

Hearing Voices©
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A couple years ago, I was standing in line waiting to board a plane. The process was not going smoothly. The plane was late, the passengers had been told to line up, then sit back down, then line up again. It was clear we were all going to be late and possibly miss our connections. I had finally gotten one person short of getting to the desk where they take my ticket and the man ahead of me was clearly frustrated. “What do you mean you can’t find my name on the stand-by list? I’ve been waiting here for over an hour!” He raised his voice and started arguing with the woman behind the desk. His white face had turned red with anger; the airline assistant was getting flustered and upset and I was getting anxious. But over the din of this loud angry voice in front of me, I heard a different voice, from inside me, a voice that said: “You should say something.” I must admit, this wasn’t the only voice I heard from within. There was another voice that said: “This is none of your business, and you’ll get in trouble!” But I decided to listen to the first voice instead. I reached out and touched the man’s shoulder and said “You shouldn’t speak to her that way. It’s not right.” Suddenly, the full fury of his anger was now on me. Maybe the second voice was the one I should have listened to!!

“And just who do you think you are?” he snarled. “What are you? A therapist? A social worker?” “No,” I said softly, “I’m a minister. And you shouldn’t talk to her that way.” Something in what I said was like pulling the plug out of a beach ball. My fellow passenger all filled up with righteous anger deflated! Whether it was the soft tone of voice, or realizing he was shouting at a minister, I’ll never know, because at that point in this drama, an airline official showed up and took the man out of the line.

I have known other colleagues in ministry for whom moments like that are not uncommon. They hear a voice that tells them to speak

powerfully and sometimes prophetically in tense moments. I’d like to say that I was courageous in that encounter, but to tell the truth, I was shaking and fearful and my heart wouldn’t stop pounding. Afterwards, the voices in my head kept talking at me for the rest of my flight. I thought of all the things that I should have said, could have said, but didn’t.

The theme for this month of services is “tell me a story about a time when you found your voice.” I remembered that moment in an airport because although I make my living through raising my voice, it was a time when I felt like I was making a giant leap into the void – deciding to speak up instead of remaining silent; deciding to *stand out*, instead of simply *standing in* line and letting the appropriate officials take care of him.

This week and next, we’re going to look at the theme of “tell me a story about a time when you found your voice” through two different lenses. Before you can speak, you have to listen to your own voice. So in this week’s sermon, we’re going to explore the voices that are in our heads, the ones that often aren’t verbally expressed, but that can narrate, dictate and or liberate our ability to speak when needed. Next week, on the Sunday when we reflect on the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and will explore the theme of Resistance and Resilience, and the role that our voices can play, and in fact, **MUST** play in the next chapter of our country’s life.

I’ve long been fascinated by the stories of people both in the Hebrew, Christian and Muslim scriptures who have not only heard the voice of God or Allah, but whose actions as a result of hearing those voices created a nation, a movement, or a religious text revered by millions. In Judaism, Father Abram is told by God “go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” And, without any question,

Abram pulled up stakes and moved to an inhospitable land, which eventually became the land of Canaan, now known as Palestine. Later in the Hebrew Bible, Moses goes up to Mt. Sinai and hears God's voice, telling him that he will go back to Egypt and free the Israelites from slavery. In that encounter, Moses tries to weasel out of it and says "why send me? I'm slow of speech and thick of tongue!" And God simply says, "I will be with you." These are two emblematic stories of listening to a "voice" that is depicted as outside of one's own head, and represented as a faithful encounter with the Divine. In Islam, the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) had his first revelation through a visit by the archangel Gabriel who revealed to him a verse from the Koran and commanded him to recite the first lines of chapter 96 in what became the Koran. From this initial encounter, the Prophet carefully listened and retained all that he heard, giving us a holy text that has inspired and guided millions.

But not all voices tell us things we want to hear. In the Hebrew Bible, we can't ignore the story of Abraham and Isaac, who was commanded by God to sacrifice his own son; or Joshua's belief that it was God's will to slaughter the people of Jericho completely and utterly. So whose voice do we listen to? And how do we know what voices are real and helpful and which ones are false and misguided?

That's a task both for religious scholars, and for psychiatrists and psychologists. Our member and regular summer speaker Mark Marnocha has taken this subject on, reminding us that: "Hearing the voice of gods, ancestors and spirits is central to many if not all of the world's religions. Socrates, Moses, Margery Kempe, Joan of Arc, Gandhi are among the famous figures to have been identified as what's called "voice-hearers." Until recently, with the advent of modern psychology and psychiatry, these experiences were strongly associated with spiritual enlightenment, saintliness, creativity and philosophical insight as much as they were with madness and disease. In the world of the arts, poets and playwrights; authors and essayists all struggle with finding their voice," and some have indeed been driven to madness, or to drink, trying to find the exact perfect expression for that voice. Vocal artists know that the difference between a good singer and a great one is finding their own "voice" –

that is, the way that they express themselves is a sound that is uniquely their own. We can identify a great singer just by hearing them; because no one sings like Ella Fitzgerald or Paul Robeson. It's not just their sound but how they are able to channel their life experience, their personality, and their own particular take on a song into their voice.

