

An outline of

The Five Fundamentals of Singing

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Q. What is, or what are, The Five Fundamentals of Singing (TFF)?

If you're anything like I was, you may wonder in frustration: *why do some people just seem to have it, while no matter how much I practice, I just can't seem to get the voice I want?*

The thing is, it's not that you may have missed the memo on the right scales, quirky trick, or knowledge about how the voice works – instead, there are fundamental physical and mental traits that natural singers have that those of us who struggle with singing have either lost or neglected.

The five fundamentals of singing are those five fundamental components of a great voice that you need to have in order to reach your singing potential. Much of what you'll find here, you won't find elsewhere in the singing teaching world!

You see, I've found that the singing teaching world knows how to hone an already decent voice but when it comes to the struggling singer, too many teachers throw overly technical remedies at us that don't address the root cause of what's holding us back. The five fundamentals get to the root cause.

The common skills that all aspiring singers wish to develop, such as better pitch, richer tone, bigger range, less constriction, or being able to “belt” for example, naturally start to emerge as they develop these fundamentals. It may come as a surprise that, by establishing a solid framework of fundamentals, these skills don't require a great deal of specific training of their own.

The approach to singing training that you'll be introduced to in this outline is all about how to build the physical and mental capacities that enable you to develop the best possible vocal instrument you can develop.

Technique and time practicing do matter but the overarching idea here is that, if you want your fabled 10,000 hours of practice to count for anything, you need these five fundamentals in place.

Bang your head against the wall of singing technique no more!

The Five Fundamentals of Singing (TFF for short) is a training system I developed that guides you through the development of these fundamentals in your own voice. It is designed to give you an intuitive knowledge and feel for what makes a voice really tick, without needing to know intricate vocal science, and with the aim of enabling you to take the reins and teach yourself.

TFF does employ some traditional methods but if you've been trying to sing for some time, much of what you will learn in TFF is very different to what you've probably been taught before.

Once upon a time, singing used to be a complete mystery to me but now I “see” it as clearly as my fingers working a guitar, and I can practice with the same amount of certainty and clarity. Through TFF, my wish is to pass that same certainty and clarity onto you.

The Five Fundamentals at a glance

Fundamental 1:

The Singer's Core

- There's a reason why so many aspiring singers spend years frustratingly messing around with breathing technique: it's because their bodies simply lack the basic strength and structural integrity necessary for that technique to actually achieve anything. A strong and well-aligned core is necessary overall but it especially makes hitting powerful high notes effortless without so much work put into "supporting the note". Breathing technique still matters but it's nothing without a foundation of strength;

Fundamental 2:

The Animated Face

- Your vocal tract works best when the rest of the chain that connects to it is working its best. We've touched on the core already but what few consider is how well your face functions. A well functioning jaw and facial muscles are, as with F1, critical for all aspects of good singing, but improving tone and resonance and fixing nasality is where F2 plays an especially big part;

Fundamental 3:

Single-point-singing

- There is no such thing as "high" and "low" notes in a real physical sense. Therefore, singing as if the notes are *up* or *down* upsets the natural action of the muscles of the vocal tract. Singing on a single point goes a long way to fixing constriction and choking on high notes;

Fundamental 4:

The 'self-focussed' voice

- Take any song you enjoy and try to sing it right now. As you are singing it, notice if at the same time you are also "hearing" the original recording of that song in your head. This needs to stop if you are to sing your best. It should only be you, focussed on your own voice, in the moment. This is how you really find your own voice;

Fundamental 5:

The Primary Functions

- The singing voice has always been broken down into parts and the task given to the aspiring singer is to learn to connect those parts together for a seamless voice. There is much debate and confusion surrounding this and I apply my own approach that I believe makes it much easier to understand the voice as a whole and it removes the fear of the breaks, bridges or transitions in the voice that every aspiring singer seeks to eliminate.

Q. Full overview of the fundamentals

There are both physical and psychological elements to having a great voice. The fundamentals are a bit of both but some are more one or the other. Fundamentals One and Two are very much physical, Three and Four are primarily psychological, and Five is a bit of both.

When developing the Fundamentals, the physical should be worked on first, but not exclusively. Meaning: as important as the concept of Single-Point-Singing (**F3**) is, you will have a much harder time developing it with poor core strength and structure (**F1**) and poor facial muscle activity (**F2**) – but, you don't need to wait until **F1** and **F2** are *perfect* before working on **F3**, for example.

