



Trish and a Frustrated Voice

Christoffer Haugaard and Trish

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. The purpose of the paper is to share Trish's knowledges and discoveries concerning the ability to hear a voice 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 Epston.¹

Introduction

Trish was referred to Aalborg Psychiatric Hospital in February 2019, having previously received psychiatric treatment in relation to a diagnosis of schizophrenia in another region of Denmark. At the time, she was approaching her mid-twenties. She had been prescribed antipsychotic medication since her teens, which successfully suppressed those visual hallucinations she had experienced since childhood. The voice that she had also been able to hear since childhood, persisted despite medication, however. In addition, she was also prescribed an antidepressant. Trish's childhood and teenage years contained much pain and difficulty and there is no doubt that this is the reason for her experiencing great challenges in her adult life with regards to overwhelming negative emotions, being in a chronic state of alarm, disillusionment and distrust of other people and deep feelings of abandonment and unworthiness. Trish and I met just a couple of weeks after her referral, as the psychiatric team had suggested participation in group therapy might be helpful for her. Specifically, a group that I was running. Therefore, I met with Trish to describe this group to her and discuss with her if she might like to participate in it.

At this meeting, Trish explained to me that in fact she was feeling very bad. Despite antipsychotic medication, she could still hear a voice speaking to her. It was now telling her that she was a bad person and that it would be better if she died. It pushed her towards suicide, which was difficult for Trish to resist. She connected this turn for the worse to a recent attempt to take an education and the stress and pressure that this had subjected her to. She had stopped the education, but this state of stress persisted. She described to me how her head

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





was bursting with thoughts and she was overcome by powerful negative emotions. Attempting to help me to appreciate how this was for her, she asked me to imagine numerous criss-crossing highways like they have in big American cities, and every highway is packed with 40,000 cars driving at high speed, and every car is full of people. Every person inside a car is thought, Trish told me. That was how it was for her to experience her own mind. Picking out any specific thought was impossible for her. It was simply a constant, loud buzzing and flashing of images threatening to burst her head open. Trish had the feeling that she was on her way to requiring psychiatric hospitalization, although she would prefer to avoid such an outcome.

It quickly became clear to me that participation in group therapy was not the right course of action with the state that Trish was in, and Trish agreed. Instead, I asked what she thought might be beneficial at this time, and she suggested individual conversations with a therapist and perhaps increasing the dose of her medication. The psychiatric team in charge of treatment decided to pursue individual therapy and so Trish and I went on to having weekly conversations. During these conversations, we explored the possible historical background for this state of suffering and strove to recover known and find new ways of dealing with this. This part of our collaboration will not be the center of attention in this account, however. What Trish and I would specifically like to tell you about, is what we later discovered about the voice that had spoken to her since childhood. Therefore, we will only share a few essential pieces of information regarding the first four months of our collaboration:

Being with Horses and the Being of Horses

Trish loves horses. If I am any judge, horses love Trish too. She grew up with horses around, and for a period of her childhood, her family lived in an area that is something of a nature park in Denmark. I have visited the area myself on a number of occasions in more recent years. There are rolling landscapes, open meadows and long, winding coastlines. As a child, Trish would roam these open spaces of tall grasses, trees and hills on horseback. This was her escape from the house and the pain. She would ride without a saddle, go to the shore and scream her pain at the top of her lungs out to the waters. She would meet and play with invisible people that she could literally see. These invisible people that would later be categorized as hallucinations and the horses was how she survived. She would be away for hours on end and no one minded.

During our conversations, Trish described to me the significance of horses to this day. At the time, Trish lived with some family as she found herself unable to live alone. Luckily, this place was in the countryside and had horses. When Trish was in the house, she would feel depressed, anxious and agitated. Every evening, powerful feelings of abandonment would wash over her like a great, dark wave and the tens of thousands of thoughts in her head would threaten to split her skull. Then the voice would feed her already present sense of her own unworthiness. This would reduce her to weeping in despair in the fetal position on the floor of her room. But when she was outside and interacting with the horses, it was different. Whereas Trish usually found humans to be inconsiderate, untruthful, preoccupied with their own dominance and even manipulative, she found horses to be completely honest and transparent. They would





respond exactly to what state she was in and their responses would be equally direct. The horse does not worry like humans. The horse is right here and right now. If you are kind, the horse will appreciate it. If you are calm, the horse will feel safe. Trish knew the art of what is sometimes called horse whispering. She can read the horse's language – a subtle language of gestures, body movements, facial expressions and blinking that most humans ignore and rarely even realize exists. She used these skills in combination with her deep love for these beings to help traumatized horses. Horses that otherwise rejected human companionship and were regarded as 'wild'.

