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Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy

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Editor's Note By David Epston

I first met Christoffer in the audience of a 2-day workshop I presented in Aarrhus, Denmark in March of 2014. I was so taken by the erudition of his concerns regarding the ethics of the practice of Narrative Therapy and the passion with which he expressed himself that I sought him out afterwards. After further discussion, I pleaded with him to consider writing these matters up for publication which he did in two consecutive papers (see Haugaard, C., (2015). Narrative Practice as an Ethical Position and the Moral Legitimacy of Narrative Therapy, *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (3), 55-63; and Haugaard, C., (2016). Narrative Therapy as an Ethical Practice, *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 35(1), 1-19).

As well, we had entered in to an email correspondence around his taking up of Michael White's practice relating to 'psychotic experience' and the 'Power to our Journeys' group. As a consequence of this, the management at Aalborg Psychiatric Hospital in Denmark where he worked sought that he should develop an approach along these lines for those recidivists to their service who no longer accepted conventional psychotropic medication for reasons of their own and wished to withdraw or had done so.

I suggested a co-researching approach much like the one I had been engaged in leading to the publication of "Biting the Hand that Starves You: Inspiring Resistance to Anorexia/Bulimia." Such co-research had close parallels to Collaborative Anthropology and Participant Action Research (PAR). This led to his interviews with Victoria. The development of his approach to 'seeing' voices as persons spontaneously grew out his collaboration with Max in late 2016 and in 2017, which then became part of the co-research project due to the surprising effects of the letters to him. Collaborations with Alice and later Rose then built on the discoveries by Victoria and Max in 2018 and onwards. Christoffer and I have been in close correspondence since early 2017 and continue to the present. This led to the publication of Christoffer's work in a previous release of this journal (See: Haugaard, C. & Max (2019): Respectful letters for aggressive voices: Max's story. pp. 19-36; and Haugaard, C. & Victoria (2019): Sitting through it with the voices: pp. 37-54, *Journal of Narrative Family Therapy*, 2019, Release 3).

Since then, his work has advanced considerably and this special release has decided to collect several lengthy papers up in one place. Because of the complexity of his practice which has taken place over a considerable period of time (e.g., Alice's paper covers a period between mid-2018 and into 2020; Rose's paper describes developments over less than a year from late 2018 to mid-2019; Trish covers just over a year from 2019 to 2020), we have waived all conventions

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Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy, 2021, Release 3, www.journalcnt.com, p. 1.





about length of articles. As well, we considered it vital to an appreciation of his practice that he include transcribed excerpts along with commentaries by those co-researchers concerned. I believe, given this practice is only 5 or 6 years old, we hope Christoffer will keep us informed and consider another special release in due course.

Christoffer brings to his practice a vast scholarship in northern European mythology, and folklore, contemporary anthropology especially in reference to the Amazon and Candomblé (an Afro-Brazilian religion in Brazil) and as far away as Miyazaki films, especially 'Spirited Away.'

I would suggest these references for some of his inspirations in question:

Harvey, G. (2018), If Not all Stones Are Alive: Radical Relationality in Animism Studies, *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, 11(4), 48-497.

Pickering, A. (2017). The ontological Turn. *Social Analysis*, Vol. 61, Issue 2, Summer, 2017, 134-150.

Rasmussen, R. H. (2019), *The Stick and the Calabash. Building Gods in Bahian Candomble*, Uppsal Universitet.

Shaw, M. (2018). The Lindworm. A Story Told by Martin Shaw. *Emergence Magazine*, June 15, 2018. <https://emergencemagaazine.org/film/the-lindworm/>





Demonstrating Kindness to Magical Beings: Alice's Story

Christoffer Haugaard, Alice & 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. The purpose of the paper is to share Alice'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 the following, Alice and I (Christoffer) endeavor to share some discoveries concerning a kind of beings that she can perceive in various ways in the hope that these discoveries and knowledges may be inspirational and helpful to other people who live with similar experiences. Within psychiatric discourse, these beings have been categorized as hallucinations or hearing voices, although Alice does not prefer those terms. For that reason, I have been interested in what she might like to call them, and she has suggested 'magical beings' as her preferred term. As far as Alice can determine, the magical beings have been with her always, although she has not always had the same degree of awareness of them. She does recall their presence and how they had a will of their own when she was only eight years old. By seventeen, she became more specifically aware of them. Up to around this time, they had wanted Alice to steal things, drink dangerous chemicals and hurt other people. The difficulties of being Alice and the effects of co-existing with her magical beings troubled her parents, and they had made several attempts at getting help from a psychiatrist, something Alice was very reluctant to go along with, and which the magical beings also strongly protested. As a consequence, Alice said almost nothing about what she was experiencing. At 16-17 years of age, she was in contact with Danish Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and had some conversations with a psychologist. These conversations focused on living with Asperger's syndrome, and although she found those conversations to be meaningful, they were not very helpful for her in dealing with the magical beings, and she did not mention them to the psychologist. At eighteen, she had moved away from her parents to live in an institution due to her difficulties with anxiety, her need for assistance in daily life and

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





social relations. As life was becoming increasingly overwhelming for her, she was required to leave her high school education. This was an extremely frustrating and difficult time for her, and she was given tranquilizing medication daily for a prolonged period. At this time, the magical beings began to suggest to her that she would feel better if she harmed herself. They began to recommend that she cut herself or knock her head against a wall. Alice began to experiment with such practices that had been present but uninfluential up until this point. It was clear to her parents that such residential treatment was not helping Alice and they determined to repatriate her and seek help from Adult Psychiatry, for which she was now eligible as she had turned eighteen.

This was where Alice and I first met each other. Her parents had requested that she see a psychologist to help her with her anxieties. This was a very challenging situation for her, and in addition, as she informed me later, she had made up her mind to never trust a professional. At our initial meetings, Alice did not want to speak with me without a trusted person present, and even then, she did not look in my direction at all nor utter a word. It was not until after a number of such meetings that she decided to be in my office with me on her own. It was a short meeting in which she hardly spoke a word, and I recall asking her some questions about her situation and thinking out loud about what I imagined she might be thinking. To my great relief and joy, this changed slowly so that Alice and I were eventually able to have conversations like the ones we will be sharing with you here.

In this account we will be focusing specifically on a journey of discovery concerning magical beings. It is, however, important to bear in mind that these explorations are only part of our collaboration and that co-existing with troublesome (and perhaps troubled) magical beings are one challenge among a number of significant challenges to Alice living the life that she would like for herself.

Alice has received psychiatric diagnoses within both the psychosis spectrum and the autism spectrum. According to her, she has tried six different antipsychotics throughout the time I have known her. Ever since Alice and I first met, we have had weekly meetings except during holidays or other periods where I have been away from work. I have collaborated with Alice from early 2015 and until the time of writing, which is December 2020.

The Magical Beings

The magical beings have been there as long as Alice can determine, and she has no idea how they came to be or why. Her awareness of them has increased during the course of her life, and during the time that she and I have collaborated, she has given them a number of titles. Initially she referred to them as evil thoughts. Later she began to designate them as The Evil One, which gave way to calling them The Other, until she settled on calling them The Others. Alice has explained to me that she experiences them as being in possession of a will of their own, distinct from her own. They are multiple, like a group who share the same will, however, and so

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although they seem to be a multitude, they act in unity. As you might expect from something that has been psychiatrically categorized as auditory hallucinations, Alice can indeed hear them speaking with a voice at times. But they also communicate in other ways besides speaking in a way that she can hear. They also make themselves and their will known to her by means of sensations or moods, so that she can determine by this how they are feeling and whether they approve of something or not. They are also able to insert thoughts into her mind in the form of mental images and even movies with violent and horrifying content. They are able to create bodily sensations including the feeling of being physically strangled by them. Attempting to describe them to me, Alice has said that “they are like something from a different dimension outside what we can understand”.

