



Rose and the Whispering Voices

Christoffer Haugaard, Rose & David Epston

Context

The following text is based on therapeutic conversations taking place at Aalborg Psychiatric Hospital in Denmark. The material on which the paper is based is Christoffer's ethnographic diary of the unfolding events, written as these events took place, as well as written correspondence between Rose, Christoffer and David. The purpose of the paper is to share Rose's knowledges and discoveries concerning the ability to hear voices and their significance to her well-being. We share this in the hope that both people who are able to hear voices and professionals who seek to assist them may find some inspiration for their own explorations of living with voices for the benefit of both the people who hear them and the voices themselves. This paper is part of a co-research project involving a number of people who are able to hear voices in collaboration with Christoffer Haugaard and David Epston¹

Introduction

In this paper, Rose, David and I would like to share with you a journey of discovery to find a path to peaceful co-existence with voices that had hitherto been at war with the person hearing them, causing much suffering. One might easily simply want to get rid of such voices. However, rather than winning such a war, this journey led instead to a practice of respectful engagement. We would like to tell you how this happened, hoping this knowledge may help you in some way, whether you are able to hear voices yourself, or know someone who does have this capacity.

When I (Christoffer) first met Rose, she was in her twenties and had recently moved to Aalborg from another part of Denmark. As is the usual practice at the psychiatric facility where I work, she initially had meetings with a psychiatrist. Rose had previously been enrolled in an intensive psychiatric service for two years and had had frequent conversations with psychologists and had tried antipsychotic medication. However, this proved to have adverse effects, exacerbating those visual and auditory hallucinations that Rose experiences. This pharmacological course of treatment was consequently terminated after a two-week trial. For this reason, Rose did not want to pursue further psychopharmacological treatment. These hallucinations had been part of Rose's life for as long as she can remember. In her pre-teens she had also been considered as qualifying for a diagnosis of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and had received psychopharmacological treatment and according to Rose to no effect, and this was

¹ For more detail, see the section New Narrative Practices with Disembodied Voices in *Journal of Narrative Family Therapy*, 2019, Release 3.





discontinued. In her teens, she struggled with Anorexia but reached a point of powerful defiance and successfully exorcised Anorexia from her life. She was also diagnosed with Autism in her teens prior to being given a diagnosis of Schizophrenia. At her assessment, Rose expressed an interest in treatment but would not consent to antipsychotic medication. Rose's psychiatrist referred her to me, and I became very curious to meet this young person with a lifelong experience with voices for whom antipsychotics did not seem helpful. Having collaborated with Victoria about her hard won knowledges about living with voices without medication as well as the discoveries together with Max concerning aggressive voices that appreciate respect,² I wondered what Rose might know and what we might further discover if she might be interested in such a journey. This happened at a time when I was also collaborating with Alice³ to explore practices of hospitality with certain beings that she feels and communicates with in various ways. So, in early November 2018, Rose and I met in my office for the first time.

I was intrigued by Rose and to hear what she might wish to speak with me about. Sitting in her chair with bangs partly obscuring her eyes, she told me that she was interested in having someone to talk to about things she is unable to talk to most people about. That was in relation to life in general, her own history and close relations, but also in relation to some specific topics, such as living with visual hallucinations and troublesome voices on a daily basis. The visual hallucinations, Rose described to me, are deformed humans as well as monstrous beings. These may include suddenly seeing a person falling off a tall building while Rose is casually looking out the window, seeing the shapes of zombies outside the bath curtain when she is showering, an undead werewolf leaping over parked cars as Rose is conversing with a friend in the middle of a parking lot, grotesque humanoids looking like human-fish or human-reptile hybrids, living skeletons and a knife-fingered skeletal woman in the bathroom mirror. Rose recalls being chased by a big living skeleton several times a week during a period of her childhood. Such apparitions still happen on most days – something Rose is now used to, although it can still startle her.

Rose has been able to hear voices speaking to her since early in her childhood. They would require her to perform various actions that to outsiders would resemble OCD, and say that if she did not, then people she loved would die. It became impossible to do all these things because of the sheer amount and complexity of actions required, and then she began to insist on compromise. The voices would then punish her with painful body sensations, but she kept insisting on making compromises. They began to accept this and then they became more willing to compromise, so that such elaborate routines could be reduced to small gestures that did not interfere to the same extent with her life. Until a couple of years ago, she could also hear two very distinct voices with complete personalities – a male and a female voice. It was not clear to her how they related to the voices making demands. It wasn't until later in her life, that she

² See Haugaard & Max, 2019 and Haugaard & Victoria, 2019.

³ See Haugaard, Alice & Epston, 2021.





became able to more fully distinguish these two, as Rose will be explaining below. They would make comments on her daily life, but not in an obnoxious way, although they could be distracting and annoying. However, earlier in her life they did make demands. At the time when Rose and I met, these two voices were no longer with her. They had decamped a few years ago under rather mysterious circumstances and left Rose with a choir of mostly whispering voices. It was these whisperers that troubled her at this time. They talked in whispers among each other, and then addressed her with messages concerning how she should fear other people or provide her with a list of reasons why she should kill herself. They seemed to want control over her. I asked if they were listening in on our conversation at that moment and whether they responded to our conversation, given my experience that some voices are opposed to such conversations as we were having. Rose said they listened, and she predicted that after she leaves, they would twist the conversation against her. They would have her regard my words or the thoughts behind them as negative.

I couldn't help but think of Alice's discoveries concerning the potential value of hospitality towards what Alice prefers to call Magical Beings, and asked Rose's permission to say something that might sound weird. Thankfully, she did not mind such potential weirdness, and I told her about Alice's discovery that her Magical Beings appreciated being offered cigarettes and how we had provided this for them, and how this had changed our interactions with them towards more dialogue and mutual curiosity and learning to be friendly.⁴

I talked about that for a bit, sort of engrossed in giving an account of it and responding to Rose's comments. Then I looked back at her, and discovered she had tears in her eyes that she was unable to hide. I asked what was happening, and she struggled to explain it, but said she was moved by the mutual kindness and openness of what I was describing. She had never thought that you could be kind to voices like that – voices that want murder. She thought it was beautiful. Given her prediction that her voices would try to twist this conversation against her, I asked her permission to address this team of whispering voices with an offer of hospitality, as perhaps they would respond to respect and kindness, as voices have done in some cases I have been involved in. She gave her permission and I turned my gaze away from Rose, looking into the space in front of me and said:

“Voices – I don't know how to address you as I don't know a name for you, but you who whisper and speak to Rose - allow me to introduce myself: I am Christoffer and this is my office. I would very much like to be a good host to you when you are here. Therefore, I would like to ask you if there is some form of hospitality that I might extend to you? Is there anything you would like to have or for us to do? I am not able to provide or do anything, but if you would consider what you would like and tell me, through Rose, then we might figure something out. Thank you for your attention.”

⁴ See Haugaard, Alice & Epston (2021) for an account of this.





I asked Rose if this was okay with her and was relieved to hear that she didn't think it was too weird. In fact, she said "I have never experienced a conversation with a psychologist like this before. They tend to be like they are reading from a textbook, but this is very personal. I have never been so emotionally moved by a first conversation with a professional before. I struggle to stop the tears again". Having run out of time, we agreed to meet again for further conversations. Fascinated and intrigued by all that Rose had shared with me, I wrote a letter to her to preserve the gist of our conversation and to repeat my invitation to the whispering voices, hoping that might make it harder for them to completely twist our words around against her:

Hi Rose.

I do hope it is okay with you that I write you a letter. You said many things that I find worthy of preserving in writing, and as well, I can't help but consider the likelihood of the whispering team of voices making their own spin on our conversation. It is fair enough for them to have their opinion, but other accounts deserve to exist alongside theirs. This is mine.

Thank you for your description of how you deal with seeing things others do not. I believe your knowledges concerning this may very well prove helpful to me and to other people.

I took note of your account of finding a way to live with voices. The voices that wanted you to do all sorts of things. Was it just too much and impossible to go along with in the end? Is that why you insisted on compromise in relation to their demands? I recall that you said they made threats that your sister would die if you did not comply. How were you able to insist on compromise in relation to something like that? Were you able to talk the voices out of making that threat? Or did you begin to have doubts about their credibility? You also stuck to your compromises even though the voices inflicted pain on you. How did you withstand that? Were you quite fearful during the time of your "negotiations" with them? I really wonder how such a change is brought about.

