



Mindset Reset: Mindfulness and Positive Thinking Strategies for Music Educators

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Guest Article

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This article is a transcription of the talk that I gave on April 3, 2020. I hope you will forgive the conversational nature and imperfect grammar, since I was speaking from the heart, rather than reading a written document. I hope that even though this talk was given weeks ago that you will still find it helpful and relevant to your life.

I want to provide strategies to help us through this incredibly challenging time. My goal is to provide ways to think about how to tune up our instrument, how do we tune up ourselves? We often think about how to tune up our orchestras, bands, and choirs, and ensembles. We may think about giving a car a tune-up or even tuning the radio, but it seems that probably the last thing we ever think about is tuning up ourselves. I want to share ideas with you, today, to help move us from what we might be feeling now and I want to acknowledge these feelings that all of us — myself included — have been feeling these past weeks. I know that it has been an incredibly challenging time and I want to honor those feelings that we all share.

It does feel like there is a dark cloud over our heads and I know we are all experiencing grief and loss. I know that we all miss seeing our students in person. There has been so much change and it certainly has spun our world into a sense of turmoil and a feeling of lack of control. I want to honor that as being authentic and real. I hope to provide ways to manage our thoughts and create what I call a Mindset Reset. Because, I think our ultimate goal in the end is to be our best selves for our students that we can be. I am going to share some ideas and practices that will hopefully, help us move from fear to hope.

What is really going on in our brain? Well, it turns out that when we are feeling fear, stress, and anxiety - that's perfectly normal with all of the changes and the constant barrage of negative news that we are hearing - it is absolutely normal for our amygdala to basically

hijack the rest of our brain. The amygdala is there for a purpose, an evolutionary purpose to protect us. It is really part of that fight, flight, or freeze function that we have for our own protection and security. The problem is that when we are in a state of fear and anxiety almost all of the time, it virtually shuts down the parts of our brain that we want to have used in the optimal way. That's our pre-frontal cortex and neo-cortex. That is the part of our brain that we use as musicians and teachers that allows us to be creative solution finders, build relationships with others, be team players, to be able to respond calmly rather than react. That's where we want to be. And when we are there, our brain is creating all of these great — what I call, the good stuff — chemicals that are just soaring through our mind and body. Those are Dopamine, Endorphins, Oxytocin, and Serotonin. When those are flowing freely, we are able to find a sense of serenity, peacefulness, and calm in order to be the teacher that we know we can be.

Let us talk about control. There are some things that have not changed. I think our purpose and our “Why?” for teaching music, no matter the situation or the crisis, has not changed. I think we can still have control over our own purpose and vision. Think about the reason you chose to become a teacher. Has that changed? Many of us chose to go into the profession of music education because there was a music teacher in our life who saw something in us, who believed in us, who encouraged us and supported us along the way through the challenges, through the ups and downs, and we wanted to be someone like that, to be there for our students. Maybe that is one of the hardest things right now - that rather than being with our students, we are separated from them. Whether it is online instruction, it is over the phone, or through email, we are doing everything we can to connect with our students. We are really finding that this is a new challenge. Perhaps during this time of separation and isolation, we can pause and reflect on our “Why?” and purpose, and for some of us, we may

rediscover that our “Why?” may actually be deeper than it was before as we recognize the incredible power of music, how it is a desire and an absolute need and necessity for all of us as human beings.

I actually want to talk about music and what can we learn from music that is going to help us through this period of time that we are in. I’ve often shared, and others have often shared, that music expresses life, and therefore it is an expression of the full range of emotions. It expresses often what words cannot. I remember as a young student learning to play the saxophone when I realized that I could feel an emotion and feed it into my saxophone, and it would come out through my sound. Music often teaches us about life. It teaches us character attributes — leadership, teamwork — all of these ideas about how to be a good person and working together are things that I learned through music. That is going to be even more important now than ever before.

