

Vocal image. I never gave much thought to my voice forming an image of any kind. Though some people may say it is common sense to know our voices give others an impression, even if the impression is not flattering, I did not think of vocal image as significant.

Looking back, I cannot pinpoint an exact moment that gave a hint of what was going to happen to my voice or my life.

However, in July 1999, I finally made an appointment with a local Ear Nose and Throat (ENT) specialist after nearly a year of (what I thought) was laryngitis happening off and on.

I had moved to my home state four years prior. I was in my third year of employment. Among other duties, part of my job was to share in answering incoming calls. My voice had deteriorated to the point where some callers thought I was fighting sinus trouble and often said, “Poor dear! I hope you feel better soon!” One caller, pleased with information I provided said, “Thank you sir! You’ve been a big help!”

Ironically, one regular caller—before I transferred the call—asked, “When are you going to see about your voice?” I smiled and answered, “I have an appointment tomorrow to see about it. Thanks for asking!”

My husband drove me to the doctor’s office. When we arrived, I registered with the receptionist and sat in the waiting room. I had no fear, but I was curious.

Naturally, I wanted to know if the trouble in my voice was because of the singing. Anyway, my name was called. As I entered the exam room, I scanned the charts on the wall, tongue depressors in a container and a machine next to the chair.

The doctor explained all the details involved in a laryngoscopy. I marveled there is a nasal spray of medicine to numb the throat to prevent gagging while the fiber optic camera scope showed my vocal cords.

While checking my vocal cords, the doctor instructed me to repeat the word, “One.” After saying the word a few times, he removed the scope and wrote on my chart “spastic dystonia.”

He assured, “There are no polyps, but your cords are slightly irritated. I don’t treat spasmodic dysphonia, but I can refer you to a speech pathologist to begin treatment. Now, your vocal cords are only slightly irritated; but over time and without treatment, scar tissue can develop on your vocal cords and surgery will be needed to remove the scar tissue. Do you sing?” My heart jumped. I answered, “Yes.” He said, “Though I don’t treat this condition, I will advise you not to sing. Rest your voice as much as possible until you see a speech pathologist.”

I was grateful to know there were no polyps on my vocal cords. Fighting back tears, I thanked the doctor for his help as I left the exam room. As my husband opened the door to leave, he asked, “What did the doctor say?” I could only imagine what my husband thought seeing me lose the fight with my tears. As we walked to the car, I finally answered, “He told me to rest my voice as much as possible and not to sing until after I see a speech pathologist. I was all right until he told me not to sing.” My husband said, “At least, he didn’t say stop singing for good.” I sort of smiled and nodded. It was a quiet ride to work. I arrived at lunch time. When I got to my desk, I

turned on my computer, typed “spasmodic dysphonia” and saw the name of a doctor in California. I read about different treatments people were using. I was glad to see there were non-medicinal, non-surgical treatments available. They were my last-resort options.

I called the number. Surprisingly, the doctor answered the phone. I expected an office assistant would answer. I explained I was newly diagnosed with spasmodic dysphonia and that his name came up while searching for information about cause and treatment.

I told him he had a good idea for voice recovery. I was disappointed no training of his technique was available locally. However, I learned a popular radio host was interviewed to talk about her experience with the same condition! Just knowing *that* gave me hope! I thanked him for his time. The next available date for my appointment with the speech pathologist was six months away.

Fast forward to January 2000, I went to the speech pathologist. Before starting vocal therapy with her, another laryngoscopy was done. In addition to a battery of tests, she recorded my voice to set a baseline, explained to me about easy onset, and gave me a list of words to practice.

What once was done without thinking now had to be done with conscious effort. I found online support through the National Spasmodic Dysphonia Association website. I resigned my office job to find a job allowing me to rest my voice per the doctor’s orders.

I found a manufacturing job working third shift. I enrolled in college for the 2001 Spring semester determined to gain control of my life. I gave an informational speech about spasmodic dysphonia in my Comp 1 class. I was better than lucky to learn my Comp 1 instructor was also a certified speech pathologist! I followed through on information she supplied and got a personal amplifying system. I am also grateful for the support of my co-workers and a husband and wife team from Tutwiler, Mississippi for their work with me.

In April 2003, my voice began to improve. My new co-workers were happy for me. Even though my voice had not fully recovered, I returned to office work for a while. Within the last couple of years, I gained courage to explain upfront when speaking publicly that I have a voice condition called spasmodic dysphonia. It is not life-threatening, but it is life-changing.