Either way, it seems to me you were successful! They accepted the compromise and the extensive sequences of actions they had demanded were reduced to small movements. Did this make everyday life more manageable? Am I correct that after this, the voices became more manageable and settled for just making comments?

Then something remarkable happened! The two more distinct voices left you but seems to have made room for all the whisperings. Are they like a committee that has taken upon itself to make plans for how you should live your life? Unfortunately, their input is quite unpleasant, such as reasons for you to kill yourself or to fear people. They twist things and use them against you. You predicted that they would do that to our conversation. But that made me wonder: Would it be possible to appeal to this whispering team of voices? Would they enter into conversation with us? Is their attempt





to twist my words an invitation from them to enter into conflict? I would like to reciprocate that invitation with another invitation (and you are welcome to read it to them on my behalf, if you consider this appropriate):

“Voices – I don’t know how to address you as I don’t know a name for you, but you who whisper and speak to Rose - allow me to introduce myself: I am Christoffer. I would very much like to be a good host to you when you are in my office. Therefore, I would like to ask you if there is some form of hospitality that I might extend to you? Is there anything you would like to have or for us to do? I am not able to provide or do anything, but if you would consider what you would like and tell me, through Rose, then we might figure something out. Thank you for your attention.”

Warm regards, Christoffer.

A Letter from Rose

Rose returned in a week’s time and informed me that she had received my letter and had written a response to it. She went on to read it aloud to me. Here is my translation of her letter:

There are some details that I did not share with you about my voices – primarily because I was a bit overwhelmed, and it can be difficult to structure all one’s thoughts and give an account of them in one go. However, I will attempt to explain it properly here;

There has been a constant development of my voices over the years. When as a child I had the very intrusive voices that dictated my compulsions, I was still not quite aware of who/what they were and where they came from. It wasn’t until I got somewhat older, around my teens, that I began to reflect on these voices to find answers. What I immediately think makes the most sense is that the voices were undefinable from when I was a child. The two voices with more distinct personalities were there but I could not distinguish them clearly. I recall also having much whispering back then, and the whispering I have now seems to agree with me that they have been there a long time.

After our conversation, I recalled a memory of having been hypnotized/put in a trance by my mother’s good friend who was also an alternative healer. She was pretty “voodoo”, so to speak, as she asked about earlier lives and other things, she firmly believed in. However, I could not answer any of these questions, for what happened for me was that the two voices began to speak clearly to me. I saw images from their lives and I got to talk in particular with one of them who had so far been very harsh. I must add that they said they had nothing to do with earlier lives, but they took the opportunity to speak clearly to me now that I was so open to listening.

I would like to try to explain a little about them, despite them not being with me anymore.





I characterized one of the voices as “feminine”. It was a female voice that spoke in a Copenhagen accent. She was laid-back, tolerant and was good at calming me down when I was stressed. However, she was also very talkative and that could get exhausting at times.

The other voice I characterized as “masculine”. It was a deep man’s voice that had an American-Danish accent. He wanted me to be productive, efficient and strong. If I wanted to achieve something, he helped me get started with it and kept me on track. He was also good at telling me what people to avoid, as I have had people in my life that were positively toxic for me. On the other hand, he was also so harsh that sometimes I could not live up to his expectations at all, which pulled me down further.

During this treatment the male voice told me that he was a soldier from the Vietnam War, and he showed me memories from his time, which really moved me. The feminine voice, on the other hand, was from inner Copenhagen, where she had led a chaotic life in the 80s. The voices held to these identities although I had a lot of doubt as to whether it was just my own imagination running amok. To this day, I find it very odd.

The two voices had many debates which was the worst part about them. We ended up having a reasonably good cooperation until the day when they just disappeared. I have thought about why they disappeared. I have tried calling them in the past, but it didn’t work and by now I have accepted their absence.⁵

I have an additional story to add which my mom told me later the same day that you and I talked. We were once at a family camp on an island. In the middle of the week there was a strong sea fog coming in from the sea making it very misty – you almost couldn’t see your hand before you. My sister, I and some others went playing in the fog, but then my sister noticed I was gone. She told our mother, who then found me a little later, standing paralyzed in the fog. I told her that a man had spoken to me in the fog – a man in a uniform from old times who was no longer part of reality. I was five years old at this time and have no recollection of it myself. My mom thinks this was the first tangible sign that I saw things that weren’t there, but that before that I could also seem remote and look in strange directions for no apparent reason. I was very quiet during the rest of the family camp.

⁵ In late 2016, these two voices disappeared from one day to the next. Rose had her sister and some friends visiting one evening. Rose and her sister had a disagreement, after which Rose had gone to bed while her sister had stayed. The next day, the two voices with personalities were gone! Rose even called to them but got no reply. She has never heard from them again. Only later did Rose hear what had transpired after she fell asleep that evening. What Rose has been told, is that her sister heard her apparently talking in her sleep, and apparently the ones doing the talking while Rose slept was the two voices! Rose’s sister started talking to them, but they were angry with Rose’s sister due to the events of the evening and they ended up having an argument. This led to them finally feeling offended at which they took their leave. And then, the next day, Rose found that they were simply not there anymore, although she had no recollection of these events herself.





Now I have rambled long enough, so allow me to answer your questions from your letter.

It became too much with all the things that the voices required me to do at the end and I knew I had to stop, or my brain would literally explode. However, I don't think it was the two voices with personalities who dictated everything all by themselves. At that time, the whispering crowd existed too – I have become very aware of that after our conversation.

I can see that you also speculate a lot as to how I managed to make compromises with the harsh voices. The short answer is; willpower, love, pain and pride. For a period of my childhood, everyone around me, including myself, were deeply unhappy. I was just so far down that I thought that if I don't at least try to turn my own shit around, we would never get better as a family. I simply loved my sister and mother too much to let them down. I wanted to help where I could and if that meant becoming a nice and stable daughter, then that is what I would do for them.

So, the motivation was the love for my family, but it also became something I did for myself. Then willpower came into it. I believe that to this day, I have still not experienced anything as hard as going against my voices. But I knew I had to win just one power struggle with the voices – otherwise things would just get worse. It is my experience that something can only hurt for a limited time at a time, after that the pain just turns to numbness – for example, if you hit yourself on the same place on your arm for 10 minutes the probability of feeling something on that spot after a time is small – there is a soreness, but you can live with that. I combined these power struggles with compromise. That is, I started out hard to show the voices I could not be dictated to. Then when we were in all-out war with each other, I laid the negotiations on the table and a kind of cooperation began. A simple example might be:

Voices: You must walk in and out of the door 5 times before going in, or else your mother dies while she is out shopping.

Me: Let's say I must do it 2 times instead – then she will only have a fever, if nothing else?

And of course, she didn't get a fever, so I used reality as an argument against them. I partly humiliated them, but I still allowed them to be there. However, this was a full-time job in itself and it took me more or less two years to get in proper control of it. I was so proud of myself when I won a battle, so I used that feeling as a motivation to hold firm, even when it was hard.

Daily life became more manageable as the compulsions lessened. However, I still had many delusions of reality and they still influence me to this day. For example, my voices can say something as absurd as "if you don't fold that cloth properly on top of the case





for your glasses, you will become deaf tomorrow". Normally I just do what they say when it is such small things that don't take much time or much energy. But when they are powerful demands, I once again try to negotiate with them. I have become quite hard on them with time and I mostly just say they are ridiculous and carry on with my day. They don't like that and there are many bodily hallucinations as a consequence of my refusal, which drains me a lot – particularly due to anorexia, which I had at 16.

I miss my old two voices these days, as they did not have evil intentions and in addition seem more intelligent than the group of whispering I have now. They left a void that the whispering tries to fill up with chaotic thoughts.

It is hard for me to say why I was so moved by your story about the cigarettes, but I suspect it may be in part because I have not experienced being met with such kindness and openness before. My experience has been that the psychologist always has looked upon me as a human being of lesser worth or as a crazy poor thing. I already thought I was crazy myself, less worthy and in the way by feeling like I do, and frankly I am ashamed. That is why I was really surprised by the openness you have around the voices. In addition, it also did something to my voices. They have been quite peculiar since our conversation – like a little confused. I get very mixed signals and messages. Some try to tell me they are there to help me – they sound positively anxious. Others laugh and say I am stupid to believe I could feel better. There is also a group that sit and mumble to each other, like they are negotiating about something... All in all, there is a lot of noise on the channel right now and it exhausts me. I try to take it easy and figure out what's what in it all. But when I attempt to ask about their motives, it is all silent. So, I don't know what you can do to make them speak. I suspect it is a matter of trial and error. They certainly seem flustered by the fact that you address them directly. I will say more at our meeting of course, if I find some answers – this is just the thoughts I had just after I read your letter. However, I will try to write down some messages from the voices, if they become open to dialogue again.