Let’s talk about what we learn through teaching music. Well, one of those things we all do is conduct. I think we can all agree that the quality of the upbeat, the style of the upbeat, the emotion that we put into our upbeat is certainly going to affect the quality of the downbeat. And we can take this into other fields — the throw of the football is the upbeat, the catch is the downbeat. The shot of the basketball is the upbeat the swish is the downbeat. The handoff of the baton in a track and field relay is the upbeat, the catch is the downbeat. How the band, choir, orchestra, or marching band, Mariachi ensemble or any musical ensemble takes the stage is the upbeat to the performance.

We can choose our upbeat and as our upbeat changes, the downbeat changes. The upbeat is the thought. The action is the downbeat. Our thoughts are the upbeat to our actions. It begins with our thoughts. And this is why the ability to choose our upbeat matters so much.

I want to share some thoughts from some valuable thinkers in history. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “The ancestor to every action is a thought.” There is no action without a prior thought. Everything that we can think of was conceived with the thought first. This glass of water, this glass was first designed in somebody’s mind. They conceived it and visualized it. Intentionally created it. It’s like the piece is composed and then performed. The composing is the thought. The performing is the action.

Over 2,500 years ago Lao Tzu wrote these prophet-

ic words: “Watch your thoughts; they become words. Watch your words; they become actions. Watch your actions; they become habits. Watch your habits; they become character. Watch your character; it becomes your destiny.” You can see that it begins with thoughts and so I want to give strategies to think about how we can choose a method to even control our thoughts.

As long as we are thinking about negative thoughts, the world is going to end, and all of this fear-based anxiety — just listen to or watch the news — that negativity is going to be coming at you with a barrage and getting inside. It’s like the nutrition that you put into your body. The nutrition that you feed your mind. If all that you are hearing is negativity on your social media feeds and from the news, it is hard to really move away from that. I want to give some strategies where we can manage and choose our thoughts in order to shift them from negative to positive. Why is that helpful? Well, when we are in a positive realm, it actually ignites the prefrontal cortex and neocortex, and once again, that’s the part of our brain that allows us to be creative solution-finders in a place of serenity and calmness. Maybe you’ve noticed that from stress, we are not always able to respond the way we wish we could from a loving place. Sometimes we respond with a knee-jerk reaction because of the state of stress that we feel.

Here are some amazing thoughts about positivity that really blow my mind. One that sticks out that I will never forget is that every second your brain takes in 11 million bits of information, but you are only conscious of 40 bits. Imagine if we could choose what we focus on. The great thing is, we can. Furthermore, the average human being thinks 50,000 to 60,000 different thoughts per day. That’s a lot of thoughts. Surprisingly, 95% of the thoughts that we think today, that we thought yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that are the same thoughts. But it turns out, if we are going to change our life, if we are going to change the trajectory of our life, it begins with changing our thoughts. So, how can we change our habits of thought? One way to think about it is, do we just take things in and accept them where they are at like a thermometer and measure the temperature, or are we a thermostat that can change the weather? I believe that we can be a thermostat.

What we focus on grows. What we focus on expands. The mind will go in the direction of your dominant thought. Focus on what you want. Focus on what you want to create. Focus on what you desire. Feel that

feeling inside as if it is actually happening. Your mind doesn't understand the negative. It doesn't understand the 'no.' If you say:

"I don't want to feel stress."

"I don't want to feel anxious."

"I don't want to have fear."

"I don't want to feel <blank>."

Your mind will create more of that. Whatever you focus on grows, even the negative of it. So, focus on what you want, rather than on what you don't want. If you want more light in your life, look to the light. Find the light.

There is nothing more powerful to slow everything down than managing our breath. Why this is so important is that when we are stressed, fearful, or anxious, our breathing changes and it becomes shallow, high, tight and constricted, irregular, and loud. That's a physiological response. It is something we can't actually help. Rather than just trying to change your emotions at will, look to changing your breath first and slow everything down. The holistic doctor and well-published author, Andrew Weil, wrote "It is much easier to regulate the breath than to will negative moods to end."