Overall, if you only take away one thing from this outline, let it be this:

You can do all the scales and all the song application you want but if you're lacking adequate development in these five fundamentals, you'll never be able to create the voice you desire, no matter how much time you commit to it.

Fundamental one:

The Singer's Core

- **As an aspiring singer, you probably have a very hard time grasping the concept of *breath support*. This is likely because what you are lacking is not breathing technique but a well-structured torso and adequate core strength necessary to support good singing.**

By pure chance, the biggest breakthrough I had in improving my voice after years of conventional practice, was when I decided to start working out. Turns out all the technical breathing and support exercises I had practiced for hours on end weren't helping me sing better because my vocal support mechanism was simply *too weak for singing*.

Too weak for singing? How's that even possible? I wasn't a weakling in general but it turns out it takes a lot better core strength than you'd realize to sing the way we all want to sing. Famously great singers have exercised these muscles from a very young age. The rest of us need to play catch-up and the quickest and most effective way to do this is:

Strength training for singers

I advocate a targeted strength training program for singers to take primacy over practicing breathing technique. I would never say that breathing technique isn't important, just that it counts for very little without a solid foundation of core strength. To start with, we must counteract the effects of living a sedentary lifestyle. These days we grow up sitting down. Our body and its muscles are compromised and weakened because of it – and the core muscles that power and control singing don't magically escape this fate. Breath support is a very necessary component of singing but if your

body is set up well, breathing for singing can be picked up much more quickly, and much less arduously than you may have been led to believe.

- 1) Traditional breathing exercises are the slow (and often never-ending) road to a strong support mechanism. Strength training does most of the same job, except much more quickly and effectively;
- 2) Strength training provides the foundation upon which effective breath support technique can be applied;
- 3) Most teachers will tell you to give a big note more support (more physical effort in your core) but if you make your core stronger overall, the effort you need to apply to support a note is lessened, making your job easier in the moment.

Our voices depend upon a well functioning body to operate effectively. The closer we can get our bodies to a natural, functional set up, the greater the chance we have to develop to our vocal potential.

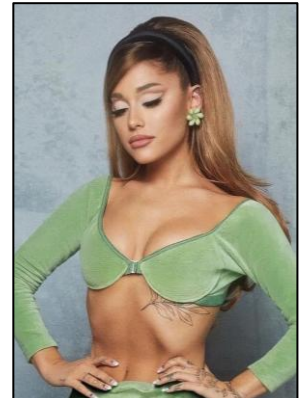
I don't believe that vocal "support" and breath management are *skills*, as is commonly taught. When our body is operating well, good breathing "technique" is part and parcel of this.

The strength training approach supersedes support and breath management with the lung power that comes with natural *strength and structural integrity*.

Notice any similarities between great singers and humans not living sedentary lives?

They have huge ribcages and great posture.

The better you can emulate these examples, the better your breath support and breathing technique will be.



How to posture: I remember trying to sing while standing stiff as a board, trying to hold my posture right, while trying to do scales. It just felt awkward, and there was too much to concentrate on. Unfortunately, good posture isn't something you can just switch on.

Due to our sedentary culture, most of us grow up looking like someone was [cutting corners when constructing us](#). Our natural structural potential has been compromised by the humble but not-so-harmless chair, among other things. Good posture is not a set-up you can just adopt - it's the end result of a naturally strong musculature brought on by the appropriate training and use of certain muscle groups.

Good structure allows for good function: Think about: how well are you going to be able to play a cheap, poorly strung, warped-neck guitar? Structure and function are inherently tied together. Breathing technique is much less of a battle when the body is strong and structured well.

Fundamental two:

The Animated Face

- Just as we have sedentary lives with our bodies, so too do we have sedentary faces. One of the key differences between a singer with a great voice and one without is the state of the muscles above the neck. We can't sing well with inadequate strength and activity in our jaw and facial muscles.

There are essentially two parts to F2:

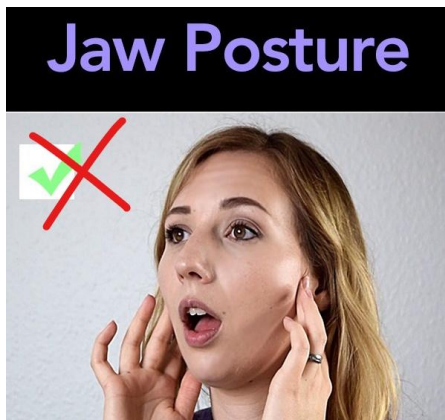
- 1. Facial muscle activity:** Naturally good singers have vibrant, expressive faces when they sing. Just the same as how having strength and power in the body allows for physical athleticism, so does having strength and power in the facial muscles allow for vocal athleticism. This doesn't mean that all is lost for those of us who may not see ourselves as having good jaw structure. If we understand what creates good jaw structure - which is having sufficiently strong and active muscles of the face and jaw, as well as proper tongue posture - then we can activate and strengthen these muscles to bring our voice to life.