There hasn't been anything to get from the voices. They have returned to their old habits since our conversation. The day before yesterday they woke me up to convince me there was a demon. I am so fucking tired of this power struggle I have with them.

Best regards, Rose.

Listening to Rose reading this letter to me, I got the strong feeling that she was in possession of a veritable gold mine of knowledge about living a whole life with different kinds of voices, as well as visual hallucinations and other forms of survival.

Getting to Know the Whispering Voices

At this meeting, I asked Rose's permission to address the voices directly. This seemed appropriate in light of Rose's letter and the invitation I had given the voices to be my guests. I





was curious about this crowd of whisperers. There seemed to be a lot of them, but how many and who are they all? And what do they want, I wondered? Being mindful that a lot of diplomacy and care may be required in communicating with voices, as well as mindful that Rose would be the target of any retaliations from the voices, I made sure to ask her permission to communicate with them, which she graciously gave. I addressed the voices by speaking directly to them while looking into the space in front of me, then turning back to Rose to hear what answers the voices might give her to pass on to me.

Christoffer: These voices, of which there are many, are they divided in groups in some way? Like, by their interests or by what they want?

Rose: There are some who try to take care of me and look out for me. Then there are some who are like the embodiment of destruction and self-hate. And then some who are mumbling.

Christoffer: Have the voices responded to being addressed last time we met, and responded to my invitation to receive some form of hospitality in my office?

Rose: The voices have been acting differently since that meeting.

Christoffer: How do the voices feel about me talking to them and offering hospitality? Do they appreciate it or feel uncomfortable with it?

Rose: They perhaps feel validated by being spoken to directly, as I usually try to push them away. It also creates some chaos for them and leads to discussions among them. And embarrassment, irritation, confusion.

Christoffer: Have they not been spoken to before?

Rose: No. Other psychologists and psychiatrists have been dismissive of them.

Christoffer: Thank you voices for listening to our conversation and responding to me. I really appreciate that and hope we may find a way to make you comfortable here. Rose, you said they are many. How many? More or fewer than 10?

Rose: More than 10. Not sure how many.

Christoffer: Would it be all right with you and with the voices if I ask some questions about this.

Rose: Sure.

Christoffer, turning away from Rose to address the voices directly:

You who speak to Rose, we understand that there are quite a few of you. Do you know, by any chance, how many you are? Do you have an idea?

Voices (via Rose): 27. 21. (Rose later clarified: Some said 27 and some said 21)





Christoffer: Right. Thank you indeed, voices. I hope you don't mind me asking a little further: From what Rose says, it seems you have different opinions and interests. Is that right? Are you sort of organized in groups with different opinions and interests?

Voices (via Rose): Yes. (Rose has clarified that they say more than what she passes on, but as they are many talking, she is only able to grab the precise answers to my questions out of all the talking)

Christoffer: Okay. Thank you. Do you know how many groups there are? Like, more than three?

Voices (via Rose): Yes. More than three.

Christoffer: Thank you very much for participating in this conversation. I would just like to ask another couple of questions. Is that alright Rose? And alright with the voices too?

Rose: Sure. Fire away.

Christoffer: Thank you. Voices, when you come to Rose with some message or other, is that the result of a consensus among you? Do you all have to agree to a message before delivering it to Rose, or do the messages she gets also represent just the interests of one group, but not necessarily everyone?

Voices (via Rose): Sometimes it is a consensus, other times not.

Christoffer: Right. Thank you very much, voices. I think I will desist from any more questions for now, as I think I understand that this is quite unusual for you. Okay, Rose, my thinking with these last questions was to get some idea of how to give them hospitality. I wanted to know whether they would have to agree to something they all want, or if some of them might like one thing and others would prefer something else. Like some might like coffee, but others might not.

Rose: They are not interested in coffee, I can tell you.

Christoffer: Okay. Anything they would like... (turning away from Rose again) Anything you would like, just discuss it and then pass it on to Rose to tell me. Okay? (Turning to Rose again) How is this for you, Rose. When I speak with the voices, is this okay or is it just plain weird?

Rose: It's okay. It is hard though. This is something that is such a big part of my life and there is so much in it. And I get this uncomfortable feeling in my stomach and body.





Christoffer: You have mentioned how the voices would respond to your demands by inflicting painful bodily sensations on you. Do you think these uncomfortable sensations now are part of how the voices are responding to this conversation?

Rose: I suspect so, yes. I think it is a good idea to not ask them anymore for now.

We stopped the exploration for the day. On our third meeting, the following week, Rose tells me that she has been engaging in conversation with the voices at home. She has been trying to learn from them who they are and what they want. We continue our exploration together:

Rose: They have been milder during this time when I have talked with them. One of them answers. The others hold back and just mumble. They are not too fond of the fact that one of them replies. The one who replies has given herself a name: Patricia. She made it up on the spot. They are not full, rounded personalities like the two old voices. They are sort of integrated into each other. Like Cerberus. A creature with three heads. They are a sort of addition to my emotions and closely tied to my emotions. They respond to how I feel. They are not individuals. Maybe they would lose some power if they were accepted? If they are the embodiment of negative emotions, then accepting them might take away some of their power?

Christoffer: I have come across voices who are very reluctant to be known, because they feared losing their authority if others know something about them. And with Alice, we have been wondering if her voices don't really know how to relate with humans.⁶ Maybe these whispering voices don't know either? Maybe we need to show them? And maybe I need to prove I am worthy of their trust? Have they been commenting on our conversation?

Rose: They are quiet now, but they were busy just before I came in here today.

Christoffer: Voices, I would like to thank you for being calm here today. I suspect that being spoken with and being offered hospitality is quite new to you. In light of that, I very much appreciate your calmness. Rose, what were they saying before our meeting?

Rose: They said I shouldn't talk to you and that you didn't want to help me, but only wanted to know about voices for your own gain.

Christoffer: Is this an example of how they twist things around, like you told me they would do?

Rose: Yes.

⁶ See Haugaard, Alice and Epston (2021) for explorations of this theme and developing a practice of demonstrating kindness to entities similar to Rose's voices.





Christoffer: Okay, voices. I see. I think you are concerned about my intentions. That is a fair concern. I would like to try to reply to that. My experience with this kind of approach we are taking, is that it does help the people concerned. With Max, it made significant changes in his life and in his words, it gave him a life. With Alice, we are still exploring this, and she says that because of this work we are doing, she is feeling MUCH better.⁷ So, I believe it does help the people who consult me. It is true that I gain something from this, but my main concern is that the person consulting me gains the most and should do so. But by sharing such knowledge as we discover, others also gain from it, and so there is a gain for more people. And the insight and knowledge I gain, I use to help others, so that others gain from it. Just as I am now drawing on the knowledge that has come from collaborating with Max and Victoria.⁸ I certainly expect Rose to gain from this collaboration. What matters to me, is the fact that people get in that other chair and invite me into their lives. That is a great privilege by which I am honored, and I strive to repay that trust by doing something that contributes to that person's life. I feel an obligation to do that. Is this reply adequate?

Rose: I think it is.

Christoffer: I suspect I must earn the trust of the whispering voices. That is something I must prove to them. Voices – I have extended my offer of hospitality to you and asked if there is anything you would like to have or would like me to do as your host at these meetings. I wonder if you have come to any conclusions about this? It is okay if you have not.

Rose: They don't really know.

Christoffer: Might they not know much about hospitality? Maybe they have no idea what to ask for or what to want?

Rose: Possibly.

Christoffer: Maybe we need to just show them and not ask them about something they don't know how to answer. I understand you don't like coffee. How about movies? Alice's voices watch movies. Would you like that? Perhaps not gory ones, but rather a movie that shows how relationships work?

Rose: They don't know. I think they don't want coffee because I don't like coffee. They are connected to my emotions.

Christoffer: Anything else? What do you like, Rose?

⁷ See Haugaard and Max (2019) and Haugaard, Alice and Epston (2021) for details.

⁸ See Haugaard and Victoria (2019).





Rose: What I like? I like tea.

Christoffer: Okay, I can get that. I prefer coffee, though. How about I have tea and coffee next time, and you, voices, have tea and Rose has tea, and I drink coffee.

