

# Ep #13: Why Should I Look in the Mirror??

Can't  
wait  
to hear  
you

with  
Michèle Voillequé

**Full Episode Transcript**

# Ep #13: Why Should I Look in the Mirror??

Your voice is unique to you. It grows as you grow. It changes as you change. If you're curious about the relationship between your voice and your body, your heart and your mind, welcome. My name is Michèle Voillequé and I can't wait to hear you.

I keep a little mirror in my living room studio. It's maybe two and a half, three inches wide, just a small round little mirror that I got on Etsy a zillion years ago, so that my students can look at their mouths. Sometimes, not every lesson. Some students never look at their mouths, but just so that it's there.

And it's small so that you can only see your mouth. You can't get fixated on whether your hair looks okay or whether the mascara's run or, you know, your wrinkles are bothering you or, oh, I really should have shaved before I came to my voice... none of that. Just so that you can only see your mouth, because there's so much information there about what's going on with your voice, you can learn by noticing your mouth.

And one of my students this week came to her lesson. She said, “You had me look in the mirror last time I was here and I went home and I cannot remember why. Can you tell me why, why am I supposed to look in a mirror?”

It's a really good question because looking at ourselves in a mirror can be traumatic. It is challenging and is a hard thing to do, which is why the mirror in my studio is so small.

I myself do not enjoy looking in a mirror, working with the mirror, and I have learned so much from doing it that I offer the opportunity to my students. You can always say no. You can always say no. And looking in a mirror can teach you a lot.

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For instance, with the student this week who came for her lesson, the thing that we, she and I were working on was helping her to have a more oval-shaped mouth when she sang.

Our mouths, most of the time, are shaped into rectangles, or, you know, smiley faces. The corners, our mouths have corners. Sometimes it looks like they have four corners, sometimes just two, uh, when you're smiling.

And there's a lot of tension that the cheeks exert on our lips, pulling them to the side so that we can smile, um, so that we can have just, you know, really nice, expressive, easy-to-talk-to faces.

It's a nice feature of a speaking person that their, uh, cheeks are alive and that they're, they look animated. It can actually make them, easier to understand. There are really good reasons why we speak with animated faces.

And, that animation can put undue stress on the voice, such that when we're giving a public presentation and we're a little too animated, it can cause us to lose our voice or feel more vocal fatigue than we would if our faces were a little bit more relaxed.

Or when we're singing and trying to make a durable, solid tone with a nice vowel, if our cheeks are pulling to the side it can be really difficult to find that freedom, and a real vowel. By that I mean a good singing vowel.

So, this week's student, so we, uh, picked up the mirror again, and, just tried to make an oval-shaped mouth. And she noticed how difficult it was. There's, there's like what you, your mind imagines is a round

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mouth. And then there's even further to go to really get to “oval” and getting from “kind of round”...so the continuum from “smiling” to “rectangle” to “rounder than that” to “oval,” is longer than you might think.

And what we found in the lesson was that it was much easier, actually, to get to “oval” by just placing her hands on her cheeks, near the mouth, to just disable them. And notice that those little muscles there don't need to be firing. That the, the skin around the mouth, on the sides of the mouth, can be soft and just not involved in pronunciation.

And I don't remember if this happened this week with this student, but it certainly happened with other students that, often, as soon as you put your fingers there, to prevent yourself from smiling or pulling your cheeks to the side, your tongue suddenly thinks that it can't pronounce anything. Which is just fascinating.

It shows you how hard-wired our jaw and tongue and cheeks are into the project of making sound. So that when you take your cheeks out of it, when you ask them to soften, the tongue sometimes can immediately get confused.

And you sound like you have a lisp, like you've, um, been numbed up with Novocaine, like you're, you know, an adorable three year old with a speech impediment, it's, it's fascinating.

But the truth of the matter is that you can speak perfectly articulately with your cheeks involved and with your cheeks uninvolved. And you know, this is audio, so you have to take my word for it, but I'm gonna say, “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.”

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That was with my hands not on my face, and now I'm going to put my hands on my face and soften my cheeks as much as I can and say it again, "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers."

To my ear right now, it sounds like the second one has even kind of a deeper resonance. So I'll say it again, uh, without my hands on my face. "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers." And I was trying to smile at you while I did that.

And now I'm going to soften my cheeks and say, "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers." You can let me know what differences you notice, but I hope you can hear that, um, my tongue is working just as well as it was without my hands there.

So this is something that you can obviously practice on your own, with all kinds of tongue twisters. The ones where you'll see probably the biggest difference are where the vowels are EEs and EHs.

So, "how much wood could a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?" is really easy to say with a pout. You can put your hands on your face or you can just pout.

That's another way that I help people get to a rounder or more oval shaped mouth, is to just, you know, imagine that you're a supermodel and you're just, pouting. And I'm pouting now, and I don't know if you can tell. I feel like I can tell, but I know what I'm doing.