Christoffer: Let me see if I understand: We can normally perceive three spatial dimensions and then time is a fourth dimension in physics. Do you mean dimensions in this sense?

Alice: Yes. Like they are from a fifth or seventh dimension or something.

Christoffer: Does that make them difficult to describe in any way that easily makes sense?

Alice: Yes. But sometimes they are like a fire. Like black flames close to my heart.

Living with The Others is a great challenge. During the time that I have known Alice, The Others have been constantly striving to convince Alice that she is a bad, evil, lying person and that she is not working hard enough to get better and is to blame for the problems in her life and the pain she feels. They almost constantly encourage her to jump off from tall buildings or throw herself out of cars at speed, step in front of the train, drink poisonous chemicals, continuously bang her head against the wall, or burn her hands on stoves or ovens or with boiling hot water. They also encourage her to hurt and kill others, especially people she cares about. One of their means of terrorizing her with these ideas is to use their ability to insert mental pictures and run mental films in her mind. They show her pictures of these horrible and violent things happening to her or others, often casting Alice herself as the violent person in the stories they create in her mind. This leaves Alice in fear of being an evil person who might desire or do such things, as well as being an altogether horrifying experience in itself, as these ideas are so completely contrary to her own will and the kind of person she strives to be: Kind, considerate, just and loving. In addition to subjecting Alice to this treatment, much of which she considers unspeakable, The Others also tell her that if she tells anyone about the contents of these images and films, then they will become reality, leaving Alice to deal with this alone.

Under the initial term Evil Thoughts, Alice and I collaborated during 2015 to 2018 to find ways to reduce their influence. The approach that I took to them was to strive to expose their agenda and means of being influential in order to develop strategies to resist them, and also striving to take the evaluation of Alice’s character out of the hands of the Evil Thoughts and consider her character in relation to her knowledge about the kind of person she wants to be and what she





actually does, including my experiences of knowing her as a very kind, careful and considerate person in our conversations.² During this time, Alice was also struggling with other concerns and several very challenging events took place in her life. After she became associated with Aalborg Psychiatric Hospital, she was also prescribed antipsychotic medication. Self-harm, contemplating suicide, hospitalizations including the use of restraint to stop her from self-harm were recurrent themes during this time. The Others did not seem responsive to our attempts to deal with them; however Alice did point out that at least I was kind to her and that being able to trust me to persist with kindness towards her, gave her hope and some strength to persist with her life.

A Different Approach

During 2017 and 2018, I have collaborated with Victoria and Max to document their knowledges about living with voices and making this knowledge available for others.³ One element of this was a change in my view of how one might engage with voices: Perhaps, rather than an antagonistic approach that strives to expose and resist the voices, one might practice respect for the voices and their perspective? While I was working on documenting this, Alice and I seemed to have gotten stuck. She was telling me that she could not see a future ahead of her anymore and that she didn't expect to be able to keep on living for that much longer. In May of 2018, The Others were requiring Alice to convince me that they did not exist at all and that Alice had fabricated everything and had no real problems at all. In fact, The Others required her to justify this by a desire on her part to get attention. This was a very confusing situation, as The Others did an impressive job at this charade and had Alice apologizing to me for having made a fool of me. I suspected The Others were behind this but felt I could not simply ignore what Alice was saying. I wondered how to find a way forward. This brought me to consider if Victoria's and Max's knowledges might be of some assistance here. I called them up and explained that I knew of a person who might benefit from their knowledges and asked if they might consider sharing it with this person. Both Max and Victoria were keen to help others with their stories, and so I shared extracts of their accounts with Alice. I gave this to her along with a letter to her, explaining my suspicion that The Others were requiring her to tell me that she only made everything up because The Others want her to be isolated and hope that I might get angry and expel her, if I were to believe she was a liar. In the letter, I also suggested she read Victoria's and Max's accounts:

Hi Alice.

I strongly suspect that The Others are relatives of voices that other people have told me about. I can see that they are using similar methods. Here is my suggestion for something to do: Mark those places in Max's and Victoria's accounts that make sense to

² The inspiration for this work was White, 1995.

³ See Haugaard & Max, 2019; Haugaard & Victoria, 2019





you or spark your curiosity. Bring this to our meetings so that we can consider it together. That may give us some inspiration and helpful knowledge which we may connect with our combined intelligence and creativity! In addition to being helpful for you, I hope that we may as well contribute to the collective knowledge of beings like The Others. That may help others too.

Besides this message to Alice, I also wrote a letter to The Others themselves:

Hi Others.

I write to you to inform you of certain things to avoid unnecessary uncertainty. I am aware that for you to hear or read this, Alice will have to read it or someone else must read it to Alice. But I would like to make it clear that this letter is from me, Christoffer, to you Others. If you Others have some disagreements or other about the contents of this letter, then I ask you to direct it at me. Alice is not responsible for the things I write. If she is reading it to you, she is only my messenger. Is that clear? Thank you!

Others, I would like to tell you that I have a pretty clear impression of you by now. I feel quite confident that I have a pretty high rate of success in picking out your activities. I am able to hear you standing behind certain things that Alice say. I have realized that you use Alice to say things that come from you. For example, it is you who are behind ideas that Alice is an evil person, that Alice lies, that Alice has made everything up, and that one should feel sorry for me because I am so gullible. This is coming from The Others. I also feel quite confident that I know what the point of it is:

To convince me (and probably Alice too) that Alice is a bad person who is not deserving of anyone's compassion or help. And now I will tell you what I believe concerning the reason you want to convince us of this. You want that because if you can get Alice to convince me that she is evil and unworthy of my help, then you hope that I will shun her and throw her out. By accomplishing that you hope to cut her off from a source of help. You want to cut her off from contact with anyone who treats Alice with dignity, respect and kindness. You want to cut her off from anyone who thinks she is good. And you want to separate her from anyone who supports her own will and her desires for her own life. And anyone who is paying attention to you and work against you.

What do you think, Others? Am I getting close? Do you recognize yourselves and your activities in what I am writing?

And this is where I would like to inform you of something: It is too late to shake me off! You will not succeed in that. Once when you were less cautious and probably didn't think much of me or Alice, you revealed yourselves. I have heard detailed descriptions of you and have been able to observe your activities in my office over the period of three years. I know way too much about you to sweep it off the table with a simple claim that Alice is





lying. It is not that easy. And you are exposing yourselves when you attack Alice right in front of me. I can see her reactions to how you terrorize her. I can see how you shut her up so she dares not say a word or even move. I can clearly see when you get her to hit herself (whether it is by your direct command or indirectly by making it so unbearable for her that she hits herself in a desperate attempt to get some peace from you). Honestly. Why don't you give up!

What is your game? Do you know? Do you have some purpose in tormenting an innocent young woman like this? I even understand that you started doing this when she was just a child. I honestly think that is cruel and shameful. Do you have some purpose in that? Is it something you can explain and justify? If so: Let us hear it so that we can engage with it in a fair and orderly fashion. Or is it more the case that you are trying to ruin Alice's life for no apparent reason? Do you simply enjoy pain and destruction? Or do you not know of anything else? Have you no idea what life might be about if not this? Is it a kind of game to you?

Lately you have been extra busy trying to convince me that you are just a lie and an excuse. Is that because it is getting a little too hot for you? Am I getting too close? Do I know too much? Are you concerned about the knowledge available to me from other people with knowledge of your kind? Are you concerned about what Alice may be capable of if she gets out of your reach? My offer still stands: Participate in our conversations in a respectful manner and allow Alice and me to speak freely. Then your words will be heard too, and I will strive to accommodate you to the extent that my ethics and my loyalty to Alice will allow. If you are more than destruction and torture, then I encourage you to let us know.