Rose: Sure. We can try that.

Distinguishing and Characterizing Groups of Voices

We tried giving the voices tea on our fourth meeting in late November. Rose informed me that she has been working towards some conclusions about the voices:

Rose: They are not complete individuals like the two old ones, but more like reflections. Like a reflection of something in my life. There is something else that needs to be dealt with, rather than only engaging directly with the voices.

Christoffer: Are they less like agents of their own and more like mediators of something other than themselves?

Rose: I like the description of them as 'mediators'. I think there is something to David's idea of soothing my feelings to soothe the voices,⁹ but this is sort of what I already do. But soothing negative feelings is not easy. It too points to something else. There is something that needs to be dealt with that is connected to both feelings and voices.

Rose and I then explored the contents of the messages she got from the voices and the kind of situations they reacted to, in order to get a sense of what they were about. Here is a selection of the kind of messages the voices give to Rose:

You are nothing special.

You are a burden to society.

You must cease to exist.

People will be happy once you are dead.

Suck it up you big egoist.

You're not entitled to be angry.

You are selfish.

You are depressing and demoralizing to other people and suck out their energy.

⁹ David suggested this in correspondence. With Rose's consent, Christoffer shared his diary of these explorations with David, and as well shared David's comments with Rose.





You take too much.

When other people say nice things, they are just out to exploit you. They want you to trust them so they can destroy you.

You are unworthy of being loved, having a good life and getting other people's attention – you might as well give up right now.

Here are thirteen reasons to kill yourself...

If Rose feels bad, for example if she has a stomachache: You deserve the pain. That is good. Do nothing about it. Just lie there with the pain. That is your punishment and what you deserve.

Considering their messages, Rose noted that the voices seemed to revolve around matters about having a purpose in life, personal worth, achievement and failure, and that she did not agree with their views on these matters.

Here is Rose's written summary of tentative conclusions and impressions in a letter from her in mid-December 2018, after our fourth meeting:

There isn't only one group of voices, but three – possibly more. Rational explanations and gentle behavior work very well with the first group. I'll just expand on the different groups as I have discovered more since last time.

First group – Rational, fighters against injustice and direct

This group is one of the smaller groups, but they have a very clear voice and sound almost like a homogenous voice when they speak. They respond to what they find to be unjust. They encourage me to put my foot down but are not extremists. If they hear that their message is received and that I am actively making a plan to deal with the problem, they pretty much relax. I do not have much against them, but they are not always equally helpful. I think they want to help me, but I wouldn't call them guardians.

Second group – Angry, rebellious and destructive

This group consists of many voices. They are comparable to a storm. You can hear them whispering quietly on the horizon and in a short while it picks up swiftly. It leads to crashes and thunder in which the whispers almost become a high-pitched screeching noise and then follow the yelling and screams like lightning from the sky. They are very intense in their behavior and like a storm. I have not experienced any other options than waiting them out.

Third group – Moralizers

This group may be compared with a group of monks. They have a firm view on the world and how I ought to fit into it. If they had their way, I should say farewell to all safety and give it to others. Because others need it more than me, because I do not deserve what I have etc. etc. The more control I have in my life, the less powerful they become. It is my impression that it is





best to defy them. Their passive-aggressive remarks only get to you if you feel weak and inferior. I try to build up my self-worth little by little. They react sternly when I defy them, even when it is just little things – for example, I commented on a youtube video. That is something I haven't dared to do in a long time as I have always felt that my opinion is insignificant and that I am just an inconvenience to others. They raised their voices while I was writing the comment and said "That is an irrelevant and unnecessary comment... You are just being an inconvenience!", but as I posted the comment, they just got snippy and went back to the back of the head.

With regards to the second group, I don't know what it is that has hurt them. I suspect they may be an embodiment of things from the past – old scars that have become inflamed. But I think they are made up of things that are afflicting me in the present. Suppressed frustrations and a desire to bite back – an anger, but also overwhelming exhaustion and despair. It is like they struggle against each other as well as me – they want everything but are unable to do anything. For example, they want me to move at the same time as I am sleeping. I consider making a compromise with them: I will try to be more physically active and see if I can channel out some aggressions that way. Perhaps something that involves hitting things – like kick boxing. I need to gather courage and money, though. The other part of it is about getting more rest without a bad conscience. I try to accept the despair, but not allow it to blow me off course. They will need to be handled simultaneously, or otherwise one section of them will become furious or unhappy due to the imbalance. That is my best take on it so far at least.

Our subsequent meetings increasingly took the form of Rose reporting to me about her discoveries since our last conversation. She felt that new ideas emerged with every meeting and that this was unlike anything she had tried before. She continued to explore having direct conversations with the voices to be able to identify and distinguish the different groups of voices and explore ways of speaking with them and how they respond. It was not clear that the whispering voices appreciated tea. Having offered them tea for a few weeks I told the voices that this was my impression and that I would therefore cease to serve this to them. I encouraged them to protest in case they disagreed, but they did not subsequently comment on this.

Rose also identified a fourth group of voices:

Fourth group of voices - The Lunatics

These voices seemed to attempt to terrorize Rose. They would say things like "All the people around you are actually aliens in disguise! You are the only real human being. You are alone!" She recalls back in school that they once told her that the image projector that was used in the classroom could pick up her thoughts and would project her thoughts onto the screen in the classroom for everyone to see her thoughts. Terrified, Rose responded to this by trying her best to control her every thought when she was in class, so that nothing bad would be projected to cause her humiliation. But The Lunatics would simultaneously fill her head with awful images.





The Lunatics also make predictions about events in Rose's life and have been so good at it that it made them seem very credible when she was younger. Rose concludes that it is this group of voices that have been responsible for those threats and requirements that made her appear when she was growing up to suffer from OCD. Rose says about them: If you do everything The Lunatics tell you to do, then you cannot function as a human being. She also deduces that the voice named Patricia that initially responded to us was in fact The Lunatics. 'Patricia' was their attempt to exploit the situation where we were trying to engage what was then only known to us as a collective of whispering voices. Rose deals with this group by building a mental wall to keep them out. They are like a virus trying to take over her brain. They seem impossible to reason with.

Killing Them with Kindness

In December 2018, we take some time to evaluate the explorations and the approach to the voices that Rose was in the process of developing.

Rose: I have developed this practice of speaking to them in a gentle and reasonable way. Even if they are very unpleasant. Like "killing them with kindness". Sometimes I also express my agreement with them with regards to some of the things they say, and that makes them calmer. It helps, but it is taxing. I imagine it will be taxing for a while yet. It gives me more room to consider the situations I am in, but it doesn't make every aspect of it calm down. The more I am in charge of my life, the less power they have. They thrive on uncertainty. When I allow myself to be angry over something, it gives me more confidence. I also picked up a quote from somewhere: "Don't put yourself on fire to warm others". I think I need to build up myself and gain confidence in myself.

Christoffer: The things you do to build up yourself, is that something that the voices point to and call it selfishness or egoism?

Rose: Yes, they do.

Rose has been developing a practice of responding whenever she becomes aware that she is listening to the self-hate and self-criticism focused messages from the voices. She responds with a mild, accepting, calming, contextualizing view of her circumstances and how she is feeling. She tries to do this consistently to train her brain to respond this way. She has a feeling that this is working. We have a break over Christmas and then meet again in January 2019. Rose now informs me that The Fighters Against Injustice are quite receptive to Rose's approach of 'killing them with kindness' and reasoning with them. Before Christmas the Angry and Despairing Ones and The Moralizers didn't respond to it, but they do now. She can calm them all down now. By getting a proper perspective on them by identifying them by their group and the concerns and intentions of that group in combination with 'killing them with kindness' has made her more able to deal with it. It is no longer chaotic like before. She can see who is talking, understands their concerns, and can see what it is they are reacting to in her life. We further evaluated the effects of Rose's new practice in mid-January:





- Christoffer: The situation with the voices now, is that a change that has happened?
- Rose: Yes. Now the voices are more like a television that is on in the background with a channel that I can identify, rather than the chaos it was before. I am able to separate the voices into groups now.
- Christoffer: Is this a positive development?
- Rose: Yes, it is. I have more energy now. I know what it is the voices are on about more quickly now. I can go to the root of it.
- Christoffer: Does this knowledge make you less receptive to what they are saying?
- Rose: Yes, I think that may be right. It is more like it is a 'foreign' group of voices. Further away from 'me'.
- Christoffer: How big a difference would you say this makes – modest, big, very big?
- Rose: It makes a pretty big difference. I am more able to think about what to do. Figure out how to live together. It gives me more energy to consider things that make a difference to my situation in a longer perspective. More room for engaging in things, like brushing up on maths and learning a new language like I have been doing these past couple of weeks. Before this, the voices took much of my cognitive fuel. I feel more focused. My mind is calmer. There has been more progress in two months than the two years I was in an intensive psychiatric program! Imagine having to go to work in a very stressful work environment so that getting up in the morning is a battle because you don't want to go there. But now it's like there is a calm work environment. People are sitting at their desks doing their thing and it's okay to be there.

