, the system is a by-product of the moment. When they start talking to the camera, the body doesn't all of a sudden go 'oh that building is NOT going to fall down', whereas in the studio, the body does not focus on external stimuli that it would normally out in the street. All this stimuli actually makes your voice *more* dynamic than when you are sitting in a stagnant environment.

Your job is to create a constant stimulus that has measurability to it. To do this in public speaking, every object has a location – *Measureable Geography*.

Donald uses the example of how he says the word 'jug' when referring to jugs at different locations in the room. The relationship to the object is determining the language that we use.

The problem is when you write out a speech, they become words on a page instead of objects in the world.

When you are writing it, you are thinking of the objects, however, when you are speaking it, you are thinking of the audience in front of you and continually addressing them. **You actually need to be addressing the objects that you are**

referring to. *Every single noun that you refer to in your speech needs to have a measurable geography.*

Also anything that reflects a noun. If you have an adjective describing the tall / beautiful / broad mountain. There is difference between the word tall and broad. The difference is to do with the description of the geography. *Even the adjectives are related to finding the noun in relationship to it's measurable geography.*

If you are standing 20 kms away from a peak of the mountain you would say 'oh my god look at that peak of the mountain'. If you stand at the base of the mountain, the same words would sound very different. The proximity of the peak changes the way you say the word 'peak'. It's measurability is what gives it it's dynamic.

Does the object move? If you talk about being at the race track, you don't talk about being at the race track. You are actually describing the movement of the car past you on the word 'race track' instead of the figure 8 which is the shape of the track.

Your voice has measurable geography; size, scale, movement, texture, etc. All of that gives the listener a sense of what you are describing. The word 'car' sounds different when describing a little Mazda 121 than when describing a Hummer. The same word has a completely different way of being spoken.

The idea that there is a 'way' to speak is problematic, as it suggests a reduction of the individual and that there is a set of standards that must be adhered to when in fact the language is related to your personal experience and can *only* related to your personal experience.

This is important when doing a sales pitch...and also a good way to learn to lie. One can hear the lie very quickly because the lie is not related to the object anymore, it is related to something else. In a sales pitch, you have to really get involved and really experience that product. So that when you are selling it, your sense of it's measurability is so engrained that it does sound like you know what you are talking about.

Exercise: Donald got us to say the word 'glass' when we held it in front of us. First time when empty and second time with liquid in it. We indicate the value of the object through how we say the word.

All words are simply **tags**.

When you engage with the size, shape, texture of the object when you are talking all of that will be embedded in your voice. *You cannot act that.* You literally have to use the word as a tag for the object not as something that represents the English language. The word is there to represent objects.

If the moment you stand up to speak, you think your job is to make the English language sound richer, sound more exciting and dynamic, you've made a mistake.

Donald does not deal with any 'pretty' text. Students have to bring stories of war, conflict, devastation, loss because as a society we have become so 'tidy' that we talk about everything that's nice. We've forgotten that when terrible things are happening, like murder, someone is yelling / screaming something not nice, but they are still speaking English.

When you accept that words are tags, you let go of the need to tidy the language and get involved in the content.

When we've established our actual place on the planet and everything's distance is from us, we engage our natural storytelling ability which we do everyday. We take the object from where it is, we go collect it, we bring it and put it next to us.

This is a *vocal journey* that we do naturally. We remember where the incident took place and we recreate it around ourselves. We still *recreate* it around ourselves in the 360. One of the problems with having an audience in front of you is that we keep wanting to put the world in front of ourselves. This is a limiting factor.

Donald gives example of telling a story 'I was walking down this alley and there was this guy walking 20 metres behind me'. Your voice as you tell the story illustrates that he was behind you. Your voice has to operate like a 'laser pointer'. *The same red laser pointer that you make your cat chase around the room, you have to make your audience chase that laser pointer around the room.* That's what *your voice* does.

Word by word is moving from object to object to object.

Judi Dench says that in every single line of Shakespeare. **In the 8-10 words, you should be dealing with 3-8 images.** If you are not referencing 3-8 images per line, you are not talking, you are reading. In your speech, work out how many objects are referenced, either by the noun, verb or adjective, and can you use your voice as a laser pointer to reference those objects continuously as you are talking. Be they in their actual location or in their recreated location in the room or in relationship to your audience.

Within that relationship, there is *you, your audience* and *your object*.

There is a **triangular** relationship between you, your audience and whichever object you are talking about in each moment. There is a connection between you and your audience, and then the two of you have a relationship to your object as well. The object has a relationship to you, you go into relationship with your audience, **your job is to get your audience to look at the object.** You know where the object is because you've experienced it.

Your voice is *hypermobile*. Pitch, pace and volume variation is directly related to these ideas and to *passion*. The more passionate we are, we tend to get louder.

