

Ep #11: Opening Courageously

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.

Today I want to talk about opening courageously. This is one of those nine instructions that I mentioned a couple of episodes ago. The episode was called, Your Whole Self is the Instrument. I think it's number nine.

And opening courageously is one of the things that we need to do to maximize the physical strength available to us when we're using our voice.

Opening courageously is also something we need to do emotionally, psychically, and spiritually, when we're using our voice. And I'll get into a little bit of that today.

Just for a quick review, when I say that “your whole self is the instrument,” I mean that we need physical strength, neurological calm, and a grounded sense of being if we want the project of using our voice to go well.

And when I talk about the project of using our voice, I'm not talking about what happens around the kitchen table so much as I am as when you're singing, when you're giving a presentation, when you're using your voice in a bigger way – when it's something that you need to give attention to in order for it to work.

So one of the components of physical strength, there are three: engaging your core, broadening your back, and opening courageously. I talked about broadening your back a bit on the last episode, episode 10, and I've spoken more about opening courageously as it relates to your jaw

Ep #11: Opening Courageously

and your upper body on an episode called Why YouTube Warm Ups Might Not Work for You. I think that's episode 5.

But today I want to talk about more your trunk, more your shoulders.

So, opening in the front: if you clasp your hands behind your back and pull down and kind of roll your shoulders back, you can feel some new width across the front of your chest. The point isn't to arch your back but to help your shoulders find a neutral, rather than a rolled-forward way of being.

Because when our shoulders are rolled forward, we're collapsing our chest, and we're crushing our ribs a little bit. And that makes it harder for the lungs to expand as fully as they might.

That kind of rolled forward posture also puts a lot of pressure on your neck, and specifically on your larynx, which houses your vocal folds, and it's harder to phonate freely when the shoulders are rolled forward.

Phonating is what happens when your vocal folds make sound. And so that means singing, speaking, sighing, wailing, ahhhhhh – that's phonating.

There are lots of reasons why we walk around with our shoulders rolled forward, why we sit with our shoulders rolled forward. It's sort of a natural protective posture and it will take some practice for most people – this has been my experience – to find a comfortable open posture across the front of the shoulders.

Well, it takes some practice to hold onto that. Most people I know, including myself, can find it easily enough. By clasping your hands behind your back and squeezing your shoulder blades together and

Ep #11: Opening Courageously

maybe pressing your hands down a little bit so you stretch your shoulders down as well as back and you can feel a nice opening across the front of the chest and then you let your hands go and maybe for 15 or 30 seconds, your shoulders are rolled back and you feel nice and open, and then before you know it, you're just like right back where you started again.

It can be a hard openness to maintain because we don't have strength built up enough in other parts of the body to sustain it. Or we're just really used to slouching. Or there are really good emotional reasons to be slouching. Or gravity is here, ready and available to just have its way with us.

So I want to offer you an exercise to practice staying courageously open – open across the front of your chest, open along the sides of your neck. So if you can, before I add on, if you could just move one ear closer to its shoulder and feel a stretch, a gentle stretch, and do the same on the other side to feel a gentle stretch.

And maybe stretch your arms up above your head and feel how long the sides of your waist can be. How long the distance between your hip and your armpit on one side and then the other side.

And then bring your arms back down. Clasp your hands behind your back. Squeeze your shoulder blades together. Feel that width across the front of your chest again.

And sitting, or if you're standing, standing well, close your eyes and notice what you can hear in the room you're in, or if you're outside, what you can hear around you.

So maybe this will feel safer if you're sitting down. But I want you to take just 30 seconds. and just make note of all of the sounds you hear.

Can't Wait to Hear You – a podcast with Michèle Voillequé

Ep #11: Opening Courageously

And as you're making a note of the sounds you hear – there isn't going to be a test later to make sure you got all of them, this is just, this is you noticing – as you're noticing, see if you can notice what's nearby, what's far away. What's in the middle distance? Just everything you can hear, remaining aware of the fact that the front of your chest is open.

So if you're in a safe place, that is, not driving a car and you'd like to try this, set a timer for 30 seconds and go. Pause the podcast and come back when you're done.

I have done this exercise in various forms for quite a long time. And I want to give special recognition to a couple of people, well, one person and a place, where I learned about it again, all over again, uh, this summer.

One was in an improv workshop with David Razowsky, and he's using this exercise as a way to help improvisers become centered and present to the place, and to redefine what noise is.

Because when you're on stage and you hear a sound that's interrupting, or there's a sound that's irritating, you have an option. You can accept that sound as something that becomes part of your improvisation or informs your character in some way, or you can spend mental energy rejecting that sound.