Describing and Evaluating Rose's Practice with Voices

Beginning in January of 2019, David Epston and Rose initiated a correspondence with the aim of exploring and describing Rose's discoveries during her and Christoffer's collaboration. The following is a conversation between Rose and David that unfolded in parallel with her weekly meetings with Christoffer between late January 2019 until June 2019 in which they reflect on Rose's discoveries in November and December 2018 and their ongoing effects:

Engaging Respectfully

- David: Were the voices taken aback when you began to 'kill them with kindness'?
- Rose: They were. I have always thought of them as a burden I had to shake or fight off. When I approached them with respect and kindness, they got confused. However, the confusion only lasted for a while, but the first three groups have grown more receptive since then, because of this.





- David: Did they reject out of hand your tack of ‘killing them with kindness’ at first?
- Rose: Some more than others. The first group (Fighters Against Injustice), were open to reasoning, if it aligned somewhat with their views of things – so as soon as I respected and accepted them, they would also accept compromises. The other groups were more skeptical, especially the Angry and Despairing Ones, who didn’t want to listen to kindness, or “baby babble” as they’d refer to it. “How will this help anything?” was a recurring question, but the kindness was a good ice breaker, so we could start off a better partnership. I have tried compromising with all groups before, but back then I didn’t know that they were different groups. I think me trying to get to know them better, has helped a lot. They don’t have a personality like people, but they have motives, which was much easier to learn about when I was openminded and kind to them.
- David: Is it possible that they are gaining a small measure of respect for you?
- Rose: I’m not sure. However, I do know that we have a better partnership now. When the voices begin to speak, I know which group it is, so I can reassure, calm or reason with them faster, with their perspective of things in mind.
- David: Did you have to show them respect first, before they were willing to show you a small measure of respect?
- Rose: Oh, I definitely had to show them respect and kindness first. They don’t take the initiative for anything outside their own agenda, but they are willing to cooperate now, as they can see that cooperating helps getting their ideas out into reality. This applies to the Fighters Against Injustice and the Moralizers. The Angry and Despairing Ones are calmer just by being allowed to vent to me, knowing that I will consider how I can help them with my actions.
- David: Can you see your respect for them growing? Can you foresee their respect for you growing?
- Rose: My respect for them has grown and if the partnerships improve, I think my respect will become even greater. I can’t speak for the voices here, but I’d like to think they’ll also respect me as time goes on.
- David: Were you surprised as much as they were, by how you could break the ice and start negotiating a very different kind of partnership, than you had before?
- Rose: Oh boy, was I surprised! I was honestly skeptical, since my only experiences with them beforehand was tough negotiations, crying or flat out ignoring them. But it really worked, which I’m very happy about.





- David: A question to the voices: Do you consider Rose is showing you more respect now than in the past? What would they say in response?
- Rose: They have different responses, but I'll try to boil down what they said. The first three groups agree that they get more respect now. Their concerns are heard and though they think there's always room for improvement, it is more pleasant now than before. The fourth group don't care much for it and are just mocking me as response.
- David: Was it a matter of you going first in terms of showing them respect? Is that something we all should consider in order to break what might be considered a dead lock?
- Rose: Yes, I had to show the respect before hoping to get some from them. I think this is a rule that applies anywhere in life. Respect is not just given to people for free. We must earn it through our actions and consistency. I'd love to live in a world where respect and acceptance was a given, but it's not this world unfortunately. Which also applies to my brain and voices. So, if I want to see improvement in my life, I must be the first to take the steps towards a better me.
- David: In some ways, would you consider yourself as their translator from their language, to one you can share?
- Rose: This is an interesting question. I haven't given it much thought before, but I am indeed a translator of 'their language'. They communicate with words, emotions, pictures, videos and hallucinations in the body. Sometimes I know their answer through my gut feeling, since they don't always speak directly. They have also given me headaches before or even optical illusions, if they're very unhappy about something.
- David: Does this make you wonder as it does me, that if 'killing them with kindness' has made such an impact on at least the first three groups, that they have not known kindness in their pasts? That they have been cruelly treated by someone or another who should have known better?
- Rose: I think they have experienced injustice or cruelty from me in the past. I tried to push them away, which only led to suffering. I can see that now. The voices have been with me for a long time, but it's only recently I've been able to distinguish one from another. I think a lot of the conflict between me and the voices has been due to misunderstandings and a lack of knowledge. The voices perceived these misunderstandings as cruelty, and I honestly don't blame them! I was very adamant on keeping them away and they were often greeted with a "shut up" when they spoke to me.





- David: When you no longer told them to “shup up”, how did you respond differently? And how did the voices respond to your different response?
- Rose: Honestly, it’s only been since my conversations with Christoffer. Before that I just pushed them away and tried to treat them as static noise. They reacted a little different from each other, but they were mostly positive about the new approach! I think it is because they finally felt like I took their feedback to heart. The Lunatics were more indifferent about it though, and just continued to spew nonsense in the same uncompromising manner. They might even have been pissed that I was able to distinguish them from the other groups! I certainly have an advantage over them now, since I’m able to categorize who’s saying what.

Telling the Voices Apart

- David: Do you consider it has been critical to this adventure, that you have been able to tell them apart? If so, why do you think that was so?
- Rose: It really has. Before I didn’t know who said what and why. They all just felt malicious. Now that I’ve been able to get to know them better, I have a better idea of how to approach them. Although they’re not people, they’re different just like people are! There’s no ‘one size fit all’ approach in real life. So of course, there isn’t one in my head either. I can feel they appreciate being treated more as individual groups.
- David: I am wondering if you have ever lent them a proverbial hand in the past? Are there any indications they are touched by you? Would taming a wild kitten be similar in any way, shape or form?
- Rose: Yes and no. I have approached the Angry and Despairing Ones this way and it has helped them, even though they were skeptical at first. I’ve discovered that they’re in a constant fight or flight state, so they need patience and consistency. They’re skittish by nature and very easy to trigger. The two other groups (Fighters Against Injustice and the Moralizers), are not cut from the same stone, so they’re more sturdy. They need to be heard and understood, not comforted or tamed.

It has been a great help to just know who they are. They’re twenty-ish voices after all, and even though they don’t have personal names (they don’t want them, and it would be a hassle to remember), I know which group they belong to from the content of their words. For example, if I hear a voice say, “you shouldn’t speak with that person anymore; they’re vile and take advantage of you”. I know this is the Fighters Against Injustice, as the voice is talking about what they perceive as injustice. Back when I was unable to categorize them, all





words felt like a big tsunami of noise; it was incomprehensible. Now that I'm able to categorize the voices, it's easier for me to reason with them. An example could be this, taking the example I just mentioned as a starting point:

I hear the Fighters Against Injustice out and then say "I understand where you're coming from, as this friend has been sort of selfish lately, but she has a lot to deal with right now, so a discussion wouldn't benefit any of us right now. But I will remember what you said and if it continues, I will most definitely reconsider my stance on this." For the Fighters Against Injustice, this is enough for them to calm down. I'm experimenting with which approaches are most effective, taking the group into consideration. They are all very different.

David: Is this critical, that you can see what it is they are reacting to in your life? Previously was this obscured and were you confounded?

Rose: Yes, it's incredibly important for me to know why they say as they do. Otherwise I wouldn't be able to come up with constructive feedback.

David: Are matters such as this concerning relationships with your friends what some or all of the whispering voices bothered about before, even if they went about such concerns in very different ways?

Rose: Yes! They certainly have a very strong stance on this. Well, all expect group four, 'The Lunatics'. They don't care about anything besides mayhem and destruction. But the fact that I'm able to reason with three of the four groups is a great advantage for me. But I think it is an advantage for the three voice-groups as well. They're now able to function more as a council, whereas they were shunned away before these discoveries. Though they have extreme views, which isn't always in my best interest, I can see where they come from and even find something helpful in between the lines. I hope to refine and develop this method, so we can (hopefully) live peacefully together in the future.