All of us hear voices, all the time, but the bigger question is – what is that voice telling you? In a newly released book called "The Voices Within: The History and Science of How We Talk to Ourselves," Professor of psychology Charles Fernyhough states the obvious, and then asks some provocative questions: "Everybody talks to themselves," says Fernyhough. "Everyone hears voices in their heads... inner voices are a facet of ordinary life. They grumble and chastise and offer up opinions, though to what extent differs from one person to the next." But then, he wonders, "How and when did these voices first enter our heads? Do young children hear voices the same way adults do? What distinguishes the inner voices that we all hear from the auditory hallucinations of schizophrenia? What is the relationship between pathological hallucinations and the exalted experiences described by medieval mystics, who believed they were hearing the voice of God?"

Many years ago, I had to take a battery of tests in preparation for ministry. One of those tests was to screen for mental, emotional and spiritual fitness for this vocation. After the tests results were in, the psychologist came into the room and said "Your test scores were really high on emotional and mental health, except for this one puzzling anomaly." I was alarmed. "On the question "Do you hear voices?" you answered "Yes," but all your other answers would not seem to indicate mental illness. So why did you write yes?"

"Well, I do hear voices, all the time", I said. "Don't you?" Good psychologist that he was, he said "Tell me about the voices you hear?" "I hear the voices of injustice crying out to be heard, and I hear the voices of the hurt and the angry and the lost and the broken needed to be restored to wholeness... and I hear my own voice, speaking to me in the silence, challenging me to take the next scary step and I hear..." He held up his hand and was smiling. "Oh, I get it. We were screening for

voices that talk back to you – like from a television set - not voices in your head, everybody's got voices in their own head.”

If the purpose of our religious and spiritual practice is to help us live an authentic life, then how do we know the voices in our own heads are ones we should listen to? Given the fact that we all hear these voices– voices from our ancestors, parents, friends, critics; voices of oppressed peoples and the conscience that responds to them; voices from stories, songs, TV shows, movies, and politicians – how do we sort out what's true and what's not?

It's not my intent this morning to talk about psychosis, schizophrenia or auditory hallucinations because that's an area better left to the mental health professionals. Many of you in this room who practice in the helping professions could tell me stories about clients and patients you've treated who hear voices that do not necessarily lead them into composing a symphony or designing a great cathedral. More often than not, those voices are painful and destructive to the person and those around them. Most who carry that diagnosis hear more than one voice; like a crowd. In her book, “When God Talks Back,” T.M. Luhrmann wrote:”I remember a man who told me that he could count seventeen voices that he heard throughout the day. When I asked him how his medication helped, he gave me a defeated look and then turned away. When I take my medication,” he said, “my head gets clear enough that I can decide what kind of soda I want to drink.”¹

Hearing voices for most of us doesn't mean we have a mental illness, but still, it is worth asking ourselves what kind of voices we hear and where they come from. The quote I just offered you from the book by Luhrmann, “When God Talks Back” is a little deceiving because it is not at all a book about mental illness, but rather a book about prayer. Luhrmann is a UU-raised cultural anthropologist who was interested in how evangelical faith traditions experience and teach their prayer practices and whether they have an actual experience that literally matches their descriptions of prayer as “talking with God.” So she asked

permission of a particular evangelical community called the Vineyard to be a participant in their community for a two year period, taking their classes, attending their small groups, talking to their members, and seeing if she could have the same experience that they were having.

What she found out is that through taught techniques of deep internal listening, mental imagery akin to guided meditation, and a profound desire for a personal relationship with God, many members of the Vineyard can vividly and believably and rationally describe their prayer life as a conversation with God in which God is experienced as talking back. Perhaps that is true for some of you as well. Even though I identify with the Christian tradition and engage in prayer, I can't say that this is literally true for me.

But something happens when I pray, and I do hear voices. I am not ready to believe that they are God talking literally and directly to me, but at the same time, who knows how God talks? We are very comfortable with poetic imagery about hearing voices through the natural world, and so if the trees and the rivers can speak to us metaphorically, maybe God can in all that comes to us from inside when we are silent or centered.

So what voices do YOU hear? In your silent times of meditation or your prayer practice, how do you discern the voices that you should be listening to and the ones you should ignore? Why is it that too often we may listen the wrong voices? The ones who told us we couldn't sing or shouldn't try; the ones that told us we were too fat or thin or not smart enough or not good enough; the ones who shamed us and blamed us for being who we are. We don't have to listen very hard to hear those voices, for they seem to always be accessible to us, always ready to launch into a narrative that we then accept as true. Hopefully, you hear other voices too; like the ones described in Chris Young's song that Jay played this morning; your father's voice, perhaps in a rare moment of emotional vulnerability, saying “I'm so proud of you.” Or the voice of your Beloved who says “I love you exactly the way you are,” or, maybe the voice of God, or the voice of your highest values speaking back to you, telling you exactly what you need to hear and will provide you the courage to do it.

¹ Luhrmann, T.M. “When God Talks Back,” pg. 533 from “Are They Crazy?”

The point of having a religious and spiritual life is to develop and deepen your ability to hear these deepest oldest truest voices – the ones that call you to your best, most courageous self. One of the reasons why I believe we attend this fellowship is to continue to find our own voice, empowered and encouraged by our deepest listening, the voice that is supported by the values by which we shape this life we have been given, and by extension, help to shape the world into a more just and compassionate place.

Mary Oliver’s poetry has become like scripture for many Unitarian Universalists; because her keen eye and clear poetic voice often reminds us of how important our own voice is. So let me leave you with this a reprise from our Mary Oliver reading, the last stanza of her poem as prophetic and powerful parting words:

...little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice,
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do – – – determined to
save
the only life you could save.

May it be so.

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