Neither approach is better than the other, I think. I think it's more, how do you want to spend your energy?

And I think for me, it's better for me to make myself aware of all of the sounds in the room, and outside the room – the fire engine, the blaring music, the whatever – to become aware of them and accept them as part of this present moment and use them if they're helpful and not use them if they're not helpful.

Ep #11: Opening Courageously

By expanding my ears in that way, I feel more centered in myself. I actually feel safer the more I can hear and make myself aware of hearing.

And then, also this summer, I happened to be in Leipzig, Germany, which is the home of the Bach Museum. Leipzig is where Bach wrote most of his pieces that you know. If you've heard something by Bach, he probably wrote it in Leipzig. And the Bach Museum is a wonderful place. I can't recommend it highly enough. And they have things for all ages of people.

And one of the things they had for, they thought was for kids, was a worksheet with this exercise on it: to sit quietly with your eyes closed and notice what you can hear, and then draw a map of the sounds you heard and where they were in relation to you.

So what was close in, what was far away, and what quality did the sound have? Like, if it was a car rushing by, how, how would you describe that? Or if it was birds in the trees or the wind in the leaves, how could you represent that graphically? And that was just charming to me.

So today I'm proposing, again, another way of becoming aware of the sound in your environment and thinking about it not as noise maybe, but as just sound. What's the canvas, what's the sonic canvas that you are walking through, living in? My metaphor has fallen apart. I hope you can follow what I mean.

Anyway, very useful for expanding your creativity, for becoming more aware of the world around you, for becoming maybe more accepting of the world around you.

And for me, when I apply it to this posture exercise, this instruction of opening courageously and maintaining that openness, can I learn to

Can't Wait to Hear You – a podcast with Michèle Voillequé

Ep #11: Opening Courageously

maintain that openness while doing one other simple thing? Which in this case is having my eyes closed and listening.

The next step for me, and I'll suggest for you because you're here, is to try that listening exercise, again 30 seconds, listening, taking note of everything you hear, but this time with your eyes open and being aware of the openness of your chest. So you have open ears, an open chest and easy breathing.

No special breathing to be doing here. No stiffness to be holding on to. The point isn't to find rigidity, but to simply become aware of being open and what that feels like.

And if you need to stretch again halfway through, five seconds in, go ahead and stretch. There's nothing wrong with movement here. We're trying to practice as perfectly as we can the state of being that we need when we're using our voice for singing or speaking.

I want to step back from the physical for just a moment and mention boundaries – emotional boundaries, psychic boundaries.

We're not only bracing ourselves against the loud noises of the world, right? We're bracing ourselves against bad news, relationships we don't like, people who make us feel tense, situations that are not going the way we want, right?

Can you feel your shoulders moving in? Can you feel yourself feeling less open? That's a real thing. And it's a fair question – if you have it – to say, what if opening courageously is just really not a good idea, right? Because I might get hurt, I really don't feel safe. This is just not making any sense right now. It doesn't make any psychological, emotional sense for me to try to open courageously right now.

Ep #11: Opening Courageously

And I want to say. You don't have to. You really, you, honestly, you don't have to. And it's something that we can learn to do even when conditions are not perfect. And that's what I'm gently suggesting today.

And I want to hold up an idea that I learned from Danielle LaPorte, something that she would talk about: having an open heart. An open heart for other people, an open heart for the world, an open heart for relationships. She, and I don't recall the book, I don't recall where I heard her say this, but what I remember is, the desire to have a wide open heart, a big open heart, and a big effing fence.

So, imagine yourself sitting on a porch of a farmhouse with a, with a large area of land around you, lots of fields. And there's, there's a fence around the perimeter of your property. And the things that you want to protect your heart from, they can't come through that fence. And so cultivating this idea that you can have a big open heart, it's easier to have a big open heart when your boundaries are clear.

There's a lot more to say about that.

And when it comes to performing – speaking or singing in public – there are all kinds of things that we cannot control, which is why this sitting with your eyes closed, listening to the world exercise is really important.

Because sirens happen. Because metal water bottles fall off of tables onto hardwood floors and make incredible noises. Because cars honk.

There are all kinds of disruptive sounds, and when you can practice listening and expecting those sounds, you train your nervous system, you train your trunk, you train your shoulders to tolerate them, to accept them, and to allow them to be, which helps you stay calmer, more grounded, open, even when it's not entirely comfortable to be open.

Ep #11: Opening Courageously

So this has been a little new lesson in opening courageously. I hope it's been helpful.

I have really appreciated your feedback and your comments. Please keep them coming. Thank you so much for listening.

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