



Respectful letters for aggressive voices: Max's story

By Christoffer Haugaard & Max

Christoffer.Haugaard@rn.dk

Introduction

In an interview titled "Psychotic Experience & Discourse", Michael White (1995) proposed a way of relating to problems concerning hearing voices. White distinguished between helpful voices and troublesome voices. I would agree that this is a very important distinction, and I find it relevant to consider how much more complex this matter has proven to be than is customarily figured into mainstream diagnosis (compare Beavan & Read, 2010; Corstens et al, 2014; Luhrmann et al, 2015b; Read & Bentall, 2012; Read, van Os, Morrison & Ross, 2005). For example, I have met people who say they would be reluctant to lose the company of their voices. Others who hear voices contend they are both supportive and helpful to the living of their lives. In light of recent developments connected to the Hearing Voices Network (see Corstens, Escher & Romme, 2008), and more recently the ethnographies of T. M. Luhrmann and others (Luhrmann, Padmavat, Tharoor & Osei, 2015a; 2015b; Luhrmann, 2018), I believe there may be grounds for considering if a central issue of voice hearing might be a matter of relations.

The question may not be so much whether people ought to hear voices or not, or whether this is taken to indicate abnormality or even pathology. Instead, we might make it our priority to consider what kind of relationship a person is having with any number of voices. White (1995) proposed that we consider troublesome voices in light of power relations and that we characterize troublesome voices in terms of their agendas for a person's life, their strategies of power and their ideological or moral assumptions about how life is to be lived. It seems to me that this way of engaging with voices is very close to externalizing conversations, and I have also considered the category of inquiry associated with externalizing conversations (White, 2007) very adequate to characterizing and revising a person's relationship with troublesome voices. It seems a small step to consider voices as problems that are already related to as "external" or that already appear to the person as an external agent. In concert with White, I make no effort to support or introduce ideas about voices being split-off parts of the self that need to be accepted and integrated into one's sense of self. I am quite at ease with relating to them as indeed external as persons, but of course a different kind of person, or different order of person than embodied human beings.

I believe that this matter of how we relate to voices and what those ways of relating require of people is worthy of considerable thought. Luhrmann's preliminary research, as well as the ideas within the Hearing Voices Network (see also Larøi et al., 2014), suggest that this matter is quite significant to the forms and levels of distress associated with troublesome voices. Luhrmann suggests, for example, that Western ideals of a bordered, integrated and coherent self within





the person may contribute to the experience of voices as troublesome. If voice hearing is considered in light of Vygotsky's theory of the development of thought and language (Jones & Fernyhough, 2007), might voice hearing appear almost unsurprising to us, and even a logical extension of the way our thinking works in general? In recent decades, ideas about relational, non-self-contained subjectivity have been developing in anthropology and religious studies (Bird-David, 1999; Harvey, 2006; 2017; Viveiros de Castro, 2004; 2015) of mostly non-Western cultures. Might we, in light of such understandings, take voices seriously as a kind of person? Such consideration may be important in response to the stigma of being able to hear voices associated with widespread Western understandings of normality and selfhood, and support a shift away from conceptualization and practice of pathologization, toward conceptualization of troublesome relations – a move from striving for a cure to instead striving to establish respectful relations with voices.

Leaving aside the matter of how to explain or defend such an approach, Max and I will here provide an example of working with troublesome voices that engages with them from a relational understanding of the experience and a response to troublesome voices that is more a matter of respectful relations than cure.

Max and the voices

Max, person with inside knowledge about voices.

I first met Max in 2013, a young man in his twenties, and no less than 27 hospitalizations behind him, many of which involved the use of force and restraint as he was at times violent. Max received antipsychotic medication, which did not relieve him of hearing voices, and had a history of self-harm and attempted suicide. In fact, the risks of self-harm and suicide were so imminent that Max and I decided to write up an agreement between the two of us as well as the staff at the psychiatric emergency room, describing how this danger should be handled in relation to our conversations. Both Max and I did, in fact, have concerns about the risks for Max's life that might be involved in simply talking about the voices or the urge to kill himself. A plan was made and accepted by Max, the psychiatric emergency room and Max's psychiatric team, which besides myself, consisted of a psychiatric nurse and a psychiatrist. This collaborative action was prudent for reducing our anxieties about these life-threatening risks so that we could dare to proceed.

In our first couple of conversations, Max introduced me to three voices he could hear. We took the approach of characterizing these voices, trying to figure out what their agenda was for being involved in Max's life, and what strategies or methods they would use to gain and maintain their influence and further their agenda. This inquiry led to a characterization that I committed to writing in the form of a therapeutic document, and that I shared with Max throughout our meetings [document is reproduced below].





