

# Voice

## NONFICTION

*“A fall of voice, regretted like the nightingale’s last note.”*

~ William Wordsworth

I try to speak, and my voice catches, an acorn lodged in my throat. Well-meaning friends say: *Maybe it’s not something to power through. Study the throat chakra. What is the silence trying to tell you. Are you listening?*

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Just using my voice makes it harder to use my voice. The voice therapist, Juliana, says a polyp on the vocal cords rarely resolves through therapy, but because mine is small, we can try.

She tells me to blow through a straw and hum, five times a day, into a half-filled bottle of water. For the first two weeks, I am diligent. I write “voice” on my calendar in the times before and after each meeting. I say *ohhhhhh* through a straw and hum up and down, like a siren.

At the end of a long day of teaching and marketing work, I hear scratchy gravel when I speak and worry that my efforts are for naught, though the therapist insists I sound better. But then I go on a trip, and I don’t do the exercises five times a day. Three at most. Something, not nothing.

“I’m doing the best I can,” I say to my husband.

Who am I trying to convince?

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I search the calendar for a time to have surgery, after which I won’t be able to speak for two weeks or teach for six. Maybe I won’t have surgery. My voice sounds raspy, rough and stumbling, but I’m not in pain. A woman’s voice deepens as she ages anyway.

“Try to vocally budget,” the therapist says. “Limit the number of phone calls and Zooms. Avoid loud restaurants. If you have to strain your voice, do the exercises before and after.”

When I cancel calls with friends, acquaintances, former clients, I feel relief. This may be the

first time I've ever simplified my schedule.

*You do too much*, my grandmother used to say. I waved her away, believing I could do it all.

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This isn't the first time my faltering voice alerted me to an uncomfortable truth.

At 28, I was engaged to be married. For weeks before the wedding, my fiancé, I'll call him B, who was out of work, slept over every night, returning to his parents' house each morning, scruffy and untucked. We were Orthodox Jews and his mother called him an asshole for having sex before marriage.

It took him seven years to finish college, but all he could talk about was the a cappella group he sang with on campus. Unable to hold a job for longer than nine months, he insisted he'd make it as a performing musician. I could be the partner who encouraged him to play piano and share his beautiful voice with the world. But when no one hired him for paying gigs, B curled into depression, and I panicked.

In a therapist's office, blinds drawn against the heat, I said, "I don't want to be the person who cancels the wedding. He'll go to therapy. I'll help him. I'll be the dutiful religious wife."

I emptied my closet of pants and short sleeves, wearing only long skirts, long sleeves, high-collared shirts. I bought fancy hats and cotton berets to cover my hair once we married. I even visited a wigmaker to consider an \$1,800 human hair *sheitel*, backing out at the last minute because it was too heavy on my head. A religious wife puts her husband first. A Rebbetzin told me to fake it in the bedroom so my husband could find pleasure. "You'll eventually have your chance," she said.

We married before 350 people in black tie and floor-length dresses. At the reception, the band leader brought me to the side of the stage, and B got up with seven college friends to perform as if our wedding were a concert, as if all the people at the round tables were there to watch him sing and dance. It was August and outside, the humidity was thick. Icy with air conditioning, the ballroom had no natural light. In my custom silk dress with little pearls on sheer sleeves, sequins in my curly hair, I forced a smile and tapped my hand against my dress, bopping to the music, embarrassed that everyone was witnessing my groom pull all focus from his bride.

But I should have expected it. For two weeks before the wedding, he stayed up every night, organizing the chuppah lighting, coordinating with the ceremony quartet, writing new music, then balling it up and throwing it in the trash. This was not a coming together of two souls; it was his grand debut. Marriage put him on the map, while it silenced and hid me away.

Later, in keeping with the rules of our religion, we danced on separate sides of the parquet. Men in black suits brought in chairs, lifting me up and carrying me to B, bouncing us in the air while everyone danced around us. Shaking with laughter, B handed me a white napkin to hold between us. I didn't get the joke.

