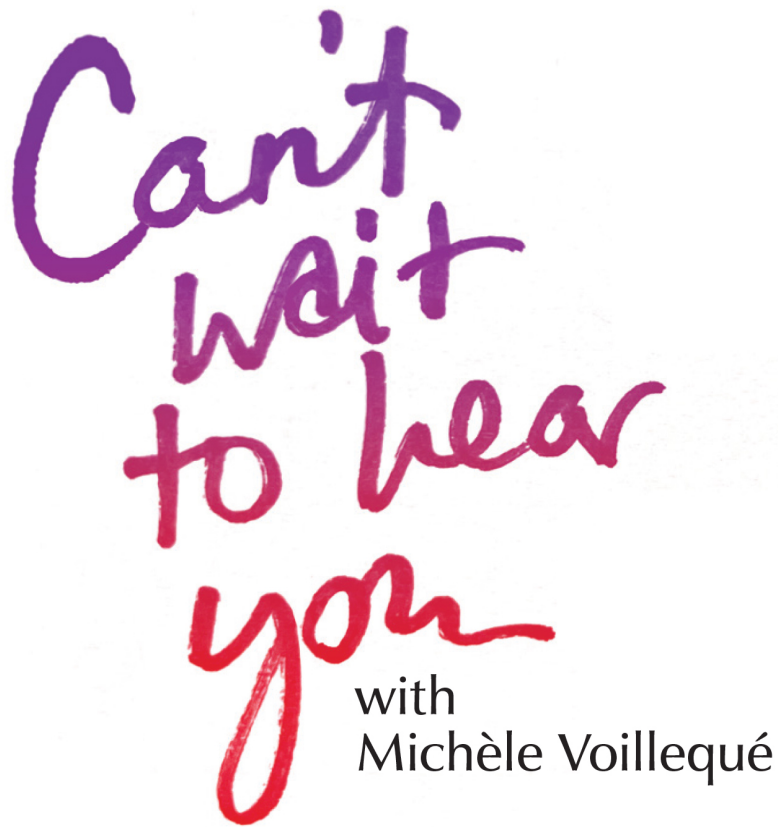


# Ep #69: Expanding Your Comfort Zone



## 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.

Today I want to talk about the work that it takes to expand your brain, your body's definition of “familiar.” We learn to use our voices by imitation, right? We're born and we cry out, and then we start copying the grownups who are taking care of us to try to figure out how to communicate with them so that we can get our needs met.

And very quickly we settle on a set of behaviors that help us get our message across quickly and efficiently, and that's what becomes our speaking self. That becomes a collection of speech habits that becomes second nature to most of us. If we're lucky, they become second nature. And so we don't have to spend hardly any time at all thinking about how to make the sounds past a certain age.

Once you get to middle school for sure, you're not thinking about how to make sounds with your mouth. Lots of people have to have a little bit of speech therapy in elementary school because they have – maybe some of their consonants don't sound the way that people think they should, help with rs and ls or maybe help with distinguishing vowel sounds.

But, you know, most of those issues are sorted out relatively quickly and we just go on and we don't think about our speaking voices at all. And our speaking voice becomes something that's familiar and something that's comfortable for us. And we feel a lot of safety.

You might not be consciously aware of it, but when our voice is working well, that's something that we just don't have to worry about.

If you've been coughing for a long time and your voice is wrecked, right, or you went to a concert and you sang too loudly or screamed too loudly,

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and your voice is trashed, you might find yourself apologizing to other people for how your voice sounds when you're sick or when the voice is really tired and honestly, they don't care.

When we're apologizing for being phlegmy or sounding froggy or whatever, that's more often than not, that's disturbing for us. It's uncomfortable to us that we sound funny. We don't sound familiar. to ourselves, we don't feel as comfortable as we're used to feeling, so we feel a little unsafe.

Are people gonna reject me because I sound weird today? Am I gonna put anybody off because I sound weird? The answer more often than not is, “of course not,” but that's not how it feels to us as the voice user.

When we're working to change our voices, you want to become a better singer? You want to become a more effective speaker that requires us to use the body differently and to make different kinds of sounds than we've been making, right?

Better is going to be different. And different is going to be identified by our survival brain at first as “Wrong. Bad. Stop. Not good. This is unfamiliar, this is uncomfortable. We should knock this off right now.”

And so I found myself in the last, week or so, realizing that there's a little bit of a dissonance in what I'm asking my students to do, or how I'm framing the project, because as we're working together one-on-one, I ask a lot of the time, “How does that feel? Does that feel more comfortable?”

A lot of my students are coming to me because they enjoy singing, they enjoy speaking, but there's a certain amount of physical discomfort that is happening, and they would really rather that it not.