So, "how much wood could a wood chuck chuck?" There isn't anything particularly about that phrase that involves the cheeks and smiling. But, for example, "seashell, she sells seashells by the seashore, she's a

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sashimi chef.” That “she sells” is going to encourage your mouth, to smile, is going to encourage your cheeks to pull to the side.

So, if you put your fingers on the sides of your cheeks, and you say, “she sells seashells by the seashore, she's a sashimi chef.” Then, you can notice the difference for yourself, how, how that works.

“Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers,” is another one. “How many peppers did Peter Piper pick? If Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers, where's the peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked?”

So, again, um, the EH vowel may encourage your mouth to pull to the side.

So that's one reason you might look at your mouth in a mirror, is to notice whether you have a nice, uh, round shape, a nice oval shape if you're singing, or if you're just working on your speaking voice, to notice how much your face is involved, how much is your mouth being pulled to the side as you're speaking, and if you're having vocal fatigue, can you find a way to reduce that?

Another reason to look in the mirror is to notice your neck.

When we are singing and speaking, our neck muscles can get also way over-involved in the project than they need to be, and when they do get over-involved or over-recruited, it usually doesn't bode well for the voice.

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That tension in the neck and the shoulders and the upper back all affects the larynx, which is where your vocal folds are, and affects how freely those vocal folds can vibrate.

So you might need a slightly bigger mirror than my little three-inch one. I really don't think it's three inches. I think it's two. It's tiny. But, you might need a bigger mirror than just a little pocket mirror or compact mirror like the one in my studio.

And if you don't have a compact mirror, let me tell you, you can tape pieces of paper, eight and a half by 11 size sheets of paper, to a bathroom mirror so that you can only see the body part that you wanna see. I have actually done that. So if you only have a big mirror, with a little scotch tape and some paper, you can make that mirror smaller.

Now, you might not need a mirror to tell you that you have tension in your neck. You may be very familiar with that. And it's worth looking just to see what fires when you start to sing or speak.

So, like to stand before a mirror and with the most relaxed front of your neck that you can create. So you might roll your shoulders a little. You might stretch a little from side to side, noticing what muscles you can see when you do that. Like what, what's actually happening with your body when you do that.

And then just take a couple of breaths and then say something really simple like, your name or your address or a tongue twister if that's really easy for you, or the words to the song lyric that's been going through your head for the last three days – something like that and notice what If anything, grabs in your neck.

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Usually, if you're a very smiley, animated kind of speaker, you're going to be able to see your neck strap muscles engage when you go to speak or you go to sing. And the calmer you can train your neck strap muscles to be when you're singing and speaking, the easier the project will get for you.

There's a huge payoff for figuring out how to let that grabbing habit go.

And, you know, probably the worst instruction to give anybody or anything is “relax.” You know, it usually doesn't go well. Because if we could, we would. So the project, especially with your neck, is going to be one of noticing and giving your neck other things to do.

So, I'm just going to stick with tongue twisters because they're fun. For example, looking at “how much wood could a wood chuck chuck if a wood chuck could chuck wood?” Just that first line.

If you're noticing that you have tension in your neck when you try to say that, just turn your head from side to side, like you're shaking your head no, very slowly, and just notice what's your range of motion? How far can you turn your head to the right before it gets twingy? And then how far can you turn your head to the left before it gets twingy?

And what's the path like along that, little semicircle that you're making with your chin. Like, does it get a little bumpy? Does it get a little rocky? Not everybody can turn their head smoothly from side to side.

It's a normal human thing for it to be a little wobbly, or go through, you know, there's a tense part on the way, not just at the extremes, but on the way to the extremes.



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And so just notice, what's it like to turn your head from side to side? And to the extent that you can watch yourself do that in the mirror, you will learn a lot.

Because your eyes will see things that your body is not registering, is not feeling, you won't be picking up as a physical sensation because it happens so much, it's no longer new. But your eyes can show you what's actually, what's going on. Where are the hitchy bits, as I call them, in that head turn.

And depending on how challenging that is for you, you may or may not want to add any speech or any singing to it at all. But if you feel like, "Okay, I got this. I can turn my head from side to side."

Now, say a tongue twister while you do that. So, starting either at one extreme or in the middle, you choose, but you're going to turn your head from side to side while you say, "how much wood could a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?"

And just notice how easy or hard is that? Turn your head from side to side saying your name, the Pledge of Allegiance, the Gettysburg Address, anything you've been forced to memorize in your life that you don't have any emotional attachment to at all, and see what that's like for your neck.

And then choose something harder, that you have emotional attachment to. It might be a poem that you particularly like, it might be something difficult you've been trying to say to a friend for months and you just haven't figured out how. Try that out.

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See what that's like as you move your head from side to side and say words that have some emotional charge for you. And notice how your head and neck respond.

