



# Developing Your **SUPERPOWER**

MUSIC-MAKING CAN  
SHOW US THE WAY

Note: The following are excerpts from Celeste Headlee's keynote address to the membership during the 2025 TMEA General Session.

I am the last member of the family who knew my grandfather William Grant Still personally. You may have heard of my grandfather—he is the dean of Black American composers. He died in 1978 when I was eight years old, and I'm the youngest grandchild. So, after I go, his story becomes something you can only read about in a history book, and I feel the weight of that obligation—I always have.

Don't get me wrong, being the grandchild of a famous composer, especially this particular one, is a rare blessing. He was the first African American to conduct a major symphony. He was the first to have an opera or symphony performed by a major company. The list of his firsts goes on.

The reason he was the first to do so many things is because Blacks weren't supposed to write or play classical music. Any Black musician invited to Carnegie Hall during his time was expected to play jazz or blues. But my grandfather believed that art music both embraces and transcends race. He believed it is the pure expression of a culture and a voice that speaks on an emotional level to all colors, all creeds, all genders, all people.

William Grant Still believed that God gave him a purpose to unite the races through music. And I can look back now and see that his purpose was not achieved. Most people know the name of Copeland, but they don't know Still. Today, he's referred to as a *Black composer*, while others are referred to as just *composers*. And the races remained divided in our country.

My grandfather may have been wrong about what he could achieve in one lifetime, but he was right about something else. *He was right about the power of music to transcend.*

## COMPASSION BUILDS RESILIENCE

There is a reason politicians use music at their rallies and protestors sing as they march. Singing in a choir and playing in a band or orchestra can increase your empathy, and that is crucial today because, by some measures, empathy has fallen by about 40%, especially among students.

*And maybe that doesn't worry you, but it really should.*

For so long we have thought that empathy was a soft skill, but as it turns out, empathy is a *survival skill*. Empathy is recognizing that someone else is feeling an emotion, knowing what that emotion is, and being able to ask yourself, *what would it feel like if I were in that situation?* That's what empathy is. It's a feeling, it's an emotion. Empathy doesn't help until it takes that next step and becomes *compassion*. Compassion is empathy in action.

It is what we all need from each other, and it has to start with empathy. We have to see each other, we have to look up from our phones, and we have to recognize what other people are feeling. That's the first step. And, frankly, it's a first step many of us have been unable to take.

But I want to give us just a little bit of leeway here in why it has been so difficult. One of the reasons it is so hard to have empathetic, compassionate, or even productive conversations in 2025 is because everybody's tired, nobody's sleeping enough, and everybody is coping in some way with inequality. Everyone has experienced some trauma over the past few years.

I know it's really hard to focus on the needs of other people when you yourself are fatigued; we also know that stress makes us less

compassionate. It makes us less cooperative. It makes us more irritable, less able to listen. And that means as a species, it makes us less resilient.

The good news is that when it comes to all of this—when it comes to empathy, but especially when it comes to communication and collaboration, everybody here has a superpower. It is your evolutionary biological gift, and it is *collaboration*.

### DEVELOP YOUR SUPERPOWER

If you have seen any of the superhero movies, then you know that even superheroes have to be developed and trained, and their skills have to be strengthened. The same is true for this gift that we are all born with—these incredible communication skills that we have. There are a few reasons why we don't seek out training in conversation. First, we tend to believe that good communication is a talent—you either have it or you don't. But that's not true for the most part. *Good conversation—good collaboration—is a skill that can be learned, practiced, and improved.* Second, and even more prevalent, is that we don't think we need it. Studies show that while more than four out of five people say a past relationship was damaged because of poor communication, fewer than one in five think it was their fault.

And finally, the smarter you are, the greater the likelihood that your conversational skills are poor. There are a lot of different reasons for this. One is that brilliance in one area can tend to make you think you're smarter than average in every area. Another is that when you are smart, you have a lot of information to impart, so you approach conversations as a way to tell other people what you know, when *conversations should be approached with curiosity to learn what they know.*

### LISTEN TO UNDERSTAND

*Conversation is difficult.* Cognitively speaking, it requires a sophisticated type of neurological processing. That's why our brains had to get bigger to do it. It requires a high level of focus. And what makes it so tough is not usually the talking. Talking is pretty easy for most people. *It is the listening.*

Listening doesn't always come easily. It requires a huge amount of executive function. But the secret to good conversation is always good listening. Stephen Covey once said that most people don't listen with the intent to understand. They listen with the intent to reply. And that means most of us are simply going through the motions, pretending to listen until we can talk again.

