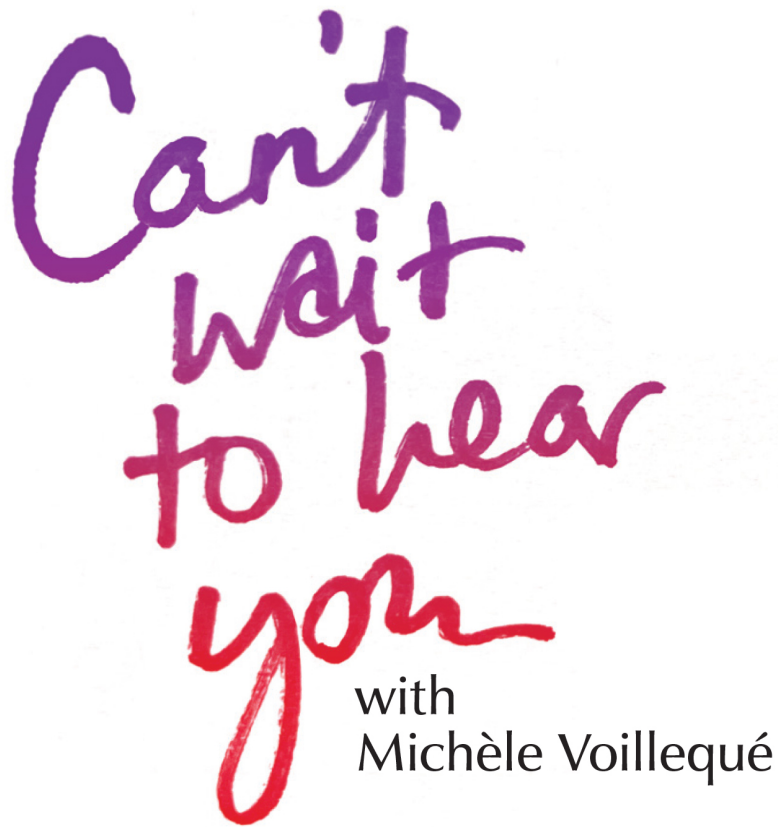


Ep #53: Alternatives to Perfectionism



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.

I've had a couple of conversations lately with students about perfectionism and they seem worthy of a podcast.

I myself am a lifelong perfectionist. It's affected my life in any number of ways and regularly, like now, maybe not daily, but certainly weekly. I'm engaging the question for myself of what's "good enough." When can we call it done?

And something happened in my life 20 years ago that really helped me reframe perfectionism when it comes to performing. And I wanna share that story with you and then a little bit of the conversations that I had with my students in the last few days.

So 20 years ago, more than 20 years ago on the Sunday between Christmas and New Year's at a Unitarian Universalist Church, I was scheduled to sing the offertory and, the guest minister was preaching on heresy.

And one thing that you should know about Unitarian Universalists is that they are proud heretics. Unitarian Universalism grew out of the Protestant Reformation, so a sermon on heresy could only hit the spot.

Anyway, the service starts, the sermon happens, it seems like the service is going well. It comes time for the offertory, and I start to sing this lovely Bach aria that I had prepared.

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About a third of the way through. I notice that there's something going on in the pews, but I can't quite tell what. I don't have the bandwidth to try to figure it out because I'm singing Bach, and Bach is hard. So I notice that there's something, but I just keep going, I mind my own business.

And then the president of the congregation comes barreling down the center aisle, comes up to the lectern, which is just a few feet from where I'm standing, waving his arms, and says, "We have two medical emergencies. The paramedics have been called, the situation is under control."

And then he turns to me and he says, "So sorry to interrupt. Please take it from here."

By this point, the music had come to a complete stop. The pianist and I looked at each other and we said almost simultaneously, "Let's repeat the A."

Something to know about Bach Arias is that they're often written in an ABA form where the final section is the same as the one that you began with. So "repeating the A" meant going back to the beginning as though it were the second time through and just finishing the piece.

The congregation hadn't gotten to hear the whole B section, but at that point, that was the last thing anyone needed. So we picked the music back up and the offertory ended just as the paramedics were entering the sanctuary.

Now you might say that a worship service where the sermon topic was heresy and the offertory was written by a heretic – Bach worked for the Lutherans in Leipzig – one should expect that at least two proud

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heretics would be stricken with illness during that worship service. At least, that's how it would happen in Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon.

But, but instead, what I learned that day was that nobody died.

I sang, and one person fainted because they'd forgotten to take their blood pressure medication. And another person was dizzy from dehydration and probably holiday and caretaker exhaustion. But in the end, no one needed to go to the hospital. Some fluids and a comforting arm around their shoulders restored each of them to health.

And so from that day on, my self-evaluation process has started with noticing whether anybody died as a result of my singing or speaking, including me.

It is so easy for me to get wrapped up in the tiny details, like I came in a hair too early, or I forgot that word in the second verse again, things like that that I forget to see the whole picture.

Was it good *enough*?
Did I do what I meant to do?

So reminding myself that nobody died helps me stay focused on the overall impact of my performance and not whether it was perfect to some nebulous standard that doesn't even really exist. And thank goodness, so far, "nobody died" has always been true.

So rather than engaging in a conversation about whether or not something was perfect, I ask myself five questions.

The first question is, did anybody die?

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The second question is, did I remember my One Thing?

Whenever I go into a performance or a new scary, stretchy situation, I try to have one thing that I wanna accomplish, one technique that I wanna try in this stressful performance situation, one main idea that I wanna communicate, one feeling that I wanna have in my body as I'm doing the thing, whatever the thing is.

