

Richard Dale Sjoerdsma

To Cherish Is A Choice



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WORLD VOICE DAY 2018 IS UPON us. Increasingly, voice specialists and practitioners of all stripes invent a fascinating variety of ways to celebrate the human voice, from the highly scientific to the deeply intellectual, from pedagogic to performance to playful. These all tend to be activities in which we actively engage with others. With two highly charged *ch* words, a noun and an active verb form, the current WVD theme, which I find brilliantly provocative, draws the focus inward to the level of conscious decision.

“Make the Choice to Cherish Your Voice.” The key word, I think, is *cherish*, a word not in common parlance, and, when found, usually limited to amorous application. In fact, when I encounter it, a 1966 tune by The Association, “Cherish is the word I use to describe . . .,” provides an earworm that gains occupancy for an extended period. As the continuation of that text would indicate, however, the voice probably would not be the first direct object of the verb to come to mind.

Cherish finds its source in the Old French *cheriss-*, the lengthened stem of *cherir*, the base for which is the Latin *carus* (dear). The early sense was—and to large degree remains—“to hold dear.”¹ But to me it carries a much stronger connotation: to value, to treasure, to nurture, to watch over—a connotation with which Mr. Roget would seem to agree.

Why cherish your voice? It is, of course the only one we have, and with it a level of communication unique among creatures. Whether or not humans are the only animals that can speak is largely a semantic problem that depends upon one’s definition of “speak.” It does seem incontrovertible, however, that humans possess evolved brains that produced language and syntax, with an incredible range of sounds, tones, and inflections used to form vocabularies with hundreds of thousands of words. Of particular interest to us as singing artists is a school of thought, promulgated by Husler and others,² that the laryngeal organ “has had a multiple function in terms of communication that has its origins in ‘singing,’ as opposed to ‘speaking.’”³ World Voice Day seems an ideal occasion to celebrate the voice as ultimately a singing organ.

How does one cherish one’s voice? First, voice training, anatomic/physiologic knowledge of the instrument, vocal hygiene and care, along with similar obvious matters that leap immediately to mind, have received ample attention in this journal, from myriad books on voice, and in a wide variety of other printed, aural, and visual sources; further elaboration here would be superfluous. Second, I would suggest that *cherish* implies acceptance. Not only is it the only voice we own, it is unique to each individual, and to

nurture it is to love and accept it as a gift. By extension, that would imply, thirdly, that to cherish the voice is to cherish one's self, to embrace that body, mind, and soul are integral to voice. Thus, it is important to educate the self, to nourish the mind, to feed the soul. In the last several issues of the *Journal of Singing*, I published in consecutive "Provenance" columns reprints of Richard De Young's *Repeated Notes*; several of these eloquently address issues of personal, artistic, and spiritual development, and bear repeated readings. To cherish the voice, after all, is not so much for personal self-gratification or aggrandizement as it is for communication with and the edification of others.

Now we arrive at the heart of the matter. "Make the choice . . ." What I communicate next, I had all along determined to reveal only in my final edition of "Editor's Commentary," whenever that may be. Many readers who have followed this column for the last five years are aware of my bout with cancer. In July 2012, I had a malignant lymph node with expansion removed from the neck, which, in turn, apparently resulted from a rogue cell or two that lingered following an excision of a cancerous lesion from the floor of my mouth six years earlier. The later surgery was followed by a six-week program of aggressive radiation therapy that had deleterious effects on my voice. Upon my request, the radiation oncologist made every effort to incur minimal laryngeal damage, a commitment in which, according to my otolaryngologist/surgeon, he succeeded in so far as was possible. Nonetheless, my voice has changed rather significantly, and I no longer sing publicly.⁴

I need to share with you that the initial cancer—and thus its subsequent spawn—can be directly attributed to my history of smoking and drinking. Although painful to admit, for a variety of reasons that would take a book to detail, I had for a time made a choice *not* to cherish my voice, until, in the case of alcohol abuse, it became a condition that lay beyond volition, when choice was no longer an option. Freedom came through divine intervention, a hospitalization, and a continuing 12-step recovery program. Although I have been clean and sober since 1986 and nicotine free since 1988, there remained a price to be paid—that was the sacrifice of a

God-given gift on the pagan altar of addiction. I can't begin to describe the quality of life and many blessings that have been given to me over the past 31 years, including the editorship of this journal. Still, it is a loss that I continue to grieve and a tale that I regret to tell, but if I can help one soul . . .

Make the choice to cherish your voice.

NOTES

1. Glynnis Chantrell, *The Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 93.
2. Frederick Husler and Yvonne Rodd-Marling, *Singing: The Physical Nature of the Vocal Organ*, rev. ed. (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1976).
3. Comments from an email communication with *Journal of Singing* Associate Editor, Leslie De'Ath.
4. Cf. Keith DeBlieux and Jaime Eaglin Moore, "Radiation Therapy for Laryngeal Cancer," *Journal of Singing* 74, no. 3 (January/February 2018): 307–310.

Musicians wrestle everywhere:
All day, among the crowded air,
I hear the silver strife;
And—waking long before the dawn—
Such transport breaks upon the town
I think it that "new life!"

It is not bird, it has no nest;
Nor band, in brass and scarlet dressed,
Nor tambourine, nor man;
It is not hymn from pulpit read,—
The morning stars the treble led
On time's first afternoon!

Some say it is the spheres at play!
Some say that bright majority
Of vanished dames and men!
Some think it service in the place
Where we, with late, celestial face,
Please God, shall ascertain!

Emily Dickinson, "Melodies Unheard"