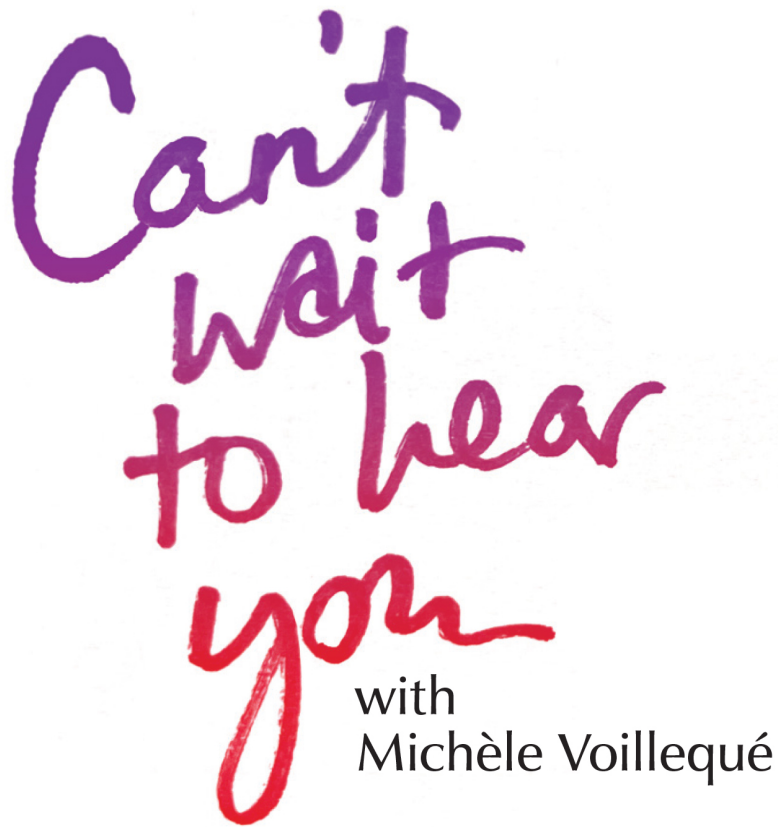


Ep #58: Thoughts that Help



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.

It really does matter what we think of ourselves when we're using our voice.

If we're having a low self-esteem day, a low confidence day, it's likely that our chest is going to be collapsed and our shoulders might be slumped, and our breath might be shallow, and that's going to affect the vocal quality.

It's also possible that things inside could feel really schlumpy too, and you could speak with more vocal fry because there's just not a lot of energy for saying anything else.

On the contrary, if we're really excited or feeling confident, we probably have a voice that sounds more energized. Our chest is probably more lifted. We might be more aware of there being an energized feeling about us – a sense that energy is moving “up.”

And if we're really feeling hyped, that can lead to not just a pleasing, engaging kind of voice, but also one that is kind of strained. If we're really excited, it can push everything in our throat “up.”

The pitch can go up and our throat can start to feel tighter and tighter and tighter, just from being excited from the good feeling.

So, wherever we happen to find ourselves, whatever mood we happen to be in, the mood matters. And we need to learn to pay attention to our bodies in spite of the mood.

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If we're trying to make conscious choices about how we use our voice, either for singing or for speaking, by definition, we can't go on autopilot.

We need to learn how to notice what we're thinking, notice what we're feeling, and engage our body in the best possible way to get the result we want.

This takes practice. This takes skill. This is why there are voice teachers. This is what I help people learn how to do.

When it comes to thoughts, though, there's more to say than just, “I feel schlumpy,” “I feel confident.”

A student recently shared this thought that she knows is affecting her confidence level when it comes to singing.

She is asked to speak in public all the time. She's very good at it. She's incredibly accomplished at public speaking, but when it comes to singing, she says, “Nobody's asked me to sing, and so I don't feel as confident. I'm thinking ‘nobody's asked me, and so maybe I'm imposing by singing.’”

And to that, I want to say, “who asked the birds?”

Did anybody ask the birds?

I think they didn't.

I think the birds are just singing because that's what birds do. They sing. Nobody asked for it, and the world is fine for it.

The world is fine for it, even when my neighborhood crow family starts “mouthing off,” as it were. And my neighborhood crow family is probably unlike yours in that I have a couple of crows in my neighborhood crow family that actually sound like geese.

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They're not geese. I verified this. I've heard the sound that sounded like a crow trying to sound like a goose, and I went out and found the bird, and sure enough it was a crow sounding kind of like a goose.