At that point in our relationship, there were more pressing concerns for Max and consequently the voices did not become the centre of our conversations. Rather, our conversations inquired into Max's life story, his circumstances of living and the requirements involved, and what kind of person this life required Max to be. He had grown up in, and continually inhabited, a world of violence. Max suffered anxiety, emotional coldness, aggressive impulses, violent behaviour, visual and auditory hallucinations, self-harm and suicide attempts. Our conversations at that time focused on the possibility of resisting this world of violence and becoming a different version of Max: dealing with anxiety, self-harm and aggressive impulses, becoming able to feel warmth, and to feel good about doing good things. Max wanted his life to change, and part of that was to no longer be the kind of person that violence had made of him. He wanted to be able to *"feel content, pride, take joy in who I am – to wear a smile."*

Violence and crime were the norm during all of Max's childhood and right up until the time I first met him. His earliest memory was standing in between his father and mother, attempting to stop his father from beating his mother. As a child, he carried a knife to school with him for his own protection. In one instance, he recalled a remarkable memory in which the mother of one of his peers gave him a hug. This proved incomprehensible to Max, and unbeknownst to this woman, he had in fact been prepared to stab her to protect himself as she drew close in order to hug him.

Max does not want any further details of this history to be included here, but I can assure the reader that calling what Max was subjected to as "terror and torture" is entirely justified. I would also like to tell the reader that Max and I hope that although this is disturbing information, it is not included here to cause distress. It is, however, key to getting a sense of the great significance of the discoveries and developments that we shall describe later.

I might call what Max and I undertook a pursuit of an alternative identity project to the one he had been recruited into by the circumstances of his life. These conversations were helpful for Max. At a certain point, however, our ways parted as Max moved elsewhere.

This is the document I provided for him characterizing the voices:

Hello Max,

Thank you for our conversation. We spoke some more about the voices and their role in your life today. It was possible to have a relatively calm conversation, despite the fact that the voices eagerly strive to obstruct any of your attempts to do something good for yourself. Here is our characterization of the voices so far, based on our first two conversations:

There are three voices:





1. A militant, commanding, ordering male voice. He is the most present, he is degrading of you and orders you to perform acts of self-harm.
2. A more calm male voice who, in league with the militant one, observes you and evaluates you. The evaluations are negative.
3. A female voice screaming in terror. This happens when you are in a very bad state.

Agenda:

The voices' plan for you is to get you to isolate yourself at home and sit and cut yourself with a knife. They want you to deny yourself anything good and want you to be cruel to yourself.

Why?

The voices believe that you do not deserve to feel good. We considered that this idea may be related to an understanding that one should "pay" for the good things in life with pain and suffering. I got the sense that the voices are requiring a very "generous payment" from you, for if you cut yourself superficially, you only get peace from their humiliations in the time that you are doing the cutting. One time you cut so deep you could see bone. For that, the voices only gave you peace for two days. What are the voices on about here? What kind of idea about you would they need to have to make it seem reasonable to them that you should pay so much for so little in return?

Methods:

By what means do the voices seek to ensure your cooperation and promote their agenda?

- Speaking about you and others in an ugly, demeaning and degrading way. Might this be an attempt to persuade you to refrain from certain things? For example, if it is true that I am a quack as the voices say, then there is no reason to waste time talking to me. Is that intended to have the effect of keeping you from developing any hopes and keeping you from believing in anything that contradicts their agenda?
- Continuously being obnoxious (to put it mildly) and disrupting and preventing you from focussing on anything whatsoever with the intent of preventing you from getting involved in anything meaningful or giving. In other words, a form of sabotage.
- Simply persisting with the above strategies in order to exhaust you as a tactic in itself.

By the way, thinking about the fact of their presence throughout your life, have they had any influence on your idea about yourself? In that case – what have been the consequences of that?





The influence of the voices has not been constant. It was not until you were in your early 20s that they became capable of getting you to perform acts of self-harm. From when you were a child and until you developed chronic pains in your early twenties, you have worked all that you could. It appears as if work has been a way of avoiding the influence of the voices, and that commitment and being busy perhaps put your manpower/labour out of reach of the voices. But that changed when you became “tied to my bed” by pain. However, there have been recent examples of the voices not always getting their way. For example, they can no longer get you to cut yourself. And just maybe they failed to get you to take an overdose only last week!