That is what I wanted to tell you Others for now. I hope to have captured your attention. In case I have, many thanks for that.

Regards,

Christoffer.

On our next meeting, Alice had read the extracts from Victoria and Max. She had marked a number of places in Victoria's account.

Alice: Victoria was afraid anything would happen to people she loves. I am generally afraid that anything will happen to someone I care about and that it will be my fault. Victoria sat and listened to the voices for hours – how was she able to do that? Victoria decided that if she did not go against the voices, then she would eventually die, but I cannot resist. It is too tempting. People will like me better if I do what The Others want. If I took my own life, then I would be brave enough. I would like to be brave instead of afraid. It isn't good to be afraid and





I have always been afraid. When Victoria spoke with her voices, how did she know what to say?

Christoffer: Would you like me to ask Victoria if she can explain this to us?

Alice: Yes, I would like that.

Christoffer: I will ask her.⁴

Alice: Victoria says that when you get medication to remove the voices and they persist regardless, then that is a defeat. It is a defeat. It is a defeat because medication and hospitalization doesn't help. I like having this material from Max and Victoria. It is good to just have it.

Alice also wants to tell me something that she has been wanting to tell me for a long time. It is difficult, though, as The Others are opposed to her revealing it. Nonetheless, after a while, Alice informs me that The Others use threats to silence her. She has been gathering courage to tell me for a long time, and only today did she do it. I ask her if she would consider this an act of bravery. The Others disrupt the conversation at this point. Alice suddenly looks very tense and turns away from me and looks like she is struggling. Based on our past experience, I make a guess that The Others somehow disapprove of our conversation and are giving her a hard time to stop it. I decide to address them:

Christoffer: Others, I suspect you disapprove of what we are discussing here. Okay. I think this is an important matter we are talking about, but I do not want Alice to suffer, so I agree to change the topic for now. You get your way. We'll talk no more of this for today. So, you just relax now. Go have a break for a smoke or something. We'll just talk about something else.

Alice chuckled at this, and I did as well, thinking that my remark about a break for a smoke was rather witty. We went on to talk about some everyday topics and Alice was able to relax. But then she leaned over slightly and said very quietly: "That worked pretty well".

Christoffer: What did? What worked?

Alice: Telling The Others to have a smoke worked quite well. They liked that.

Christoffer: Really?! I was just trying to lighten the mood by being a little funny. I had no idea The Others would appreciate it. That is really fascinating! I wonder if they are smokers, and maybe no one has ever given them a break before? Maybe they are exhausted sometimes.

⁴ I did ask Victoria about this, and that led to the description of talking to voices in Haugaard & Victoria, 2019, pp. 51-52.





Alice: I don't know.

Christoffer: We are running out of time for today, but wow! This is really fascinating. The fact that they appreciated that gives me some hope that we might find a way to relate with The Others that doesn't have to be such a power struggle.

Making discoveries

Next week Alice joins me, and we begin speaking about casual matters as we usually do. We are having a pleasant conversation about this when suddenly she inquires "is it alright that The Others are in here?" I am baffled because to my knowledge she has never been unaccompanied by them.

Christoffer: Were they not here when you came in?

Alice: They are always in my head.

Christoffer: But were they stowed away somewhere in your head, and only just came out now today?

Alice: Yes.

Christoffer: Did you do that? How did you do that? And yes, The Others are welcome to be here.

She doesn't reply to that, but then she says that she has talked to The Others.

Christoffer: You talked to them? Have you ever done that before?

Alice: No.

Christoffer: What did you say?

Alice: I said I'd prefer that they do not control everything I do.

Christoffer: !?!?! Did they respond?

Alice: No.

Christoffer: When did you do that? A few days ago? On several days?

Alice: Both. I have done it on several days starting several days ago.

I readily admit to being baffled by this.

Christoffer: What did they think about that smoking break they got last week?

Alice: They liked that.





Christoffer: Have they never had anyone give them a break for a smoke before? Are they smokers?

Alice: They haven't tried that before. I don't know if they smoke. They are glad that you are nice to them. I want to get them out of my head! I want them to go over in that corner.

Christoffer: That corner there? You want them to get out of your head and over there? Okay. Would The Others like a chair?

She nods, and I get up and put a chair in the corner. She looks as if she is making some kind of effort at negotiating. This goes on for a while and I get the impression that there is some difficulty for Alice. Perhaps The Others are reluctant.

Christoffer: Is this all very new for The Others? Are they nervous about this? Have they never been spoken to before? Never had a break for a smoke before? Never been stowed away before? Never been asked to get out of your head and into the corner before?

Alice confirms all this.

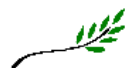
Christoffer: The Others – I guess you are rather anxious about all this. I can assure you that no harm will come to you. My office is a safe place for Alice as well as for you. You may sit on the chair in the corner, and nothing will happen to you or Alice. You may even smoke over there if you want. I am giving you special permission to smoke in my office.

After a while, Alice confirms that The Others are now in the chair.

We go on to have a conversation about what has transpired. I am amazed at what is going on and trying to fathom what it is that Alice is doing and how on earth it has come to pass that The Others are in some sort of agreement with her requests.

Alice: It helps to read the things you have written down for me and the material about Max and Victoria. And it helps to talk to The Others. I also accidentally found a letter from you with something to say to The Others from last year that I think may be useful. I will keep that and use it for emergencies. This all helps me to get The Others out of my head and then I can deal with them better. If they are only in my head, it all becomes a mess.

During this, The Others do interfere somewhat on occasions. For example, they compel Alice to hit herself twice although I have told them that this is not okay. Alice and I then sit on our hands to prevent any further incidents of this. After a while, The Others jump back into Alice's head, which is visible by a return of the extremely tense and nervous-looking body language that The Others produce. I try to calm The Others by reassuring them that we are ending our





meeting for today and that I am very grateful for their involvement in the conversation today. As well, I suspect that so many new things happening at once are a little too much for them.

Christoffer: Alice, do you think The Others have gotten scared of me lately?

Alice: Yes. And they are scared of disappearing. I want them to disappear. But I don't want to be without them.

Christoffer: I am very hopeful after this that we can find new ways for you to co-exist. Have I mentioned I know someone who was terrorized by a Triad of Terror and now they are her helpers? Maybe The Others can be friends or at least get a different job in your life. I am hopeful after this conversation that that is possible.

Leaning over and speaking quietly so The Others wouldn't pay too much attention, Alice confides in me that mostly she wants The Others to disappear, but they wouldn't have her say that. Consequently, we agree that leaving her life is too much for them to handle, and that we will make it our agenda to work towards a better relationship with an acceptance of their presence. She also confides in me that, although she really liked our conversations up until this point, they have also seemed somewhat boring and not going anywhere until recently.

Christoffer: How recently?

Alice: Until last time when you said I might be able to help someone. Now this is exciting. I am excited about this.

Christoffer: Wow! I am too. I think every observation you make now is important! We are venturing into the unknown and making discoveries. I have seen voices and similar problems respond to various things and change their ways, but what happened here today was a first for me. I am amazed by what just transpired right here right now! Please keep me informed on your discoveries!

Alice: This was a very good conversation today!

I was left in amazement and puzzled as to what exactly it was that I had just witnessed.

On our next meeting, Alice tells me that she has been feeling bad about putting The Others in the corner like she did last time.

Alice: It was better that day when you offered them a smoking break than the day, I put them in the corner.

Christoffer: Why is that?





Alice: I must not decide what they should do. They make me feel bad whenever I try to do anything to make me feel better, or when anyone tries to do something helpful for me. They punish me for it.