In our hotel room that night, he explained, alight with laughter, that he had wiped his sweaty face with the napkin before giving it to me. I felt betrayed, tricked, the butt of an ugly joke. The last thing I wanted was B naked in my bed, but it was our wedding night, so I tried, until I had to push him away, saying, *it's ok if we just go to sleep*, when what I wanted to say was: *Let me close my eyes and shut you out.*

The first year of that marriage, my throat burned. Three times, the doctor diagnosed strep and prescribed antibiotics.

I sifted through the long skirts in my closet, ran my hands over the dozens of hats I wore to cover my hair. In the synagogue, I sat behind a wooden lattice with all the women. In that world, I'd forever be behind a barrier. From the front of the sanctuary, the rabbi called out page numbers. Men shuffled about mumbling prayers, slapping backs, sneaking shots of whiskey. Walking down the street on the Sabbath, I called "Good Shabbos!" to people I passed, but the men in black suits kept their eyes on their feet and scurried along without responding.

In intuitive medicine, getting sick in your throat means you feel you don't have a voice.

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The four writing classes I teach every week include my signature course, Finding Your Voice. Through tears, my students say, "I need to claim my voice before it's too late. I have a lot to say. It's time to start saying it."

I know exactly what they mean.

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Once, on a rooftop, in the moist heat of Bali, with views of bright green terraced rice paddies, a yoga instructor said, "You are enough, Lynne."

In the night, the wooden windows of my room flew open with urgent rains pounding from the sky. The wind was fierce and cool, a relief from the constant beating heat. I stood at the windows, watching sheets of rain pour and pour. The dark storm was beautiful. Morning brought quiet and stillness and though the ground was wet, the air was calm.

On that rooftop, I sat on a mat, holding a binder on life coaching. I was the instructor's guest, invited to write about her and photograph participants. Her words surprised me. I hadn't asked a question or encouraged scrutiny.

Standing in the open window, I wanted to stop telling other people's stories and get to know my own.

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I've been working since I was 14. At my first job, Dunkin Donuts on Orchard Lake Road, I wore the pink and orange uniform, packed donuts into boxes and poured coffee with two creams, two sugars, unless told otherwise. Once, I got to fill the donuts. I cranked the machine to shoot more jelly into the soft dough than suggested, believing customers deserved more sweetness in

each bite. The donuts I filled were so heavy that my thumb poked through when I grabbed one. They never let me fill the donuts again.

I loved that job. I was in the world, meeting people, offering quippy conversation and a quick smile and on my breaks, I drank hot chocolate with a shot of cream because I could eat anything and never gain weight.

After Dunkin, I worked at a dry cleaners and then I managed an aerobics studio and then I went to college and collected more jobs, always doing what others demanded, even after I moved on from customer service. The minute I graduated, I drove to New York and lived in a small apartment with a friend from middle school and rode subways and buses to and from my job at a newspaper in the clanging city. I've been working for 36 years. I am a hard worker. Smart. A go-getter. All the words people use to describe me are about what I can do. Nothing about who I am. No wonder my voice falters. I learned to measure my value by how well I satisfied other people's needs. It's exhausting to always say what other people need to hear.

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Researching the throat chakra, I learn its energy comes from effective communication, inspiration, expression, so if I don't follow my purpose or live authentically, a blockage will form.

I may never know what caused my injury. Perhaps the three-hour webinar I taught in November, or maybe just wear and tear and living lots of years. Because the polyp is small, the voice therapist says I may choose to live with it rather than remove it. It will never become cancerous. Besides, even with surgery, it could return.

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In our final session, the voice therapist explains vocal fry — the huskiness at the end of a sentence, when the voice dips down and drags across the ground. *Try not to*, she says.

Working in Argentina, she noticed that Spanish-speakers finish sentences on a rise. Their voices go up, very little vocal fry.

But Americans fry our voices all the time. Our sentences descend into guttural endings. We are tough on the voice.

So I'll be quiet for a time and let my voice come through on the page, choosing my words to proclaim *I am absolutely enough, and it is time to be heard.*