

Mumble's The Word

I returned from two weeks in England recently with an interesting cultural document: reams of videocam footage narrated by a sheep.

Well, not exactly. It was me, mumbling nasally away as usual. I saw very few sheep the entire trip, but from the tape you'd think I'd overdubbed in a fold somewhere near Shrewsbury. Next to me, your average Shropshire sounds like Professor Higgins.

I don't know why it surprised me. I've always talked like a ventriloquism school dropout, the result of anxiety reinforced by habit, especially at home. Though it's a bit late to blame my parents, it does make life simpler. They had an interesting take on youthful opinion: children should talk in whispers unless spoken to, then project as though to the balcony. Usually, I barely made it out of the orchestra pit.

'Speak up!' they'd say. 'You act like you're afraid to open your mouth.' Excuse me if I still get the urge to scream into hearing aids.

There's also the matter of being from the midwest, where people treat words the way a pizza cook pounds dough, rounding them off and flattening vowels so far back in the throat you need a tonsillectomy to find them.

So it wasn't like I should suddenly have been modulating in the dulcet tones of Lord Olivier. Nevertheless, I was appalled. Here I had all these resplendent visuals--- Tewkesbury Abbey, ancient streets in Canterbury, the River Avon shining beyond daffodils in the English spring--- and the soundtrack sucked. Worse yet, I'd recorded some of my relatives, from whom words purl distinctly and melodiously, not as bog runoff. The contrast was embarrassing.

'Do I really sound this way?' I asked people. The answers weren't terribly reassuring. 'It doesn't distract me from what you're saying,' said a neighbor. 'You're better than you used to be,' said Marsha. Huh? That's like saying you're great in the sack till you unzip your fly.

So I decided to seek therapy. I'd addressed the issue briefly once before, in Hellerwork, a massotherapy program that restores resiliency to the fascia--- in other words, a fascia lift. (Sorry.) Releasing tension from the body's connective tissue helps generate more openness both physically and emotionally, especially as it involves getting down to Y-fronts stone sober with a woman you've just met.

One day my practitioner, Judy, a supremely centered soul with puttiesque curls, asked if any areas of my body seemed especially tense. 'My jaw seems a bit tight,' I said, my clenched speech at odds with the relaxation I felt otherwise. After

asking permission she put her index finger alongside my gum and told me to bite down. The top of my head orbited Mars a couple of times, then splashed down in tears. Yes, there was some stiffness there.

Later on, the irony was hard to resist. 'How'd your session go?' asked Marsha. 'Another woman had her fingers in my mouth today,' I twittered. She still lets me go to the dentist, though. The women there wear gloves.

My speech therapist was more circumspect. She listened, recorded, gave me diagrams of facial muscles and techniques to relax them, lists of words and phrases to help enunciation. I learned I could be the *masseter* of my verbal fate.

'Pay attention to how you say 'goodbye,' she suggested. 'It's a good indicator of how you're forming sounds.'

'I never say goodbye,' I said. I was being truthful. Except for aping the rude flight attendants on *Saturday Night Live*, I hardly ever used the word. Farewells were never big in my house. My limey mother said 'cheerio.' Dad simply disappeared from view like a submarine. One minute he'd be standing over a heating grate slurping Grape-Nuts Flakes and milk, the warm air billowing his bathrobe, the next he'd be gone. We'd be alerted to his whereabouts only by snores from the bedroom.

It later occurred to me that a lot of people--- parents, girlfriends, clients--- had left, in one way or another, without saying goodbye, which meant that I hadn't, either. No wonder my jaw wouldn't open--- it was crammed with all those unsaid partings.

That's changing, though. Bit by bit, the sheep is becoming, if not Henry Higgins, then Eliza Doolittle. Anna helps make sure of that. She no longer lets me walk her to the schoolbus in the morning--- she's a big kid now--- so every day I say goodbye to her from the curb. Goodbye to me as well. Loud and clear.