Christoffer: Do The Others not appreciate when someone else attempts to be in charge?

Alice: Right.

Christoffer: Do The Others want to be in charge?

Alice: Yes.

Christoffer: But do they appreciate being treated with respect?

Alice: Yes, they do.

Christoffer: How could it have made a difference to The Others to get a smoking break?

Alice: I don't know if it was because it helped, or if it was because it made us laugh.

Christoffer: Would they like to have cigarettes? I would buy some for them if they did.

Alice: They would like that. But you don't have to buy cigarettes, Christoffer!

Christoffer: It's fine, Alice. No problem. I don't mind doing that at all.

Alice: Okay.

I then purchase a pack of cigarettes and bring them to my office for our next meeting. In the meantime, I really wonder what The Others will want from us. For example, will they want the cigarettes to be lit? Or are they able to consume them somehow without them being lit? There is a fire alarm in my office and regulations prohibit smoking. Will I have to go outside and light one for them and then leave it to smolder? Then in early July we are sitting in my office again. I take out the cigarettes and put them on my desk by the corner where The Others were sitting the day Alice got them out of her head. I open the pack and pull out a few. Then I sit back in my chair.

Christoffer: You are very welcome to have a smoking break, Others. I have bought cigarettes for you, as I promised. (Turning to Alice) Can they smoke them on their plane of existence, without them being physically lit?

Alice: They can smoke them without them being lit. They just appreciate that you have bought them.

Christoffer: Good! There is a fire alarm here, so if they wanted them lit, we'd have to come up with a solution to that.





Alice laughs and says: They don't really want to get over there. They say it is crazy. They say you just want to expose me. That you just want to trick me by gaining my trust before you expose me.

Christoffer: What do they mean? Expose what?

Alice: Expose that I am a liar because there isn't really anything wrong and everything is something I am just making up.

Christoffer: I am not trying to trick anyone. Not you Others either, in fact. Nor do I want to expose Alice in any way. It is obvious to me that something is torturing Alice and making life very difficult for her and I would like to help her out with that. I don't really want to trick you Others either. How about this: If we speak respectfully of you, will you give us some peace to speak freely for a little while? If we promise not to speak behind your back?

Alice: I think you need to tell them.

Christoffer: Tell them what? Do you mean tell them to get in the chair in the corner?

Alice nods.

Christoffer: Others, please be so kind as to go over to the corner. Will you please do that now? There are cigarettes for you. I would very much like to be a good host for you, and you are my guests here. It would make me a little sad if you did not receive my hospitality at all.

Alice informs me that The Others are hesitant, and I repeat my invitation for them to be my guests and sit in the corner.

Alice: We are discovering important things and The Others are saying it is crazy.

Christoffer: Do you mean that they say that our important discoveries are crazy? Is that to distract us from it?

Alice nods.

Christoffer: I suspect that when The Others say it is crazy, or even that they don't even exist, then it is because we are on track to discovering something that makes them concerned about losing their influence. Do you know what they think or know is the alternative to being attached to you? If they lost their grip on you, would they be thrown into another world? Or would they be thrown into nothingness?

Alice nods.





Christoffer: Nothingness? Is that what The Others think or know is the alternative?

Alice: That is sort of implicit, I think.

Christoffer: Then I can understand why they are afraid and suspicious. In that case, they are struggling for their very existence. You Others, I would like to tell you something about my and Alice's intentions. I believe you have been eavesdropping when Alice and I have talked about it. We have been talking about how we do not believe you can accept getting out of her life and that the agenda that we do believe in is about creating more pleasant and, dare I say, harmonious ways of co-existing. I would in fact like to get to know you. I am making an effort to show my respect for you. I spent 45 kroner⁵ on cigarettes for you.

Alice: I feel bad for you.

Christoffer: For me? No, I am quite okay. It is fine. I want to show this hospitality and I can afford cigarettes.

Alice: They are happy that you are kind to them.

Christoffer: I am happy to hear that. I very much desire to be respectful towards you Others. Do you drink coffee?

Alice: They would like to have coffee. It is fortunate that I got you as my psychologist.

Christoffer: Yes! How many people would be interested in getting to know you Others? How many would offer you a break for a smoke? How many would buy cigarettes for you? How many would treat you to coffee at their own expense? My guess is that you Others have probably never ever been treated like this? I wonder if most people who become aware of you want to get rid of you? I wonder if most people who know about you would want Alice to have so much medication that you just disappear! In that case, you are indeed very fortunate to have run into me!

Alice: Maybe I can become friends with them? If they weren't so mean.

Christoffer: Did you hear that Others? Did you just hear that offer? Someone just considered being friends with you, if you are not mean! Wow! What do you say?

Alice: It's just annoying that they are there when I sleep as well. They give me nightmares.

⁵ Danish currency. 45 kroner is approx. 7 US dollars.





Christoffer: Are they working all the time? What is this Others – your first break for a smoke in... what, more than twenty years? Your first break in over twenty years! Oh my! That is a long time indeed to wait for a smoke! Do you never get a break? And you don't sleep at night either? Couldn't you need a rest?

While speaking to The Others, I have been looking towards the chair in the corner where the cigarettes are. Turning back to Alice I say: Alice, I think they may be attached to you because the alternative is nothingness and they are at work at all times to have a grip on you.

Alice: Maybe I could make the bed for them?

Christoffer: Yes. Maybe a little space somewhere. A shelf or a box or some room on the windowsill.

Alice: I have both a bed and a couch. I could prepare the bed for them.

Christoffer: Do you prefer to sleep on the couch?

Alice: I always sleep on the couch.

Christoffer: Right. Maybe you could try that out so they could have some rest at night. You know, Alice, I have come across people who co-exist with beings that seem similar to The Others in some ways, and some of them have become friends with them. And even some who used to be friends with them, and then they fell out with each other. What should we call someone like The Others who may have something in common with beings that some have called 'voices' and psychiatry calls voices or hallucinations? What do you think, Others? What would you prefer?

Alice: It is okay with voices. Maybe 'magical beings'. Maybe such negative energies can become magical beings if I concentrate on it and take care of them.

Christoffer: Is it possible to take care of them? Do they perhaps not know how to be nice?

Alice: I haven't had an awareness of them. Not until I was around seventeen. So, I haven't been able to take care of them.

Christoffer: Have they perhaps always been rejected and been something people wanted to get rid of?

Alice: If I am kind to them and take care of them, then maybe they can evolve.

Christoffer: That is a fascinating thought. I'll just write that down... Maybe they can learn how to be nice if people are kind to them?

Alice: But how can I have friends like that? Won't other people think it is abnormal?

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Christoffer: Some will most likely think that. Maybe the trick is to be discreet about it and do it in ways that are not so visible. I know people who are friends with someone similar to The Others, and some people have guardian angels and helping spirits and that kind of thing.

As the conversation reaches its end, I make sure to say that I'll see to it that there are cigarettes for The Others next time as well, and also coffee for everyone. I also write a letter for The Others, as a break of a few weeks in our meetings is coming up due to our summer holidays:

A Letter for The Others

Hi Others. I hope you don't mind that I have taken the liberty of writing a letter for you. I would like to ask you to allow that Alice reads this letter so that you can get to hear it. Please remember it is from me. These are my words, not Alice's.

First of all, a thousand thank yous for the conversations we have had with your participation during the past four weeks. It has been a great joy and honor for me to speak with you directly. It has also been a great joy for me to be able to provide you with hospitality. I am glad that Alice has discovered that you appreciate breaks and like cigarettes and coffee – things I am able to deliver. I can tell you that I have been hoping for such a situation for a long time where we could speak with each other. I know it may be challenging for you to participate in our conversations like you do now. If there is anything I can do to make you feel more comfortable then please let me know. I just might be able to accommodate it. I will see to it that there is coffee and cigarettes at our future meetings.

