

Ep #22: When Death is Near

Can't
wait
to hear
you

with
Michèle Voillequé

Full Episode Transcript

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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.

Death is on my mind, and it's what I'm going to be talking about in this episode. So if that's something that you don't want to hear about right now, this would be a good episode to skip. But I think the stories that I have for you today are worth recording, and I hope you'll come back some other time to hear them when you're ready.

I volunteer at the San Francisco VA Medical Center and have done so since 2008. When I first started volunteering there, I was going room to room, singing to hospice patients in the Community Living Center. And I did that for a few months until one of them said to me,

“Michèle, I want you to make me a chorus. These men need activity. They sit around all day watching television and that's not good for the mind. We need to be singing. We need to be singing as a group. We need to be making music.”

– and I'll change his name –

I said, “Okay, Mr. Brown, I'll see what I can do.”

I think it's important to know that Mr. Brown had Parkinson's disease and his voice was barely audible when he said this to me, but he had such conviction. The conviction was perfectly clear.

I don't remember his rank or which branch of the service he was in, but he was used to ordering people around. He, even though his voice was

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no longer strong, he could make it clear what he wanted and how he thought things should be done.

So that gave rise to the Community Living Center Chorus at Fort Miley. And our first rehearsal, I'm pretty sure, was Valentine's day of 2009. And we met as a group weekly and then every other week for years, stopped only by the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions on visiting.

The medical center was completely closed to visitors for quite a long time. And now, I'm not sure what their restrictions are on testing, but I haven't gone back in person yet.

In May of 2020, we figured out how to do Zoom meetings. So the, a recreation therapist carries me around on an iPad and I'm back to visiting people one on one in their room, singing with them over Zoom or sharing music videos that we find on YouTube and talking about the music and just sharing music and memories together.

It was one of the things that really sustained me through the pandemic and we're still on Zoom. The Zoom is lovely and I never thought I would say that about Zoom.

Anyway, one of the people that I regularly visit with, I learned last week has moved from the assisted living wing to the hospice wing and I'm really not sure if I'm going to see him again and that's, that's heavy on my heart.

He's been one of my favorites. I've learned so much about music from him – Blues guitarists that I had never heard of before, soul artists that I had kind of heard, but now I just have a, just such a deep appreciation for it, for them, mostly because I see how happy and how peaceful and

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how joyful this music makes him.

When the recreation therapist wrote to tell me that he had moved into hospice care, she asked if I could send the list of songs that we've listened to, so that she could put it by his bed, so that the caregivers, the nursing staff and other folks there could play him the songs that he really likes rather than having to guess.

So yeah, I've kept a list of all the songs that he and I have shared. It's long and it was so rewarding to be able to send that so that he might have better care in his last days.

If you think for yourself about the music that you love, what would be on that list for you? What do you just love to listen to now? What music would you love to share with a stranger? What music brings you comfort when you're ill? It's a good list to make so that they can have it for you when you can't speak for yourself anymore.

The second reason that death is on my mind is this morning I sang at a memorial service, which you can hear. My voice is tired. My voice is tired. There was a lot of singing and there's a lot of blooming happening in my neighborhood right now.

And I don't feel myself to be particularly affected by the spring, but I wonder if that isn't in fact playing a role, or maybe it's just vocal tiredness and, the stress of a day.

I guess, I really like singing at memorial services. It really is one of my favorite ways to spend my time and you know, it is, it is stressful. So I think you're hearing that in my voice and I hope it's not bothering you.

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But anyway, this morning for the memorial service, one of the songs that the family requested was “In the Garden,” which is a gospel waltz. It's a very sweet song, and it happens to be my grandmother's favorite hymn.

My grandmother's been dead for, uh, 20 years now, almost, yeah, wow, yes, she's been gone 20 years. And the person whose memorial it was today is just a couple years younger than my mom. So this is, with me loving this hymn, it's now at least a three generation hymn.

When I asked my grandmother what her favorite hymn was and she told me that it was “In the Garden,” and I asked her why she said, “I don't know, it just reminds me of your grandfather.”

Now what I know about my grandmother and grandfather – these are my mom's parents – I know that they met at the Methodist youth group at the University of Oregon And that what my grandmother was first attracted to about Bob was that he was tall, he was well dressed, and he was a good lead.