Here are some examples of strong and vibrant facial muscles:



Notice the engaged checks, engaged eyes, the alignment and power of the jaw, and even the crinkled noses. This is more than just singing with emotion.

2. **Alignment of the jaw:** the common prescription for jaw position or alignment when singing is, “collected down and back”. This ‘neutral jaw’ position has our lower teeth starting from their normal closed mouth position and then moving further backward as the jaw hinges down. I argue that when singing, our upper and lower teeth should instead be *in line* with each other as the default position. Additionally, jaw tension is something singing teachers always try to fix but jaw tension is a symptom with many causes not of the jaw itself. The jaw, when done right, is a source of power for the singer. It’s not something to be relaxed or neutralized.



[This](#) is an illustration of what is still widely taught as correct jaw alignment and action for singing but great natural singers contradict this rule all the time (see previous images above and Pavarotti below).



This is Pavarotti as an example of what I call the “confident jaw”. Notice the alignment of the upper and lower teeth compared to the image above.

Also note the “lift” in the cheekbones, even the scrunching of the nose owing to the activity of the facial muscles (as previously mentioned). Note that this is **not** just about opening your mouth more but about engaging the face as a whole.

Nasality is a complaint many people have about their voice. This I’ve found has very little to do with adjusting the soft palate, as I was taught but instead about firing up my lazy facial muscles. Once I learned to get more active in my jaw, face, and lips, the nasality went away. In a traditional sense, you could say we are talking about *enunciation* here but there is a little more to it than this.

Try observing great singers and speakers (such as news anchors and actors) – you’ll start seeing a confident jaw and animated facial muscles. Then check yourself in the mirror, is your face slacking off?

Fundamental three:

Single-Point-Singing (SPS)

- **This fundamental is important for improving pitch and vocal freedom and removing constrictions and doubt from the voice**

Here is something that may come as a bit of a shock to you: ***there is no such thing as high and low notes***. Changes in pitch are caused by changes in *frequency*, which is caused by the vocal folds vibrating *faster or slower*. There is no up or down in this equation.

A little bit of throat science:

The larynx isn't equipped with the type of nerves that allow us to feel what's going on down there, so even though the larynx does (and *should*) move up and down during singing, we cannot directly feel it. If you do feel something, it essentially means you're doing something wrong (so use it as a warning sign!)

So when we are singing, **there should be no feeling of upwards or downwards movement**. There are a number of practice strategies that we can implement in order to cultivate this lack of sensation. In itself, simply becoming aware that there is no such thing as high notes can have the effect of removing a lot of tension, constriction, and bad habits associated with reaching and stretching for notes.

“Higher and lower” is simply mental imagery that we developed some time ago and haven't moved on from since. Because mental imagery has a physical effect (if you think a note is high, you'll reach up for it), we need to remove the idea that 'high C' is *higher* than 'middle C'. This doesn't mean that a 'high C' isn't challenging but if we remove the mental baggage from it, we make it a lot more achievable. Developing **F1** and **F2** will get you closer to hitting a 'high C' with confidence, but if you retain that fear of how “high” it is, you'll sabotage your efforts.

Single-point-singing means:

- Remember to sing forward and straight out on the same (imaginary) point for each note. Yes, physical components of your voice do move but you are not the conscious conductor of this symphony.
- The notes of your range are not like the floors of a building reached by an elevator. This machine goes faster or slower, not up or down.

Fundamental four:

The self-focussed voice

- People talk vaguely about ‘finding your own voice’ – the thing is, your voice isn’t lost or waiting to be found, it’s just being *interrupted* by what I call “subconscious karaoke”

When you sing, it must be all you – and I don’t mean this in a spiritual sense. Just as we all have a unique fingerprint, we all have our own uniquely contoured vocal tract which creates our own “vocal-print”. Unfortunately, most of us try to imitate someone else’s vocal fingerprint.