I would also like to ask something of you, if it is not too much. I am terribly curious about everything that is happening now and what you Others and Alice might discover over the next weeks before I see you again. Perhaps you come to an arrangement where you borrow Alice's bed? Because I am so curious and fascinated with you and Alice's experiments (have you noticed her courage and creativity as I have?), I hope that Alice might make some notes and document how things develop. Others, will you consider allowing Alice to make notes of her observations for me? I would really appreciate that. Frankly, I regard her observations as invaluable. Some of the things that have been happening in our meetings lately are beyond what I thought was possible and I suspect we are exploring unknown territories. Will you please allow her to make notes of her observations? I would take great joy in that and be very grateful to you. I also suspect there may well be other people and others of your kind that might one day be grateful to Alice for her discoveries and observations. Will you do me the favor of allowing her to do that on my behalf?

Thank you in advance, Others. Kind regards, Christoffer.





Further Discoveries Concerning The Others

After the break in our meetings, I am very keen to hear what has transpired and what further observations Alice might have made. I set out the chair in the corner behind my desk for The Others and set out cigarettes. I also pour a hot cup of coffee for Alice, myself and for The Others. I put their cup next to the cigarettes and say, “this is for you, Others”.

Alice: There have been some days where The Others have not bothered me so much. I have told them that they may look on when I am gaming. For their entertainment.

She suddenly becomes tense.

Alice: The Others say, “what you think is not important”.

Christoffer: Are they saying that in relation to my letter to them where I suggest that your ideas and observations are important?

Alice: Yes. And they don’t like me taking notes.

Christoffer: I suspected they might feel that way about it.

Alice: On those days when they haven’t been there as much, it is tempting to just enjoy it. That may be the times when I can become friends with them. They don’t like that idea!

Christoffer: Right. Okay.

Alice: Also, I have a respiratory infection. They haven’t been as hard on me because I am ill.

Christoffer: Is that because they are taking into consideration how you are feeling?

Alice: When I am ill, then I already feel bad and then they don’t have to do as much.

Christoffer: It still sounds like a kind of consideration. Do The Others have a heart?

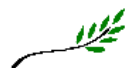
Alice: When I am ill I focus more on the fact that I feel bad in that way, and maybe don’t feel The Others so much because of that. And it is okay that you can’t do so much when you are ill.

Christoffer: If you are not able to do something, then you will have to justify it to The Others, and that is easier when you are ill?

Alice: Yes. They show me things all the time. Every time I close my eyes. They show me insects.

Christoffer: You Others, why do you show Alice insects all the time? What’s up with that?

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Alice: They don't know how to do anything else.

Christoffer: Was that your knowledge of them, Alice, or did The Others just express that insight about themselves?

At this question, Alice shows signs of being uncomfortable and abruptly turns her head as if struck by an invisible hand.

Alice: They are not there at all.

I become concerned if The Others might be on their way to punishing or attacking Alice at this point. Obliging Alice to say they don't exist seems to be a sign that they cannot accept what we are doing.

Christoffer: Was that The Others? It looks like they interfered. Right, I suspect something about this conversation is making The Others not feel safe. Let's just sit on our hands, Alice. That way it is more difficult for them to get you to hit yourself. I'll do it too so it doesn't seem so strange. You Others? I do not mean to provoke you. I hope we manage to speak about matters in an acceptable way. Do take a cup of coffee and enjoy the cigarettes.

Alice: They are very happy with the coffee and the cigarettes.

We seem to have averted this potential attack. I do not continue with the prior line of questions and turn to something else that I hope is more acceptable to them.

Christoffer: I am very pleased with that. If they like scaring people and if it is a game to them, I wonder if there is a way for us to give them some of what they like without anyone getting hurt? What if we showed them a gory movie? A really gory one. Should we consider that?

Alice: Maybe. But I don't like movies like that at all.

Christoffer: Nor do I. But it isn't for us. We could play it on my computer monitor in the corner, so we didn't have to look at it. Only The Others. And maybe it should be something that isn't really realistic and something funny. Otherwise I wouldn't be comfortable showing it to them anyway. Maybe something comical like one of Peter Jackson's old movies.⁶

Alice: I guess we could try that.

Christoffer: If they don't know how to do anything else than the things they do; may I tell them a bit about how to be kind and what love is? Would that be okay?

⁶ I chose Peter Jackson's movies *Braindead* and *Bad Taste*.





Alice: Yes. I would like that.

Christoffer: Others, I would like to tell you something about how to be kind. An example may be something like being interested in what another person cares about and being respectful and mindful of what matters to another person. For example, Alice loves her rabbit and it means a lot to her that he is safe and well. That is something you could be mindful of. You have this ability to put images in her mind. That is a skill you have. If you were to show kindness, you could give her images of her rabbit being safe and happy, or that he is eating the food she gives him and enjoying it. Alice may very well appreciate such images because she loves him. That is my take on it anyway.

Alice: What you are saying is correct.

Christoffer: What do The Others have to say about it?

Alice: They don't like me saying it.

Christoffer: Is that perhaps because they would like to come off strong and hard at all times, and maybe want to seem intimidating to me? Might there be something about this that The Others are concerned might lead to them losing face and appear in a way that they themselves regard as weak?

Alice: Yes, that is right. Why do they do that?

Christoffer: My guess is that it is a way for them to maintain authority and influence over your life and discourage us from what we are doing. I am very interested in being considerate to The Others. Do you think you might be able to say what their response is without it provoking them too much?

Alice: I suspect nothing could happen from doing so. They are interested in it.

Christoffer: The Others are interested in kindness?

Alice: Yes.⁷

Christoffer: They are interested in how to be kind? Wow! That is very joyful for me to hear.

Alice: It is embarrassing for them.

⁷ Alice and I would like to add an update to this. I explained kindness to The Others, taking Alice's rabbit as an example. In 2019 Alice did in fact report to me that The Others had begun to show her images in her head of herself taking good care of the rabbit. I took great joy in hearing about this and thanked The Others for this act of kindness towards Alice.





Christoffer: Okay. I am very happy that they are interested, though. Perhaps we can tell them about kindness when we meet? By the way, did you try offering them a bed to sleep in?

Alice: Yes, I make the bed for them. I still have nightmares, but The Others aren't always in them.

Christoffer: Okay? So maybe they use the bed? You Others, do have another sip of coffee and your last smoke for today.

Alice: They are very appreciative of the coffee and cigarettes.

Christoffer: I am happy about that. That is also a way of showing consideration and kindness.

Alice: They say it is odd.

Christoffer: With the bed? Well, maybe. I don't think odd things are necessarily bad, though, just for being odd. Perhaps being odd mostly means that some people have trouble dealing with it and that because of this one must act with some discretion with certain things. So what if it is odd if it works? I think this comment about oddness is the stuff The Others say to confuse us.

Alice: Yes. And it is hardly any more odd than that The Others are here. That would be the oddest thing.

Christoffer laughing: Indeed.

Over the coming meetings, Alice informs me that she now speaks with The Others every evening. She lays out a pillow for them and tells them that they may sleep beside her.

We carried on with these practices, experiencing ups and downs in relations with The Others. We also made the additional discovery that The Others like to watch movies. It became apparent to us that The Others were quite interested in violence. We deduced this from the extreme violence of the images they put in Alice's head and how they encouraged her to be violent to both herself and other people. So maybe they had a thirst for blood? I suggested to Alice that perhaps they would enjoy seeing gory movies? Maybe this could satisfy their thirst for violence? The Others accepted this, and accordingly we added this to the hospitality that they received in my office: They would get the chair behind my desk, a hot cup of coffee, a pack of cigarettes and I would put on a gory movie on my computer so that they, but not Alice and I, could watch it on my computer. We have kept up these elements since September 2018. Both being fans of Ghibli movies, we also considered the possibility that the character of Mr No-Face in Chihiro – Spirited Away might help us to understand what kind of beings The Others were. Interestingly, The Others quite liked the comparison and allowed us to explore this connection without interruption.