And he or she was on his own for a while and then, a year or two later, I heard a conversation between two crows that sounded like geese. And I thought, "Oh, somebody's had a baby, maybe."

I don't know what you think of the sound of crows. One of my friends cannot tolerate it at all. Crows that sound like geese aren't much better. But you know, it's all good.

I didn't ask them to sing or squawk or whatever, and they're just being them, and I really think that's a helpful thought to have when you're considering your own singing: what if the birds, with their singing are asking me to sing, too? What if that were true?

It doesn't have to be literally true for it to be a helpful thought.

In fact, if you're in a performing situation, or even practicing, if you're getting ready to sing, that's something you can listen for:

What can I hear?

Can I hear birds singing?

And whether or not I hear any birds, can I imagine that they're asking me to sing?

Maybe you can't hear them, maybe you can see them out the window. Maybe you can just imagine that they're there, and in that way, invite yourself into participation with the larger world.

Because when we think that our singing is only about us, it gets very small and very tight and very judgmental and very scary.

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But when we can accept that our human noises, our human song is just as welcome on the planet as all the other sounds, I find for me, it takes a little bit of the edge off. It calms me down.

I don't remember whether I've told this story on the podcast before, but I think it bears repeating:

I once was at a music workshop where I was actually playing the violin in a small chamber ensemble for a singer who was working on a baroque piece of music. I don't remember the composer. It doesn't really matter.

Anyway, she was terribly worried about the high note that she needed to sing, and I think it came, like, at the end of the phrase, like a long, held high note that everybody's listening for, everybody waits for it to bloom. It puts the bow on the whole thing, right?

It's the kind of thing where you think, "That's gotta be perfect, or the whole thing, the whole piece is just gonna fall flat."

And she was really worried about it and it wasn't going well. She was getting to that part of the piece and she was just clutching her throat was closing down. She couldn't really hit it.

And the performance coach who was working with us, she said, "You know that note that you're worried about? That F," it was the pitch F, "it's been sung thousands upon thousands of times before now.

"And sound vibrations, they don't really stop. You know, they keep going. And so that F is echoing in the air all around us. It's still here. It was created millennia ago and it's still here. And all you need to do is allow your F to join that chorus of Fs already sound-, already and still sounding."

The point she was making was that the singer wasn't alone. The note was already created. All she had to do was join it.

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And wouldn't you know, that idea did the trick.

The singer was able to hear that, relax into that idea that “the note’s already here. It’s already sounding. I just need to join it,” and it came out. It came out so much better than it had been.

There is quite a lot about singing and teaching singing that is pretty woo woo. It’s partly the fault of the instrument because I can't see your vocal folds. I can't physically manipulate them, and we don't have conscious control over our vocal folds.

So even if I could tell you something totally bizarre, like, “your left vocal fold is a little, it's a little too low, could you move it up a little bit?”

Like, that is totally not a thing. But like even if I, even if that made sense to say you don't have any ability to do that, right? The vocal folds are just responding to the flow of air coming up from our lungs and, that air starts moving because we have a thought that we wanna say or sing something, and so the body just goes at it.

It's not like learning to kick a soccer ball or do plié or make a basket or catch a fly ball. The voice is happening so fast, we don't have that level of physical control over it, at the level of the vocal fold muscles.

And so, in the process of teaching and in the process of singing and thinking about singing, I and most of the other voice teachers I know rely on a lot of metaphor, on imagery, on stories, on thoughts to help the student and to help ourselves do the thing we wanna do, accomplish the task we want to accomplish.

Of course this is a physical art. We're learning how to use our physical bodies well in order to make better sounds in the world. There's a whole

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bunch of stuff we do have control over and that's what we spend time on in lessons.

But we, it's also important to acknowledge your human self, your soulful self, who might be afraid, might be uncertain, might be feeling schlumpy, might be thinking, “nobody's asked me.”

It's okay. Those aren't thoughts and feelings to try to suppress.

Those are thoughts and feelings to notice and hold and contemplate and see how they can help. And if they can't help, how we can shift them towards something that does help.

I want to offer a couple of other corollary thoughts to, “but they haven't asked me” and, “I'm afraid I can't hit the high note.” One of them is, “I'm shy.”

A lot of my students talk to me about how inhibited they feel using their voice and about how they're a naturally shy person. And, I, myself, am a naturally shy person.