What are the Whispering Voices?

Rose: I don't think they have previous lives or hosts, and they don't seem to imply that they do, when I ask them. They are strange, for sure, and feel foreign at times, but they are unlike my two previous voices who had whole identities like a human being, as well as previous lives. For me these whispering voices are more like an embodiment of emotions and/or memories, but I'm not entirely certain where they come from.

David: Is it possible that the Fighters Against Injustice had different experiences to lead them to not only recognize injustice, but as well to 'fight against it'? And





the Angry and Despairing Ones suffered grievously and without anything much to mitigate such suffering?

Rose: Yes, I think so! I perceive them as embodiments of emotions of some sort. They're not just emotions, because they think and express different kinds of emotions themselves, but I think they have roots in strong emotions and/or memories within me. So, the Fighters Against Injustice have most likely been born as a rebellious outlet from the pressure to do better that I've felt throughout my life. As well does the Angry and Despairing Ones come from pain, fear and suffering. But as I also mentioned, I'm not entirely sure if this is true. I honestly don't think they themselves even know where they come from. Knowing their roots gives me a tool to connect to them better. I know there are some things that happened in my childhood that the voices (especially the Fighters Against Injustice) have a hard time letting go. When I visit these memories, I can 're-feel' the emotions; emotions which they often feel themselves. It makes me understand their point of view a little better and it also gives me something concrete to talk about with them. They indirectly help me let go of some grudges, as I try to make them accept the past. We connect over something we all had to endure, so we can try to move past the traumas together... Well, at least I try to, but they can be pretty stubborn at times. It's a process though, and I think progress has been made.

Characterizing Rose's Practice

David: Would you mind writing me a story about one time when you started negotiating a very different kind of partnership with the voices?

Rose: Sure! It's nothing fancy, but I remember some time back I felt ignored and replaced by a close friend. It hurt me a lot and the voices reacted to that. The Fighters Against Injustice were essentially saying things such as "fuck that bitch! You've always been there for her, and then she got some new shiny toy-friends to replace you. You should give her a piece of you mind, and then dump her for good, when she needs you the most!"

The Moralizers overlapped and said at the same time "It's her own choice if she wants to leave you. Honestly it was most likely because you were too selfish. Let her pursue her own happiness and come back if she needs you. The greatest honor is to be of service to others at all times. Your grief is selfish and unnecessary".

The noise triggered the Angry and Despairing Ones, so they exploded with something along the lines of "Fuck this entire situation, you don't deserve friends but she also doesn't deserve you. You're better off without her but also





better off without life. Just kill that bitch and then kill yourself. Or just kill yourself. Just disappear! Give me peace, I don't care!"

This chain reaction happens whenever there is the shadow of conflict in my life. Sometimes it just happens, because one of the voices correct me on my behavior and then triggers the other groups of voices. For years it was just noise to me, until I understood they were groups, with different motives and trigger-points. I began to pick apart the chaos and listen to each message (they tend to repeat themselves in heated moments) and then address each one specifically.

I said firstly to the Fighters Against Injustice, "I understand your frustration, as I don't find this to be fair either. I have been there for her each time she was down and I honestly feel used. However, two wrongs don't make a right. I don't agree in doing her harm, just for being inattentive to me. I will however stop supporting her unconditionally and have a talk with her about this, when the right time comes".

I then continued on to the Moralizers and said "I agree that it's her choice to leave and I support her in finding her own happiness, even if that includes me not being there. However, I don't owe her my unconditional love as she is not my child. I will not stand on the sideline as a product waiting to be used only when the consumer pleases. I'm an individual on the same level as her and I will find an honorable purpose, but it's not being her 'happiness product'."

Lastly I turned to the Angry and Despairing Ones and told them, "I understand you're frustrated, sad and angry. I am too. But let's try one more time, just for you and me, and see if we can do good in the thing called life. I believe in you".

This was one of the first times I tried this tactic with the voices. They were surprised at being seen and understood. It quieted down immediately! As time has gone by, they sometimes argue their case back, but then we just have a little conversation about it. It's sometimes tiring, but it's better than screaming shut up at each other.

David: Do you mind me asking you how the Angry and Despairing Ones responded to such an honorable plea on your part and on behalf of them? Were they as touched as I was to hear about it?

Rose: They were calmer. That's the goal with these kinds of talks; to soothe them. I don't think they were "touched" as you and I can become, when receiving an inspirational speech. Now that I think about it, these speeches work a lot like a lullaby does for small children, who need to sleep.





Effects of Rose's New Practice

David: If you are now open-minded and kind to them, how would you describe your relationships with them before?

Rose: Imagine working as a manager at a larger company. You're in your office as soon as you wake up. Your employees or coworkers are already there, and oh boy! They're riled up, lining up in front of your office, screaming and kicking the door until it finally breaks, and they all come storming in. They scream their demands at the top of their lungs, but you don't know who wants what, why and how. You can kick them out, but they'll be back. This will only stop when you go to bed again and then you start over first thing in the morning the next day. It was chaotic, to say the least.

But this method has already given me more energy in my daily life. I have just begun learning maths, Chinese and Spanish, something I wouldn't think of ever being able to, looking back a few months.¹⁰

David: How much better is it than screaming at each other? 90% 50% 25% or what? Would you have ever imagined or dreamed or hoped that you might reach such an understanding conversation as quickly as you obviously did?

Rose: 110% better! No seriously. I've always had less energy than 'normal' people, because of my inner chaos, but my energy has been increased lately. Not as much as the average person, but enough for me to be able to go out and work for the things I want. Before my discoveries, I hadn't imagined things could be another way, so it was a pleasant surprise for sure!

David: How much significance would you allocate to this matter of "taking their feedback to heart" rather than treating them as "static noise"? Did you first have to distinguish the voices one from the other? Was this something like a fork in a road that has consequently been leading you in a very different direction than you had been heading?

Rose: I think me being able to distinguish them from each other played a large part in it. Before it was a mess of chatter, impossible to decipher. It was a big game-changer for me, to be able to address them "individually"; that way I could get to know them better and figure out the best way to address them. It has led me to have more energy to try out things I haven't had the energy to do before. As well as working with myself in a more constructive manner. I think the breakthrough with the voices has been a major step in the right direction for me. Because I'm able to tell them apart from each other but also myself. I

¹⁰ This statement was made by Rose in early 2019.





feel as if my own thoughts are easier to distinguish from the voices now. It makes it “my own” experience to live, if that makes sense. I’ve lived with self-hatred for as long as I can remember, and though it is not entirely gone, I feel the burden is lesser now. I hope to continue working on this, so I can feel even more content with myself with time.

- David: Has this getting to know one another, led to any developments that were entirely unexpected although appreciated at the same time by you?
- Rose: Yes! Besides making it easier to address problems and solve them, it has also made my head more cheerful in general. They have begun to show humor once in a while, which is a nice comic-relief.
- David: Was it a surprise that you could lullaby the Angry and Despairing Ones to being at peace with themselves?
- Rose: It was! But the more I think about it, the more it makes sense. They’re called angry and despairing for a reason... They feel very intense emotions and whether you’re an animal or a human, you want safety most in these pressed situations. There’s safety in calm and soothing words, and I’m glad I can help them feel less pressured.
- David: I am not surprised Rose, given such a remarkable improvement in how you have reconciled their grievances/concerns/distress or perhaps even suffering? Which of those words best describes what you experienced? Or perhaps you have a more apt word in your vocabulary?
- Rose: Depends on which group you refer to. The Fighters Against Injustice and The Moralizers are more interested in pushing their political agenda but can see reason, so for them it would be concerns/complaints. The Angry and Despairing Ones however, they match all the words you mentioned above. I’ve noticed how they’re different from the two other peaceful voices (and obviously the Lunatics); they don’t seek control. They’re more of an embodiment of suffering, grief, anger and other suppressed emotions. They cry out in desperation, so I honestly sympathize a lot with them, though they can be overwhelming at times.
- David: Is it a new thing to argue with the voices?
- Rose: I argue with all of them, but not often with the Angry and Despairing ones. It’s different from day to day how much the voices like to “bicker”. We mostly argue when my reasoning doesn’t make sense to them. They can seriously get heated about how I dress myself, when I brush my teeth and other trivial stuff. When it is as petty as that, I can’t help but throw some snarky remarks at





them. Like the other day I said this to The Moralizers, who grew impatient with me; “Oh, you’d like me to get done with brushing my teeth? Well, last time I checked you don’t have teeth yourself, so let the actual real human being do the hygiene routine, thank you.” This was followed by splutters of “how dare you!”, but then I try to talk rationally to them; “I’d love to hear your input in matters that have more significance, but as of now there aren’t any. So, I’d recommend saving your energy, as well as mine, for that time”. Usually it will be enough, but other times it ends with a more polite “shut up, we’re done” from my part, because they won’t stop throwing a fit. It is pretty new the way I talk with them now (4-3 months), and it keeps developing.