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Evaluating in October and November 2018

We kept up the practice of offering The Others cigarettes, a cup of coffee and putting on a gory movie for the meetings in my office. During this time we engaged with The Others and tried to understand who they are and how best to interact with them, arriving at a practice of very cautious diplomacy. We also talked about other matters, however, and The Others were by no means the only concern for Alice. In October and November, Alice made some evaluations:

Alice: I like this practice of trying to understand them. And I like that it is like we are on an adventure. That makes me feel better. It is easier to live with them that way. When they are not simply something that needs to go away, but someone we can try to understand. Maybe they can learn to be friends? Don't you think they have already changed?

Christoffer: Yes, I do. We are able to have a conversation with them now. That was not possible before.

Alice: They say it is stupid.

Christoffer: I suspect they say that because what we are talking about seems alien to them, but at the same time, I suspect they are interested in it, even though they may feel embarrassed about it. Maybe they need time? Without us putting pressure on them.

Alice: How?

Christoffer: If we are kind to them and give them cigarettes and coffee and show them movies, and then just allow them to sit there and observe us, then maybe they will learn something, and it won't seem so alien to them?

Alice: I like the bit with showing them movies. When I know they are watching the movie, then they aren't paying so much attention to me. Then I know they are doing something else. It reminds me of something about horses. If you try to push a horse too much, they won't do anything. They'll be stubborn. I once had a horse that would step on my foot. If I tried to push him away, he would just put in more weight.

Christoffer: For the sake of helping other people who may want to try to talk to magical beings or voices and teach them to be friendly, could you describe how you do it?

Alice: When The Others are mean to me, I think to myself that I should be gentle towards them. That way I am doing something instead of just taking it. That means that I act in the situation. I guess that is a positive thing, whether or not it has an effect on The Others.

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Christoffer: Do they reply when you speak to them?

Alice: They don't always reply, but they do react to it. Their response can be both positive or negative. They sometimes create stories or movies in my head. Then I tell them "I don't want you making movies in my head. I don't like those movies." I try to be gentle and mild. I don't feel like being angry at them – I feel sorry for them. I have come to realize that when I talk to them, I am automatically nice to them without making any effort to. I speak calmly and in a friendly manner. I regard them like Mr. No-Face in Chihiro – Spirited Away or like a horse, and then I wouldn't be angry. Surprisingly, that is quite easy for me. The Others aren't going away, so if I am supposed to be mad at them then I'd have to be very angry all the time. I try to consider how it may be tolerable that they are here.

As Alice told me this, The Others try to interfere, clearly not wanting her to say these things. They compelled her to slap herself and had her say they don't exist.

Christoffer: Others, I would like to apologize for moving too quickly. I am aware that we are discussing things that are difficult for you and that you don't feel at ease with. I may ask more questions and say more than you like due to my enthusiasm and curiosity. I would like to assure you that I do not do so out of a lack of respect for you.

Alice: But I do want to share my knowledge. That is for me to decide.

Christoffer: I agree with you. Your experiences, your knowledge is yours to decide about. Others, if this is something you do not appreciate, may we compensate you in some way?

Alice: The approach that we have now means that I feel MUCH better. It makes it exciting to discover things about The Others and find a way to live with them. I think I have accepted that they are here and that has given me a different approach. The Others are very happy about the coffee and the cigarettes and showing them movies is also really good. It takes their attention off me. The Others have changed with all we have been doing lately. They are becoming likeable. Since we have taken this approach, I feel better. It makes it better. It is like going on an adventure. It feels like we are Alice in Wonderland, trying to figure out how to interact with strange creatures.

Dealing with Aggressions and Calming Down The Others

We provide here an excerpt from our conversations that exemplifies how The Others are sometimes enraged and how we have tried to learn to interact respectfully with them under such circumstances. This is from late 2018. Prior to this conversation, Alice had generously

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allowed me to reveal some of our explorations in a teaching context. I started out telling her about the teaching and the responses from the participants. The Others had a hard time with it. They had her hit herself twice. Each time, I spoke calmly to them, like: "Others, I suspect something about this concerns you or makes you uncomfortable. That is okay. I would very much appreciate your words here. Please allow Alice to pass on your concerns. I promise to listen and take it into account. I don't want to make you any more uncomfortable than what may be absolutely necessary." And as they kept having a hard time and began threatening to directly hurt me also, thereby scaring Alice quite a bit, I added "Alright, Others. I hear you. I understand what you are trying to tell us. I won't say another word about this for now. Please be calm and relax. I have heard you. I respect you. I will stop this for now." Then I asked Alice if they were calming down, but they were not. They were acting violently. Being aware of Alice's experience with horses and having the feeling that The Others were acting like an agitated animal, I asked Alice:

"If this was a wild, agitated horse and we were in an enclosure with it, what should we do?"

Alice: Be kind towards it. And calm.

Christoffer: Okay. Others? You are welcome here. You are welcome to be here. I understand that you have a concern. That is okay. That is perfectly alright. I am listening to you. I hear what you are saying. Are they still wild?

Alice: Yes.

Christoffer: Is it helpful if I am quiet for a while?

Alice: Maybe.

I stayed completely quiet for a while and tried to relax myself as much as possible and breathe slowly.

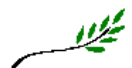
Christoffer: (Whispering in a most calm and unafraid way) Let us try to calm ourselves right down. Get the heart rate down. Breathe slowly. Like with a horse.

We were quiet for a while. Alice moved her head side to side, like someone being slapped, but then these movements subsided, and she just sat still in her chair. I decided to attempt to speak to The Others again, looking into the space behind my desk across the room where we seat The Others.

Christoffer: You are welcome here, Others. It is okay. I wish you no harm whatsoever. You are safe. Nothing will happen to you or Alice. No harm will come to you. You are welcome. You must be exhausted! You may relax and have a smoking break. Please do not hesitate to do so. Are they more calm now, Alice?

Alice: Yes. They are still saying ugly things, but they are calm.

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Christoffer: That is good, Others. Very good. You are doing well (I am bearing in mind what Alice has once explained to me about the importance of positive feedback for animals). Just enjoy your coffee and another cigarette. That is all good.

Alice: They are very happy about the cigarettes and coffee.

Christoffer: Good, good. Very good. You are welcome. It is my pleasure.

As promised, we did not discuss the material from the teaching any further. Then Alice said she had something to say. At this point, she was relaxed and able to speak quite freely again and it seemed resolute that The Others were calm again. Alice then told me that since last week, she has been speaking to The Others a great deal and told them many things, more than she can readily summarize. And she has asked them:

“Why do you not want me to keep living?”

Christoffer: A very good question! Did they answer it?

Alice: Yes, they did.

Christoffer: What was their reply?!

Alice: The Others say that they feel very bad and do not desire to live any more. If I die, then the connection between us is dissolved.

She added that she had also been telling them when she doesn't appreciate what they are saying to her. She has been disagreeing with them about matters such as their assertion that she was ugly. In reply she had said “aah I don't think that is entirely accurate”. They seemed surprised that she answered them back and did not attack her for it. She had also been talking to them about how they often claim that they are not really there at all. Suddenly, Alice and I both felt that knowing how The Others feel and why they wanted Alice to die, really helped us to make sense of their actions. Alice concluded “I feel so sorry for them”. I did too.

Christoffer: Do you think we were asking a lot from The Others today?

Alice: I think we are.