*Regards,
Christoffer*

A new life and a new idea

About two and a half years after these conversations had come to an end, Max requested to meet me once again. I could not have been prepared for the amazing news he had to tell me. He was moving away from his old life, and was fast becoming part of a new and different one: a life of warmth, caring, empathy and non-violence. This was connected to the fact that since we last spoke, he had fallen in love and moved in with Joan who he would eventually marry. This meant Max had become a step-father to her three children, who had quickly accepted and come to love Max, much to his surprise and amazement. These changes were overwhelming for him. It was quite clear for people around Max – *myself included* – that Max was doing an impressive job at being a caring partner to Joan and an attentive step-father. But although Max managed to function within this very different world, he felt very much like an alien and thrown in at the deep end. Our conversations now revolved around a metaphor of passage from one reality and identity to another.

We made use of ideas relating to culture shock, introduction to new and unfamiliar customs, acquiring the necessary skills for a particular way of life and needing time and assistance to become accustomed to such a new way of life. I readily admit to being amazed at how obvious it was that Max was able to have the emotions that go with a caring and loving family life, despite the fact that such feelings were very unfamiliar to Max. We imagined what would be involved if a person were suddenly inserted into a foreign culture. How does one learn how to act? What feelings and ways of thinking are required? How does one learn what seemingly exotic things mean? We talked about making observations and getting information from competent members of such a foreign culture, and how Max might go about imitating others and receiving guidance and explanations, hearing stories that exemplify the norms, acquiring skills and practicing them to achieve habituation and eventual competence. This involved developing new skills, feelings, responses and interpretations of others, along with his suppression of old patterns and responses. This development was extremely arduous for Max,





and I was indeed impressed by the speed with which he learned to restrain responses that had become second nature to him by necessity.

The voices were giving Max a lot of trouble over this period of our time together. They were having a hard time accepting what was happening in Max's life and would regularly overwhelm him with degradations and claims of his unworthiness for the love and acceptance he was now enjoying from Joan and the children. They tried to intensify his own doubts and make claims to the effect that people around him were neither truthful and nor to be trusted. At times, Max could do nothing but sit paralyzed while the voices poured their vitriol over him. He tried making counterclaims, arguing with them or exposing missing links or errors in their reasoning, and this did sometimes disturb the voices, but they would quickly retaliate and punish such noncompliance with escalating reprisals.

One day, Max and I sat pondering this puzzle of how to deal with these voices. What could be done to give Max a break and allow him to move on with engaging with his new life and a different Max? At this very moment, Max reminded me of something he had mentioned towards the end of our former run of conversations: he had once posed the idea to me that perhaps there was a good intention behind the voices even though that seemed so counter-intuitive to both of us. Max's idea was that perhaps the voices had, in fact, contributed to his survival in that world of violence he lived in throughout his childhood and into early adulthood.

We pondered:

- Is it possible these voices were trying to protect Max?
- Is it conceivable what they were doing right then was an attempt at his protection, conceived by someone who still thinks the way you need to think to survive in a world of violence?
- Perhaps the voices were looking at the developments in Max's life, but were lacking an appreciation of the difference between the world of violence he had barely survived and the world of love he had recently engaged in?
- What if the voices did, in fact, care about Max's survival, but were having a hard time adjusting to a reality that is profoundly different from Max's prior life?
- If this might be so, might we be able to appeal to them?
- What if we were to cease trying to outwit them or strike back and instead give them some credit and offer to update them on Max's life?

After some consideration, we thought it worthwhile to give these adventurous ponderings a go.

A different kind of conversation

With Max's permission, I began to address the voices aloud, looking not at Max, but into the space directly in front of me, asking Max to simply listen to me and for the voices' responses. I





directed my comments to the voices themselves and told them about our earlier conversation in which we concluded their intentions had been benevolent to ensure Max's survival up until this time in his life. And, I assured them of my respect for such efforts they had taken on his behalf.

I spoke to the voices about Max's new life as a loved partner and a revered step-father, and how he and I believed that different actions were necessary on the voices' behalf to further this development and thereby continue to protect Max. I spoke to them assuming that they would still be interested in contributing to Max's survival. Max immediately told me that this had an appreciable effect on the voices. Did we catch them short? Had we possibly confounded them? The voices didn't respond in their usual manner. We wondered if this was a bewildering yet interesting experience for them to be addressed in this way. Max urged me to put this in writing for him, which I immediately did. Here is what I wrote:

A letter to Max and the voices:

- *The voices are receptive to things you say to them. It has been possible to make a hit on them on some occasions. But they deploy some very unpleasant tactics when met by such resistance.*
- *Perhaps it is possible to speak with them in another way? The way they treat you is horrendous indeed, but perhaps there are good intentions behind it that are understandable and may provide some common ground?*

Why do the voices do what they do?