Let's try it. The first breath I want to share with you is a breath I started sharing with my students when I was the band director at Loveland High School in Loveland, Colorado. It began around 10 or 15 years ago. At the time, I had been doing a lot of yoga after school and in the evening and sometimes even before school super early in the morning. I found it to be an incredible stress relief. A lot of it came from the breathing and so one day I brought it to the rehearsal. We had been using breathing exercises like the breathing gym that many of us are familiar with, which is great for working on lung capacity and building a great sound and tone. I introduced a breath I now call "the focus breath". Just breathe in through your nose for four counts and breathe out of your nose for four counts. Let's try it a couple times. Get relaxed. Relax the shoulders.

Here we go: In 2, 3, 4, out 2, 3, 4 (repeat). Notice how the space has gotten softer, more focused. Notice how your mind is more focused. It works great in rehearsals and I found that an advantage that I didn't even anticipate is improved classroom management because you can't talk when you are breathing through your nose

and that led to a strategy where instead of asking students to stop talking, I created a non-verbal response to say "let's breathe through our nose." It centers the students. The students feel great. You can even try it in your distance learning sessions with your students, and everybody will feel great.

The next breath I want to share with you is an incredible tool to slow everything down and you can do this in the morning, you can do this 3-times a day, 3 times in a row. I call it "the serenity breath". Breathe in through your nose for 4 counts, hold for 7, and then release the breath out through your mouth for 8 counts. Let's try it. For added benefit, you can actually anchor your tongue on the roof of your mouth behind your top teeth and that completes the energy circuit. Any time you are feeling worked up or tight in your chest, I promise that it will slow everything down and you will feel so much better.

The next set of breaths are called "the triangle breath" and "the square breath". To practice the triangle breath, breathe in through your nose for 3, hold for 3, release the breath out through your mouth for 3. I was teaching the triangle breath at a conference for ACDA for a bunch of choir directors and I was sharing how these breaths can help you if you are having trouble sleeping at night. That is a very common experience for us as teachers, pre-COVID, and maybe even more so, post-COVID. We are always thinking about our lesson plans or what we are going to do the next day and that keeps us up at night. One of the choir directors raised their hand and said that something that has worked even more from me is the square breath. Let's try "the square breath". Breathe in through your nose for 3, hold for 3, release the breath out through your mouth for 3, and hold for 3. You can probably do these breaths at least 3 times to have an optimal benefit.

The next breath is really active in that we can slow our breathing down and also think about something in particular while breathing. I call it "the gratitude breath". It turns out that gratitude is an incredible thing because your mind can't multi-task. We can't feel two feelings simultaneously. So instead of focusing on what is causing us stress, we start focusing on what brings us joy, what we are appreciative of, or what we are really grateful for. We can intentionally shift our mindset to focus on what brings us joy or what we are grateful for, and when we do that, the other feelings start to fade away. We want to stay in this place of gratitude for optimal benefit. So while we are breathing in our nose, focus on

something you are grateful for — it may be your family, maybe the security and safety of the home that you are in, maybe it's gratitude for the workers on the frontline, the healthcare workers, gratitude for your students, and your love for your students, gratitude for music, gratitude for the coffee that you had in the morning, gratitude for access to technology, gratitude for access to media that allows us to stay connected, etc. So, breathe through your nose, think about what you are grateful for, and then exhale all that you want to get rid of, breathing out through your mouth for 8 counts — get rid of all the toxins. Let's try it again. In through your nose for 4, out through your mouth for 8.

I want to take this to the next level. Rather than expelling negativity, this time, breathe in gratitude and then release what you want to send to the world. Perhaps you want to share love, compassion, empathy, joy. Whatever it is, send that to the world through your exhale. Inhale gratitude, exhale peace, joy, love.

Breathing technique is so important — you can bring that into a morning meditation or before you go to bed. It turns out that meditation is really an opportunity to ground and center yourself. While you are meditating you can also be focusing on gratitude — what you are grateful for. You can be breathing slowly in your nose and out your mouth and visualizing the day you want to create, the difference you want to make in somebody's life. Maybe you meditate on the idea of hope. Sometimes, I use an app on YouTube that plays sound sculptures based on different Hertz — 432 Hertz for example — and create different types of mental impacts. A positivity app.