Music is one of the very few professions where they actually train you to listen. Listening is the cognitive process that requires your prefrontal cortex; it requires an exchange of information between at least two people. It requires that you be listening as much as you talk. And, in fact, studies show that listening and speaking use the same part of the brain. So you cannot be listening to what someone is saying and thinking about what you're going to say in response. *You can't do it.*

If you can shift attention away from what you are saying to what you're hearing, it will be transformative. And there are a lot of ways to do this. I'm a journalist, so I will tell you one right now—ask open-ended questions: who, what, where, when, why, or how. Another one is *don't give people advice.* I don't know why we all give advice when we know we hate it when we're getting advice.

Everybody here has a superpower.  
It is your evolutionary biological gift,  
and it is **collaboration**.

And yet, people start to talk about stuff and what's the first thing we do?

*Oh my God, I have a book you have to read.*

*Oh, let me tell you what I did.*

It's our first response.

Giving advice gives us all a sense of control and status. It makes us feel good; it doesn't make the other person feel good. So instead, you can start to ask them questions, guide them to the answer with all of your wisdom rather than telling them what to do.

### ASSUME LESS

The other thing that gets in the way of our conversation and our communication is that we tend to make assumptions about other people. And because we're human beings, we're all subject to the negativity bias. *We assume the worst.* That's not a personal failing. That's the species. We get in a hurry, and so we take shortcuts and make assumptions about people.

So I want to teach you a question to ask that might help you stop making the worst possible assumptions about other people. And I'll do it by telling you a true story.

*Imagine that you've hurt your knee seriously. You don't have to be rushed into an operating room, but you're going to need surgery, and it hurts a lot. They put you in a big brace and they give you pain pills, and you have to see a specialist and you can't get in to see the specialist for seven weeks. And the whole time it hurts. Finally, it's the week before your appointment with this doctor and his office calls you and says, "I'm so sorry. We're going to have to reschedule your appointment."*

*When you finally get in to see him, you've rehearsed what you're going to say to this man. He opens up the door and says, "First of all, I just want to thank you so much for your patience. When the earthquake happened in Haiti, I rushed down. There's a particular surgery that I do that they needed at the children's hospital." Anger flooded out of you at some point, which is all just to say that context matters.*

So, I want you to get used to asking yourself: *What else can this mean? If this were my aunt, if this were my best friend, what latitude would I be giving this person right now?* We give ourselves latitude

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because we know our context. We don't give that grace to others, and that's how it can escalate.

So that makes it more important that we stop and learn how to reach out to one another. Asking these good questions, taking this time, doing it in a way that strengthens feelings of psychological safety might be your best chance at helping somebody. And this starts through *empathic listening*.

### EXTEND EMPATHY TO FOSTER BELONGING

Empathic responses invite someone to go on; they don't feel the need to know the answer or even know anything about what the other person's going through. The empathic responses say, *tell me more*. And it is really crucial right now, especially for anyone who works with young people, because when human beings are lonely, we get sick. And I'm not being rhetorical here.

Poor social relationships increase your risk of heart disease by almost 30%. They increase your risk of stroke by 32% [as reported by the American Heart Association in 2022]. In fact, having a couple of active friendships is better protection against a fatal stroke than medication.

About half of Americans said they felt lonely or left out either always or regularly before the pandemic. And Gen Z is the loneliest

generation ever on record. While occasional loneliness is perfectly healthy, because it generally tends to drive us to seek out human connection, the chronic isolation happening with so many isn't.

*The need to belong is vital to our health.* It is the strongest need that we have once we've secured food, shelter, and water. And the way to satisfy it is through social interaction. When we feel we're heard, it brings these strong feelings of acceptance. When human beings feel that they're not alone, they become more resilient; they become more capable of coping with anxiety. Just by strengthening our listening skills, we can give that feeling to other people. *We can boost their sense of belonging.*

I want to bring this back to music since we know music is one of the most effective communication tools we have, and collaborative music-making can increase empathic development in every participant.

### TRANSFORMATION THROUGH MUSIC

I do not think music is a magical pill. We know it can do as much harm as good because of its power to manipulate emotions, to stir passions. But the act of *making music with others* is good for you.

It is good for your brain, your heart. It's good for humankind.