With the horses, Trish felt connected and respected. A connection between two beings that was subtle, sensitive, honest and interdependent. It is without hidden agendas, expectations or pressures. It required her to be calm, but in the presence of the horses, she was miraculously able to in complete contrast to every other context of her life. With the horses, she was able to feel and act exactly the way the horse needed her to. Upon having listened to Trish's descriptions of this inter-species communication, I shared with her my sense that if such communication was more widespread among humans, then the world may well be a better place. Trish rarely saw this in humans, though, and often got the impression that the value of such ways of being was usually not acknowledged or even realized in the human world. Trish rejects notions of human dominance in relation to horses, and consequently rides without a saddle or bridle and acts in accordance with the wishes of the horse, such as respecting decisions by the horse about which way to go.²

Unlike her thoughts and the messages of the voice, Trish felt like her existence mattered to the horses around her: "The horses pretty much keep me alive".

A Fucking Revelation

Something amazing happened in June 2019. Trish came to see me as usual, but she felt overwhelmed and unable to resist the idea of ending her own life. The voice was telling her she should kill herself because of her uselessness and unworthiness, and Trish did not feel able to keep herself safe from this, nor did she consider this state to be within the capacity of people around her to deal with. She knew from experience that when she has been in this state in the past, it had invariably led to hospitalization. Becoming very concerned for her physical safety, I saw no other option than referring her to the psychiatric emergency room to make sure she was looked after and kept safe. I announced that she would be arriving there soon and sent her on her way. She did go there and was registered as having arrived for assessment. To my surprise I came to work on the next day to see an email from the emergency room stating that their assessment of Trish had not been possible as she had left the building. I called her immediately, but she didn't pick up the phone. A few days and several failed attempts at calling her on the phone later, she showed up for her appointment with me, walking into my office like

² For anyone who is interested in such ways of being with horses, Trish suggests the approach of Danish trainer Ute Lehmann.





a ray of sunshine. I was somewhat baffled and eager to hear what had transpired since our last conversation, and much to my surprise, Trish appeared to be unusually relaxed and happy.

She did go to the emergency room and waited there for her turn. But she felt uncomfortable with the people around her. In fact, she couldn't stand being there. Then she was visited by a sudden shift in her mental state:

"But I don't really want to die!? I have the horses. I am not in the same place anymore. I have to fight! There are no other options. I don't want to bother with thinking about suicide anymore".

She felt a surge of defiance, got up and walked right out of the emergency room without notifying anyone and just went home. She had been busy around the horses in the following days, which is why she didn't pick up the phone. Asking her about what she thinks it was that happened, she said

"It is mystifying. It is like a piece in the puzzle has fallen into place. A feeling of 'oh yes! This is what makes sense'. It is like I don't have a choice about it. Killing myself is just off the table for good. This a big change. Like having a fighting spirit. But what am I supposed to do now?! I need to figure out how to tackle this. I have realized that when I start feeling bad, I get this anxiety about getting worse, and that makes it worse. Now my brain has realized that feeling bad does not mean suicide. I have survived it before and always get better after a while".

Asking her what name she would give to this realization, she resolutely named it 'A Fucking Revelation!'. After this day, suicide has indeed been off the table, and she was now able to withstand those overwhelming feelings and thoughts that sent her that way before up until this point.

Getting Acquainted with the Voice

During our conversations from February 2019 until Trish's revelation in June as well as in the following couple of months, Trish told me a little about the voice that she could hear. The voice is female and first made herself known to Trish when she was very young. She recalls that this initial appearance happened in the context of her being the victim of sexual assault. At the time of our conversations, the voice was degrading and aggressive towards her, telling her she has no worth and the world would be better off without her. In the wake of her revelation and improved ability to withstand powerful emotions, we embarked on some further explorations concerning the voice.