For singers, this is often that the throat feels too tight, or the body in general feels too tight, notes feel stuck, things like that.

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And for speakers, it's often that the voice just gets tired. The voice gets tired really fast and it feels and sounds raspy, right. Those are not everybody's complaints, obviously, but just a couple of example complaints.

So they're coming to me because what's familiar to their body is not comfortable. And so in working with the person, I ask them to do something unfamiliar, trying a new technique and then asking the question, “Does that feel more comfortable?” And most of the time it does, but that's not the point.

What I realized is, as I'm asking, does this unfamiliar thing feel more comfortable? It feels more physically comfortable, but it doesn't feel more emotionally comfortable, and it doesn't feel mentally comfortable.

Creating this more comfortable feeling in the body – they're achieving it because they're having to think really hard about what they're doing. So I, there's a way that the words just, I don't know, get in the way, or it just doesn't, it feels like I needed to talk about it on the podcast.

To say that part of changing your voice is going to require you to expand your definition of what's familiar, and that can be fun. This is, doesn't have to be a tragedy, but just to know going in, that's what we're doing.

To make a different kind of sound, you're going to have to do something new with your body. That new thing you do with your body is going to feel unfamiliar. That unfamiliarity is probably going to get labeled by your survival brain immediately as wrong, threatening, a problem.

And while it may feel physically more comfortable, you may see how, oh yeah, this is the way to go, there's a whole lot that will, unconsciously pull you back from that new way of doing it.

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Finding a new, physically comfortable way of making a sound might require a lot of mental effort, and that doesn't feel comfortable. That doesn't feel easy. It may feel physically easy, but it doesn't feel mentally easy, and it might not feel emotionally easy just because it's new.

And again, our survival brain tends to, when we're playing around with our speaking voice or with our voice at all, whether it's for speaking or for singing, we are playing around in an area that is really sensitive, that's really emotional, because we use our voice to get our fundamental needs met.

And the survival brain thinks if we mess with that, we might not be safe anymore. We might lose our relationship. We might get thrown out of the house. We might lose our job. We could be homeless under a bridge.

Now that's really unlikely, right? That's really, really unlikely. But that's the safety, that's the emotional safety that is at stake when we start changing our voices, whether, again, whether it's singing or speaking.

So as you're going about making a vocal change, whether you want to sing differently or learn how to speak more compellingly or just not feel so tired, I think it's really helpful to think of the project as expanding your definition of “familiar,” expanding the definition of “comfortable” expanding that zone of familiarity and comfort.

Expanding your comfort zone rather than “getting out” of your comfort zone.

There's a lot of Personal Growth that encourages us to take a leap, take the bull by the horns, get out of your comfort zone, try something new, mix it up. I don't entirely disagree and I find that when it comes to changing the voice, the more playfully we can approach the project, and the more gently we can approach the project, the more successful we tend to be.

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I have done a lot of things that stretched my comfort zone, that expanded my comfort zone. It didn't feel good while I did it. I definitely felt like I was at my growing edge, but I didn't jump six feet beyond my comfort zone and try to do something.

Every time I've jumped out of my comfort zone and tried to do something, whatever gains I experienced, they were really short-lived because it was so emotionally uncomfortable. It felt so psychologically unsafe to do the thing that I just did, that I immediately snapped back.

And hearing this description, you might think, well, that just sounds like it's gonna take forever. It doesn't take forever. It just takes intense intentionality.

It means that you understand really clearly that you are walking yourself into a new version of yourself. You're singing yourself into a new version of yourself. You're speaking yourself into a new version of yourself, and your soul is coming with you.

A friend of mine years and years ago who has studied a lot of Zen Buddhism told me that your soul only travels at the pace of your human walking. So part of jet lag is a spiritual problem, is a soul problem, too, because your soul hasn't – you go to Europe and come back and your soul never, it kind of makes it almost all the way out of the state and then all of a sudden you're back.

But your body has crossed an ocean and had all of these other experiences and so there's reintegration associated with jet travel – spiritual reintegration associated with jet travel.

I don't know if that's actually true, I'm not sure if it matters if it's actually true, but I, I find that thought, that image really helpful when we're considering changing who we are in the world.

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And if you're changing your voice, you are changing who you are in the world, you are changing your way of being. And to think of it as a pedestrian journey – that creates, that can create such calm, for the nervous system to know that you're walking yourself there rather than leaping.

I just want you to know that's been a very helpful way for me to think about it for myself and also to work with vocal change with my students.

Of course, in order to get different results with how you're using your voice, you need to acquire some new skills, right? Learning how to use your voice differently means that you're gonna learn how to use your voice differently. You're going to acquire skills that you don't have now.

