

At The End Of Your Comfort Zone
by Alena Gerst, LCSW, RYT

"I don't *think* you'll need surgery."

Not encouraging words for anyone, let alone from a highly regarded voice teacher spoken to an aspiring young singer.

How did it come to this? I thought desperately, as my new teacher began enumerating her instructions, requiring me to follow them to the letter if I wanted to work with her and avoid a surgeon's scalpel. To my young and ambitious horror, the first instruction was quite simple: No singing for at least 6 weeks, possibly longer. Only breathing.

It's 15 years later, and I'm reading a book in which the author is relating a story about when her daughter began studying the violin. Before her music teacher taught her anything about making a sound on the violin, he made a point to teach her about having reverence for the instrument. This included weeks of lessons on how to sit properly, how to hold the bow, how to handle the instrument in its resting position.

My voice teacher eventually became a "life teacher" and I have affectionately referred to her ever since as my "Mr. Miagi," in reference to the karate kid's seemingly pointless "wax on/wax off exercise."

What Virginia Davidson taught me, and what I had failed to learn prior to coming to the cusp of vocal ruin, was reverence for my instrument. In this case, the voice. In my ambitious and driven haste to succeed, I had asked too much and given too little in return.

I know I wasn't alone.

The drive in our society today to succeed, to accumulate, and sometimes to just "keep up" doesn't lend itself to the reverence necessary for optimal wellness. We may find ourselves limited by giving in too easily, or remaining overly rigid. We are uncomfortable saying no, taking the time to rest, slowing down, paying attention, feeding ourselves properly, and stretching and strengthening our bodies and minds.

It's not uncommon for Yoga teachers to hear people say they cannot "do yoga" because they aren't flexible enough. It's a common misconception that practicing Yoga is all about having "bendy" body parts. But there is more to it than that. How often do you hear people say they avoid yoga because they are not "stable enough?"

The practice of Yoga, as in the practice of anything, requires a balance of both. Increasing flexibility without stability is just another way to circumvent the reverence necessary to fully inhabit your body, mind, and spirit. I tell the same thing to dancers who want to skip the level 1 Yoga classes because they're already "flexible enough." Slowing down and increasing awareness can be mighty uncomfortable. I agree with Yoga teacher Elena Brower when she writes, "Life begins at the end of your comfort zone."

So, as eager as I was to launch my career as a performer in NYC a decade and a half ago, I chose instead to spend 8 full weeks singing not a peep with my new teacher in our weekly lessons. Then when I did begin making sound, we started from the beginning. Only later did I realize she was teaching me reverence. She was teaching me stability, and flexibility, and the lessons have reached far beyond singing.

It is with these lessons that I come to the Yoga mat today.

Standing firm. Remaining flexible. Above all, respecting what the body can do, and opening the mind to a world of possibilities. That is Yoga. That is reverence.

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