



# Viola

## Teaching and Lifecoaching

by Alice Preves

Dear Friends,

I've been asked to write about what it's like to be a viola teacher and a "Lifecoach" (sometimes known as a personal and professional coach). How do these two complement each other and how do they differ? How did a violist ever end up as a Lifecoach anyway? What is it about my approach to teaching that has changed or been supported by my coaching?

To answer the first question: my interest in coaching was piqued when two of my students (Nicholas Cords and Amy Thompson) had a personal coach through a program at their schools (White Bear Lake and Stillwater High Schools, respectively). These two students were the most motivated and self-directed students I had ever worked with. When I finally met their coach, Jeannie Pullen, I was amazed to learn that she knew almost nothing about music. So I asked how she could coach my students, and she explained that the techniques of coaching work in any area.

I was a little confused by Jeannie's assertion, but now, as a trained coach, I do understand that it doesn't matter if I'm working with the CEO of a company or with a 14-year-old viola student. The tools of coaching work, and the goal is the same: to live a rich and satisfying life.

One of the rules in coaching is to never make the client wrong. How can you possibly do this in teaching? You have to correct the mistakes and poor techniques. By always asking for more and better playing, rather than finding fault, the student is encouraged to stretch. I feel that it is my job to "catch" my students doing something right. I often interrupt their playing to tell them about the great new thing they just did. That moment may actually be the first time a student did what I had been asking for, and I certainly don't want to miss an opportunity to praise good work.

If they know it's wrong, why do they do it?

We've all had the experience where a student comes to us already knowing they hold the bow wrong or they bow crooked, etc. As a coach, I ask them how long they've known this, and sometimes they will tell me two or more years. So, you may wonder, why they go from teacher to teacher holding on to their bad habits? *Habit* is reason enough. A habit is a living thing and fights to stay alive. Fear is an even greater enforcer, and through coaching we can get to the bottom of exactly what the student is afraid will happen if they let go of the way they're doing things, and help the student to see the needed change from a friendlier perspective. We may even come up with fun and exciting techniques and rewards, based on the creative insights, values and goals of the student. The asked-for change is no longer the perceived boogey-man to be feared, but an exciting challenge to be undertaken.

What if it doesn't work?

Sounds good, huh? But what if that doesn't work? Well, in coaching we have something called a challenge. A true challenge must receive a disbelieving response. ("You've got to be kidding." "No way." "I couldn't possibly.") When one is called upon to rise to a seemingly impossible challenge, the person automatically begins to sense just how far they are willing to go, and it's usually farther than they would have gone without the challenge. In a coaching situation, the client is encouraged to bargain or counter-offer how far they will go in meeting the challenge. For example, I recently asked a CEO to permanently drop 5 regular responsibilities in one week's time. She agreed to drop one at work and one at home each week. (She didn't say for how many weeks, and I purposely didn't ask, as I didn't want to limit her.) She actually dropped five at

work in one week, and she developed a new, more efficient filing system that week as well.

I grew a little weary of asking a viola student to loosen his right-hand fingers. I gave him two weeks to make the change or his lesson fee would double. The change in his technique was lightning fast, although he grumbled a lot. It seemed that by concentrating on his bow hand, he was messing up in other ways. This is the fear I talked about: his fear of not playing well while he went through the change of technique. Students usually assume the change will take much longer and be much more destructive than is ever the case. At these times, I go out on a limb and promise that if they really concentrate, and try hard to make the change, the time of the shift will be very short, and mastery will come much sooner.

What does perspective have to do with it?

"Perspective" is very important in coaching. If we see life as a struggle, guess what we get — a struggle. If we see life as a great opportunity for adventure, you know what we get. But you may argue that this isn't reality. I challenge you to take a week and totally stand in a different perspective each day. (E.g. "Everything must be done 100% every day," or "I'm led by the Universe," or "I'm a risktaker" to name only a few.) By the way, you can't appreciate this exercise unless you've really done it. I ask my students to try on different perspectives about their abilities and their practice. They may choose to adopt a combination of perspectives such as: I'm in the flow, playing the viola is fun, and I learn easily.

The Gremlins

Do you remember your reaction when you turned a page of music and

noticed that about half-way down the page was a smear of black notes (16ths or may even 32nds)? What part of you began to malfunction? Your breathing, your clarity of thought, or maybe something in your stomach began to tighten. Perhaps you began to pray that somebody else would make a giant goof so that nobody would notice you. This is one of the most common self-defeating reactions in the world, and it hits us each day in many different situations. In coaching, we speak of the "Gremlin" which is that little voice (or feeling) that tells us we're not good enough. We also have great techniques for dealing with the Gremlin, beginning with just noticing its presence and how we react to it. The techniques which I have developed for dealing with my own sight-reading (or difficult passage) Gremlin have helped me immensely, and I help my students and well as my clients to learn to function better in either viola

playing or life despite the presence of the nasty Gremlins.

### The Difference between Coaching and Teaching

The big difference between being a Lifecoach and being a teacher is that in coaching almost all of the knowledge and information is drawn from the client. In teaching, the teacher is giving information about specific techniques. In both cases, homework assignments are given, but the balance of power behind the assignments is different. The coaching client is the one with all the useful information, whereas the viola student is the novice seeking guidance from the master.

Finally, what about my teaching has changed or been supported by my coaching? I guess I've always used some of the tools of lifecoaching without ever knowing that's what I was doing.

However, having gone through intensive training in coaching and practicing many hours in developing coaching skills, I definitely use more of these techniques in my teaching. I have a better understanding of what motivates my students and I help them move toward specific goals with greater enthusiasm. Whether I'm working with a viola student or a coaching client, I always view them as creative, resourceful, and whole; and their abilities and achievements never cease to excite, amaze and thrill me.

*Alice Preves is a violist in the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. She specializes in teaching junior and senior high violists, and was named MNSOTA 1998 Master Teacher. Alice is also a trained "Lifecoach," helping motivated people enrich their lives. ‡*