

Column

Hearing Voices

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One of the stranger aspects of my peripatetic life is that on certain rare occasions I have been “guided by an inner voice.” The first time it filled the room, made me look around, wonder who said that. Since then, the voice has seemed to originate from inside me. Once I had learned to listen, the inner voice changed from “booming” to a subtle whisper.

“Clairaudient” guidance may sound familiar to *SageWoman* readers; for most people, however, such an announcement, confessed *out loud*, comes as a surprise, even shock. After all, look what happened to Joan of Arc! Nobody in their “right mind” admits to “hearing voices,” lest she be labeled schizophrenic, demonic, or pentecostal. But as comedian Lily Tomlin remarked, “Why, when we talk to God, it’s holy, and when God talks to us, it’s insanity?”

Yet, of course, sometimes hearing voices does seem truly mad. Witness, for example, “The Three Faces of Eve,” a 1957 book and movie, the true story of a woman who suffered from what her psychiatrist labeled “associative identity disorder.” Eve eventually unified her three distinct personalities by tracing the dissociative splits to a traumatic childhood event. But not all who feel hounded by inner voices are so fortunate. Tabloids scream stories of murderers instructed by their “voices” to kill.

And of course, Christian neocons, Islamic jihadists and crusading true believers of all kinds have always seen their need to stomp out “the other” as guided and justified by “God,” with whom they have a personal relationship and who, they invariably claim, is “on our side.”

Then there is the phenomenon of “channeling” disincarnate spirits, an age-old apparently supernatural marvel easily subject to quackery. In the U.S., Spiritualism flourished between 1840 and 1920, with mediums calling on spirits of the dead to enlighten them. And Thomas Sagrue’s classic 1945 book, *There is a River*, recounts the story of reluctant prophet Edgar Casey (1877-1945) whose spirit guides diagnosed disease and prescribed remedies while Casey, the medium, lay fast asleep.

In the late ‘60s, “channeling” gained new cultural currency with *Seth Speaks*, in which Jane Robert’s husband transcribed material that “came through” her in the voice of an entity named “Seth.” Since then channeled teachings about the supposed nature of reality have mushroomed. A November 2007 google search for “channeling” produced 1,750,000 hits — and for “new age channeling,” 1,740,000 hits!

At least among New Age circles, the phenomenon of an internal voice seemingly coming from nowhere but heard inside one’s head is *not* strange.

My own inner voice — and actually, at this point I could say “voices,” for a second one has recently entered — have not told me to do murderous things, nor do they seem to be mouthpieces for alternate personalities, nor do they use my body as a medium to teach the masses.

If my voices belong to disincarnate spirits — or to a “higher” aspect of myself of which I’m not usually aware — what they have to say is always short, potent, and not meant for anyone but me.

I don’t ascribe my voices to God (or Goddess, or God/Goddess); after all, who or what is this “God” who so many millions “believe in” without question? To my mind, any such divinity must be incredibly local, perhaps “in charge” of *your* life, or *your* lineage, or even, perhaps of Earth itself, or its solar system. But “in charge” of *everything*? All

the galaxies? All the dimensions? All of space and time and what lies beyond? What would that mean?

Why must we suppose that there is an entity outside the universe that “caused” it? To my mind, “causality” refers to a “law” that we made up to describe apparent relations among various “parts” of creation. I balk at an imaginative leap that posits an external Deus Ex Machina as “first cause.”

Some might argue that the word “creation” itself implies a “creator,” and so obviously, God must exist. I call that argument a train of thought channeled by the deep framework of Indo-European languages.

On the other hand, our peculiar need to ask “does God exist?”— and then to insist yes (theism), or no (atheism), or maybe (agnosticism) — may be the surface symptom of a terrible, but subtle underground, pre-verbal sense of feeling separated, isolated — but from what?

It seems that we humans endure a fundamental longing to belong, to feel ourselves connected to something larger, something that matters. We need to know, with every fiber of our being, that the universe — and our own individual life — is not random but meaningful. Fundamentalists of all stripes then twist that universal longing into a need to “believe in God” who then, magically, not only supplies meaning, but justifies actions taken on “His” behalf.

The noisy violence of contemporary fundamentalism obscures another, quieter, and ultimately, much more profound contemporary movement that aims to release our identification with any and all of our beliefs. I speak here of meditation. Soberly, and with little fanfare, over the past 40 years more and more people have disciplined themselves to engage in daily awareness practices that gradually dismantle the conditioned mind’s polarizing mental constructs. This much-vaunted “mind” of ours, it appears, works like a prison cell. It confines us to a certain small-minded set of “beliefs” about the world which, when unrecognized, lead to all manner of mayhem, from subtle patterns of mental and emotional abuse, to suicide bombing, to nuclear war.