Perhaps to protect you? Perhaps they are part of a way in which you have survived in a world of violence. In such a context, there are examples that point to them being interested in helping you. And part of that help may have been to shut you down emotionally as part of surviving under extreme conditions². But the things the voices are doing, based on such an intention, is not a good fit with the world you inhabit today. As matters are now, the effects of the voices' well-meaning work are destructive.

Might one relate to the voices from such an understanding? A way of relating to them that is not about outmanoeuvring, tricking or striking back but instead one that perhaps pays them respect for their intentions:

Dear Voices,

² Being shut down means that the voices overwhelm Max with their commands and degradations to the point of him becoming emotionally cold, losing control and being hospitalized, thereby 'shutting down' the circumstances that are putting pressure on him – a seeming cruelty that seems to have helped him survive.





Thank you for striving to protect and help Max under the extreme conditions under which he has previously lived. You have contributed to enabling Max to survive in a universe of violence that required a certain insensitivity, cool resolve, stolidity – and perhaps sometimes for Max to be ‘shut down’. I can see the good intentions and the care for Max behind your actions. Thank you for this contribution to his survival.

At the same time, I would like to tell you that Max’s life is unfolding within a different world now. I hope you will persist in your efforts to protect Max in this new reality. I would like to tell you that there is a need for you to do so in a way that makes a good fit with the reality he now inhabits. I would like to encourage you to notice the ways in which his life has changed. And to notice that Max has people and love in his life now that it is very important for him to keep. It is the best thing that has ever happened to him! I would value it if you would contribute to protecting the life Max has now. I have absolutely no doubt that Max would be indebted to you for such help.

Thank you for your attention.

*Kind regards,
Christoffer*

Max’s account on the effects of the letter

What did it mean to Max to hear me say those things that day and to read such a letter to the voices? And how did the voices themselves react to this? The next time Max and I spoke, I asked him whether the letter had been useful to him and he said that it had. In fact, he reported that “it was crazy” how helpful it was. This is a summary of that conversation:

Max didn’t tell me at the time, but when I suggested I speak directly to the voices, he had initially thought to himself, “*Oh shut up you quack! You can’t talk to an illness. It’s an illness, and you can’t just talk to that!?*” He had really thought to himself that I was embarking on something quite mad and impossible (I am very grateful that he didn’t say so at the time, as I surely would have hesitated to engage the voices in such a fashion). And as it turns out, the voices paid attention! Max reported they had listened and responded to what I was saying. The voices did not get angry with our requests because they had the experience of being recognized, respected and held accountable in a positive way. Addressing them directly required the voices to reconsider their own activities and what their intentions were. This was a complete surprise for Max.

He further told me it had been very important we had prepared ourselves before I addressed the voices. That we had developed a clear idea together about how the voices might be other





than what they appeared to be, and that it might be worthwhile to address them with respect and recognition.

What about the letter, then? What happened when the letter arrived and Max read it?

I got the letter in the mail and opened it. When I read it there was an explosion in my head! I was paralysed for a while and shaking. The voices had been provoked by it and had gotten angry. But the thing was that they could not pin their anger on anyone because the letter was just a thing. A piece of paper. The worst thing they could do was to get me to scrunch up the letter, but the words in the letter would still have been said.

The voices' anger was directed at me and at a piece of paper, but not at Max.

There was not a bloody thing that they could do about it. They fumed for about five minutes, and after that just went on to a bit of mumbling.

Max laughed to himself as he told me this.

It gave me a weapon. I could read it again and again. It is so nicely written that they cannot really be angry about it. Provocative but sweet. There's nothing you can do about it.

Max kept this letter folded in his pocket until it literally fell apart, after which I renewed it. I asked Max about the effects of this. What did this do?

It gave me peace, and it gave me my power back, and my life. My own life. For the first time, I have a tool that has worked with the voices.

After this moment there was a new pattern: the voices might get angry about something, and then throw a tantrum, but it would only last about five minutes, and then there would be peace again.

In addition, Max informed me it was significant that I had addressed the voices, along with saying these nice and respectful things to them. One thing that Max had learned from his earlier attempts to outwit or trick the voices is that he never could win that way. The reason for this was that the voices would always know everything he knew, and so they would know what he would say before he would even say it.

They know everything. It had to be someone else who talked to them like you did.





Was Max surprised by these effects of addressing the voices like this and writing a letter to them?

