

Ep #76: Afraid of Doing It Wrong

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.

One of the things that's true about using our voice more professionally, whether it's for singing or for speaking, is that we need to use our body in a way that feels maybe irresponsible, maybe vulnerable, maybe like nobody's gonna like us.

What I mean is that for singing well and for public speaking, we need a looser jaw. We need to let our mouth open more and that can feel really threatening. That can feel like a really bad idea, but that's something that we need to do so that the physics of sound can work to its best advantage through us.

Opening the mouth more is just one habit that we need to cultivate.

There are a whole bunch of habits that are different from our current ones that we need to cultivate if we're going to sing and speak to our best advantage.

And when I say “speak,” I mean speaking in front of large groups of people. I'm not talking about across the dinner table necessarily, but public, professional kinds of speaking.

And with developing those new habits, embracing these, those new habits comes a certain kind of courage, a certain kind of bravery and I find a certain kind of playfulness.

We have to learn to take ourselves a little less seriously if we're going to open up that possibility within us of making a truer, freer, more compelling sound.

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And taking ourselves less seriously for me feels like journeying backwards to childhood where we could play all day and nothing would go wrong from it, right, where play was how we learned. Play was how we explored. Play was how we did everything.

When I'm stuck in my life, it's usually because I'm worried about doing it wrong or I'm trying to find the right way to do it, and I'm getting stuck.

Which is the best right way to do something?

And I see this happen in my students, too. We are afraid to enjoy holding that long note because we want do it the right way. We don't want a long note to go on for a long time and sound terrible. We want a guarantee that it's going to sound good before we start.

And truly, how we practice that long note is by singing it a bunch of different ways and letting it be disappointing sometimes. We have to let ourselves sound disappointing before we can sound consistently amazing or reliably amazing.

“Consistently and reliably amazing” might sound like a really high bar. It does to me right now. I'm thinking, Michèle, that sounds a little unattainable.

But I do know for myself that I can find my good singing voice. It takes warming up, it takes some looking, because my good singing voice does not involve the same set of habits as my good speaking voice.

But I can find my good singing voice and I can find it pretty quickly. And I feel pretty happy with it when I find it.

So that is attainable, and I think that is consistent for myself. I can consistently find it when I do the warmup, when I do the practicing consistently, I do sound consistently good and sometimes I feel like I

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sound amazing.

So how do we wrestle effectively with that fear of doing it wrong? Or that deep desire to do it the “right” way.

This happened early enough in your life that you probably cannot remember it right now. Most of us can't remember things before we were about three years old. But I want to ask you to trust me.

I'm the mother of two and I have seen lots of other infants, and maybe you have, too, and this is where these facts are coming from.

When we were babies, we had no idea what the right way was. We were not natural born walkers. Some of us might have walked sooner than others, but it wasn't because we thought we had to do that before a certain amount of time went by. We just kept exploring.

We're born into this big, cold, confusing place, and we just start exploring our bodies.

What am I capable of?

Can I get my toe in my mouth?

Can I grab somebody else's finger?

Do my fingers do that? Can I point?

Can I pick up a Cheerio?

Can I kick and kick and kick and kick?

Can I pull myself up to standing?

We were born without an instruction manual for ourselves of all of the things we were supposed to do with our bodies. We just started exploring and trying and failing. Or, did we know we were failing? But trying and trying and trying and trying until we could.

And that sense, which unfortunately none of us can probably actually remember but I think we can conjure it in the imagination, that tenacity,

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that determination, that desire to just keep going, to not be committed to “right” or “wrong,” but just “what is” and “what can be.” That's how as adults now we begin to chip away at that need to know that it's going to be perfect before we even try.

If nobody else cared, what would I try?

If I didn't care, what would I try?

How brave could I be if I knew I wouldn't fail?

These are the questions that I ask myself when I feel stuck because I'm afraid of doing it wrong.

Now, this isn't to say that there aren't actually wrong ways of doing things.