In mid-to-late August 2019 we were appreciating how her values and her contribution to the world in the context of her relationships with horses have been demeaned in her life. Including how the voice was promoting this degrading of her worth and values. I speculated about how her contributions to the world may need shelter, confirmation and nourishment to withstand indifference and even hostility, and mentioned how reading was important to maintaining non-mainstream perspectives on psychology and psychiatry in my own life. This spurred Trish to





inquire about these non-mainstream ideas I alluded to. I answered by sharing with her, my interest in the ways in which the distinctions and related practices around normality and pathology may be problematic and how some experiences considered an error in human functioning in our culture may appear similar to experiences and understandings that are accepted and even valued in other cultures. Such as being able to hear unseen persons. I provided her with a rough sketch of the co-research practice I was working on with a number of people about documenting insider knowledges about voices³ and how we have found several examples of voices appreciating being engaged respectfully as persons and given respect for their intentions. I sketched out some of the main types of voices we seem to have discovered, especially those that are highly demeaning and aggressive but seem to understand themselves as helpers and who appreciate being respected. How they calm down and, in a few cases, have disappeared. How being under attack and at the same time unable to express anger or defend yourself seems to call these voice-persons or alternatively give birth to them somehow.⁴

Trish: My voice is like that. It absolutely fits! It came to help me. I had so much anger and desire to defend myself, but I could not. That was when I started hearing it.

She had been trying to suppress this voice ever since, but upon hearing this, she was very interested in the idea that we might calm the voice down or even teach her to be more friendly and be able to accept the presence of the voice. I asked if the voice was listening in and had some comments, to which Trish replied that the voice wasn't saying anything, but that she knew that she knows everything Trish herself knows or feels, and so the voice would know what we have said. I expressed my hope that we might assist this voice to really become the helper that we suspected it always wanted to be.

Christoffer: From explorations with others, I wonder if some voices may be related to exiled emotions, particularly anger/aggression and if aggressively protective voices may hit a wall of resistance from their host human due to the violent nature of their impulses and then end up boiling in their own fury and lash out at people?⁵

Trish: How could I go about giving the voice something she might appreciate in an acceptable way?

Christoffer: Martial art, perhaps? Such as boxing. That is a socially acceptable form of aggressive expression.

³ See Haugaard, 2019.

⁴ See for example Haugaard & Max (2019), Haugaard & Victoria (2019), Haugaard, Alice & Epston (2021), Haugaard, Rose & Epston (2021).

⁵ For this notion about aggressive voices with good intentions, see Haugaard & Max (2019) and Haugaard, Alice & Epston (2021). For considerations about the relation between voices and emotions, see Haugaard, Rose & Epston (2021).





At this her face lit up!

Trish: It is uncanny that you say that. Just this week I have been thinking about boxing! I have been planning to start fitness boxing.

Christoffer: That is very interesting. If you do, might you dedicate the boxing to the voice as a kind of gift to her?

Then she told me about how she has avoided one of her usual breakdowns just recently. She was overcome by a million thoughts and a depressed mood and the voice came and started pocking at her. But it was like her perspective was altered from the usual. Instead of just hearing the voice's actual words, she paid more attention to the message. Like she translated it. The message she got by this means was "you need to make room for your feelings now". Trish then said to herself that that was okay and that it was all okay and then she allowed herself to weep for a while. Then she went for a walk with her dog and felt relieved. This was highly unusual! This situation would normally lead to complete breakdown and hours of despair and crying on the floor, flooded with thoughts of suicide. But this time it was remarkably easy to get through it.

She also told me that all her adult life she has fled from wherever she was after 3 or 4 months. But now she had actually lived in the same place, kept doing the same things and stuck to treatment for over 6 months! I said "it seems to me like you're on a roll, Trish! You had that 'fucking revelation' before the summer holidays and now this!" She agreed.

I then gave her the paper about how Max's voices calmed down from being acknowledged as his protectors, hoping she might find some ideas to pursue. Trish told me she didn't expect to be able to read it, however. For several years now, she had been unable to concentrate her thoughts in order to be able to read anything at all.

Getting through to the Voice

On September tenth, 2019, Trish came in for our usual meeting. Already when we were walking to my office together, I noticed she had a heavy look, and when I said she had a look of heaviness about her after we had entered my office, she burst into tears. It was a shitty day, she told me. She didn't know why, but she just woke up to a day that was awful, her head full of thoughts of how she can never count on anyone to be there for her, sick of being dependent on others and a powerful rage against her parents and images of running amok, smashing everything around her. The voice was telling her that everything is her own fault and that people behave the way they do because of her, blaming her for not doing better. She could hear the lines from Eminem's song My Darling⁶ on repeat in her head. I immediately got an image of her as the little girl she once was, who had to take care of herself and her mom who

⁶ Trish explains that both the lyrics and the music video of this song is very resonant for her in relation to this state of mind she is describing here. We want to caution readers that it is a powerful video that some readers of this paper may find very emotionally disturbing.





lay in bed in depression while her dad was never around. I told Trish of this image and how I have learned from a number of people how children under such circumstances will blame themselves and strive to be better, even though nothing is really their fault.

