

Ep #24: The Only Way to Improve is to Embrace Failure

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.

There is a great joy in my life right now, which is the fact that baseball is back in season. Spring training's over. We're now two thirds of the way through April. It's a long season. It's half the year, but we're off to a start, depending on what which team you're rooting for, you're off to a great start, or a miserable start, or an okay start.

A marker for success in baseball is, "Is the team at 500 at the end of April?" And what that means is, have they won as many as they've lost? When you're at 500, your wins and your losses are equal. Ideally, you want to be above 500. You want to have more wins than losses, but at the end of April, we'll take 500. We'll take it.

And if you're way below 500, they start talking about the miraculous comeback story that your team is going to be and all of that. There's no shortage of narrative in baseball. There's no shortage of hope. And that's one of the reasons I love it.

Another reason I love baseball is, you are considered a superstar hitter if one out of three at bats you get a hit. That means one out of three times it's your turn to try, if you get a hit, you're batting 333, you're amazing! If I only finished a song one out of three times that I went to perform it. I mean, in public, I don't mean practicing at home. That, that is utter failure.

But as a baseball player, one out of three – you're a superstar. And so ball players, unlike the rest of us, I think, have a unique relationship with failure and with trying and trying again and making an adjustment and trying again and just, you just keep trying.

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It's a game of trying. It's a game of failing. In public. Okay, you're getting paid millions of dollars so that takes a little bit of the edge off, but you're only getting paid millions of dollars once you are a major league player and it takes years to get to be a major league player.

So, you know, the fancy people you see on the TV, they've blown it in front of friends and family for years before then. And it's not characterized as blowing it.

As a singer one out of three – blowing it, massive failure. For a ballplayer, one out of three – superstar. And for the ballplayer, the failure is in not trying anymore. And until you've decided to not try anymore, you're still making adjustments, you're still learning, you're still growing.

And I just think that is such a helpful attitude to have. Our culture is so perfectionistic. The critics are everywhere, not least of all in our heads, and I find we hold ourselves to standards that are just cruel a lot of the time, and unattainable, and often unnecessary.

So it warms my heart that baseball season is back. My team, the Giants, are not doing super great. We're below 500. Not too far below 500, but we are below 500. and so my heart is full of hope.

I love to listen to baseball on the radio because the announcers understand that if they don't describe exactly what's happening, then I can't see it.

Oftentimes, television announcers for baseball and for other sports will spend a lot of the time talking about something that is not at all related to what's going on on the field. They'll be complimenting each other's ties. They'll be talking about where they had a great brunch.

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They'll be dishing the dirt on so and so and whosie face and not bothering to describe the action at all because it's available on the video. Everybody can see it. Just watch the television and there's the There it is. I don't have to describe it for you.

But the radio guys know that I can't tell what's going on unless they tell me. And the vocal and intellectual prowess that's required to call a baseball game on the radio is just, it's, it's art to me. It's a kind of jazz. It's amazing. And I procrastinate a lot because I want to hear the game.

Now, of course, if you have the app, it's recorded and archived. You can go back and listen to old games. Do I really have to listen to the game right now in this very moment? No, I don't. It will be available later. But do I want to? I really want to.

It's almost how, babysitters of mine when I was a kid were with their soap operas. And how I was with, how I got to be with the soap opera *Days of Our Lives* because they were like that with *Days of our Lives*. So yeah, I guess in a way, baseball is a six month long soap opera.

Anyway. So about a week ago, I was listening to the baseball game and I heard F. P. Santangelo say something that applies so perfectly to singing and speaking, to being a person as it does to baseball.

And I won't bore you with all of the details. Let me just say that Tyra Estrada had just, drawn a walk, and that had loaded the bases. And Estrada had in, you know, his previous at bats, in the recent history, had been having a hard time getting a hit and was what you might call “scuffling” at the plate. He wasn't having good at bats. He, he wasn't seeing the ball really well.

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And here's what F. P. Santangelo had to say about that. He himself is a former ballplayer, so he's providing color commentary. He knows what he's talking about. So to quote FP,

“It's just weird how the mind works. You get a couple of base hits, you're seeing the ball big, things start to slow down.