It was a gigantic shock for me. I knew it had an effect because it affected the voices when you spoke to them. But I didn't know it would have so big an effect. I could use the letters when I was at home and affect the voices' behavioural pattern. I had not expected that. I have been able to use the letters at any time. Like when I was at the crowded mall and the voices just got worse and worse, I could take out the letter and read it. The voices must have the same respect for Christoffer as I have. I keep the letters and can pull them out again if I need them. They are between some books, sticking out slightly so they are easy to find.

A second letter to the voices

Six months later the voices were once again having trouble keeping up with and adapting to the developments in Max's life. They expressed the idea that all these turn of events in Max's life were unjustified because of the crimes he had committed when he lived in the world of violence. This brought us to consider matters of justice and the social good and how to determine what constitutes good in relation to crime and reform. In this regard, I was reminded of a television program I had once seen about an unusual approach to imprisonment and rehabilitation in Norway. We discussed these matters and again decided to commit a summary of our tentative conclusions to writing, addressing it to the voices in a respectful way. We did so on the assumption the voices were committed to helping Max, although their understanding of what that entailed may have been considerably at odds with our own:

Dear Voices,

I would like to thank you again for the protection you have provided for Max during part of his life. I believe your desire to contribute to Max's survival is still present. I would also like to tell you, as you may have noticed, that great changes have happened in Max's life. These are changes that have allowed him to move into a new space. To be a different version of Max. And that movement is really happening. It is visible and readily recognized to people who know him. They can hardly believe their own eyes, as they could not have imagined that all this was possible.

It can be difficult for Max to believe it himself. And perhaps for you too? It may seem unjust that such a positive development is happening in Max's life, bearing in mind his history. I would like to invite you, voices, to consider the meaning of 'good' and 'justice' in this case.

When people do something wrong, it is our custom to punish them from the understanding that one must pay with suffering for the suffering that one has inflicted





on others. Therefore, we deprive criminals. But it seems often to be the case that such punishment does not necessarily lead to better human beings at the other end. One does not necessarily become a better human being from being exposed to punishment, pain, stigma and exclusion. Unfortunately, many imprisoned criminals return to prison again and again. But I would like to inform you that in Norway³ there is a prison island where the inmates can move with relative freedom, and where the surroundings are pleasant and reminiscent of a nice life. And here the inmates are taught those skills and ways of relating to others that are conducive to a good and law-abiding existence. People who have been 'imprisoned' on this island are not very likely to show up in the penal system again!⁴ We must ask ourselves: What is conducive to creating human beings that do not commit crime? That are not violent? But are loving and contribute to society and the lives of others?

One may believe that Max deserves to suffer. But look at the results of the life he is living now. He is a caring man with a big space in the hearts of his partner and her children. He is calm and thoughtful. He does no harm to anyone. He is removing himself from the life of violence at such a pace that it is difficult for him to keep up with himself. So what would we prefer? 1) A Max who must suffer for his mistakes and be held in a cold world of pain? 2) Or a Max who loves and is loved and who harms no one? Do we want vengeance or do we want a more peaceful and safe society? I believe that the development that has taken place in Max's life is in the interest of us all. This means that there is something to consider other than justice. It is my opinion that the results speak for themselves.

I hope you will consider this.

*Kind regards,
Christoffer*

Max's account of the effects of the second letter

At first, the effects of this letter were difficult for Max to describe. However, on a later occasion, he tried to approach a way to explain it to me:

It was as if the contents of that letter worked like a scattergun over everything. It did something to EVERYTHING. Things in my childhood were changed by it.

³ Bastøy prison island (Bastøy fengsel) near Oslo in Norway. [Link here](#); [Link here](#)

⁴ Reported reoffending rate 16% compared to the European average of 70%. [Link here](#)





I was amazed! What did Max see in that letter? He said that he had been particularly drawn to the beneficial results from Bastoy prison and the last part of the letter about what we would prefer for someone like Max, and what the common good might be.

When I got the second letter, I remember lying down with it and reading it, and then holding it to my chest. Then I heard weeping and thought who in the world is that? But there wasn't anyone home who might be weeping. They will hate me saying this, but I think it was the voices.⁵

The letter addressed matters that Max later told me were essential to him. The matter of crime and justice was the central question for him in relation to his fundamental view of his life.

Crime WAS ME from when I was a child. It was normal. It was just how things were.

With the new life that Max had become part of, supported by this perspective on crime and justice, he now could see another world around him:

I see love, safety and intimacy everywhere around me. And I am involved in making it.