I have also been using the free download of Deepak Chopra and Oprah Winfrey. They have a 21-day meditation on hope that I am using right now. I've also listened to meditations delivered by Wayne Dyer and Abraham Hicks. I've used the Waking Up app by Sam Harris. Some people really like Headspace. There are guided meditations that help. I think that if you can find even 5, 10, 15 minutes each morning, you will find that it becomes almost like a forcefield. It feels like a bubble around me that allows me to be more of a responsive human being rather than a reactive human being. I meditate in the morning but there are also benefits to meditating before going to bed, particularly if you have trouble sleeping. Meditations sets you up for a day where you are centered and grounded. You can compose your day while you are meditating and blueprint it and see it before

it happens. Then your day begins to manifest in a way that you hoped it would. So, meditation is connected to breathing. It is connected of course to mindfulness.

I believe that gratitude is one of the greatest things to shift our mindset. Breathing is the other one. When we change our breathing, it allows us to shift our mindset to a place of serenity where you can be the best version of yourself. Focusing on gratitude is one of the most important things and the development of the positive psychology movement led by Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania did some of the initial studies to prove that focusing on what we want to create rather than what is wrong helps guide the mind to build, create, and lead a life where gratitude — the more things you are grateful for, the more things you notice that you are grateful for. You notice that what you focus on starts to manifest.

I learned a lot about visualizing when I ran cross-country and track and field in high school, where we were taught to visualize the race before it happened, and then in addition as a musician at the undergraduate level, my saxophone instructor taught me visualize the performance of a solo or of a recital before it happened. Now, as a conductor, I study the score beforehand and visualize it in my mind's ear before I conduct it. I think as musicians we understand the idea of visualizing. Now that we are home, we can actually take this as a practice of mindfulness and for meditation and visualize the day you want to create in the morning, or at night think about what you want to create the next day. Musicians are creative people. We don't have to let life just happen to us. We can create the life that we want, even while we are sheltering in place.

Mindfulness takes all of these ideas of breathing, meditation, gratitude, and it's a way of thinking about living. It's not like I am going to be mindful for two minutes now and that is my mindfulness practice. I like to think of mindfulness as a way of conducting your life.

One thing about mindfulness is that it is about self-reflection. It's about self-awareness. It's about noticing the details. It's about noticing our thoughts. When you are meditating, you'll notice that thoughts are coursing through your head. Some people think that you will meditate and everything will be still, and you will eliminate all thoughts. I have never been able to do that. Meditation is a practice and it's something of which you never attain mastery. "I have mastered medita-

tion. I have cleared my mind of thoughts." That hasn't happened and it, likely, will not happen. Accept your thoughts. Let them pass. Let them ebb and flow. Know that your thoughts and feelings come and go, just like the tide moving in and moving out. Acknowledge your thoughts. Reflect on them and let them pass. Some of the creative ideas that I have for my life and for the day happen while I am meditating. Accept them. Allow them. Be open to what is passing and be non-judgmental. That is really, really important. All right, so take advantage of this time while you are home to find a moment to pause, to slow down, and reflect.

I want to give some words of encouragement. Within our limitations, discover your creativity. Rather than focusing on scarcity, notice abundance. Rather than thinking about all of the challenges, rethink it, reframe it as opportunity. Instead of doing, doing, doing, how about just being? Rather than always achieving, think about becoming. Rather than thinking about fear, find hope. Rather than focusing on our loss, focus on gratitude. Instead of obsessing over goals, try giving. If you find that your ego is taking over, try serving. Instead of hate, feel love. Rather than being bored, rediscover your curiosity. Instead of resistance, allowing. If you feel tight, release. Rather than always trying to be right, choose kind. Instead of feeling anger, feel peace. Rather than focusing on negativity, choose intentionally to focus on positivity.