“When you're scuffling, you're just not seeing the baseball and you're trying too hard. Everything speeds up. You're predetermining, ‘I'm going to swing at this pitch,’ and you're hoping it's going to be a strike instead of the other way around. ‘I've got a game plan. I'm looking for something middle away, drive it to right center field.’

“And then all of a sudden your brain starts to slow down. Your eyes start to work better and you just become a baseball player and you let your talent take over. But when you're struggling, that little man in your head is telling you 1800 different things when you're getting in the batter's box and right now, Tyro Estrada has slowed the game down.”

This is Michèle again, um, Tyro Estrada slowed the game down by not swinging at a pitch that was a ball and that's how he got on base and put his team in a really advantageous offensive position.

When you're trying to learn a piece of music, when you're trying to figure out how something goes, it's really easy to get very tense and very tight and very goal oriented, for lack of a better word.

You want to get it. And in that getting, it's...you're grabbing. Literally, your, your mind and your body are trying to grab onto something to learn it.

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Because the voice is an instrument that relies on releasing air, releasing tone, breathing in deeply, calmly, expansively, and then letting that air go, most kinds of grabbing are just going to make it harder.

Grabbing as a concept when you're singing, I don't want to say “never a good idea.” I can't think of a time when it is a good idea. But maybe there is a time when it's a good idea. Grabbing just doesn't work.

And yet that's kind of our default mode when we're trying to learn something is to grasp it. And if we, we talk about it, “she hasn't grasped concept” is something that we say, right?

So instead, a posture that we can practice when we are learning something is “how open and relaxed can I be? How receptive can I be to this melody that is eluding me? How receptive can I be to this harmony that's eluding me?”

F. P. Santangelo talks about “seeing the ball big,” it's like the baseball grows in size. You know, when you're standing in the batter's box, most of the pitches that are being thrown are over 90 miles an hour.

F. P. Santangelo is talking about “seeing the ball big,” and I'm over here, not a baseball player, wondering how do you see the ball at all? Because it is so fast. Right?

But that's the talent of the ballplayer is to be able to see the ball, to see the pitch coming. And when you're calm and collected, when you're grounded, when you're feeling strong in your body and calm in your mind, that ball actually looks bigger and it's easier to hit because you're ready for it.

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You're ready for it to be whatever it's going to be, not what you're hoping it's going to be. Not what you're going to try to make it be. And the same thing applies to learning a tune.

One of the ways to do this if you are a music reader, is to put the sheet music down and find a recording and listen to the recording again and again and again, letting it wash over you, letting your body feel what that sound is.

Try to take it out of your mind. Try to make learning the tune not a mental activity, but an actual physical activity. How does your body feel as it's experiencing the tune?

And then try to hum along. Try to "la la la" along. Allow yourself to make mistakes. Don't try to get it right, but just try to see, "how does the sound want to come out of my body?"

And when you've achieved something like a receptive state, then go to the sheet music and see how you're doing. This is if you are a music reader.

If you're not a music reader, then at that moment, if the song has words, that's when I would pick up the lead sheet. That's when I would go to the lyrics and see, am I getting the lyrics right? Or, what are the lyrics?

So don't even think about lyrics. before you're in a receptive state. Learn how to receive the song first before you try to copy it.

And for my students who are wanting to learn how to hear harmonies and wanting to learn how to sing in harmony, the same thing applies.

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The more we try to grab, generally the less successful we are. And by generally, I mean, I want to say a hundred percent of the time, but I'm sure it's not always a hundred percent.

So spending time listening, listening, listening, and feeling what the harmony feels like in your body, feeling what the song feels like to your body. And when I say that, you know I'm in California, so you can accuse me of woo and I won't be offended.

But what I mean is, yes, the sound is coming in your ears, but it's also, sound is air. Sound is vibration traveling through the air, and that vibration is physically reaching your body, all parts of your body, not just the inside of your ear.

Not just the part that's closest to the speaker, but your whole body feels it. So if you have a stereo, one of the things you can do is listen to music on larger speakers and lie down on the floor. See if you can feel the vibration that comes through the floor.

Sit with your back to a speaker. Feel it from behind you. Sit, you know, facing forward to the side. See if you can wake up those nerve endings that are on your arms, your shoulders, your legs.