Luckily, the prison cell does have a gate, which, though when we first notice and try to pry it open, may appear locked. And no wonder! How long has it been closed, rusty with disuse! Meditative practices, when pursued with discipline over time, gradually open this gate to reveal a timeless presence that knows no boundaries. This mystical experience of union — at first only barely glimpsed, yet with years of practice, stabilized and deepened immeasurably — calls to us always, just below the surface turbulence — to return, return, return — to the Oneness that is our birthright as beings.

And here is the crux point: rather than answer the question “Does God exist?” such awareness dissolves it. For when we fully surrender to the present moment, then we sense the whole universe as meaningful, alive and aware, divine.

The longer I live, the more I sense this internal homing device that calls us back to our true nature as one with all of life. Unfortunately, our universal longing for what we have lost too often gets translated by the conditioned ego mind into the need for a parental God who tells us what to do and not do and protects us from the big bad world. So loaded has the “G” word become with connotations designed to separate good from evil, the saved from the damned, that I would rather lie low and stay clear of the fray.

And yet, I cannot, for there are times when, if my auditory apparatus is to be trusted — and I do trust my sense of hearing, more than I trust, say my sight, as less subject to projection — I know that I have been contacted by some kind of alien, and yes, I would say “higher” intelligence.

Is this intelligence “divine”? Does it live outside its creation? Well, certainly outside my normal awareness. And it certainly seems to know a lot more than “I” do. I’ve learned to trust its ability to guide me. But “divine”? What would that appellation add to the situation besides ego inflation? So while I’d rather not use that term, I do admit to types of intelligence, or levels of awareness, dimensions other than the visible, in both myself and the larger world. And if the universe is itself divine, then it feels both unimaginably complex and mysteriously unified — a paradox to which, as usual, I must surrender. And yes, this apparently larger intelligence does sometimes take form as a voice, clear as a bell, coming out of nowhere.

Each time I have heard an internal voice I have stood at some kind of crossroads, paralyzed with indecision. And just then, timed precisely and out of the blue, a voice speaks to me in clear, unequivocal terms. It demands that I take action, or it clarifies my situation, or it lends reassurance and perspective.

Looking back on the six occasions when I have heard voices — only six, their rarity one measure of their value — I begin to admit that perhaps I have heard the loud, clear, alien voice inside my head because I needed to. Because I am so headstrong and stubborn that only an abrupt, even violent interruption in my obsessive thought patterns forces me to sit up and take notice.

The first three occasions were all early on, when I was a young, saintly and alienated Catholic wife, mother and graduate student in philosophy. Coming nine months apart, they heralded three precisely timed stages in the initiatory process of waking up to my own life.

- On the first occasion, I was 26 years old, in the hospital with general abdominal peritonitis. After a week of intravenous antibiotics that were not working, the doctor came in, said he didn't know what else to do. I blurted out, "Am I going to die?" He shrugged, looked embarrassed, turned and walked out of the room.

The internal crisis precipitated by my unanswered question felt galvanic, so strong that I suddenly jerked my hand into the air and, in a first-ever obscene gesture, gave the finger to "God," my Biblical, judgmental, all-seeing God who right then and there, I decided, did not exist.

Immediately, the implications of this newly cleared-out psychic space were clear — and terrifying. For if God did not exist, not only was I free to live my life the way I chose, but I was also responsible for that life.

And just then, suddenly, to my huge shock and surprise, an inner voice, huge, booming, male, filling the room, a single command: **LIVE OR DIE. IT'S YOUR CHOICE.**

I date my understanding of the body/mind/spirit relationship — that physical illness is a symptom/symbol of spiritual un-ease, and that the body follows the spirit's call — to that crucial moment in the hospital when, apparently, I chose to live; for within 24 hours the fever and infection had mysteriously disappeared.

- The second occasion, nine months later, occurred one week after I had finally, and with fear and trembling, exercised my newly won freedom to leave my difficult marriage. I was at a party, stoned, twirling to the music of The Doors, ecstatic with relief and possibility. Just then, the same voice, abrupt, booming, and completely unexpected: **YOU ARE ALONE, AND YOU HAVE NO CENTER.**

Of course, the voice startled and scared me. And yet, even so, I also felt strangely comforted. Hearing the voice again both assured me that I had not imagined it the first time, and that, indeed, despite what it said, I was *not* alone. Big Daddy God in the sky may be dead, but someone or something was watching out for me, appeared to have my welfare at heart, and even told me what to do next: I must discover or create my own “center.”

A few days later, while keeping one eye on my two wandering toddlers, I was pushing their stroller through the aisles of a bookstore when my other eye was drawn to a book by Ouspensky, a disciple of the 19th century spiritual teacher Gurdjieff. As I took the book from the shelf it fell open to a page that, as I devoured its message, made my spine tingle.