David: In some ways, are they (Fighters Against Injustice, the Moralizers and the Angry and Despairing Ones) returning the favor of “lullabying” and soothing you in a similar fashion to how you have been so considerate of them?

Rose: Nope. I wouldn’t say it’s similar and I don’t think they’re “returning any favors”. But we have a mutual agreement; they understand to be heard, they have to hear me as well. So, when I’m overwhelmed, they know I’m not in a place where I can take their feedback to heart. Sometimes, we can agree to take up a discussion at a later time, if my head and body is not able to think/act rationally right now. It’s not always though, and some days they’re grumpier than others.

David: Is it possible for the voices to feel reassured that you are finding your way to a meaningful life of some sort or other? And is that what might provide some peace of mind for them?

Rose: I think they’re more reassured in being able to survive with me and knowing they will have an influence in the life to come. Especially the Fighters Against Injustice and Moralizers. The Angry and Despairing Ones want to find peace, which I’ll try to help them with, if I get the chance. I just don’t know how to do that. They’re not like the Lunatics, who I need to push away. They’re vulnerable, so being a brute won’t solve a thing.

Rose on Co-research and Psychiatry

David: Am I right in thinking that this co-research conversation is restricted to discussing what has come of your conversations with Christoffer over the past four months or so? If so, this is of particular relevance given Christoffer and I are trying to figure out along with our co-researchers how to develop a rather unique practice?

Rose: I wouldn’t say our co-research is restricted to discussing only the last 5-ish months. I had developed some ways to handle my mental state before meeting





Christoffer, but I won't lie; the talks over the last couple of months have been very helpful. I've never met a psychologist who treated me and my symptoms so casually and respectfully, which was a nice change! I've been a patient to psychiatry on and off since I was 11 years old, and in that time, I had only met psychologists and psychiatrists that either pitied me or grew angry with me. Neither was very helpful. I'm not 100% sure what principles your unique practice is based on, but I think it's promising!

David: How important has it been to you considering that Christoffer "has been very helpful" that he has received your symptoms "so casually and respectfully"?

Rose: It's been very important! As I said before, I've never met a psychologist or psychiatrist that has treated me as an equal. I don't like being treated as less than others (which I honestly think very few do) so my reaction to their treatment of me, was to shut down and give snarky remarks. I know that it has not been the best way to handle things, but it was my way to protect myself in a system, where I felt like I was left out and "not enough". My experience is that many people feel like that in psychiatry due to the treatment given by psychologists and psychiatrists, which is far more damaging than many of them know. Mental illness is not equal to mental retardation or lower social class. I won't give up my self-worth to get help, which I thankfully don't have to anymore.

David: If you were to make a wild guess why this practice is "promising", what might your guess be?

Rose: I hope I don't repeat myself now, but it's a mixture of respect and genuine interest. I've been treated like a number in the system for years. A number that just needed to be "fixed" so it could "get out of the system" and make statistics look nicer. The amount of times you're told as a schizophrenic that "but what you see/feel/hear is not real" is insane! Christoffer and I talked about how he had many patients who have been told that by professionals. It's so disrespectful and invalidates part of our reality, because yes; I know it's not "real", but it still feels very real to me! I can't just flip a switch and then all voices and hallucinations are gone, if I could, I'd have done it.

The practice you guys are developing is much more inclusive of the person suffering. I've been treated as an individual with valuable information, whereas before I was "just a number". There's always an open mind to things during our conversations. It doesn't matter how you picture your voices/hallucinations, if it's helpful. The lack of "boxes" and "procedures" is so refreshing. It makes me feel like a human again.





- David: I appreciate your term “game changer” with regards to telling voices apart. This is something Christoffer and I are considering, thanks to you, very carefully e.g. distinguishing one from the other. Would you encourage us in such a co-researching direction?
- Rose: For sure! If people have multiple voices, they’re more than likely to be different from one another. I just think it’s important not to create too many “boxes”, because I think that there’s as many different voices as there are people having them. It would be useful to have some sort of baseline or some stereotypes to use as a starting point, but I’d just hate to see voices become “numbers”, as many patients are in the system right now. I guess what I’m trying to say is; yes! If it’s thought through, which I have a feeling it will be, when it’s all of you working on it.
- David: What did Christoffer do/say/act that you understood to be out of respect for you?
- Rose: He talked to me casually, you know, like a human being. But it was more about what he didn’t. He didn’t throw on a sad pity-face or give off a demeanor of superiority. He didn’t try to be a “know-it-all”, who “listened” just to give basic advice. He didn’t get mad, when I began on a longer speech about an issue. All in all, he didn’t act like he knew better and still doesn’t. I appreciate that.
- David: What did Christoffer do/say/act that you understood indicated his curiosity about your particularity and uniqueness as the one and only Rose?
- Rose: He has always asked questions openly, which I appreciate. I’d rather have a person ask me bold questions than walk on eggshells around me. I remember our first conversation, where he asked if he could speak directly to my voices. For the first time in many years, I was surprised about something a professional in psychiatry said. I felt as if I wasn’t that crazy after all, which overwhelmed me and made me cry for a bit. Before this, I’ve been called irresponsible for not taking medicine, unrealistic for wanting to go to school and immature for being unsatisfied with my treatment in psychiatry. All coming from psychologists and psychiatrists in the system. Now I’m being treated as a decent human being and a person with valuable knowledge. As someone who isn’t “out-of-touch with reality” or a “poor soul”. Though I don’t put my worth in what others think of me, it’s nice to feel accepted and respected.
- David: Would you say as well that he seemed possessed of an urgent curiosity? That is how some have described co-researching... that it requires an urgent curiosity on behalf of the outsider co-researcher.





- Rose: I'm not sure to which extent the curiosity goes, but there sure is curiosity! I think you're right in curiosity being important when helping others or doing co-research, as you say. You feel more compelled to speak up, when the other party seems genuinely interested in your knowledge, asks questions and listens without judging.
- David: When you say he always asked questions "openly", what exactly do you mean by "openly"? Would you say other professionals asked them "closed" or "foreclosed"?
- Rose: He asks questions without a motive behind them. It's all about learning and discovering, which I'm thankful for. Most professionals I've talked with before, have always asked questions to paint a picture or with an ulterior motive. I felt as if I was constantly evaluated, and often far too few questions were asked before they made a conclusion! It was so frustrating... They treated me as if I already had all the answers, but why would I talk with them if I did? Sometimes it was trick questions to make me seem in a better position than I was. The amounts of times I've been told, "You have it so much easier than others", because I could hold a steady sleep schedule and eat lunch, is infuriating. I felt like I had to slit my wrists or do something of the same caliber to be taken seriously. Thankfully I didn't act on it, but the guilt was overwhelming for me; I felt like I didn't have a right to feel bad, since so many "had it far worse", and since I couldn't stop feeling bad, I felt my right to live was far less than others. Now I know the truth is more nuanced than that, but I still have to shake out the feeling of guilt from time to time, especially when I'm down.

Rose and the Voices September 2020

In September 2020, Christoffer posed a few questions to Rose concerning her conclusions and impressions of her interactions and discoveries now close to two years after our collaboration began:

- Christoffer: Have there been any further developments in your relationship with the voices that you would like to add? And are there any longer-term effects of your respectful engagement with the voices have you observed?
- Rose: A lot has happened, but much of it is small nuances that have helped me to understand the voices even better. It would take forever to list every single detail, but here's the gist of it:
- Since I made the descriptions to David given above, I have distanced myself from the term "killing them with kindness", as it is inaccurate to my current daily practice. There is no murdering going on, after all! However, I still do rely on the "kindness" part of that, along with respect. It truly was and still is the





icebreaker to get to know the voices better (at least the first three groups; Fighters Against Injustice, the Moralizers and the Angry and Despairing Ones). Our current relationship is now based on mutual respect, and it has been quite peaceful lately, in terms of arguments and heated debates. I also think this is due to the voices trusting me more now. They know I am not out to get them or want to make them disappear anymore, as I'm no longer frustrated by their existence nor their input. We may still not agree all the time, but from my perspective that is just a part of hearing voices. I actually appreciate them more now, as they often do have valuable input. They are also less stubborn in expressing views in some ways, as they now know they can voice their opinions calmly and still be heard, instead of us shouting at one another.