And when we think about acquiring skills, just generally in life, they can be pretty neutral. They're not necessarily, you know, emotionally or psychologically threatening.

Learning how to plant a bulb in the garden is, it's a skill, but it's not, there's nothing necessarily particularly threatening to your identity or your position in the world. Maybe you'll cut yourself with the spade that you're using. But again, that's also another low probability event. It's just a skill. It's just something that you're learning how to do.

The skills that we acquire when we're changing our voices, they involve psychological change. They involve emotional change. They involve emotional growth.

And so it's not just a question of acquiring a skill, it's familiarizing yourself with the person that you're going to be when you use that skill. How does that change your person?

How does using your voice in this new way feel more comfortable physically, and how does it create emotional discomfort, if it does?



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It doesn't, and I should say it doesn't always. But one of the reasons that it can be so hard to change the voice is because of the emotional discomfort. So that's what we're speaking to today.

So it's, we're not just learning a skill, we're also integrating a new version of ourselves.

What this means for practicing is that you can work on this new identity, independent of vocal exercise. You are going to need to actually exercise your voice, to have it sound different, to have it feel different, to make new kinds of sounds. You are gonna actually have to use your voice.

But the identity part is something that you can practice in a regular moment. And that has to do with embracing the identity of a singer, of a better singer maybe, or of a speaker, or of a more compelling speaker – whatever change you want to make – and being that person wherever you go.

One thing that I notice most of my students need help with is learning how to consistently take a breath that expands their trunk, how not to breathe shallowly.

We can breathe shallowly through most of our days, and nothing bad happens to us, right? The body works just fine. But if you're working on becoming a better voice user, one thing you're going to have to learn how to do is consistently take a breath that expands your trunk, that feels open and generous, not over pressurized, but just like a big, open, generous breath.

And you can practice that while you're working at the computer or when you sit down for a meal. You can have that idea in your head throughout your day, maybe on post-it notes on your mirror.

Take a good breath, and make taking a good breath a new habit, but it's part of this identity of being a more effective voice user.

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Another thing my students work on a lot is the sense that their voice is something that vibrates their whole body. It's not just a bit of sound kind of dribbling out of their mouth, down their chin, but that the voice, the sound that they're creating in their throat is vibrating their whole body.

And that vibration extends not just out their mouth, but all around them. It vibrates out the back of their body. It vibrates out the front of their body in their chest. It vibrates out their feet, out the top of their head.

And this isn't a call to be really loud necessarily, but just to be aware that your voice takes up the space of, like, if we were to make you into a gingerbread cookie that had soft edges. We're not going to indicate all of your fingers and toes and all of the nooks and crannies of the edges of your body, but rather just a, a big, generous rounded gingerbread person shape.

Your voice fills up all of that space. When you remind yourself of that, you walk through the world very differently, even when you're quiet, when you understand that your voice takes up space that extends beyond your body.

That's a way to practice this new identity of a more effective voice user without making any sound, and to expand your comfort zone, to get familiar with what it takes to sound and feel better/different while you're using your voice.

I'm aware that "more effective voice user" might not be the sexiest title, for this person, this new identity that you're embracing. Fill in your own words.

Maybe you want to think about being a musician wherever you go, being a beautiful sound maker wherever you go, being a beautiful change maker wherever you go. And you don't have to take on beautiful, I just think, why not?

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Being a powerful speaker wherever you go - that this is part of who you are. It's not something you turn on or off, but this is part of who you are.

And that awareness, building that psychological comfort along with the vocal exercises will help you step into that identity and have your voice behave the way you want it to behave, more quickly and with more psychological comfort.

It will feel like you're walking yourself into your next level, your next version of yourself.

Before I go, I want to give you something to contemplate. And always, I hope this is useful. If it's not useful, don't worry about it.

But the thing I want you to contemplate is, we are all unique beings, and part of that being is having a little fire, a little pilot light that is always on, that's always us, that's always true.

And sometimes we turn the flame way up and sometimes we turn the flame way down, depending on the kind of life you're leading. But even when we're asleep, the pilot light is on.

There is something that is fundamentally, uniquely “us,” and I would ask you to contemplate that: what's in that pilot light? What is fundamentally, uniquely you?

And can you see your voice journey as being in that pilot light? Whether you imagine yourself to be a singer, a speaker, or both, what's it like when that's just going on all the time in the pilot light? It's just always there.

And you can turn it up, you can turn it down, but it's not a personality that you put on. It's not a pot that goes on the stove, it's in the stove. It's there all the time. What is that like for you, and what else is there? What

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other parts of your identity are in that pilot light, too?

I would love to hear your answers to that question if you're willing to share it. Again, I really hope this is helpful, and thank you so much for listening.

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