Most humans, said the author, have no free will. Rather, they are mechanical beings, creatures of conditioning, reacting to external events like robots. In order to earn our free will, we must wake up to the present moment, over and over again, wake up to the eternal “I am.” Only in this way, he said, will we begin to develop a “magnetic center,” and thus create the possibility of making real choices.

An exquisite timing had joined the remark by the voice, and, only a few days later, the message in the book. A path had opened. I was to notice synchronicities as markers along the way, and I was to “develop a magnetic center.” From that eureka moment on, I

vowed to learn how to wake up in the present moment, decondition myself from society's programming, and discover what made me tick as an authentic human being.

- Another nine months, another psychic gestation period, flew by. My work to decondition myself was bearing fruit, almost too much. One by one, by taking a careful look at each of my intellectual assumptions, I was stripping myself of the rules and roles that had governed my life so far, unshackling my being from invisible plates of armor that had protected me from the realities of both inner and outer worlds. I felt like a new-born baby, open, vulnerable, and very, very scared. What was going to happen to me? How could I live and work in the world when I no longer belonged; when I could not control my behavior but only watch, helpless and embarrassed as strange remarks flew from my mouth?

Each day I would go into the bathroom to look in the mirror. Not for vanity's sake, but because I was changing so fast that I wondered who would look back at me. One afternoon, while staring into my mirrored eyes, I heard the voice for what turned out to be the final time in that round. **DON'T WORRY. JUST KEEP GOING. DON'T GET STUCK.**

Though startled by the ferocity of this sudden booming interruption into my confused, lost, fearful state, of course I felt comforted, even blessed and grateful, to hear it again, and to absorb its message.

That afternoon, I had a further revelation, this one not an auditory voice, but simply an intuition, clear and strong — of myself as one of the forerunners to an enormous cultural revolution; and that one day I would be able to help others go through the same kind of scary, wonderful, terrifying, liberating process.

(Two years later I would discover astrology as the language I would learn to help others help themselves.)

Now we call this process “transformation,” and one by one, individuals have been transforming themselves, waking up to a larger life, for four decades.

And now, in November 2007, it appears that, thanks to the shockingly arrogant, even malevolent policies of the Bush/Cheney administration, plus the skyrocketing price of oil and the specter of global warming, our entire society has begun to arouse itself from the grand illusion that more and more sex, money, stuff and status can ever make us happy.

I've heard the booming male voice on two other occasions, many years after the first three-stage wake-up call. As before, both times it was loud, and sure to get my attention. No surprise; for I had strayed seriously from my path.

- The year was 1980. I was involved with an archetypal bad man, a near end-stage alcoholic (though I, an ignorant Pollyanna, denied it) with liver damage and periodic esophageal and stomach bleeding wherein he would suddenly vomit nearly half his blood supply.

I was determined to heal his body, change his mind and save his soul — and of course, it wasn't working.

Late one night, the very night when I had finally resolved to leave him, though I had never actually seen him drink — he arrived home, in a drunken state. Drunk, and dangerous.

I had been asleep, and as the truck door slammed, burst awake to the loud, booming voice: CENTER YOURSELF. YOU HAVE ONE MINUTE.

And believe me, I did. Sat right up in bed and moved into my center. By the time he blew through the door of the bedroom I was prepared. And though it took a few hours, and though I had to take psychic power over him in order not be killed by the guns he pulled out of the closet, I managed to escape.

- Cut to August 1987, seven years later. I am twirling like a Sufi at midnight in a giant 40-foot-diameter yurt with 75 others on the night of Harmonic Convergence when suddenly, with no warning, the voice, loud, booming: YOU MUST FINISH YOUR PERSONAL KARMA BY THE END OF THE YEAR.

I knew what it meant, and I didn't want to do it. I had to go back and reconnect with the father of my children in order to heal their alienation from me, their mother, who had not seen or heard from them in six long years. Had the voice not demanded that I act, I don't know if I would have had the courage or fortitude to actually do what I knew I had to do. Had the voice not kicked me in the butt, I might still be suffering from shame, guilt, and desolation as a mother separated from her children.

That was 20 years ago, and the last time I heard the booming male voice. I like to think that I don't need rough wake-up calls anymore, because I hew closer to the naturally unfolding path of my own nature.

Within the past year, to my surprise I have been twice contacted by a new voice, this one female — soft, subtle, gentle, kind, and no less authoritative than the other.