The Angry and Despairing Ones are very calm lately, as I have found out more about my past and suppressed traumas. I really do believe they're an embodiment of my suffering and therefore are more connected to my existence. The Fighters Against Injustice and the Moralizers groups are more like beings of their own, in the sense of not being directly connected to my life. I now believe they've come to me, because I've felt lost for so much of my life and needed guidance.

I also know that the hurtful input the Moralizers and Fighters Against Injustice gave me back in the day, was due to them being hurt by me as well. They fear dying or not existing, like most other conscious living beings in the world, and me wishing them gone from my life just amplified those feelings and made them want to lash back at me. Now that I listen to them with respect, honesty and acceptance, they are much more in favor of doing the same. It's given me much more peace in my day to day life!

The lunatics, however, are a whole other story! I still don't know how to work with them, as they really embody craziness, unpredictability and hurt. Since they didn't respond to kindness and respect, I've tried mockery instead, which includes me referring to them as "the brats" instead of "the lunatics". Whenever they come up with conspiracies, I'll just laugh and belittle them. This is very much the opposite of what helped the other groups, but it seems to hurt "the brats's" ego a little. I do not know if this is the solution though, or if there even is one!

However, the brats have been easier to tackle since the other groups were more "on my side". They really don't want anything to do with "the brats", as they know it doesn't help their own causes.

Christoffer: What would you particularly like to call attention to among the discoveries that you have made regarding voices over the past couple of years?





Rose: Accepting the voices as real, living and valid has been the greatest game changer for my mental wellbeing as well as theirs (with the exception of the brats). It has not been easy, as I've always been told by those around me, that the voices were "just in your head", "not real" and "not healthy". I've been ashamed of experiencing what I have and prayed for just a small grain of normalcy. Why couldn't I just stop experiencing voices? What do I do wrong to continue to hallucinate? Why can't I just stop being like me? Many questions like those repeated in my head over the years, and though I have not shaken off the shame completely, I am in a much better place, with my new attitude towards the voices and me.

I will not continue to feel ashamed about existing and experiencing what I do, as it is completely beyond my control and just part of being me. I will not let others discredit my value as a human being, just because I function differently than most. I will not keep on spending what little time I have on this planet, hating myself for what others might think of me.

Like me, I know now that the voices have been hurting because they've felt discredited throughout most of my life by everyone around, including me. It has been hard to acknowledge how much pain I have inflicted on them over the years, but it is crucial to do so, to further better our relationship to each other.

I can imagine my way of referring to the voices as independent and real might seem worrying or strange to some and while I do understand that line of reasoning, I'd like to emphasize how much better we all are doing with this new-found philosophy. Yes, it is true the voices can only be heard by me in my head, but that doesn't mean they're not real in some way! I experience them after all, and I am very much a real human being. But most importantly; this attitude works for me and the voices. Believing in them, makes them believe in me, which causes much less suffering for all concerned.

Christoffer: How are the voices doing?

Rose: The Fighters Against Injustice, the Moralizers and Angry and Despairing Ones are all doing much better. They just replied "good" to the question. The brats do not like my newfound strength, but that is to be expected.

Christoffer: Do you have any further messages you want to give to readers of this paper, both professionals and people who are able to hear voices?

Rose: To those who also hear voices; Know you are not alone. I understand it is often excruciatingly difficult to live with hearing voices, but I urge you not to give up hope. You are not a defective human being for experiencing what you do and





don't let anyone make you believe that. My best advice is to try to understand your voices. Try to see past the cruel remarks and death threats, to see if there is a motive or emotions that cause that need for such destructive behavior. Ask the voices how they feel, or even why they feel! Reassure them, that you just wish to have a better relationship with them. Don't be afraid to experiment and find methods that work for you! It does not matter how weird the methods may be, if it helps you out.

To professionals: I know you have dedicated a large part of your life to this field of work and to help those suffering. I applaud you for that, as it is crucial, we have people who do so.

I also understand that most practicing psychologists and psychiatrists meet many individuals during the course of a day, and it would be near-impossible to be invested in everyone's story. It is a lot of emotional suffering to listen to and something most would be overwhelmed having to do.

Much of the knowledge handed through education comes from books written by other professionals, who have observed people like me. I do not mean to discredit your knowledge or that of the authors of those books, but know that not everything is figured out yet, especially when it comes to mental health.

When talking to someone hearing voices, my best advice is to be curious. In fact, the best you can do, is to be honest about your lack of knowledge on this subject, as you haven't experienced it yourself. Let the person who hears voices tell you about their experience and listen to their input, as they hold the knowledge for the next generation of books to be written on such subjects.

I do not have any guaranteed solution, as I can only speak through my own experiences and knowledge, but I do believe most voices who act cruelly, do so, because they feel their entire existence is invalidated. Telling a person who hears voices, that they're "just in their head" doesn't really reassure or help them much, as such counsel doesn't make the voices disappear and makes the individual feel more alienated. In the case of my own voices, it even made it worse for the voices to be told that, because it invalidated them to such a degree that they didn't even feel seen by me; the one who hears them.

I also do not know how to "make voices disappear", even though I've had voices disappear on me. I think it's something they have to choose for themselves, so I wouldn't recommend having that as your main motive, when engaging with the voices. Again, there is no known cure for this, so being open-minded, curious and kind is the best way to gain more knowledge and most importantly; helping the one in need.





Christoffer's Reflections on Rose's Discoveries

A number of things particularly stand out to me from witnessing Rose's explorations and discoveries regarding the formerly whispering voices as well as her experiences from co-existing with various voices throughout her life:

Telling voices apart proved at very important element of the approach Rose developed. The voices had previously seemed like a somewhat undifferentiated crowd but proved to consist of a number of groups of voices with distinct characteristics, perspectives and agendas. To engage respectfully with these voices, the individual perspectives of each group had to be taken into account.

In addition to differences between them, these groups of voices seemed quite different in kind to the two previous voices, the masculine and the feminine one. This leads me to wonder if we might speak of different species of voices. Some voices seem to be quite human whereas others have a narrower perspective on life, tied to a moral agenda or with particular emotions. And some voices seem inhuman. Should we consider voices in terms of different degrees of human-likeness and degrees of individuality? How might such differences between kinds or species of voices play a role in how best to establish acceptable relationships with them?

The essential role of enacting respectful engagement seems to be very much in accordance with the discoveries made by Max and Alice, whose voices also appreciated being treated with respect and having their perspective acknowledged by the person hearing them as well as by me. One element of this respect may be to acknowledge voices as persons in the sense that they have a perspective of their own, as well as feelings and agency.

I also took note of how Rose's voices communicated beyond speaking in the ordinary sense. They are indeed able to make themselves heard in the literal sense, but they also communicate through bodily sensations, moods and mental images. In addition, it seems apparent that voices also have the capacity to listen.

In common with Rose and David, it is my hope that these explorations and discoveries may serve as inspiration and as an aid for others who are engaged, or might want to engage, in getting to know what and who voices are, and in exploring paths to peaceful co-existence.

Acknowledgements

Christoffer would like to thank Rose for generously sharing her knowledges and discoveries regarding voices with Christoffer, David Epston as well as the readers of this paper. He is continuously impressed with her resolve with regards to finding a way forward for herself and engaging with such respect and kindness with voices with whom she had previously been at war. He would also like to thank her for the work she has put into creating this paper with him and David, hoping that her knowledge may assist others.





Christoffer would also like to thank those voices who have been willing to engage with him and to listen to Rose and engage with her in finding a new way to co-exist.

Consent

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

References

Haugaard, C. (2019): The road to co-research. In *Journal of Narrative Family Therapy*, 2019, Release 3, pp. 55-59.

Haugaard, C., Alice & Epston, D. (2021): Demonstrating kindness to magical beings: Alice's Story. In *Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy*, 2021, Release 2.

Haugaard, C. & Max (2019): Respectful letters for aggressive voices: Max's story. In *Journal of Narrative Family Therapy*, 2019, Release 3, pp. 19-36.

Haugaard, C. & Victoria (2019): Sitting through it with the voices: Victoria's story. In *Journal of Narrative Family Therapy*, 2019, Release 3, pp. 37-54.