Christoffer: I imagine this rage was adequate but impossible to create a space to express.

Trish: Yes. I have this rage that I keep behind a façade.

Christoffer: I suspect that the voice may be a helper, but that she takes a ‘tough love’ approach where what you would need is perhaps a warm embrace and the space to cry. I wonder if I might be able to do what you did a few weeks back, and be able to see the voice’s message behind its hard words?

Trish: Taking a positive view of the voice requires a lot of energy from me that I rarely have. Mostly I just want to kill her.

This made me think of Max and how we had made a letter for him.⁷ I told Trish and wondered if her voice and Max’s voices might have very much in common. Might the voice appreciate hearing the words I used to address Max’s voices? Trish said that was okay, so I made some on the spot changes to the letter to Max’s voices to fit with Trish and then read it aloud to the voice, looking not at Trish but simply into the space before us:

“Thank you, Voice, for striving to protect and help Trish under the painful circumstances under which she has lived. You have contributed to Trish’s survival in a world that may have required a certain insensitivity, cool resolve and perhaps sometimes for Trish to be shut down. I see the good intentions and the care for Trish behind your actions. Thank you for this contribution to her survival. At the same time, I would like to tell you that her life is now unfolding in a different reality. I hope that you will persist in striving to protect her in this new reality. I would like to bring to your awareness that there is a need for you to do that in a way that makes a good fit with her present life. I would like to encourage you to notice the ways in which her life has changed, and take note that Trish has something in her life now that is very dear to her and important for her to keep – such as her special relationship with the horses which is healing for both herself as well as the horses. This is something wonderful! I would greatly appreciate it if you would contribute to safeguarding the life Trish has now. I have no doubt that she would be grateful to you for such help.

Thank you for your attention. Christoffer.”

Trish sat in the other chair, her long flowing hair covering her back and in tears looking like one in despair, crouched over her legs, her face in her hands. As I read, she straightened up and just sat still, her back straight and her eyes looking out in front of her. Suddenly still. After having finished, I waited a while. She staid still like that. I asked if the voice was responding to my

⁷ Haugaard & Max, 2019.





words. She then moved to say that indeed the voice was responding and seemed to appreciate it. But then Trish began to move in discomfort again, saying that her head was overflowing now.

Christoffer: Voice that speaks to Trish, I appreciate that you are responding to us and attending to what I said. But you're going too fast! Please slow down so that Trish can grasp what you are telling her.

The voice responded and slowed down, Trish informed me. She became calm.

Trish: The voice appreciates the words. She says that she is only trying to help me. I recall being on good terms with the voice earlier in my life. It really was a friend. I don't know what went wrong from there. She really was there to help me, and she did.

Christoffer: Perhaps we need to find out how best to help you now? I invite the voice to participate in this. We may be able to find out what the voice can do to bring her intentions and her influence on you into accord with each other.

Trish nodded. Then she looked clearly out of energy, which she confirmed was the case. And the voice too, which was now calm and still. Trish said she felt better now and looked it too. I then rewrote the letter to Max's voices to fit how I read it and gave her a print of it, and because I knew Trish couldn't concentrate in order to read, we made a recording of me reading the letter once again on her phone so that she could always listen again.

From Friendship to Conflict

Trish and I met again two weeks later. She said she had been feeling better since last we met. She moves between feeling alright and feeling moderately bad. She had not been dropping lower than that, which was a very significant positive change. That meant it had been manageable. She had even been home alone for several hours which she was otherwise incapable of. The voice had been in the background and rather subtle except on a few occasions where she had tried to force Trish to rest. We now understood that this was the meaning of what she was doing. She was trying to force Trish to rest in an attempt to help her. But in these past two weeks, the voice had done that in a significantly milder way than normal. Like she was more considerate. Trish now understood the point of it and took some time to rest and allow her feelings to be expressed. This way she got through it quite quickly in sharp contrast to suffering a complete breakdown.

Christoffer: Did our last conversation make an impression on the voice?

Trish: It certainly did. The voice was acknowledged and respected, and I gather this calms her down. I haven't had the need to hear the message from you to the voice, although it has given me a sense of safety to have it at hand. But it hasn't been necessary. I really feel that things are on the move for me. Like





things are changing in my brain. It is really strange. It's like you are doing some kind of voodoo on me!