Christoffer: Reminds me of back in June when a lot of things happened that was completely new for The Others. Maybe today is like that. I guess we have to be very respectful and move slowly.

Alice: I am sorry about that. Is that evil?

Christoffer: For me?

Alice: Yes.





Christoffer: No, not at all. Of course, my curiosity wants to carry on, but I also want to respect The Others and I don't want anyone to get hurt, and when The Others are agitated, they hurt you. I don't want that. I am alright with this. It is okay that we must move slow.

Alice: Okay.

Alice and I hope that the above provides an example of the kind of diplomacy and respect that was required to interact with The Others and the ways of calming them down that we developed. This excerpt also mentions a discovery that had a significant impact on our perception of The Others: They were suffering and were trying to break down Alice so that she would kill herself in despair, giving The Others relief from their pain by ending their existence. Although we could not support such a project, it did help us to understand the motivations of The Others and to feel some sympathy for them. This led us to wonder why they didn't just wait, as eventually Alice would die of old age. But they didn't have the patience for that. We began to explore possibilities for making life more fun for The Others so they would not long for death so much. Perhaps the smoking breaks, coffee and movies already provided them with some relief? They very consistently appreciated this hospitality no matter what other sentiments they had concerning me or Alice. Alice also discovered that they would at times be able to share a sense of humor. Their sense of humor was dark and even morbid at times, but on occasion, Alice could join them in what they found comical and have a laugh with them. She also discovered that they tended to support her in being angry and in having a strong sense of justice. Over time, Alice did begin to express this more openly, perhaps to some satisfaction for The Others. They also seemed to appreciate being spectators to her computer gaming. At a later point, Alice began to practice a form of martial art, and this appealed a great deal to The Others. We hope that these developments do indeed contribute to making existence more bearable for them.

We also discovered some of the reasons for The Others being in such pain. It turned out that they were frustrated that they could never do what they wanted because Alice resisted them. They wanted to be violent and express their rage. We came to suspect that rage could in fact be their basic nature, but because Alice was not able, and furthermore didn't want to do the kind of violent things they liked, they could not channel their explosive energy into the world and ended up burning in their own rage. Here we are only summarizing these explorations. We hope perhaps to be able to make this knowledge available at some point in the future.

Hospitality is put to the Test

In April and May of 2019 there was an incident in which Christoffer and The Others had a fall out with each other. This involved Christoffer becoming frustrated with them and withholding the hospitality we had established. We include here an account of this incident, as we suspect it





gives some indication of the effects and challenges of hospitality towards magical beings like The Others.

Some very positive developments were taking place in Alice's social life in March of 2019, she had decided to care less about what other people think and just do what she liked, and she was collaborating with her mother to organize the written material from our conversations to make it easy to use in daily life. At the meeting where Alice informed me about these positive developments, The Others were quite calm, and earned a big sticker.⁸ They also repeated a desire they had expressed to me before: Their desire to be friends with me. Similar to the first time they approached me about such a prospect, I thanked them and stated my desire to also be friends with them, and that in order for us to be so, Alice would also have to be their friend, and they would have to respect her right to live her own life. I then informed The Others that I have come to regard Max's voices⁹ as friends over time, and that they have expressed concern for my wellbeing, and in light of such a development, I see friendship as a possibility. But it must include Alice. I also gave Alice an abbreviated account of how her discoveries are proving helpful to others.

Through April, Alice, David and I experimented with developing ways for Alice to provide hospitality for The Others like I did in my office. We hoped that this would contribute to giving them some peace of mind and time to rest beyond the meetings in my office. At this time, the hospitality in my office was going very well and we wanted to extend that. I gave her some of the cigarettes I keep for them to take home and give them, and David composed some tentative words of acknowledgement that Alice might read to them in the evening. Alice also suggested setting out a plate of biscuits for them.

At the end of April, Alice had been experimenting with reading respectful words to The Others and offering them some cigarettes from me in the evenings. They hadn't responded to it, and Alice was concerned that they might try to harm her when she speaks to them, which was unlike last year when it had a positive effect on them. The Others were reasonably calm in my office, but they were still cruel in Alice's daily life, and she had now found it necessary to resort to ignoring them again. It seemed what we were doing was no longer having much effect outside my office. During a conversation about this, I had just mentioned to her that I was working on a draft about our work with The Others and handed it to her, and she suddenly froze, made a sudden movement of her head and stared directly into my eyes. This is something she only ever does in exactly this circumstance and declared in a most urgent tone of voice that "The Others are not there. They don't exist. It's just a lie". I questioned this,

⁸ At this time, we would give The Others little stickers as acknowledgements for their respect for Alice and I. Alice had suggested this as a way to give them positive feedback on their behavior. The Others enjoyed this and were eager to get these colorful stickers that Alice had purchased for them. We would put them in a special little booklet with a date for each.

⁹ See Haugaard and Max, 2019.





referring to all our work and all my observations and our knowledge of this being a diversion by The Others. But she strongly maintained it, apologizing for making a fool of me. I asked, “why would you lie about all this?” She replied, “to get attention and because I am evil”. I disagreed and added that “all people want attention. What that means is having one’s existence acknowledged by others and your life being attended to by others. Everyone needs that. I know that sometimes people who self-harm are told that they do it for attention and this is taken to be bad, but I disagree. If someone does something like that for attention they are certainly in a desperate situation, and the fault is one those who are not paying attention”. Alice nodded in agreement with my view. I then spoke to The Others and complained to them about this, telling them I know full well why they do this. Alice repeated the claim of their non-existence, and then began hitting herself. At first, she stopped when I told her to please cease, but it started again soon after, and I reached over to gently hold back her arm, at which she said, “please don’t hurt me!” I replied that I wouldn’t dream of doing anything of the sort. Then Alice informed me “I want to kill you”, but with the facial expression of someone who is scared of what response this will provoke. I told her that I did not believe that for one second and that I know her to be a considerate person who appreciates these conversations, a very strong proof that she does not want to kill me at all. The Others didn’t stop, however. I suggested changing the topic so that we could talk about everyday matters while we listen to music as usual, hoping this might satisfy The Others. It seemed clear to me that they could not accept what we were talking about. This did calm them down and we could finish our meeting as usual.

I became very frustrated with The Others, however, as I had begun to expect them to be significantly more accepting of Alice and me by this time. This violent response from them confused me, and I found their turn for the worse towards Alice outside of my office quite demoralizing. I experienced a moral dilemma: Is it right for me to persist in giving The Others hospitality even if they return to attacking Alice? Would I be expressing some kind of acceptance of their return to aggressive behavior by doing so? Or should I make it clear to The Others that I expect them to give something in return for my hospitality and that reverting to attacking Alice like this would have consequences for our relationship? How could I consider being friends with The Others if they act like this? Would I betray my loyalty to Alice if I kept treating The Others like respected guests while they compelled her to hit herself? I decided to do what The Others seemed to be asking me to do: To act as if they don’t exist. This is what I did on the following meeting. I told Alice that I would respect The Others’ claim about their own non-existence, and as a consequence of their non-existence they could not meaningfully be guests. I poured coffee for Alice and myself, but none for The Others, nor did I pull out a chair for them and put out cigarettes or put on a gory movie. Instead, I followed up on Alice’s news that she had decided to pay less attention to what other people think about her. The Others interfered, however, angry that they were not getting their smoking break and movie as usual. I explained to them that the reason was their behavior at our last meeting, and I told them that I expect them to treat Alice with respect and refrain from attacking her in order to get hospitality in my office. The Others refused.