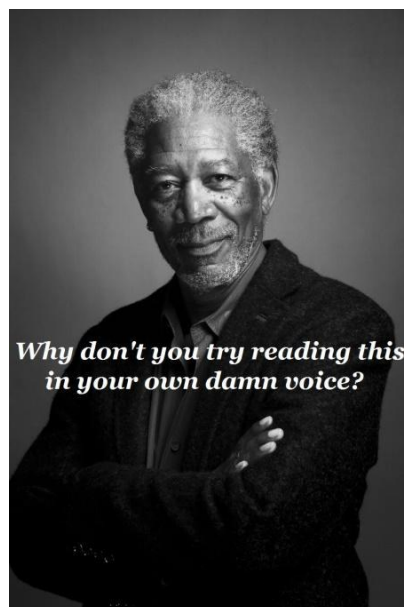
As aspiring singers, we all spend most of our time singing and practicing the songs we enjoy by other artists (before we maybe write our own catalogue). The vast majority of us thus also subconsciously imitate the artist’s voice we are singing with at the time.

Think of your favourite song and you can hear the song and the singer in your head. Chances are, when you go to actually sing the song out loud, you’ll still have the singer’s voice in your head.

Mr Freeman here demonstrates the point well.

Adopting aspects of a singer’s style or tone is all good, but we must always be vigilant about having *their* voice in *our* head when singing.

When we sing, this subconscious “hearing” of another singer’s voice in our heads has a whole host of negative effects on our ability to sing well because it interrupts the normal functioning of our own voices.



- In order to sing a well-known song well, it’s essential (fundamental even!) that we remove the original song from our head as we go to sing it and put ourselves in a state of what is called *flow**
- In order to “find your voice” for originals, you’ll likely need to rework your voice to eliminate the bad habits you’ve picked up from singing along to other artists.
- If you sing the songs of many different artists, then chances are you’re changing your voice with each different song you sing, that’s a lot of unnecessary extra work!

Fundamental five:

The Primary Vocal Functions

- **Ways of understanding and utilizing your voice such as the *register* system (head/chest voice) or the *modes* system are either outdated science or are more clinical than they are practical or intuitive.**

The traditional way to categorize the voice and teach aspiring singers how to use it is through the register system. It's still believed by most people that in order to have a unified tone throughout the whole voice, a singer needs to "mix" head and chest voice, and "bridge" between the two main registers to avoid vocal breaks.

I believe these categories are an inaccurate representation of how our voices actually operate. Yes, if you want to sound the same throughout your entire range, transitions will need to be made at certain points but this does not mean that these transitions are physically rigid and absolute – they are stylistic choices. The belief that there is a break in your voice that you *must* navigate causes more anxiety than it relieves. "*I'm approaching my break*" is probably the most anxiety-inducing technical thing a singer has to think about. The good news is you don't need to!

Research by the [Complete Vocal Institute](#) in Denmark led to a new system of "mapping" the human voice and the way we use it. The framework I use is based on theirs but I have found that their system has its limitations. My own framework differs in some key respects. I believe the system I use to be more intuitive and user-friendly than either the CVI system or the traditional register system.

The system I use categorizes the voice-based upon the purpose that it evolved to serve:

Communication

Without the need to communicate something (danger, safety, or desire for example), there would be no reason for animals to evolve the ability to make sound. All the complexity of language that we know today was built upon very simple foundations that emerged in our ancestors a long time ago to meet the basic needs of survival for a social animal. Singing further branched off of this foundation.

For singing, we make things infinitely easier for ourselves if we learn to tap into these baseline functions of communication:

- The *Intimate* function
- The *Muse* function
- The *Affect* function
- The *Assert* function

Some of this stuff will no doubt stir up debate but I'll save the wider discussions for elsewhere.

Below, we'll look at the functions in a little more detail. I have presented them in order of their relative volume to each other – low to high – which also coincides with the *intensity* of their tone.

Although you can produce quite loud sounds in the high parts of the voice with a low intensity function, it will still be quieter than that same note produced with a higher intensity function.

The Functions:

Intimate

Salient characteristics:

Very soft; can be aspirated (air added); intimate; comforting; very personal or close proximity

- Very low relative volume (but in the very high parts of the voice this function will be medium-loud)

Songs where examples can be found:

Boyfriend by Justin Bieber (The spoken verses)

Lay Me Down by Sam Smith (Most of the first verse)

Ocean Eyes by Billie Eilish (Chorus)

Muse

Salient characteristics:

Contemplative; a distant or wishful idea; dreamy; gentle affection or friendliness;

- Low to medium relative volume

Songs where examples can be found:

Somewhere Over the Rainbow

Sittin on the Dock of the Bay

Amazing Grace

Sign of the Times by Harry Styles (First verse)

Affect

Salient characteristics:

Palpable or affective; dramatic; passionate; often about desire, frustration, or sadness in regards to love

- Medium to high relative volume

Songs where examples can be found:

Nessun Dorma (Pavarotti's version being the prime example)

The Power of Love by Celine Dion (chorus)

Bohemian Rhapsody by Queen ("Mama...")

