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# Finding Your Voice

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If you've ever harbored a secret ambition to sing, listen in as Barbara Cook, one of our greatest cabaret artists, teaches us a lesson in emotional honesty.

Barbara Cook is teaching a master class. I'm in the first row. We are at the Orange County Performing Arts Center in Costa Mesa, a California town world famous for its mall. Klieg lights focus on where Ms. Cook will stand. The theater is packed with college students. Not one was born when Barbara Cook was Broadway's beloved ingenue Marian the librarian in *The Music Man*.

Ms. Cook will be 79 in a few days. The first 78 were the hardest. Her baby sister died when Barbara was 3. That same week, her mother's brother was murdered. Then her parents divorced. Cook's mother clung to her remaining daughter. They shared the same bed until 1948 when, after a visit to New York, Barbara waved goodbye at the station. Success came quickly. So did marriage, motherhood, divorce,

depression, alcoholism, and a weight gain that led to starring offers in *Tugboat Annie*. Two years ago, Wally Harper, Ms. Cook's accompanist of almost 31 years, died.

At 2:05 P.M. a door opens. The auditorium goes silent. Ms. Cook sweeps in. She gets a standing ovation.

"Now, who's going to sing for me?" She takes in the house.

Hands shoot up.

"This is not a performance," Ms. Cook cautions. "This is a class. What this is about, what I respond to most, is someone being their authentic self."

"Authentic self?" I thought her publicist told me she loves imitations. I'm having a private class with her tomorrow. Will she like my imitations?

A tall cherub starts to sing "Smile": "Smile though your heart is aching / Smile even though it's breaking / When there are clouds in the sky, you'll get by / If you smile...."

He sings as if he's already absorbed the advice in that last stanza. Ms. Cook interrupts. "You're showing us the

result, not the process. Put yourself back to when the loss occurred.”

He begins again. Ms. Cook interrupts again: “If you try to move me, you won't.”

On the third try: “I hear no difference. Would you just bloody sing it more, get into the song more?”

Demonstrating, she sings “Smile.” It could break your heart. “Do you see what I'm saying?”

He tries for the fourth time. She holds up her hand. “We put on a fake cloak because we think that's what's needed. What we really want is you. Take off your emotional clothes and be naked. It's scary. But this is where safety lies. The core place. If we can sing, dance, paint from that place, we cannot be wrong. Got that?”

The cherub takes “Smile” from the top. I hear no difference. Ms. Cook stares at him. After the final note, she puts her hands on his shoulders. “That was sweet.” She turns to the audience. “Wasn't that sweet?”

Clarissa Lecce, a pretty girl in a flippy polka-dot dress, sings a song from *Ragtime*. Oh my God. Her voice is perfection. What could Barbara Cook possibly say?

“You're very talented. You sang that beautifully. Now sing it and let us come to you. Simple, simple, simple.”

Miss Lecce gets it. The song is even better.

Dressed head to toe in black, Barbara Cook moves like a cat. As a student sings “Someone to Watch over Me,” she paces, tilts her head, stops, walks, stops again, turns, tilts. She shifts her weight, holds her chin, cocks her head, gets closer, moves back. Listening, for Barbara Cook, is physical.

“Play 'em like a fish,” she tells one girl. “Keep 'em on the line. 'I want you in bed with me.' C'mon. We're all adults. That's what this song is about.”

Ms. Cook invites a boy in the audience to stand in front of the girl so she can look in his eyes while she sings. “Hold hands,” Ms. Cook says. The song takes off. When it's over, the boy continues to hold the singer's hands. His cheeks are flushed. His chinos bulge with what the writer Gerard Shyne used to call a 10 to 6.

I'm learning so much! Everyone improves! Even students who start in the stratosphere! I can't wait for my private lesson. I'm a singing fool. My mother perched me on the piano when I was 3. I'd sing “Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered” for company, waving a chiffon scarf. In camp I was Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. Wait till Ms. Cook hears my voice. I can hold my breath for two laps in an Olympic-size pool.

I make a list of favorite songs; the ones I sing straight are on the left, my impersonations on the right. We meet at noon in a hotel banquet room, the rehearsal pianist, Barbara Cook, her assistant, me.

She studies my list. “I don't like imitations.” She points to a song on the left. “How about 'The Nearness of You'?”

We get right into it. I'm doing my fabulous breath-control thing, singing the first eight bars without coming up for air.

Ms. Cook's eyes bug.

“Uh, why don't you try it a bit lower?” she says. “And don't hold your breath so much.”

This time I channel Billie Holiday with a little Chet Baker. Ms. Cook stops me.

“You let these phrases run together in a way you wouldn't do at all in conversation,” she says.

“Oh.” I decide not to tell her that's my specialty, my jazz heritage, my *technique*. So I say: “I grew up on jazz. It was almost as if the voice were an instrument and not about the meaning of the words. Do you ever scat?”

“No. It's not what I do. My God, Ella, that's in her bones. It's not in my bones. I sing soulful ballads as well as anybody's ever done them, you know? That's what's really the meat of my talent, I think.”