When it comes to singing and speaking, using the body, using the voice in a professional capacity, there are definitely do's and don'ts.

It's important to separate the fear of doing it wrong because they won't like us, or I will look ridiculous, or I'll discover that I'm not talented and I'm wasting everybody's time, God hasn't favored me, so who do I think I am? Like, that train of thought. We need to separate that fear from the fear of, “I might physically hurt myself.”

And that's what I mean when I say there are do's and don'ts about how to use the voice in a professional capacity. There are do's and don'ts and those are knowable. Those are things that we can learn and have in our back pocket.

The fear of being embarrassed of doing it wrong because it will lead to us being ostracized in some way that is going to take on a different flavor probably every time we think it.

We are going to come up with a new and amazing way to feel ridiculous or to worry about what's going to happen with this note right here.

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What's gonna happen with this phrase? What's gonna happen with this speech?

In terms of the definite “right” way and “wrong” way to use your voice, to warm up to practice, as a general rule of thumb, you want to start small.

Well, first you want to stretch. You want to find all of your height, all of your length, all of your width. You want to stretch up to the sky, you want to stretch down to the floor. You want to stretch from side to side.

You want to figure out how big you are actually, and can you feel yourself grow bigger by stretching and feeling also connected to the earth?

Can you feel yourself big by stretching and also connected to the earth, firmly planted. Whether you're standing or whether you're in a chair, you want feel your feet on the floor, and then you want to see how the breath is moving today.

So, taking some good breaths without making any sound. Then taking a good breath and making an easy maybe whooping kind of sound. Something that's [who] something that's just letting air move through your body.

And that can feel like a big thing, maybe we're talking about a big breath and a large easy sound.

After that, you want to explore something smaller. You don't want to start singing full out right away. You don't want to start shouting full out right away.

For speakers, this is usually where stretching your face – singers, too – stretching your face, massaging the inside of your mouth with your tongue, doing some tongue twisters... but for singers, I would move the

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tongue twisters to later. But if you're a speaker, I would put the tongue twisters maybe a little earlier.

Massaging your jaw from the outside. Another way of figuring out how big you are – how open can your mouth comfortably be? How loose can your jaw be?

And then starting, if you're a singer, with some humming or some lip trilling or singing into a straw, into a glass of water and just exploring nice, easy patterns. Starting small and stretching from there.

I think if you go that far, do that much, you're in good shape for the rest of whatever else you're gonna do.

Figuring out how big you are, feeling grounded on the planet, feeling the air move easily and well with some whoops or some easy, large sounds.

And then starting with some smaller sounds, not because you squeeze down and pinch them out, but you hold all of that big space, you stay just as big as you found, and maybe you even find that you can feel yourself bigger, and then work with smaller sounds, hums, lip drills, blowing bubbles over small patterns.

Then let the patterns get bigger and let the sounds get bigger: after a lip trill, you can open to a single vowel. After a single vowel, you can alternate vowels, alternate AH and EE, for example. Or if you start with EE, alternate EE and OH and work from there.

That's my baseline “right way” to warm up, “right way” to start to engage the singing voice the right way to treat yourself.

As for the other “right way,” the fear of doing it wrong because then I will be ostracized, I'll be laughed at, I'll be a failure in a broader sense of the word, it helps me to know that when I'm trying a new thing, I am probably going to feel ridiculous, and it's my job to be okay with that, to

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let that feeling wash over me, wash through me, to be uncomfortable with the uncertainty of this new thing.

If you think about it, it's really unfair to expect yourself to do something perfectly that you've never done before or even to do something “perfectly,” and you can't even define what that would mean.

I think a lot of the time for me, I will just speak for myself, for me, when I'm afraid of doing it wrong, a lot of time, I don't actually know what doing it “right” would mean.

What I mean when I say I'm afraid of doing it wrong, what I actually mean is

I'm afraid of feeling uncomfortable.

I'm afraid of looking ridiculous.

