I am very excited to finally put my degree from the Boston Conservatory of Music to good use in my current career as a prenatal yoga teacher and labor support doula! Recently during class I have focused a lot on vocal toning and its benefits during labor and birth.

So let me back up a bit to my days as a singer. I had what I refer to as “Debraisms,” which were my own special ways (read: bad habits) of dealing with a note or part of a song about which I didn’t feel confident. I would rush by that note or phrase and get very tight in the neck, throat and shoulders. To combat the problem, my teacher would ask me to move my hips around to encourage my body—especially my neck and throat—to relax. The result would be that the notes that once gave me problems would soar out with ease and beauty. So what does that have to do with birth and labor, you might ask?

Well, as I had suspected from my own experience of constriction and release, a strong connection exists between an open throat and an open pelvis. The neck is called the cervical spine and the lower, narrow portion of the uterus is called the cervix (Latin for neck). The cervix and vocal fold tissue behave similarly when tested. For years I have humorously used the phrase open throat, open vagina!—but the statement really rings true. When the throat is open, the opening is reflected in the throat of the uterus, the cervix.

You may not be a professional singer, but you may have sung out loud with a strong and mighty voice in the shower, convinced that you should be the next American Idol. Yes, I do believe that some of my best vocal renditions have been in the peace and privacy of my own shower oasis. When I belt out songs under the warm waterfall, I am totally at ease. The water relaxes me, and I am not concerned about judgment (well, save for the neighbors) or fear of failure.

When anxiety or fear sets in, the body reacts by tightening. Fear releases adrenaline into the bloodstream causing the body to jump into “fight or flight” mode. If you’ve ever had to scream for help, you know that the voice often comes out tight, screechy and high-pitched. Being aware of the sounds of your voice can give an indication as to your mental state, how you are breathing, and your body’s biological reaction to what is happening.

During labor, ask your partner or doula to listen to the quality of your voice and notice whether it is high-pitched and constricted. If it is, have him or her hum, sigh or let out a gentle “ahhh” sound with you. This will help you lengthen your breath and lower the pitch. I use this technique a lot with my labor support doula clients. When I hear these sounds, I know that they are breathing deeply. This conscious way of breathing promotes the function of the parasympathetic nervous system, which decreases the heart rate and blood pressure and moves the body into a state of rest and recuperation. Practicing these sounds is called vocal toning.

Vocal toning has many benefits, including:

- Opening the throat, which opens and relaxes the pelvic muscles;
- Ensuring deep breathing;
- Promoting relaxation of the mind and body, which releases stress and anxiety;
- Lengthening the breath;
- Serving as a productive pain management tool;
- Creating vibration in the body, which can relax the muscles; and
- Stopping the “fear, tension, pain” cycle.

While many women find vocal toning awkward and foreign when they try it in class, they often report back after their birth that it was a very useful tool and that they were glad they knew about it. You don’t need a degree from a music conservatory or the nod from Simon to harness the power of your own breath. Just open up, let go, and “ahhh.”

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