A new voice

A few months later, Max told me about a surprising development: a new voice had shown up! But it was very different from the other voices. This one was very agreeable, spoke in a pleasant and respectful manner and was clearly sympathetic towards Max. It was both very talkative and inquisitive and often overdid it. For example, Max told me how, during our conversation, the new voice commented on all sorts of things in my office. It took note of the instant coffee jars I had, and how one was different from the others. *"Does the psychologist prefer one type of coffee, but some of the time switch to another none the less?"* the voice had queried. I made sure to provide the voice with a suitable explanation (it had belonged to an intern psychology student who preferred a different brand of coffee than me).

This was all very remarkable. Max didn't know how or why this voice had come, but suddenly it was there. I was interested to know what kind of person this voice was, asking Max what the voice seemed to be interested in, and what its concerns were. Max explained that the voice tended to encourage him to stay close to his loved ones at home and avoid strange places. Consequently, we formed the impression the voice was concerned with Max's safety and that it

⁵ With respects to the voices, I would like to add something here: *I would like to tell you voices that what Max is saying about you here, I think is moving. It does not make me think less of you or lose respect for you. On the contrary! I felt a warmth by it when Max told me. A warmth for you, voices. It made me think better of you and led me to become more interested in getting to know you. I hope you will allow it to stay in this paper. I think it honours you. Thank you in advance. Best regards, Christoffer.*





attached significance to important relationships in his life. Max and I both agreed this new development was certainly welcome.

However, the voice was very, very inquisitive— like a young child bursting with curiosity or a being from a different planet who was highly fascinated with what was going on in Max's life. Because the voice was so courteous and well-mannered, it was difficult for Max to ignore it. He often felt compelled to answer it or even go so far as to initiate conversations, however, in some circumstances that appeared strange to onlookers. As well, such engagements made it difficult for Max to concentrate and sustain his focus. So although Max appreciated the good nature of the voice, he reached the conclusion that it talked too much at times. Max needed space and quiet to focus and not act in ways others would deem strange. We decided to offer hospitality to the voice and to address it as a new acquaintance and a guest in Max's life. And as a guest in his life, we felt that Max as host was justified in setting some basic rules. We composed a letter to this effect:

Hello Max's new voice,

As someone having the privilege of knowing Max, I would like to address you. Max has brought it to my attention that you have arrived. On his behalf, I would like to welcome you as a guest in his life. I have learned from Max that you are a friendly spirit and that you take an interest in his life. I would like to thank you for that.

As you are a new arrival, I would like to tell you a few things about the life of your present host. Max comes from a very difficult life and has some voices with him from that life. He is very much in the process of moving away from that life. He has become part of a loving family with Joan and her children who love Max dearly.

This new life is at times overwhelming for him, and sometimes confusing. It takes time to adjust to a reality that is different from what you know. But I feel confident in telling you that Max is making himself at home in this new reality at an impressive pace. Several people around him have noticed this. This development is immensely significant for him. In connection to that, I would like to ask you to attend closely to the life in which you have recently arrived as a guest, and to respect and contribute to it while you are there.

There are a few specific things that Max would particularly appreciate if you would bear in mind:

- *When Max is with the children, he would very much appreciate it if you refrain from talking to him. This is simply because your friendly demeanour and clarity of voice makes him want to answer. But if he does, it will look strange to the children. For*





- that reason, it would be very nice if you would refrain from speaking to Max when he is with the children.*
- *In much the same way, it would be appreciated if you would remain quiet when Max is having important conversations. Otherwise it is quite difficult for Max to concentrate on such an important conversation.*
 - *Max appreciates good advice and warnings. But sometimes he doesn't need it. Sometimes he would much prefer peace and quiet. He is on top of many things. For this reason, it would be much appreciated if you would be willing to try and be quiet when Max asks you to. Sometimes he just needs peace and quiet.*

I would like to thank you for your friendly demeanour and what seems to me to be an interest in looking after Max. To my mind, you seem to be concerned with Max staying in places where he is safe and with people he cares about. It brings me great joy that you regard that these matters are important to Max. I am very happy that you are supportive of those things that matter to him.

*Kind regards
Christoffer*

A month later, Max would relate to me that the new voice had demonstrated a capacity to listen and to bear in mind his wishes. It had, in fact, learned to stay quiet when Max was having important conversations. Although this voice was kindly and supportive, he did hope it would move on eventually and not remain in his life forever. Max strove to make that clear by not getting too personal with this voice, referring to it as 'it' and not 'he' and stressing that it was a guest rather than a permanent residence in his life. The voice did move on after a relatively short time and is no longer present for Max.