She thinks? Barbara Cook has won every award available to a lyric soprano who sings the American songbook. She triumphed as Cunegonde in Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*. She owns “I've Got the World on a String.” She is widely considered the grande dame of cabaret. Her evening of song, *Mostly Sondheim*, played to packed houses internationally. Barbara Cook was the first woman invited to sing pop tunes in concert at the Metropolitan Opera. She's recorded 19 solo albums and sung for four presidents. *The New York Times* calls her voice transcendent.

“That song,” she says. “How does it begin, sweetie?”

She sings “The Nearness of You” looking me in the eye. I am speechless. I almost blurt “Wow!” What to say? Who knew that song could touch so deep?

“Now, that doesn't come out of anything other than memory,” Ms. Cook breaks the silence.

“You're saying that amount of feeling is accessible to everyone?”

“I've been in love a lot of times,” Ms. Cook says. “Yeah. So that's what you use.”

I've been in love a lot of times, too. I'm rarely not in love. Does that show in my voice? Does Ms. Cook love more profoundly than I do? My first husband used to turn on the radio when I sang.

“Are you sure you wouldn't like to hear my Jimmy Durante?”

“I don't want to hear you do impersonations. I want the authentic you. Durante doesn't have a wonderful voice. But when he sings, you're moved. He sings in tune, and he has a great sense of rhythm. *You must remember this*,” Ms. Cook does Durante singing “As Time Goes By.” She doesn't do his gruffness, just his timing and sincerity.

“And he doesn't hold the note, and it doesn't matter.” She demonstrates: “A kiss is just a kiss....”

"It's about the ability to be true to yourself and communicate that truth. As an audience, you know immediately whether you believe somebody or not. Don't you?"

"Um-hmm," I say. It's clear I'm not going to get to do Durante's "You Gotta Start Off Each Day with a Song" or my much-in-demand "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" à la Helen Morgan.

Have I come here to find out what Barbara Cook thinks of my voice? Did I come to see if I could entertain a great entertainer? Nope. I'm here because I love to sing. Singing makes me happy. Or, when I'm happy, I sing. And if I can learn to sing better from Barbara Cook, I'd be nuts not to try.

I launch into "The Nearness of You" again. This time I interrupt me.

"I feel as if I can't keep up with the piano. Like I'm not matching the notes."

"You are missing a few," Ms. Cook says in a kind way. If King Kong tried to sing, she would critique him with respect.

"Could I try it without the piano? If I can sing at my own pace, I know I'll sing it with more feeling."

"Tell you what," Ms. Cook says. "Speak the lines. Speak the words."

"It's not the pale moon that excites me," I say, as if Barbara Cook and I were having coffee.

"Slowly."

"It's...not...the...pale...moon...that...excites...me,...that...thrills...and...delights...me...."

She interrupts. "It has to be backed up emotionally. You talk about somebody having sweet conversation: 'Oh my God! Your conversation knocks me out!' Okay? You use those words, those feelings."

"I'm worried I'll get hammy," I say.

"The only way it could get hammy is if you're on the outside doing it. But if it's really coming from a real place in you, there's no way it can be hammy. We all have these feelings. You're saying, I'm human, too. I'm like you. We're not alone. Hmm? And it heals. It's important. It's not a little thing."

I ask Barbara Cook if she'll sing my father's favorite song: "Younger Than Springtime." I want to know why it made him cry.

She sings: "And when your youth / And joy invade my arms / And fill my heart as now they do / Then younger than springtime, am I...."

My eyes well up. The song is a short story. A story about the power of love to triumph over time. I've sung this song all my life. I'm hearing the words for the first time. I'm seeing the words in the context of my father's bountiful

love. I'm learning something that will make my life smarter. All that, from one song, sung directly to me, by Barbara Cook. Is this what authenticity can do?

“Did you ever feel in your life you were inauthentic?” I ask.

“You bet. I still do sometimes. And I say, 'Barbara, what the hell are you doing?' Because I get awed like everybody else, particularly around people who are famous. And I catch myself doing something ridiculous and I —'Jesus! Calm down, you know, come on.'”

We spend two hours singing together. I don't want this lesson to end. Ms. Cook tries on my shoes. I promise to send her a pair in orange to match the faux Bottega Veneta bag she got online from Korea. My plane is leaving in 45 minutes, but I'm only 15 minutes from the airport. There's a song from *Carousel* that I love. I saw the revival at Lincoln Center a few years ago. What can someone intimate with disillusion do with a song about innocence?

“Would you consider singing a little something from *Carousel* before I go? Would you sing 'When I Marry Mr. Snow?’” Barbara Cook says yes. The years fall away. She is a bride-to-be, pert, full of hope, ready for love. Barbara Cook is almost 80. It's baffling how she does this. It's magic.

A month later, at an informal gathering at a friend's house, the tenor Robert White is singing by the piano. Robert White has sung for five presidents and is taking requests. I ask for “Younger Than Springtime.” Midway through, he extends his palm toward me and curls his fingers. I look into his eyes. I sing from a place I've never sung. We finish our duet. Everyone applauds. Robert White blows me a kiss.

*Barbara Cook's albums include No One Is Alone (DRG).*