Scientists right now are working on robots that can write music. They feed hours and hours of Mozart and Beethoven and John Williams into the databanks and then tell the computer what kind of music they want. They tell the robot to create a 20-minute score for a short film or 12 hours of music for a video game. During a



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TED Conference I went to, I heard a computer scientist talk about AIVA, which is AI that can produce what he calls *personalized music*. Music on demand. If you don't like trumpets, no trumpets. If you don't like jazz, no jazz. In a way, it's kind of a natural extension of our personalized Facebook and Twitter feeds.

This very idea of creating personalized music using artificial intelligence is troubling. It calls into question the purpose of music and art. Why are we doing this? Why study for years if a computer can allegedly do it as well as we can? Why practice? Why pay for teachers?

I have two big problems with using AI to create music. Let's start with this idea of creating *music to order*.

There was a study in 2005 that focused on bias against dark-skinned people. Researchers went to a public school and found that all the children there had at least some bias against dark skin. So, they split the kids into two groups. The first group did nothing different. The second group listened to songs from Cape Verde, a place where people are very dark skinned and where many of the immigrant students in that school had been born. In the end, group one was just as prejudiced as ever. But the second group, the one who had listened to music from Cape Verde, was much less likely to stereotype based on skin color.


If we're allowed to make *music to order*, we don't allow for *transformation through music*.

But I have another issue with robot-produced music. And it's this: *why do we need it?*

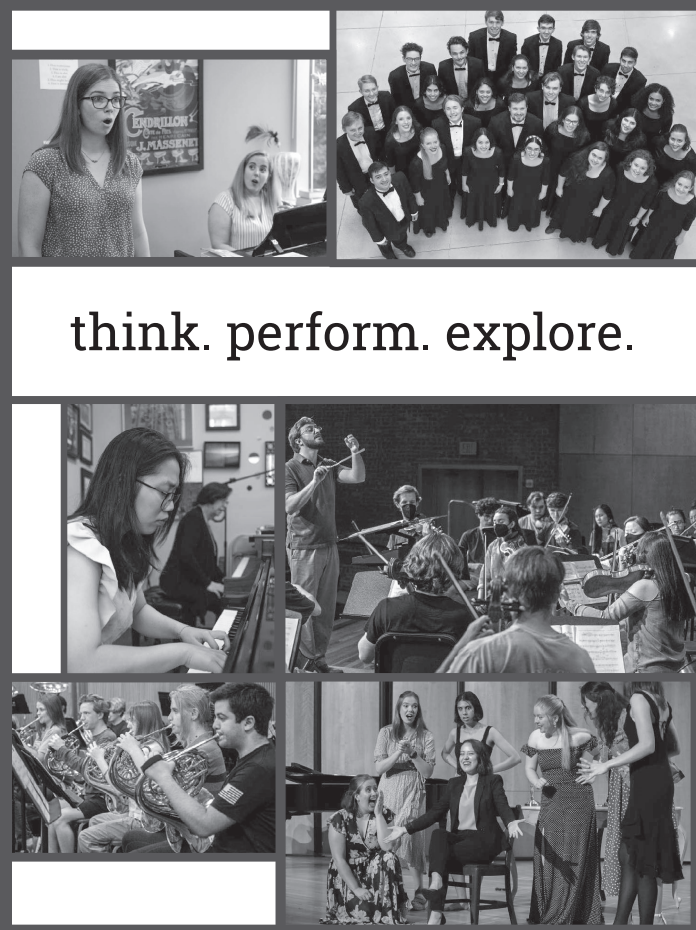
Human beings have been making art and music longer than recorded history. We have strong genetic evidence that human language has its roots in birdsong. Music is an essential part of what makes us human. And I believe it's crucial to our survival.

If we are to make strides toward greater equality and fuller understanding, we will do it while singing our lungs out in protest marches. If we're going to reach out to those of other colors and nationalities and creeds and beliefs, we'll be more effective if that message is set to melody.

The hard truth is that music makes very few people rich. But by pursuing a career in music, *you've made a statement of optimism*. You have aligned yourself with people like my grandfather, who believed music can and will make the world a better place.

No matter where you go when you leave here, I hope you continue to make music, teach music, play music, and use music to connect and communicate and collaborate. 

Celeste Headlee is an award-winning journalist and radio host, professional speaker, and author of the bestselling books *We Need to Talk: How to Have Conversations That Matter* and *Do Nothing: How to Break Away from Overworking, Overdoing, and Underliving*. Her TEDx Talk, "10 Ways to Have a Better Conversation," has been viewed over 23 million times and is one of the 10 most-watched talks posted on TED's homepage.



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