I'm afraid of feeling like a fool.

I'm afraid of not knowing.

I'm afraid of losing myself of somehow getting lost and not being able to get back to the version of me that I'm comfortable with.

And what I know for myself is that when I can allow myself, when I can make space in my psyche, in my being, to feel uncomfortable and to have that be okay...

I feel uncomfortable. Yes, I'm doing something new. That's to be expected. I feel kind of ridiculous. Yeah. I'm doing something new and that's to be expected.

When I can allow those feelings and all the sensations that come with them – sometimes there's a pit in my stomach, sometimes my shoulders are tense, sometimes I can't get a good breath, whatever they are.

Sometimes I, well, often I lose contact with the floor. I don't mean that I levitate, I mean, I lose the sensation of my feet being on the floor.

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When I get scared and worried about doing something wrong, it's like all of the blood goes to my head to try to figure it out, and it's almost like I lose track of my body. In that fear, in that worry, I just become like a floating head and it's not possible to sing well when you're a floating head.

It's not possible to speak compellingly when you're just a floating head.

Maybe it doesn't feel like that for you, but that's what it is for me and I, I see versions of it in my students, which is why if you've listened to other episodes of the podcast, you'll hear me talk all the time or frequently about feeling your feet on the floor, feeling your seat in your seat, cultivating a sense of groundedness.

The only way I've found to tolerate feeling uncomfortable, ridiculous, like this could be a huge mistake and doing it anyway – the only way I can allow those feelings to move through my body is if I'm grounded, if I feel securely attached to the earth.

When I feel securely attached to the earth, my capacity to feel all the things is a hundred times higher.

But when I'm in fight or flight or shutting down, I don't have capacity to feel uncomfortable, and so I don't have capacity to try the new thing. And when I don't try the new thing, I don't learn how to do it, and it doesn't get better.

This is the awful thing about singing. We can't get better at it if we don't practice. We, we need to put in the reps. Same thing with public speaking. We need to put in the reps.

Putting in the reps is its own process. I think that would make this episode too long. I will talk about it and I will be teaching on it in July for 12 weeks. I'll be offering a group class on Zoom, where we're going

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to look at exactly this – practicing.

How do we practice? How do we warm up?

Because how we warm up the voice is also how we practice the two things go very nicely together.

You'll learn how to warm up your voice with the resources at your disposal. You'll learn what your body needs to sound and feel the best it can and over the 12 weeks, we will practice together.

There will be more information about this class coming soon, and I will talk more on the podcast about how we put in the reps. But for today, for now, let's just start with getting more comfortable with the fear of doing it “wrong.”

Can that be a feeling that we actually welcome?

That may be a tough sell. When you feel afraid that you might do it wrong, you're on the cusp of learning something new, you're on the cusp of a new skill.

That can be a moment of great excitement or total dread.

If you can learn to identify that fear and see it as, “oh, I'm about to make a discovery,” that might make it easier to do the strange, the new, the hard.

And if you're able to make that turn, feeling that fear and realizing that you're on the verge of a discovery, can you find that inner infant in yourself?

That part that we've forgotten, but that you were once, where it was play. It was fun. Yes, you got frustrated. Yes, you had temper tantrums, but

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you also persisted and now you're walking.

There's a part of you that enjoys this. This,

I wanna do it right.

I wanna learn how to do it.

This part that's full of desire and determination to get it. To take that next step.

I really hope this has been a helpful reframe. If I've said something that feels askew, please let me know.

This is how I work with myself when I'm trying to get over the fear of doing it wrong and this is the perspective that I coach my students from when they're worried about doing it wrong.

I make it as much of a game as possible.

I pull us back onto a playground, an earlier playground as effectively as I can, so that their adult brain can take a backseat and we can play in a room of infinite possibility and just see what's here, what's possible, what could be, especially what could be fun and free and easy and in alignment with their own body.

So this is what I have for you.

Thank you so much for listening.

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