Evaluation of change on psychiatric measures

Max was first admitted to psychiatric hospital in 2010, following several suicide attempts. Between then and our first conversation in 2013, he was admitted to hospital 27 times, usually involving physical restraint due to dangerous and violent behaviour. Our first course of therapeutic conversations, comprising 16 meetings, came to an end in 2014, when he moved to a different town. Max continued to be frequently admitted at the local psychiatric hospital, but no longer by force. While living there, he admitted himself of his own free will. Unlike before, there was very little use of force. He was still restrained, but now for the reason that he requested it to ensure his own safety. He continued to be admitted to hospital several times per year through 2015, and again in the beginning of 2016. Max and I resumed our conversations in late 2016, and it was just after a few conversations in December of 2016 that we developed the first respectful letter to the voices. The second respectful letter to the voices was written in the summer of 2017, almost exactly six months after the first one.





At the time of writing this paper, autumn 2018, Max has not been hospitalized since early 2016. Max has been administered antipsychotics since 2010, but according to him, they had never worked on the voices. Despite high levels of stress, suffering intensifying chronic pain, learning to live a normal family life and hearing voices, Max has had no further hospitalizations for the past two and a half years, in sharp contrast to the very many, often involuntary, admissions between 2010 and 2016. He is now in his early thirties.

I asked Max if he saw a connection between our collaboration and hospitalization:

Because of the letters to the voices, I am able to learn. I can now learn to be a human being. I used to be intensely paranoid, but being able to deal with the voices, using the letters, has taken a lot of the paranoia away. This is the thing that has meant the most of all. Using the letters, I can function within a normal life. That pushes the psychiatric world away from me. I am now able to use the feedback from the children to be able to behave right. Their feedback is always completely honest and immediate. I have gotten a life because of those darn letters. It just bloody works. And not just for two weeks or something. They worked immediately and they keep working. I haven't been hospitalized since. I read the letters to the voices instead.

Reflections

There were some matters that stood out for Max:

- *The fact that Christoffer would relate things to his own life and would sometimes say something crazy-sounding made him so much more human. Not a role. Not a function. That has given him immense authority in my eyes, and the respect that is mentioned in the above. It is significant that the person shines through.*
- *Twisting things and turning them upside down. I believe in karma and because of the way my life has been, I believed I did not deserve good things. But then one day Christoffer said: "If karma means that you get what you deserve then would that not also mean that if life gives you good things, it must be because you deserve it?" I think that is such an annoying thing to say, but the logic is correct. That is a great help. It works. With the voices, we also turned things around: We treated the voices with respect, even though one feels like hitting back at them and being obnoxious to them like they are obnoxious to me. But we turned the situation on its head.*
- *I do recall that when I was a child, the voices guided me like a grownup guides a child, scolding and such. They prevented me from getting involved in certain things. Some things would make the voices go off on me if I just thought about doing it. That was protection and has in fact contributed to my survival.*
- *I have reclaimed something I had when I came into the world, but which did not exist in my childhood and beyond: Warmth, feelings, and caring. There is a message in*





that: You can reclaim these things. They are not lost for all time, just because you did not have them in your childhood.

As well there were some matters that stood out to me [Christoffer] in Max's story and the approach to the voices that we took:

- We related to the voices as separate persons rather than as symptoms.
- We engaged with the voices from a concern with the ethics of relations as opposed to engaging in conflict or attempts at a cure.
- We strove to move towards respect and acceptance instead of rejection or condemnation.
- Someone other than the person hearing the voices spoke to and wrote to them, explicitly addressing them in the grammar of the second person.
- The approach to the voices that we took worked even though Max did not expect it to. He informed me that initially the approach had sounded crazy and impossible, but nonetheless it worked immediately and has endured up until the present.
- We created a situation where the voices' usual tactics of attacking the person did not work.
- We immortalised the message to the voices through letter writing.
- We addressed in particular matters of social justice and related the problem to a moral universe.

Acknowledgements

From Max:

I would like to thank Christoffer, because without him this would not have happened. And thank you David Epston for receiving my story the way you did. Christoffer has also told me that he collaborates with a person who is finding inspiration in my story. I would like to thank that person too. It has great significance for me that others may find hope and inspiration in my story. That makes it all meaningful and is the reason I want to make my story available to others. I would also like to thank my wife for love, support and patience.

From Christoffer:

I feel I must mention two unnamed people with insider knowledge about relating to problems respectfully who have played an important role in helping me to understand the significance of respectful and caring relations with problems that may immediately seem obnoxious and evil-minded. I believe that their examples have contributed to preparing me to engage with Max's voices the way that I did. Thank you for your wisdom!