Christoffer: This is quite remarkable! By the way, I have really been wondering about something you just mentioned in passing last time. You said you remember being friends with the voice at one time, but then it went wrong, and you don't know what happened. I was really intrigued by that.

Trish gave me a condensed account of her history of relations with the voice. She was indeed friends with the voice and she helped her during her childhood. And not only the voice. She could also see people that others couldn't see. During a period of her childhood she was woken up every night around two o'clock by an old lady who asked her what the time was. Then Trish would say it was two o'clock and the old lady would say okay and go away again. This was at a time when Trish's family lived in a house overlooking a church yard. She recalls looking at it from her window at night and being able to see people walking around down there, and she understood that they were the dead people who were buried there. Sometimes she observed that they had parties that looked like the day of the dead in Mexico, although she didn't know anything about that as a child. She was okay with this. However, one day her mother was standing in the door to her room at night when the old lady asking for the time came, and Trish had to ask her mother to move so the lady could pass, and Trish could give her the time. Her mother was not able to see any old lady, and this made her worry for her daughter and Trish was taken to see a psychiatrist. Her contact with psychiatry proved to be problematic, particularly in her teens. She was told that the things she could see and the voice were an illness and that it was not normal and not right for it to be there and should be medicated to go away. That is when Trish and the voice fell out and things turned bad. Trish told me "it has taken years of my life to deal with the damage that this caused".

She recalls one day going home from a meeting with a psychiatrist that was telling her she had an illness, that as she was passing by a row of trees, the trees would move and follow her and branch after branch hit her on the head. It was as if the trees reacted against the psychiatrist's understanding of her experiences. I couldn't help but tell her an ethnographic anecdote about a young boy in a traditional indigenous community who lost his parents and decided to become a shaman to secure a place of respect in society. He called to the spirits for years to come and speak to him so that he could be a shaman. They finally did and he became a shaman. How different a response to the ability to hear voices? This boy actually sought to gain this ability and succeeding gave him access to a respected position in his culture. At hearing this, Trish recalled that she did in fact have conversations with a very unusual therapist when she was in her teens. This therapist pretty much saw things like these indigenous people and encouraged Trish to accept her ability and enjoy her experiences. But this was when she was also in psychiatry, so every week she was confronted with both these wildly different perspectives, and that was too much for her. She decided to stick to psychiatry because of its recognized authority.





Trish: I feel so lucky to have met you. It has taken so much time and been so difficult to find someone like you who both gets this and with whom I am also able to connect well. This is rare.

We wondered if psychiatry may sometimes end up causing damage because of how it deals with experiences like hers.

Today, Trish struggles to remember much detail about her relationship with the voice prior to being involved with psychiatry. She does recall that the voice was friendly towards her, however, and that she did not mind it being there. It wasn't a problem for her. She also did not know that it was regarded as abnormal to have a voice. When she and the voice fell out with each other, she can remember that it was in part because psychiatrists told her that it was an illness, which made her reject the voice. Since that time, she struggled to always push the voice away. That contributed to the conflict between them. She also considers that the circumstances of her life at the time was a source of frustration for the voice, and that this made the voice angry with her. Ever since that time, and until this point when we made contact with the voice, the voice was very negative and unpleasant towards Trish.

Positive and challenging developments

After Trish's revelation and getting on good terms with the voice again, she experienced some ups and downs, but saw a general improvement. In February of 2020, she described becoming more and more able to express feelings and rest and deal with challenges and obstacles. She began to confront old emotional experiences of being unlovable. She got a boyfriend, and this really provoked those old conclusions from her life. This was really an emotional rollercoaster, but she proved able to deal with it. She seemed to be performing the work of her life of freeing herself of patterns of thinking and relating with others that had been borne out of past trauma. I was amazed at times at our meetings, as she appeared calm in an almost Zen-like way. She told me that she had started to read. In all the time I had known Trish, she had told me that she was unable to read because of all the noise in her head and inability to focus. But in February she decided to start reading a book on animal behavior, telling herself that if she just read two pages a day, then that was fine. In two days, she was surprised to see that she had in fact read no less than 80 pages, although she has been unable to read for the past 7 years! She told me she can focus now and that there was less noise in her head. What noise there was also disturbed her less. She could sort of detach herself from it. I was amazed to witness this in light of her having previously received treatment from countless psychiatrists and lived in more than twenty different addresses over the course of her young life.

Trish: Things are good for me. I don't have those breakdowns I used to.

She still experienced quite an emotional rollercoaster as old patterns of thinking and relating were being contradicted by new experience, but she understood that this was a good process, although it was taxing.