Diamonds by Rihanna (chorus, pre-chorus, the versus are a good example of a mix of Muse and Affect)

Assert

Salient characteristics:

Commanding tone - like an order given by a general; someone making a confident statement; generally limited to the lower end of your vocal range; can be taken higher but requires a very solid grasp of fundamentals 1 – 4.

- Loud to very loud relative volume

Songs where examples can be found:

Sad but True by Metallica (verses)

Roar by Katy Perry (chorus)

We Will Rock You by Queen (chorus)

NB: The *assert* function isn't used a great deal in popular music; it appears more on individual words than complete sentences. Even heavy metal tends to use the *affect* function (with distortion) more than the *assert* function. The most common functions used by far are *muse* and *affect*.

One important thing to remember is that, when singing, these functions don't have to be applied in a rigid fashion – I imagine these categories above to be somewhat like primary colors with a number of shades. Some phrases that are lyrically contemplative (**muse**) can and will contain tones that fit more into the **affect** function. Some singers can alter certain functions with concentrated manipulation of the vocal tract. A good example of this would be the Bee Gees – they use a low intensity function but make it sound more impactful by having a very narrow vocal tract setting (and various studio production techniques of course!).

[Vowels and modifying your voice for hitting high notes](#)

Vowel modification is a necessary part of Fundamental Five. Different vowels and different functions (they're inherently tied together) are more appropriate in different parts of the voice basically because of the physics of vocalization. The forces that act upon the vocal tract change as one goes up and down in pitch, when loudness is adjusted, and when stylistic choices are made. A big open vowel like "ay" (as in "hey") is going to get very loud and shouty as you go up in pitch and this both doesn't suit the majority of songs stylistically but is also very physically demanding on the voice, thus peoples' voices tend to "break" at a point of exhaustion if they don't adjust to a different mode. People who are new to singing are used to using vowels and functions that are suited to speaking and so need to learn how to use the vowels that are more suited to the physics of singing - vowels that provide both volume and power without being shouty and unmelodic.

What about this thing they call the “vocal break/bridge/passagio”?

When entering the more “difficult” parts of the voice, amateur singers tend to shout for notes or flip into a very light “falsetto” type of voice. This is traditionally understood as hitting your vocal “break/bridge/passagio” – the transition between the traditional categories of chest voice and head voice. The prescription for this breaking or flipping is typically that the aspiring singer needs to “blend” their chest and head voices thus accessing their “mixed voice”.

I believe this to be poor science. The **TFF** understanding of voice structure is much more in line with Catherine Sadolin’s *Complete Vocal Technique*.

What is the end goal of TFF training?

A weightless, effortless, vibrant voice

If you’re wondering what you need to aim for, let those three things be your guide.

One of the biggest confusions for me on my journey of learning to sing was that I didn’t know how it was supposed to feel when I was doing it right (or moving in the right direction).

If the way you are singing doesn’t feel like those three things, or when you are practicing it doesn’t feel like you’re getting closer to those three things, then something needs to be assessed.

You’ll only be embedding bad habits if you try to push through and *force* your way to good singing.

The act of singing itself should not be a battle; it should not be a struggle. This does not mean that it doesn’t require energy to put on a good performance - but if singing for you is more like a fight, then you’re doing something not right.

I truly believe that a good singing voice is the result of all the innate human singing parts working with strength and freedom, where the learner can *play and experiment* to achieve the sound they desire. It’s not about applying music to the voice through academic techniques, it’s about having a healthy, optimally operating instrument and using it to channel an innate, human, musical potential – because music is in us, we just need the means to get it out.

How and why was TFF developed?

I spent thousands of dollars and nearly a decade trying other people's methods to learn how to sing. While I never struggled with instruments, singing always seemed like a riddle I couldn't wrap my head around (let alone solve). Unlike the guitar, singing didn't come easily to me.

For years I kept trying to improve my voice but it was like I was banging my head against a brick wall and just burning money.

I'm sure I tried every method out there and none of it seemed to help. Some progress seemed to occur but it was haphazard and painstakingly slow. Somehow though, I knew that **it shouldn't be this difficult** and I refused to believe that I couldn't learn to sing the way I wanted to sing. My gut told me that there had to be something missing –that there had to be something critical that just wasn't being taught by all the methods I'd tried.