Or, sometimes my One Thing is just remembering that I belong, that I'm okay, that nobody's gonna die. Sometimes my One Thing is reminding myself that nobody's gonna die.

So notice number two is, did I remember my one thing? Did I *remember* it? Not *did I execute my one thing perfectly*?

Number three, how do I feel now that it's over?

Number four, what happened that I didn't expect?

And number five, is there anything that I would change for next time?

So let me point out again, notice that these questions are not, *did it go perfectly*? The questions are not, *did it go well*? The questions are, “Did one thing go well? Did I remember one thing?” Because perfection is not humanly possible, but we can always find one thing to do.

We can manage to do one thing. We can do this one thing well this time, and we can remember another thing the next time. And working on ourselves, working on our skills one at a time really is the fastest and most durable way to improve because you're stacking things one

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on top of the other rather than trying to remember all of them at once and getting nowhere fast.

So perfectionism is definitely a tough nut to crack. But I find for me it's a daily practice, daily-ish, weekly, depends on where you are in it. These days it's been kind of an every-other-day practice for me, of reminding myself of what's good enough, and being satisfied with good enough. Also, embracing the growth that comes from making mistakes in public and realizing that nobody died because I made a mistake.

So in the example I gave you, 20 years ago, I didn't make a mistake. I just happened to be singing when a couple of people fell ill. But I have also made mistakes in public and nobody died.

And I've tried new things and I failed at them in public. And again, nobody died. That's a really useful, albeit painful experience to have because they remind me that I'm human and that I'm fallible, and that I'm trying.

Success is always preceded by a string of failures, and it is so hard to be patient with oneself in the string of failures, but I tell you, that's where the growth is. That's where success comes from.

So, more recently, I was teaching and perfectionism came up in two lessons almost back to back. And I wanna share a little bit of that conversation with you.

With one student, she was just having a lot of trouble with it not sounding the way she wanted it to. Her voice is, was just, it didn't sound the way she wanted it to and that was really disappointing and

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it's really hard to sit with ourselves and make time to practice and commit to practicing when we don't like how it sounds. Like, that is maybe the hardest thing about being a musician is continuing to try when it just, to our ear, sounds like crap.

She framed it as she's bothered by it because in air quotes, it's “not perfect.” Those were her words, “It’s just, it's not perfect and I want it to be perfect.” And I suggested maybe instead of striving for perfection, we could reframe that as trying to do something that's “less disappointing.”

Maybe “less disappointing,” could be our standard and that could be helpful, because as I said before, perfection is not humanly possible. And who decides what's perfect?

Even if you're going to argue with me that perfection is possible, I will counter with, “whose definition, whose perfection are you talking about? Is it, is it your own standard? Is it your mother's standard? Is it Simon Cowell's standard? Is it the King of England’s standard? Who's in charge? Who decides what's perfect and how do we know that they’ve approved of what we've done?”

I think the whole endeavor is just, really crazy making, trying to be perfect – but “less disappointing” is totally accessible to all of us. We know what “disappointing” is and we can just strive to be a little less disappointing the next time.

And then the second conversation was with a student who was talking about how she finds it difficult to polish her songs. She loves learning new music and, you know, figuring it all out. She's got a great musical brain.

She loves jazz, so when she's learning a piece of music, she's learning all the chord changes. She's learning the melody, but she's also learning

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how her favorite jazz singers have interpreted that melody, you know, she's doing a lot of, of musical research and musical exploration and it's great. But she gets to a point where she starts getting perfectionistic when it comes to the polishing of like, getting something really, really ready for a performance.

She finds after she's worked on something for a certain amount of time, that it just starts to settle into this tedious, almost dead place where the music doesn't feel alive for her anymore. And that makes it harder to perform because she doesn't quite make it past the point of not worrying about making a mistake.

So when I'm thinking about polishing a piece of music, I'm thinking about knowing it well enough so that when I'm in a performance situation, if anything goes sideways, I don't get lost. I know the thing well enough that I can keep track of what, the part that I'm responsible for.

This is particularly important when you're making music with a jazz combo or in any kind of ensemble where it's more than just you. Even if it's just you and an accompanist, like to really feel like you know it well enough so that you won't get lost, that's golden. There's so much confidence that comes from that.

But notice, knowing it well enough so that you won't get lost, that doesn't necessarily mean perfect. That just means knowing it well enough so that you won't get lost and you can relax into what it is that you know and then perform freely from that place.

And so my thought about polishing, can we think about polishing as just really feeling ready to go play? Knowing it well enough to just take it out and let it be, whatever it's gonna be? And if it doesn't go the way it went in rehearsal – well, in the case of jazz, that's, that's jazz – but it was

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alive, and we were present for it, and we were able to be present for it because we really took the time to learn it well enough, like I said, so that we wouldn't get lost, so that we can stay present in the music and know that the goal isn't perfection.

The goal isn't a perfect performance, but the goal is a performance where we remain present to all the music, all the beauty, all the wonder that's contained in the song.

So I hope this reframing is helpful for you. if you struggle with perfectionism, my heart goes out to you. I, I'm in those trenches with you. I don't want your desire to be perfect to keep you from sharing your gifts with the world.

You're already good enough and we need you.

We need your art.

We need your music.

We need your poetry.

We need your wisdom.

We need your loveliness.

We need you.

The world needs you.

We don't need perfect.

We just need you.

Thank you so much for listening.

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