Trish: My head feels like buzzing bees and then feels empty. Like I am present but not present. It comes and goes. Why is that?

Christoffer: Maybe this is how the brain feels when it is rewiring to relate to a new reality? And maybe, sort of like a computer updating its system, it goes through cycles of shutting down and rebooting?

Trish: That seems right. It very much feels just like that. Like processing system updates and rebooting.

We agreed that we did not expect this limbo state to persist for long, rather regarding it as a transition stage.

In late February 2020, Trish sent me this email:

"Hi! I read the entire paper you gave me about Max. Swallowed it all at once. There are so many things to compare. It is so amazing. To think that I am not alone and to think that if Max could do it, then I must be able to also! My voice responded quite a bit to the text. She recognizes the words and relaxes by it. She even smiles to me a little. I will be all right. See you soon!"

Upon meeting her, Trish elaborated that Max's story was at once reassuring and disturbing to read. Reassuring to recognize so much from Max and not be alone in experiencing what she was, but also disturbing to know that others have suffered like she did. She especially liked to read the letters to Max's voices. She also took note of Max hearing three voices. That was a new concept to her. She hears only one. She started to notice things about the voice that she hadn't before. The voice changes her tone of voice. Like last time she was feeling down, she had a deep, masculine but creaking witch-like voice. The voice has different sides to her personality and there are changes in tone to match.

Renewing our Engagement with the Voice

Meeting in early March 2020, Trish told me she was feeling very sad. There had been a change from last week. She was overpowered with sadness and an overwhelming sense of being worthless and insignificant. A feeling that she shouldn't be here and should just fall into a black hole and never return. She had no idea why this shift has happened and couldn't point to any events in the past week that may account for it. Trish had recently mentioned to me that in addition to reading, she had started committing her thoughts to writing at times, and I asked her if she had a recent account like this. To her own surprise, she had a recent description that she read to me. In it, she had preserved an account of how she had been wondering if it isn't better to stay in the darkness, because being sad is safer and known to her. She wondered if the safeness and familiarity of sadness and darkness is not preferable to uncertain happiness and always wondering when the happiness will be taken away again. I told her that in light of these considerations, it seemed meaningful to me that one would become sad. Because if the





hard work she was doing now was to prove to not be worth going through after all, then all this work would have been a waste of energy. Trish agreed that this would make sense.

I asked her about the voice, and she told me she had taken to being harsh to her again. She told Trish the same things as what is on her mind about being worthless, insignificant, unlovable, fat and ugly and stupid. I asked permission to speak to the voice, which Trish gave me.

Christoffer: Voice who speaks to Trish, if I may ask you a question, I wonder if you are frustrated with Trish and how things are for her?

Trish: She says I am worthless, and no one can ever love me.

This struck me as a very hard judgement on Trish, and it seemed curious to me in light of our previous discovery that the voice was originally a friend and had even returned to friendship in these past few months. This made me wonder if this statement from the voice should perhaps not be taken at face value. I wondered what perspective on Trish's life might lead a voice that intends to help Trish to make this seemingly damning statement in her hour of need. Maybe the voice was frustrated about something, I wondered. I decided to inquire about this.

Christoffer: Voice, do you have some hopes for Trish that you believe she is not living up to at this time?

Trish: It just goes on and on and on, I can't make out what she is saying.

Christoffer: Voice, please slow down so that we can hear what you are telling us.

Trish: She doesn't slow down. When I lose hope, the voice becomes angry with me.

Christoffer: "When I lose hope, the voice becomes angry with me" (writing this down as I say it). Voice who speaks to Trish, do you agree with what Trish is saying: That you become angry with her when she loses hope?

Trish: She says "yes".

Christoffer: I suspect this is an essential piece of information here. Do you have any idea why that makes her angry?

Trish: Because when I lose hope, I am unable to do anything. Then nothing will ever get better.

Christoffer: I think this confirms our impression that the voice really does want to help you. But it seems she is very frustrated with you losing hope.

Trish: I am just so exhausted. I have no energy left, and then this process seems to be without end. That is when I lose hope and the voice becomes angry.

We explored this exhaustion for a bit, linking it to a constant mental chess playing that Trish was doing to maneuver old versus new experiences of relations with others and view of herself.





She was free from this mental effort when she was with the horses, but also when her boyfriend was present. There was more mental chess when he was not present, and she was then visited by many doubts. The closer they were, the easier for her, because his actions proved to her that he cared about her. But work and other circumstances made constant physical proximity impossible. These circumstances seemed to account for the present exhaustion.