So one day I just said, *"screw it, I'll figure it out myself"*. I had no idea how I'd do it but I wasn't getting anywhere with the standard approaches anyway, so why not?

Thankfully, my little adventure into the unknown paid off. I managed to discover a few things that absolutely transformed my singing ability. I realized that these weren't just some handy little tricks or voice hacks; they were the real *fundamental* things that were missing from my voice all along.

I knew I was onto something because for the first time ever, progress came thick and fast and importantly, if I did the work, the progress just kept on coming. Whereas before, progress wasn't a sure thing, no matter how much I practiced.

Finally, there was no more banging my head against a brick wall and just hoping the singing gods would grant me a better voice. Instead, now I had ways I knew were guaranteed to not only improve my singing ability but would always be something I could rely on to provide a remedy for when I was having an off day.

This framework does not include banal guidelines such as *get plenty of sleep or drink lots of water* because these things should be common sense. Likewise, "sing in tune" or "express emotion" are not a part of this framework because they are blinding statements of the obvious and they *don't actually tell you anything* about *how to make your voice better*. So, if I were to give a completely descriptive name for **TFF**, it would be something along the lines of: ***"The Five Fundamental Strengths and Skills that Form a Great Vocal Instrument and Enable You to Build Your Own Great Voice"*** but that doesn't have much of a ring to it, does it? So, **The Five Fundamentals of Singing** it is.

Ultimately, the ideas in the **TFF** framework come from three places: my interpretations of voice science and conventional wisdom (where it still applies); the influence of other areas of expertise (such as fitness science, psychology, and others); but most significantly, my own discoveries and successes in attempting to improve my singing through sheer trial and error.

This approach of bringing in new, innovative ideas without throwing away good conventional wisdom has resulted in what I truly believe to be a superior approach to building a great singing voice.

The TFF approach and philosophy

The biology behind the singing process is incredibly complex but the good news is it's far less deliberately controlled than we are commonly led to believe. What this means is that your body knows how to do what it needs to do to produce a sound, without you needing to consciously conduct every little action.

The trouble is, we impede the natural vocalization process because our instrument has been left in disrepair (largely due to contemporary lifestyle factors), and this is where most "less-than-desirable" sounds originate in aspiring singers. To get back to our vocal potential requires rebuilding our vocal instrument in order to give ourselves the best set-up to practice and perform with.

So the fundamentals are largely about optimizing you physically as well as equipping you with the mental skills that directly impact the singing process. This will allow you to freely practice singing the way you want to sing. Aspiring singers usually have the necessary underlying musical capacity stuck in their head - they just need a bit of assistance in accessing it. So TFF leans more towards **enabling the voice** than about **learning technique**.

An analogy with running might help to explain the TFF approach:

Learning how to use your legs correctly as a child is an almost exclusively instinctive process - yet most people grow up to run with terrible form. *Why?* Because the natural developmental process of our bodies is sent askew by the negative impacts of hours spent in chairs and cushioned footwear (to give just two reasons). This has resulted in the compromising of our natural physical development and thus our ability to operate in the way nature intended. Aches, pains, injuries, and accelerated physical deterioration result.

So if you've ever tried to get fit by going for a run but ended up considering it a fruitless exercise, it's probably not because *you're just not a good runner, or you weren't taught the right technique* - I would say something like: you lost your innate potential to move well because your body wasn't able to develop in the way it was meant to. The goal then becomes to rebuild your body strength-wise and relearn natural human movement, which will allow your innate fitness potential to be pursued.

While I don't think that learning to sing in any given modern genre is as innate as learning to run, there's good evidence to suggest that singing itself is innate. And much like the chair for our bodies, there are aspects of our modern environment that lead to atrophy and poor form in our singing muscles. The solution is therefore to reacquaint ourselves with the natural functioning of the voice and gain sufficient strength in the right muscles in order to enable our natural, human, potential to sing.

Developing the voice to excellence *is* the same as any other pursuit in the sense that it takes deliberate practice and time but what we've been lacking up until this point is a coherent set of physical and mental reasons why some people find this pursuit drastically easier than others. With all the methods I've tried, none of them gave me a sense of truly grasping or being in control of the growth of the singing process. **TFF** gives you that sense of *visceral* understanding and control.

So, if you want your fabled 10,000 hours to count for anything, you need your fundamental framework in place.