She loved dancing and my grandfather was a great dancer. And so I think, I think the big thing about why “In the Garden” reminded my grandmother of my grandfather was because it was a waltz.

She was not a particularly religious woman. She's not, you know, big into Jesus. The chorus of the hymn goes, “And he walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own. And the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.”

So it's a song about Mary Magdalene meeting Jesus at the tomb. I know that my grandmother didn't have, she did not have a close personal relationship with Jesus. I really think that hymn reminded her of waltzing.

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And so today, getting to sing this beloved hymn in my family for someone else's family just really reminded me how much music connects us, how much it's carried on from generation to generation.

That there, there are soundtracks in families. We each have our own individual soundtracks, but in our larger groups, there are soundtracks, there are songs that just mean stuff, and that's wonderful.

It's just a wonderful gift to have that resource because in the singing of the song, in the listening to the song, the song itself is able to accomplish so much that pages and pages and pages of words could never get at.

A song can get right into your heart, and right to the heart of the matter and help you feel all of that love, all of that longing, that connection, the loss of connection, and then connection again, connection to the world around you. It's just a beautiful thing.

And this is something that I notice that most memorial services: when we can find the music that really means something to the people who are gathered, it just makes the whole thing magical, and really, honestly healing. Obviously not completely healing, but a beautiful moment, a beautiful moment of healing.

Last spring I had a near death experience. I went into anaphylactic shock. I think I've talked about that elsewhere on the podcast. Everything's good now. No need to worry.

But in the aftermath of that, I realized that in our new digital age, that my children would have no access to my contact list, to my electronics, where all of my life is now, to tell people, you know, like how would they, how are they gonna get into my computer?

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And I thought that it was more than that, like not just, you know, getting in to get to, to get to the contacts, but I realized, of course, I'm going to die someday, and what kind of document could I write to be helpful to them so that they would know who, who do I want them to contact, who do I want them to tell, what should they do, where are all the passwords?

You know, that kind of thing. I had thought about it before, but it was like the actual medical emergency that made me realize, okay, you really need to start, you really need to do this. And of course I haven't finished.

I started it and then got overwhelmed, right? It's a lot to think about.

But as I was creating this document, I told my kids that I started working on it and that I'd share it with them when I felt like it was ready. And my oldest said to me, "Would you please include the songs that you'd like at your memorial?"

And I said, "Okay, but, um, memorial services are really for the people who are left, you know, I'm not going to be there. You should make the memorial service that's going to help you."

And she said, "Yeah, I know that, but I don't want it to sound like Michele's daughter's idea of music for Michele's memorial. I want it to sound like Michele's memorial, my mom's memorial service."

And that's just prompted so many, so many thoughts on my own part. And I guess the big one today that I'm sitting with is how much the people who love us really want to know us. And how much we hide ourselves, even from the people who love us.

How just how difficult it is to be vulnerable and open and ask for what we want and be clear about what we like and what we don't like.

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Maybe this isn't true for you, but I was just struck that there's a lot of myself that I keep privately. And I'm not sure that that really serves my closest relationships as much as I think it does. Like I, I can see that there are ways with the folks who really love me how I could be more, more open.

And so I'm looking at this list of songs for my memorial, you know, songs to choose from. There, there are way too many. Y'all will be there for five or six hours if I, if they arrange for everything that I love.

But, among those, yeah, for sure, "In the Garden" is on the list with a star next to it, and I'll have to ask my friend Rod, who's a lovely baritone. He's my favorite duet partner in the whole world, and at a couple of his recitals, I've said, "You," about one of the pieces that he's sung, "You have to sing that at my memorial service."

And he's just responded with feeling appalled, basically, at having me say that to him. He's like, "You mean the next time I sing it, you want to be dead so that you can't hear it?" on the one hand, or on the other, thinking, "You think I'm going to be able to sing at your memorial service? You've got to be kidding. I'm going to be crying."

What I was trying to communicate was the, the pieces that he sang just brought such a great feeling of peace and deep love and just a great sigh of relief. A great settling down. They just seemed like perfect pieces to have in a memorial, to help people really feel grounded and present and cared for and safe and not alone.

And as I'm telling you about this, you're probably wondering what they are. I can't remember. I think that one of them was from a Schumann song cycle, but I can't remember which one or which piece.

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And the other, I think, is from the 20th century, is a contemporary piece, modern classical music. So I need to ask Rod and find out what they are so they can go on my list.