Christoffer: For a while, after we made contact with her, the voice has aided you in paying attention to how you are feeling and making room for that. Has the voice fallen out of doing this at this time?

Trish: Yes.

Christoffer: Do you think it would be helpful for you if she took up this practice again? Would it help if she encouraged you to make room for your feelings?

Trish: I think it would. She reminds me of what the alternative is, if I don't feel. She says, "feel yourself". It sort of forces me to make room for it.

Christoffer: Voice who speaks to Trish, did you hear what we were just talking about? Do you think it might be possible for you to remind Trish to pay attention to, and also respect and make room for, her feelings? Like you have done until recently.

Trish: She thinks she can.

Christoffer: Thank you. I think that may help Trish.

Trish and I then discussed what might help Trish get some breaks from it all. She couldn't get her head to be still ever. She spent time with the horses daily, but some days she only had energy for little and when she was very frustrated or very sad, she did not want to burden the horses with it. I asked about the surroundings where they live, and Trish said it is far away from other people and there is some forest and even a lake. I asked if she had a relationship with the trees there – like if she sometimes sat against a tree or walked among them. She did, but she felt more drawn to water than to trees. She liked to sit by the lake. In fact, she did so recently when a friend visited. They sat there, looking at the reflection of oaks and the moon on the mirror of the lake. They had brought some candles that they had lit too. I asked if the water could calm and empty her head, but it could not. I wondered if there might be some way for her to connect more strongly to the water of the lake and this brought to my mind the Saami practice of Joik – a form of singing that connects the singer to whatever is being sung. So, I asked if she ever sings, but she doesn't. I kept with it, wondering if singing to the lake might bring more stillness into her head. She did say that quietly singing was calming for her. Then I suddenly thought of Kulning – a traditional form of singing that is used to call animals. Trish was





interested, upon hearing me describe it, so I found an example for us to listen to together.⁸ After this, Trish reminded herself of the old recording of me addressing her voice. She had forgotten she had it, but the times when she has used it, it helped. She would remember to listen to it again. Then I asked how the voice was doing, and Trish said she was just calm and still now. Then she felt ready to go home.

After this, the voice did take up the practice of supporting Trish in making room for her feelings once again.

Evaluation in April and May 2020

In early April 2020, Trish tells me that she has now developed a number of new skills regarding taking care of her emotional limits, saying no to people, articulating her feelings and talking about how she feels. This is giving her more peace of mind and is giving her more energy. For Trish to experience peace of mind is in sharp contrast to the head splitting chaos of thoughts that she has otherwise experienced all her life.

At this time, she feels that she must still work to sustain this level of improvement. I suggested that maybe these developments are just not habitual yet, and therefore still requires work to maintain, and that maybe the learning curve has reached a plateau now. In that case, the main task for now may simply be repetition to move towards habituation.

In early May, fourteen months after we first met, Trish reports that for some time now, she has been doing alright. She says she has more energy to deal with life and problems, and has developed her skills concerning saying no to things and knowing what she is able to deal with and what she is not, and also concerning talking about her feelings with others. She says she is feeling quite well, which is hard for her to believe. The voice is far away and doesn't interfere. She can hear the voice sometimes, but she is not unpleasant at all. I asked if this may be because the voice can see that things are okay with Trish, and Trish thinks that may well be so. According to Trish's assessment, the period of "rebooting and installing new software" has been over for some weeks now.

Meeting in late May, she tells me she is well, and that her new skills and ways of responding concerning being open about how she feels and accepting negative feelings have become habitual now. She has more energy and helps out around her boyfriend's farm. The other day, she got up at six in the morning and without the need for morning coffee went straight out to turn the hay. She did that for four hours just sitting on the tractor, minding the hay turning and just thinking. The voice rarely interferes. Only when she has been very busy, does she show up to remind her to make space for herself to rest and to weep. This is okay with Trish. She thinks it is amazing to consider the changes that have happened just over the last six months.

⁸ This is the example of Kulning in question: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nc7F_qv3eI8 . Kulning is a traditional Swedish form of singing used to call farm animals to come home in the evening.





As of November 2020, this state has persisted ever since and our contact is now more sporadic, without a need for close contact.