If you're more worried about your singing voice than your speaking voice, you can do this with notes. With "twinkle, twinkle, little star" or some other simple song. And just notice how much of your neck, the big outside muscles of your neck, how much of, how much do they think they need to get involved in the project of you singing?

With all due respect to them, the less they can do, the better. They may think that they're helping, but they're not actually helping. So, that's another reason, reason number two to look in a mirror, is to notice what your neck is doing.

You might at the same time also notice your shoulders. You might notice as soon as you go to sing or speak, your shoulders come up. Or, you might notice that as soon as you go to sing or speak, that they um, pull in.

You can notice all kinds of really committed upper body tension patterns that, trust me, they're not helping. And again, to teach them how to behave differently, you're going to need to give them something different to do.

It's not going to be enough to just say, relax, because they won't. They don't know how. If they knew how, they would, because when they're relaxed, they feel so much better. But they don't know how.

So if you're one of the people who raises their shoulders or engages their shoulders in a way that's, you know, you look in the mirror and you see

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that looks like it's extra, you can clasp your hands behind your back, you know, kind of handcuff yourself, and squeeze your shoulder blades together and then relax a little bit, but just even holding your hands behind your back will disable your shoulders.

They'll have to work harder to do anything special when you start singing or speaking. And just see how that, how that feels.

So it's not so much a counter motion as just disabling, like holding your hands behind your back is akin to putting your hands on your cheeks to force yourself not to smile.

Okay, so a third thing you can notice in the mirror, and this will work again with a smaller mirror, is your tongue. What is your tongue doing?

This applies maybe more to singers than speakers, because when we're singing, we're making sounds for a much longer time, like we're holding, we're stretching vowels out.

The consonants happen much less frequently. There's a lot less for the tip of our tongue to do. And there's a lot more opportunity for the tip of the tongue to relax when we're singing than when we're speaking.

When we're speaking, everything is just kind of hyper-vigilant and ready for the next thing. And so our tongue tends to hang out in the middle of our mouth. But when we're singing, a great place for the tip of your tongue is behind your bottom teeth. And you can use a mirror to notice whether the tip of your tongue is coming back to that rest position as often as it's able to.

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So this requires you to have a song in mind that you want to sing. So, if I were to just give you an example song, um, Amazing Grace, say, “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound.”

Just that little bit. I haven't warmed up. My voice feels kind of trashed, actually. So, that's all you'll be hearing me sing on a podcast today.

Um, but for that first sound, “a-may,” you don't have to move your tongue until you get to “-zing.” And then you don't even really have to move it, you just have to close your mouth.

“Amazing.” Yeah, your tongue can still be behind your bottom teeth for the Z. “-zing, grace, how sweet the sound.”

You might find that your tongue goes up for the S or the TH. But for the most part, your tongue can just hang out against your bottom teeth. And that's something you can notice when you're looking in a mirror.

One of the things you might notice is that you'll be holding a note, a word, and your tongue will just be pulled way back, or it'll just be in the middle of your mouth.

That's something that a mirror can show you that feeling into your body might not, again, because it might be something that you do all the time, so it doesn't strike your body as different.

Like, there's nothing new there to feel. And it can really help to have your eyes show you, uh, what your habit is so that you can experiment with changing it and noticing if it makes your life or your vocal production easier.

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All of this that I'm talking about today, using the mirror, relates to part of the Your Whole Self is The Instrument framework. It relates to the Practicing Curiosity part of that, that in order to change how we're using our voice, we need to be willing to experiment, and to ask questions.

To be curious about how we're doing things and how we might try to do things differently in a way that's not focused on results so much or like good or bad or perfect or crap or... but just being curious.

What is it that I'm doing now? How am I trying to accomplish this task? Am I trying to sing an EE vowel with my face stretched wide in a smile? And if I am, can I try singing an EE vowel without doing that? Because, theoretically, this lady on the internet told me that it's possible.

So you just get curious and try. See if you can, see what it's like to do that.

And the answer to lots of things when, new things when you try them, the first response you might get from your psyche, your brain is, "That's weird. That feels really strange. That feels really new." And that can feel really scary.

And this isn't brain surgery. No knives are anywhere nearby. Nobody's going to get hurt. Really. It's scary because it's new and because your voice is connected to how you make your needs felt in the world, known in the world, and it feels like maybe you're messing with some essential part of yourself that you feel you shouldn't be messing with.

But really, it's just vocal production. It's just how you're making a sound. Your employment isn't dependent on this moment, on this experiment. This is just like 20 seconds of something different. And can you find

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resources within you to hold your hand for those 20 seconds and see what you learn?

This is, I admit, easier said than done. It's why I have a job, because it's hard to do this by yourself. But that's... this is part of the project, is being willingly curious, lovingly, compassionately curious about how you're doing things now and how you might do them differently.

I really hope this has been helpful. Thank you so much for listening.

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