So I just, I want to offer that if someone loves you, trust them maybe just a little bit more than you have with what's most important to you, with what's closest to your heart. Because if they love you, they want to know you more completely.

And it may be hard to find the moment.

It may be hard to find the time.

It may be hard to get up the courage to be vulnerable, to connect with them and to let them know what's really important to you. But they do want to know.

So, in my case, it's going in a Google doc. Nothing like our 21st century, is there?

And the third way that death is on my mind is this morning, as I was getting ready for this memorial service, I got an email from a former student who is a singer-songwriter who was writing with the news that a friend of hers, another singer-songwriter, whose song I had recorded with a couple of friends a few years ago, that he had died. And she was reaching out to me so that I could let Mark and Shawn know, my musical partners, that Larry had gone. And just to say, wow.

I was part of a folk trio for a few years, several years ago. We were called Muse Crossing. It was Shawn Doring, who played guitar, and Mark Walstrom, who played guitar and mandolin, and myself.

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We all sang. I played violin, too. And we covered songs from the 60s and the 70s, I don't know if we had any 80s songs. But even more, you know, 2000s songs, we sang songs we found that we thought would work in three part harmony.

So yes, we did "Helplessly Hoping," by Crosby, Stills and Nash and "The Eye" by Brandi Carlile and this song so far away by Larry Prado.

And I don't remember exactly how it happened.

I think my student suggested the song, heard the song and thought it would be great for us to cover. And then she asked Larry, and then we kind of, we got the lead sheet with just the lyrics and the chords. And then he, he sent his recording of him singing it. And so we took the melody from that and then arranged the harmonies and the, yeah, and the accompaniment, put it all together, included it on a CD.

I don't remember if we ran a draft by him before we recorded it or not, but I remember how happy we were when he told us he liked it. That just meant so much, to have taken something and made it our own and to have pleased the original composer.

When I'm singing Mozart, I comfort myself with the thought that we've all, humanity has made so many mistakes in the singing of Mozart that if he was rolling over in his grave at every one of those mistakes, he would be in constant motion.

Like there's just, it's just, it's just hard. And I'm sure he knew his music was hard. And I, like, I can feel a sense of grace and a sense of forgiveness coming at me from beyond the grave from him.

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But I am terrified, that's saying it too, that's too big, not terrified, but I am aware that there are people who love Mozart who are alive today that are going to have opinions about how I sing Mozart, and I am really worried about what they think.

So, you know, the possibility for criticism is everywhere, right? And we can just, you can make yourself crazy. You can, talk yourself into paralysis, right? by worrying about what other people think. So that's something that's always going on in the background, of my mind anyway, as a musician.

But particularly when I have the opportunity to sing the music or arrange the music of someone who's still living, you're really aware that you're, you're holding someone's heart. You know, you're holding their baby. and you want to, you want to do it right. And so it was, it was great that we did it right.

And it was great that we recorded it and it's on Spotify, it's on YouTube, it's, you know, it's out there on the interwebs and his song can have life now, more life, even though Larry Prado himself is gone. His song is still there for people to hear and enjoy. It feels good to be a part of that.

So in this last week of March, coming to you from Northern California and just a beautiful, beautiful spring, it's just been a week of being reminded that life is short. Life is precious. There's so much that makes living worthwhile, and it's so important to share that with the people we love.

So in honor, to the memory of Larry Prado, here's his song, "So Far Away," as sung by Muse Crossing: Shawn Doring, Mark Walstrom, and I.

Thanks so much for listening.

Can't Wait to Hear You – a podcast with Michèle Voillequé

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So Far Away by Larry Prado

Here is the rain, where's your sunshine falling?
Here is the cold, where are your warm breezes blowing?
Are you so far away, so far away?

Here is the shore, where your rivers windin'?'
Here is the dark, where your stars are shinin'?'
Are you so far away, so far away?

Lonely is the coat I wear.
Lonely is the bed I share.
Save me from this awful weight.
Save me from this lonesome fate.

Here is the road. My feet are hot and hurting.
Here is my heart. For you it has always been certain you're not
so far away, so far away.

Lonely is the coat I wear.
Lonely is the bed I share.
Save me from this awful weight.
Save me from this lonesome fate.

Here is the road. My feet are hot and hurting.
Here is my heart. For you and has always been certain you're not so far
away, so far away.

So far away, so far away.

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