Reflections and Closing Remarks

There are a number of things concerning Trish's journey that I have taken particular note of:

- Trish's sudden revelation of some kind of personal power and refusal to consider ending her life ever again seems a turning point. Might it be very significant, perhaps essential, to somehow connect with a kind of inner force or powerful shift in perspective on one's life?
- Trish's story seems to very strongly suggest that voices may not be a negative element in a person's life. Having a voice might even be a positive thing. Perhaps a source of encouragement, company and guidance? Should we perhaps take great care before simply assuming that the ability to hear a voice is automatically a bad thing?
- Voices that seem very negative might be other than what they seem. A negative voice may have reasons for being negative and might in fact have good intentions.
- May we risk causing harm if we assume that the ability to hear voices is inherently bad and encourage people to reject, ignore and suppress voices?

It seems to me that Trish's revelation and re-engaging the voice paved the way for a process of emotional healing. This process took several months and felt like updating her brain's operating system and mental chess playing. It seems to have been intensified and supported by having a boyfriend at the time. After this process, the hitherto constant chaos of thoughts ceased.

In January 2021, Trish made the following additions to the contents of this paper:

I have noticed that I am becoming increasingly skeptical and concerned about the workings of psychiatry over time, and it is important for me to include this in our account. I feel that the breaking of my original relationship with the voice and the conflict that ensued was initiated by psychiatric professionals. It seems crazy to me that it should be that way. It is upside down. They should not have made things worse for me like that. I do not think that those professionals ever intended to create such a conflict, but it did happen because of the way they approached it. The idea that voices must be an evil is a misunderstanding. Maybe they are for some people, but to simply assume that it is the case is not always right. I have now learned to engage with the voice in an entirely different way.

During my many and shifting interactions with psychiatry, I got the strong impression that the way they interact with you follows a model based on symptoms and diagnosis. There is this whole series of questions that they always ask you. Soon enough, you know the drill. I have consulted many different psychiatric professionals and had the same experience over and over again. The same model. But they don't seem to really respond to the answers you give. I would like professionals to have an awareness that you can't





just treat everyone the same way and just keep asking the questions you've been taught to ask and not engage with the answers you get from people. There is a lack of creativity and it all gets very dull. And that is just not right, because it is human beings we are talking about. It is so frustrating! If they were only half as responsive as I am when I interact with horses, then there would be a significant improvement. I understand that it is very demanding to do the work that professionals do in psychiatry, but you will have to be very, very dedicated to be able to interact in such a way! It is my impression that professionals in psychiatry focus very much on words, rather than seeing the whole picture. There is a lack of focus on all of one's communication, like body language and also one's personal history. But it is like they only pick out the words.

Regarding the voice, it has had a great significance for me to arrive at a sense of calm in not having to enter into debates with the voice, or struggle with her. I just listen to her. That has taken away a lot of anxiety. I don't have to be afraid and panic when the voice approaches me. If she comes, she comes, and I just have to listen to her. That brings much peace to my mind as well as my body. During these past months, I have been tapered off antidepressants, and there has been no problem with that whatsoever. I think the reason I don't need the antidepressant anymore, is because I no longer have the fear of the voice. Psychiatry made the voice into something aggressive, dangerous and sick, and that made me afraid of her. One assumes that professionals are right. Who else are you supposed to rely on?

This collaboration has also helped the voice to be at peace. She's not even present anymore! She only shows up when I fail to notice the need to relax or the need for love. Then she shows up, but in a much calmer way that I can deal with. Our present relationship has given her an extreme amount of peace and calm and the ability to say things in a different way. I am incredibly happy to have learned to use the voice in a positive way.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Trish for this collaboration, including the making of this paper. I would also like to thank her for the wisdom she has shared with me regarding the ways of horses and how to interact with them in respectful and egalitarian ways. Humans have much to learn from that.

Trish obviously has a healing bond with horses. Thank you to the horses in Trish's life. In the time that I have known Trish, she has experienced a couple of accidents around horses. In both cases, Trish might easily have gotten seriously injured, but walked away unharmed. I would like to give my regards to Epona, the protector of horses.

Thank you, Trish's voice, for striving to be a friend to Trish and for engaging in our conversations. I really appreciate that!





Trish would like to thank Christoffer for how everything has developed during our work together, and for the approach he has to these matters. And thanks for providing the space to just sense and feel what needed to be felt at any given time.

Thank you to David Epston for invaluable assistance with editing this paper.

Consent

The name 'Trish' is a pseudonym. The person behind the pseudonym has been fully informed about my interest in publishing her story, and has given her consent for me to write it and expressed her desire for her story to be made available to others to inspire them to find similar ways of relating to voices. Trish 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, Trish has read this paper and accepted it, and she has given her written consent for it to be submitted to a journal for publication.

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