I attribute my ability to hear this new voice to a lessening of the forcefulness of the obsessive, chattering monkey mind. Finally, after all these years of meditative practice, more and more I do seem to reside in a larger awareness that lies below the surface of daily busyness. It appears that a space has opened within my heart so that, twice now, I have been able to hear the guidance of subtle whispers rather than the huge, overwhelming boom so long required to break through the mental clamor.

These whisperings are still too new and fresh to speak of here. Instead, I nurture them as beautiful blessings, and I feel unspeakably grateful for this universe in which we are all so mysteriously held, and which apparently does “watch out for” all who reside in it in whatever way he or she requires, guiding us to follow our own soul's call in the endless journey back to the here and now.

Update 2010: Enough time has now gone by that I can speak of the most recent occasion when I heard a voice, this time soft and subtle, seemingly feminine.

The first occasion was on my two-month road trip west in the summer of 2007 to promote my book, *This Vast Being: A Voyage through Grief and Exaltation*, and to facilitate workshops on the process of grieving. Needing a day off from my grueling journey, I decided to drive from my motel room in northern Marin County California to the coast, ending up where the Russian River met the sea.

The place was called Goat Beach. And as I stepped out of the car and the parking lot I came across a large sign that warned people: “do not turn your back on the ocean.” That the steepness of the underwater drop off at this particular beach created large “rogue waves” that had been known to suddenly sweep people out to sea.

I walked along the deserted beach to the cliff where seagulls dived into the river for fish and sea lions sunned themselves on the shore. As I sat there, the usual cacophonous rush of thoughts in my head gradually stilled, and I became one with the wind, crashing waves, and cries of the gulls.

When I got up to walk back to my car, I felt myself in a kind of trance. My “self” had evaporated, melted into mysterious wild nature. It was into this transformed internal state that the voice spoke. A soft, feminine, subtle voice, only four words, in a tone of complete reassurance: “*I am with you always.*”

I remember being startled by the voice, and its message but, having no obvious context for considering it, soon let it drop out of awareness.

As I continued to walk, my attention turned to the sand below, and the patterns made by rivulets from the lowering tide. Then, just opposite my car, I stopped, my entire attention focused on the pattern below — when all of a sudden an enormous wave crashed with full force onto my right shoulder. Had I not grounded myself with tai chi practice all these years, my feet would have been dragged out from under me and I would have been swept out to sea.

And now, here’s the amazing part: the keys to my car, in the shallow left pocket of my shorts, were still in the pocket after the wave had passed. Despite being completely drenched, those keys were still there! I looked around the deserted beach and parking

lot, full of gratitude and astonishment as the message of that voice, *I am with you always*, resonated within.

Two days later I had another experience that felt divinely choreographed for both danger and protection.

I was in Big Sur, about to facilitate the first annual retreat for the new Crone Magazine staff members, and again, had a rare day off. This time I took a picnic meal with me to a beautiful rocky beach filled with people and their dogs. Walking north on the beach, I greeted the dogs as they came up, happy for both their company and this glorious beach. I was looking for a relatively deserted spot to sit and watch the sun go down.

Encountering fewer and fewer people as I walked north, I was beginning to scout out a place for myself when I saw two dogs, off in the distance near the cliff to the east, leave their masters and start running towards me. I stood still, waiting for them to arrive, thinking to welcome them as I had the others. But these two shepherd type dogs rushed at me, without sound, teeth bared. Immediately, of course, my internal state shifted into survival mode, and I started rushing them back, furious, yelling at them to get away. This only spurred them on; now they turned into pack animals, coming in for the kill. As I chased one of them, the other would come at me from behind. Finally, one of them actually bit me, hard in the thigh, drawing blood.

Now here's the amazing part. Just then, half a dozen young men came into view from the north (where did they come from? I had not seen anyone on this deserted stretch ahead earlier), and, without a word or any obvious instructions to one another, rushed between me, who was backed up to the rocky sea, and the dogs. Meanwhile, the two young women whose dogs they were had finally arrived, and after some tense moments, were able to catch them.

That done, the line of young men dissolved, and they continued on their way.

Of course I was in shock, both furious and stunned. The women insisted that both dogs had had recent rabies vaccinations. I chose to believe them, though I did ask for their contact information. Then I walked back to the parking lot, still stunned by the experience, and the sudden mysterious materialization of the phalanx of young men, and the recognition that it was now too late to receive emergency care in Big Sur which meant that I would have to drive, still shaky and exhausted due to the prolonged rush of adrenalin, back along the narrow winding coast road for nearly an hour into Monterey at night, for medical care. For the first and only time on my journey west I felt utterly alone, lonely, and desolate. The ordeal continued for another five hours, until around midnight, when I was finally able to open the lock to my motel room and collapse on the bed.

Of course I pondered this experience, and its nearness to the other experience at Goat Beach. And the feminine voice, its reassurance. Did She materialize those young men?