Take all your habits of what you think good presentation and good breathing is and ask '*what do I do?*' When you've done something you really enjoy, e.g. sports match,

concert, and you are telling someone else about it because it really matters to you in that moment, all the (techniques of speaking) are happening *naturally*. The question is how do you keep that alive in a presentation environment. To do this, make sure your nouns, i.e. whatever images that you are dealing with, you want to choose the most stimulating.

The *bombs* in Iraq or Syria. You want to talk about the ones with *nerve gas*. You want to talk about the ones that destroy entire areas so that people understand what you are talking about. **Find the image that is most stimulating and make sure that it is stimulating to you.** You are permanently in a slightly excited state. It's about getting all of your 5 senses really woken up.

In an excited state, how do you stand still?

Imagine the world around you moving instead of you moving. If it's those objects, let the excitement be in the 'laser pointer'. So that your voice is continually travelling to different places. **This is what keeps stimulating people.**

If you talk equal distance, measured tone, open, rich, warm, you will put your audience to sleep. It starts to be meditative, rather than stimulative.

In a 10 minute speech, how do you keep it stimulating?

Look for the person that is being intrigued by what you are saying, so that the relationship between the audience to you keeps you stimulated. So if there is someone that is not responding, it is not useful to go to that person.

If you go towards the person that is listening and engaged with you, you know they can see what you are talking about, you start to relax in your expression of it, you trust that your images are in existence.

99.9% of the objects you talk about are **connected to the ground.**

When voice becomes thin, it tends to say that the person is speaking about something they've imagined in their head, rather than what they've seen connected by gravity to the planet. What is the *gravitational influence* on the object you are describing? If you want to be *grounded*, ground every object you talk about. The tone you use to describe the object is also related to *its weight*.

Shakespeare is a genius because in every single sentence he puts in antithetical ideas. *Sky* and *earth*. *Large* and *tiny*. Speaking Shakespeare is as exciting as it is when someone gets it right is you've got this constant dynamic variation between the two extremes. And in literally referencing them, we (the audience) end up in this same 'contamiter'.

Start using measurable geography as a daily habit. Children walk around and they point and name. *Start pointing and naming objects*. Get used to the fact that you are naming objects. Actors need to have an active imagination 24/7.

The bigger your 'image vocabulary' the better. *Start by creating a list that stimulate you enormously. 30 things that really spark your imagination.* If you can bring 6 or 7 of those things into the speech that will already excite the ideas in the text and begin to give them a comparative relationship to the object that is stimulating you most strongly.

Size of the room. 'Dead spots' in the room.

Would people from other cultures have a problem with these dead spots?

Other cultures talk loudly all the time because it is appropriate in the background / culture.

The problem with English speakers in the Anglo-Saxon world is that we've learnt to be quiet. We've learnt how to make the language sound pretty, to hide behind well spoken sentences, which is convenient for politicians! Allowed English to become the international language and language of business and it has become *sanitized* in that process.

In our culture we have 'inside and outside' voices. Only the outside voice is appropriate to presentation. Also we have the public voice and private voice. The private voice is normally more interesting. We've all been in a train, bus or restaurant when a couple is arguing and we think 'take it home'.

Suddenly they are behaving inappropriately publicly. In the cultures which are loud, there is no difference between public and private world. What makes us do the wrong thing in presentations is that we have a weird relationship between the public and private world. It's strongly related to our cultural background.

The more working class, rural, large family / grouping, *the louder we tend to be.*

When we are loud, we don't battle to fill those spaces. Practice taking up space. Be prepared to walk into a room and go 'I'm going to be loud and if someone doesn't like my volume, they can leave' rather than 'I'm going to accommodate your English sensibilities and speak nicely to you.'

Living in a hut of 10 people. Everyone can tell when you are in a bad mood or elated. In this country, when a child is in a bad mood, we tell them to go their room until they can behave appropriately. *We have edited out any sense of dynamic in their social practice...and we expect them to be vocally dynamic when they are doing presentations but we are not allowing them to be socially dynamic.*

If voice is a by-product, you have to address underneath all of that what it is in your sense of self-editing that's reducing your ability to participate freely in that public forum. Much bigger discussion and harder one to overcome. *Undoing years and years of patterning.*

For an actor who has done the same show a thousand times, they have to keep changing the objects, images and where they are located. Continually adjust their relationships with those objects so that every night when they go on, they are fresh

objects. The words can never change but the objects change. ***The image that the word is tagging can change over and over. That is how they keep it alive.***

Sanitation of English / Culture can be said to have led to the growth of the pub, standup comedy, reality television and 24 hour news. In Hollywood, the actors are so quiet that in order to sell the movies they need 'green screens' for everything.

The set, background and special effects are loud because the people are no longer being loud. These are things that stimulate us (instead of the acting). We've moved the stimulation away from the average person in the room, being themselves, expressing an opinion, because we are so judgmental of that as a fundamental practice.

How do you go into a room to stimulate, agitate and not be sanitized? Someone should leave there hating you.