There's a funny story in our family of me going to the barbershop with my dad and, just to hang out. Yeah, he was getting a haircut. I wasn't, and Mr. Shurtliff, the barber, offered me to take a piece of candy out of the jar next to his till, and there was a huge plastic spider in the jar.

It must have been the Fall, right? It was this creepy Halloween kind of a thing, and I knew it was a plastic spider, but I didn't wanna put my hand in that jar. And I said to Mr. Shurtliff, “oh, oh, thank you, but I'm much too shy.”

And for years after that, when my dad would go get his haircut, Mr. Shurtliff would ask, “and how is your daughter who is ‘much too shy?’” And I have felt a lot in my life that I am “much too shy.” So I trust me when I say that I know this deeply.

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What if being shy is not actually a problem?

What if we can be shy and that doesn't have to affect our performance at all? What mental gymnastics do we have to do in order for that to be true?

I'll tell you what I landed upon for myself, being very shy.

I convinced myself that it's important for the other people. That this thing I'm about to do, whether it's give a speech or sing a song, isn't actually about me, my shyness doesn't have anything to do with it.

What's about to happen is I'm about to communicate some valuable information. That could be a poem and an emotion in the case of a song. That could be any number of things, if we're talking about a speech.

But my shyness only gets in the way of communicating that information. When I'm focused on how shy I am feeling, I'm not thinking about the information, I'm not thinking about the listener. I'm just thinking about myself. Again, everything in that environment, everything gets small and tight and closed and scary.

But when I can remember why I am doing it in the first place, the value of the text, the value of the song, what's important about it, why it will make a difference, why it will change somebody's mood, why it will give someone a new idea, why it will make the world better, it doesn't have to be a problem that I'm shy.

I can be shy and I can still communicate.

I totally get that this is easier said than done, and I need you to know that this is something that I learned through trial and error, by practicing and practicing and practicing, learning how to keep my shyness, but it's just

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not the first thing.

It's a feeling that I acknowledge. It's a little cringe that I allow. And then I get on with what it is that I really wanna do. What do I really want to communicate?

My shyness for other people is really boring. My song might be boring too, but I convince myself that it's not because the song isn't boring to me, the speech isn't boring to me.

So that's something to chew on.

And then the last thing you know, “Michèle, they haven't asked me to sing, and what if, what if I sing badly? Right? Like, what if I sing the wrong notes?”

Yeah, there's a lot of performance anxiety that comes down to that, right? “I'm afraid of sounding bad. I'm afraid of singing the wrong thing.”

And so the last thought that I wanna leave you with is just as that F has already been sung thousands of times for thousands of years, that F is still hovering, is still active in the world and all we need to do is join our voices to meet it, in some situation that F is the wrong note.

That F doesn't fit. It's not an F that needs to happen there in some other piece of music, right? It's some other note. It could even be something like an F sharp.

It could be something like a half step away that's gonna sound really terrible if you sing an F and it's supposed to be an F sharp or vice versa, right?

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So just as that perfect F has already been sung and is still sounding, all of the other notes have been sung and are still sounding. And the world is still here.

The right notes have been sung. The wrong notes have been sung. It's all really okay.

A moment of discomfort will happen when we sing the wrong note or we make a sound that we do not like. We will feel uncomfortable. Other people may feel uncomfortable too, but the world will not end.

On a grand scheme, the world is not going to notice, and most people forget that it even happened.

So in the same way my shyness need not be a problem, my wrong notes also need not be a problem. They've all already been sung. Nobody can be surprised anymore, at the level of the universe, at least. The universe cannot be surprised anymore, and our wrong notes are not going to break it.

In fact, our “wrong” notes in another context are the right note.

One of my friends quotes another person, and I don't know if it's a coral conductor. I don't know who said it, but my friend Rod quotes somebody who says all the time before a performance, “Enjoy your mistakes.”

Not, “Don't go make any mistakes,” but, “Enjoy your mistakes,” because they're going to happen.

And when you can enjoy the mistake, when you can notice that it happened, but not get derailed by it, not get all judgy and collapsed and angry and frustrated and whatever about it – make it a kerfuffle. When you can make a mistake but not make it a kerfuffle, you keep the music alive and you go on to the next thing.

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Because the mistake, by the time you make it and you notice it, it's already gone. The music has moved on.

So enjoy your mistakes.

Know you're going to make them and trust that it's all gonna be okay.

You are still a worthy singer. You're still worth hearing. The birds are asking you to sing.

Thanks so much for listening.

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