Thank you to Rune Hjarnø Rasmussen, historian of religion at Uppsala University, Sweden, for introducing me to recent developments in anthropology and religious studies. Thank you David Epston for assisting with this paper and contributing to Max's life. And most importantly thank





you Max for an amazing collaboration and inspiration for my work. And a thank you also to Max's voices for the protection they have provided earlier in his life and for the respect they may have for me.

Kind regards,
Cristoffer Haugaard

Consent

The name 'Max' is a pseudonym. The person behind the pseudonym has been fully informed about my interest in publishing his story, and has given his consent for me to write it and expressed his strong desire for his story to be made available to others to inspire them to find similar ways of relating to voices. Max has contributed directly to this paper by means of comments, corrections and he is also explicitly quoted in the text. Prior to submission and publication, Max has read this paper and accepted it, and he has given his written consent for it to be submitted to a journal for publication.

You may contact the author at:

Christoffer Haugaard
Aalborg University Hospital, Psychiatry, Clinical Unit for Psychosis.
Mølleparkvej 10, 9000
Aalborg, Denmark.
Christoffer.Haugaard@rn.dk

References

- Beavan, V. & Read, J. (2010): Hearing Voices and Listening to What They Say – The Importance of Voice Content in Understanding and Working With Distressing Voices. In *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 198: 201-205. Lippincot Williams & Wilkins
- Bird-David, N. (1999): "Animism" Re-visited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology. In *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 40, No. S1, Special Issue Culture – A Second Chance? (February 1999), pp. S67-S91. The University of Chicago Press and The Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research.
- Corstens, D., Escher, S. & Romme, M. (2008): Accepting and Working with Voices: The Maastricht Approach. In *Psychosis, Trauma and Dissociation*. Moskowitz, A., Schäfer, I. and Dorahy, M. J. (eds.) John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
- Corstens, D., Longden, E., McCarthy-Jones, S., Waddingham, R. & Thomas, N. (2014): Emerging





Perspectives From the Hearing Voices Movement: Implications for Research and Practice. In *Schizophrenia Bulletin* vol. 40 suppl. No. 4 pp. S285-S294.

Harvey, G. (2006): Animals, Animists, and Academics. In *Zygon*, vol. 41, no. 1 (March 2006).

Harvey, G. (2017): *Animism – Respecting the Living World*. Second Edition. C. Hurst & Co. Ltd. London UK.

Jones, S. R., & Fernyhough, C. (2007): Thought as action: Inner speech, self-monitoring, and auditory verbal hallucinations. In *Consciousness and Cognition* 16 pp. 391-399.

Larøi, F., Luhrmann, T. M., Bell, V., Christian Jr, W. A., Deshpande, S., Fernyhough, C., Jenkins, J. & Woods, A. (2014): Culture and Hallucinations: Overview and Future Directions. In *Schizophrenia Bulletin* vol. 40 suppl. 4 pp. S213-220. Oxford University Press.

Luhrmann, T. M., Padmavati, R., Tharoor, H. & Osei, A. (2015a): Hearing Voices in Different Cultures: A Social Kindling Hypothesis. In *Topics in Cognitive Science* 7 (2015) 646-663. Cognitive Science Society, Inc.

Luhrmann, T. M., Padmavati, R., Tharoor, H. & Osei, A. (2015b): Differences in voice-hearing experiences of people with psychosis in the USA, India and Ghana: interview-based study. In *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 206, 41-44.

Luhrmann, T. M. (2018): The Sound of Madness – Can we treat psychosis by listening to the voices in our heads? In *Harpers Magazine* 2018 Issue. Accessed August 17 2018: [Link here](#)

Read, J. & Bentall, R. P. (2012): Negative Childhood Experiences and mental health: theoretical, clinical and primary prevention implications. In *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 200, 89-91.

Read, J., van Os, J., Morrison, A. P. & Ross, C. A. (2005): Childhood trauma, psychosis and schizophrenia: a literature review with theoretical and clinical implications. In *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 112: 330-350.

Viveiros de Castro, E. (2004): Exchanging Perspectives – The transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Ontologies. Symposium: Talking Peace with Gods, Part 1. *Common Knowledge* 10:3. Duke University Press.

Viveiros de Castro, E. (2015): Who's afraid of the ontological wolf? Some comments on an ongoing anthropological debate. CUSAS Annual Marilyn Strathern Lecture, 30 May 2014. *Cambridge Anthropology* 33.1: 2-17.

White, M. (1995): Psychotic Experience and Discourse. In *Re-authoring Lives: Interviews &*





Essays. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre.

White, M. (2007): *Maps of Narrative Practice*. New York, NY: Norton.