Love, connection, and belonging are essential to us as human beings, and I think this is one of the reasons we are drawn to music, and why we have been drawn to being in ensembles, to conducting ensembles. That feeling of togetherness, that unity of creating something that is greater than the sum of its parts, that synergy that we create. The feeling of working towards a goal and then the performance sometimes rising above our wildest expectations. Everybody moving in sync, performing in sync, our hearts beating together. I think we have a lot to learn from those experiences in ensembles.

Think of all the things that you miss that when you get to go back to school in person, you are going to appreciate so much, like the reeds that you find on the band room floor and the musty smell of instruments. Even just having a memory of something that brings you joy will ignite your pre-frontal cortex and flood your brain with dopamine, elevate your immune system. Visualizing is almost just as good as experiencing it. I want to share some words I wrote:

"Be the light. You light the inner flame. You kindle the spark. You are a messenger of hope. We became music teachers because someone saw the light in us and encouraged us. You matter more than ever now. The world needs music and needs music teachers. Your students need you. We may be separated physically but through music we can break down the walls of separation and build bridges to connect us, to make the distance fade away."

I've been creating some YouTube videos recently on a channel I call Upbeat Global and sharing some articles I have written in response to COVID about how positivity is contagious and that together, together we got this. There is a student who contacted me on Facebook Messenger. He shared a lot about his feelings and asked me for some guidance about how to help with morale in his band and I shared some ideas with him. In response to one of my videos, he wrote me a note that I think it is so poignant because I think it is universal. I want you to read it as if it is meant for you. "For all of today, I've been looking for someone not to tell me facts I already know but just that everything's going to be okay. Even if it's not, you make it seem as if it is. Thank you!" You are going to be the one to give your students hope. Maya Angelou wrote, "Hope and fear cannot occupy the same space. Invite one to stay." And just like the flowers are coming up and the grass is turning green again, we will rise again. Hope will prevail.

Thank you so much. I want to share my contact information and want you to know that I am here for you, if I can help out in any way. We are a team and we are all in this together. We are a community of support for each other. We, myself included, need others to lean on. So, let's lean on each other for support. I am grateful for all that you are doing and will continue to do for your students and for spreading the joy of music.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Broadcasting Happiness, Michelle Gielan

Casals and the Art of Interpretation, David Blum

The Culture Code, Daniel Coyle

Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence, Daniel Goleman

Intentional Living: Choosing a Life that Matters, John C. Maxwell

Leaders Eat Last, Simon Sinek

Mindset: The New Psychology of Success, Carol Dweck

Mindfulness for Teachers, Patricia A. Jennings

Mindfulness for Beginners, Jon Kabat-Zinn

Music Quickens Time, Daniel Barenboim

The Musician's Soul, James Jordan

The Power of Intention: Learning to Co-create Your World Your Way, Dr. Wayne W. Dyer

The Silent Musician: Why Conducting Matters, Mark Wiglesworth

Dr. Matthew Arau, founder of Upbeat Global, is the Chair of the Music Education Department and Associate Director of Bands at the Lawrence University Conservatory of Music in Appleton, Wisconsin. In addition, Dr. Arau is on the faculty of the American Band College of Central Washington University and VanderCook College of Music. He also serves as a Conn-Selmer Education Clinician, and as Member-at-Large on the NAFME Council for Band Education.

Dr. Arau has guest conducted and presented on leadership, mindfulness, growth mindset, rehearsal techniques, and creating positive cultures in over 25 states and 4 continents. He has presented at the International

Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic, the Western International Band Clinic, the NAFME National Conference and webinars, numerous State and Regional Music Education Association Conferences, and the Conn-Selmer Institute. He has conducted honor bands in Australia, Greece, Cyprus, and Malaysia, and All-State honor bands across the United States.

Dr. Arau draws on a deep reservoir of fifteen years of experience as a successful middle school and high school band director in Loveland, Colorado, where he led his bands at Walt Clark Middle School and Loveland High School to numerous honor performances and championships and pioneered the Leadership Symposium.

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