See if you can feel how the sound, how the tune impacts your body, affects your body. How does your body receive the song?

If you're a dancing type and you're wanting to learn a new song, try choreographing it first, if that can happen in a free form, receptive kind of way.

Like, how does your body move when you hear it? You don't even have to be a dancer to do that. That's a good enough question on its own. How does this song make your body want to move?

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As you do that, the intricacies of the melody become more clear. Your brain is able to hear more of the subtlety because you're receiving rather than grabbing.

There will be a time for nitpicking, for sitting down at the piano, getting really clear about what those little notes are, if there are lots of little notes, getting clear about what those chords are, how this harmony works. There will be time for that.

But beginning with a blank slate, open, receptive, grounded, happy, not grabbing – you will learn that music at a deeper level, and it will be harder to forget when you're under pressure and scared and about to perform it. You will learn it in a more solid and integrated way.

And so for my speakers, how this baseball wisdom relates to you – Let's say you're struggling with vocal fatigue or your voice getting, feeling pinched and squished when you're trying to say something that's really important.

Or maybe your voice is failing you. It's time for you to talk, and you go to talk, and it's just all phlegm, or like there's no sound, or you have to clear your throat three times in order to get your voice to work.

Those problems all have in common a lack of openness in the throat and probably also in the chest.

So in the spirit of what I was saying before to the singers, in the spirit of being receptive, when you can take the time as a speaker to notice your posture. Notice, is your chest not in a superhero position, but is your chest lifted, do you have some rib expansion?

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Can you yawn a little bit? Can you make an effort to make your throat feel wider? One of my students calls this “sword-swallowing throat.” If you had to swallow a sword, what would your throat do?

Making space like that before you begin to speak, and also having a sense of calm and clarity about you, to allow yourself time in the course of a conversation.

So that you don't have to jump right on the end of somebody else's sentence before you say your own, that you are able to allow yourself time to get a good breath, to make some space in your body to think about what it is that you want to say, to really hear what was just said and respond to that, rather than responding to whatever's going on in your head.

When you're thinking about what you want to say after they're done talking, rather than listening to what they're saying as they're speaking.

Again, it can be hard to slow conversations down in this culture because we prioritize speed. We admire quick thinking. We admire rapid fire banter. But if you're struggling with how your instrument is working, You need to slow down and you need to trust that people will wait for you.

You need to be so present in the conversation that you're having or present in the moment that you're presenting. You need to be present. When you are present, like the baseball getting bigger, time slows down. The game slows down and you can use your body in a more healthy, productive, and ultimately effective way.

So it's a little different depending on what exactly the problem is that you're struggling with, but I think what serves every speaker well is feeling your seat in your seat, and your feet on the floor, and a gentle

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sense of rib expansion, and your head calmly, lightly on the top of your spine – taking a moment to find that and breathing into that body, breathing into that posture, easily, calmly, two or three times.

You can find this posture while you're listening to somebody else. And then when it's your turn to speak, speaking out of this posture, It takes practice.

This is a good thing to practice in not high pressure situations. This is a great thing to practice when you do not care about the outcome at all.

When you're calling the kids down to dinner, when you're asking how their day was, when you're helping them with their homework, can you remain attentive to your body, your posture, your ease, and start from there. In that way, slow the game down, make the ball bigger and easier to hit.

Let me know if this is helpful.

I wax poetic elsewhere on my blog, I'll put a link in the show notes to a video I recorded about Mike Tauchman, who was a Giant for a short period of time, and is not a pitcher, but came in to pitch when the Giants were losing by a whole lot.

And when that happens in a baseball game, you want to do whatever you can to save your pitchers' arms for the game tomorrow. Because baseball games are like every day, right?

So if you're really losing, if there's no hope that you're going to win the game, often, a position player will take over the role as a pitcher. And, you know, they know how to throw a baseball, but throwing a baseball and pitching a baseball, those are two very different skills.

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Anyway, I recorded a video, about an interview that Mike Tauchman did after he pitched for the Giants in one of these situations, and I'll put a link in the show notes.

So, I really do hope this was helpful. I hope if you like baseball that your team is winning, or if they're not winning, that you have hope, or you make your own peace with that, and thanks so much for listening.

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