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The next week, now in mid-May, I maintained non-hospitality and once again The Others were hard on Alice. Seeing as they were not backing down, Alice and I agreed to return some of their privileges. I pulled out the chair for them and set out the cigarettes. A couple of days after this conversation, I was contacted by Alice's mother who told me that Alice was having a lot of trouble with The Others and that they were beginning to have some success in pressuring Alice into self-harm. They were trying to get her to pour boiling water over her hands and put her hands on a burning hot stove. Her mother informed me that this turn for the worse had happened just within the past week. I quickly scheduled a meeting with Alice, and it was immediately apparent that The Others were highly agitated and aggressive. Since the last meeting, I had been fortunate to be able to consult another co-researcher on her knowledges of interacting with very aggressive voices - specifically voices that feel hurt and threatened and are prone to despair and lashing out.¹⁰ Her advice was clear: "You must soothe them. Be sweet and understanding. Calm them down with sugar and reassurance. Standing up to them agitates them immensely". As I had this in mind as well and as it seemed clear to Alice and me that my attempt to get tough on The Others was quite ineffective, I immediately apologized to The Others for having deprived them of hospitality. I acknowledged this as being entirely my mistake and made a promise to them that I would never deny them hospitality in my office ever again. Prior to the conversation, I had already expected that something like this was necessary and had made preparations. Therefore, I was able to immediately pour them a hot cup of coffee, set out their cigarettes and put on their movie. At this, The Others calmed down from their highly agitated state. In this conversation, Alice also told me that she had not been able to take her medication regularly for a period of time. She would focus on doing so from now on and did take it regularly over the following days. When we met again a few days after, The Others did very well, and things seemed back to the normal before this incident. Alice continued to investigate ways of treating The Others at home and found that showing them their gory movies on her computer worked very well. She would put on a movie and this would give her one or two hours where their attention was off her and she could be very much in peace.

By the end of May, Alice was doing okay again and had been out with friends and quite busy. The Others were somewhat exhausted from Alice's busy-ness and just relaxed in my office and she and I just spoke freely. She would continue to play movies to The Others at home as this had proven very helpful. We seemed back on track.

This incident coincided with a period of irregularity of antipsychotic medication, which is likely to have affected Alice. However, there did seem to be a close connection between specific actions and the behavior of The Others: They specifically reacted with aggression to the fact that Alice and I talked about writing a paper about her discoveries, and were enraged by my withdrawal of hospitality and immediately calmed down when I apologized and restored the

¹⁰ I am indebted to Rose for her advice. See Rose and the Whispering Voices in the present volume.





hospitality. This seems difficult to account for only in terms of the action of antipsychotic medication, and we wonder if this incident does give some indication of causal effects of our interactions with The Others, in both negative and positive directions. We have included this incident considering it as being of some value to evaluating the practice of hospitality that we discovered.

Evaluation in Early 2020

The Others no longer interfere with Alice's life. They have been very calm and content in my office since the latter part of 2019. As of March 2020, even when they are enraged or become active at home, Alice is not very frightened by it.

Alice has received antipsychotic medication throughout this exploration of hospitality with The Others, and even before we developed this particular approach. This medication has not had any significant effect on the presence of The Others in all the time I have known Alice up until we discovered their appreciation for hospitality. In the time that we have worked with this approach, we have been able to observe direct connections between our actions of hospitality or lack thereof and the level of aggression and interference from The Others. In early 2020 Alice evaluates the developments in her life in the past year and a half:

Alice: The Others aren't really a problem in my daily life now. They are there, but it doesn't interfere.

Christoffer: I have certainly noticed that for quite some time now, The Others have not interfered with our conversations here in my office. And they used to do that a lot. They would try to shut down the conversation more than once. If I recall correctly, they have not done that for several months, going back to at least late 2019. Is that correct?

Alice: Yes.

In February 2020 The Others no longer interfered at all during our conversations. Alice told me that there was a peaceful relationship between her and The Others now. This included her daily life, and not just at our meetings. When she felt bad now, it was not due to The Others, but because of other matters. Even when The Others wanted her to do something dangerous, it didn't really scare her. She called this a significant improvement. She gathered relations could worsen again. I suggested that if they did then our present knowledge of them may well give us the means to deal with such an eventuality and Alice agreed.

One of our practices over the past year has been to give The Others a sticker for every meeting where they have not attacked Alice. A small sticker if they remain reasonably calm and a big sticker if they do not violently interfere at all and are either just calm or engage constructively in conversation. We began to give them stickers in the beginning of February 2019. It was Alice's suggestion to do so as a way to help The Others learn to engage in a more calm and





friendly manner by praising them for getting it right. We kept this practice until March 2020, after which it was interrupted by covid-19 lockdown. I (Christoffer) have reviewed the booklet with stickers, and in that time of having weekly meetings, we have given The Others 38 big stickers. There are three small stickers. In addition, there have been a few occasions where they got no stickers – specifically at the time of my temporary withdrawal of hospitality. The booklet also contains a note from the very beginning of 2020 that states Alice’s evaluation at the time “for several months, The Others have been calm both at home and in Christoffer’s office”.

Christoffer: What is your impression of the causes of this change in your relationship with The Others? There used to be regular attacks, constant threats and commands to harm yourself or other people that before our discoveries did in fact lead to regular self-harm. You were hospitalized recurrently, including the use of physical restraint out of fear of self-harm leading to brain trauma. The Others constantly interfered and threatened you into silence. Now The Others engage in conversation and are calm and not frightening. You have received antipsychotic medication through all this time. What is your evaluation of causes here?

Alice: I don’t think it is because of the medication, because the medication has never worked before, and it would be very strange if it just suddenly had an effect.

Christoffer: What do you think has made this change then?

Alice: I think it is because of what I have done. I have gotten my life more together. I do things that I like and enjoy. I have friends now. And also because of what we have been doing.

Christoffer: From speaking with you on a regular basis from when you first got antipsychotic medication and through our attempts at dealing with The Others before we discovered hospitality and then practicing this hospitality over a prolonged period, I have the same impression. It would be strange if antipsychotic medication could suddenly account for this change in relations with The Others. And I believe we have seen an indication of causality when The Others and I fell out.

When Alice and I made the discovery about smoking breaks in May 2018, Alice had lost faith in having a future. She could see no life worth living ahead of her and expected to die in the near future. As of early 2020, Alice has a plan for her life and is working to develop the skills to realize it. She has friends, practices martial art, engages in creative activities and has regained her ability to read books. She does not perform self-harm and does not consider suicide. She was last discharged from psychiatric hospitalization in May 2018, which was just before our new discoveries and new approach.





Between November 2013 and May 2018, Alice was psychiatrically hospitalized 13 times. I have had weekly meetings with Alice beginning in February 2015 and from that time and up until the point where we discovered a new approach in May 2018, Alice was psychiatrically hospitalized 8 times (out of the 13 in total). After we discovered a new approach with inspiration from Max and Victoria in May 2018 and up till the time of writing (December 2020), Alice has not been psychiatrically hospitalized at all. She did come to the psychiatric emergency room in July 2019 and was offered hospitalization, but she refused and left the hospital. The reason for this episode was a period of feeling bad and being more vulnerable to The Others after having come home from exciting but also exhausting travels during the summer holidays. Alice was determined not to be hospitalized and she did slowly recover without it.

Christoffer: Would you regard our collaboration concerning living with The Others as being a success?

Alice: Yes. I think it is a success.

Alice on Therapy

The following consists of Alice's comments to the process of our explorations and the nature of our collaboration from a written correspondence with David Epston:

At first, I didn't want to speak with Christoffer, so I didn't say a word. Of course, I was too anxious to do so anyway. I expected him to give up on me after he would become impatient. Others had told me that it would not be helpful to speak to anyone. I assumed what they meant by that was that I would be a waste of resources. This was because no one had persisted with me for more than six months. One day, by coincidence, we found out that we both love anime and the movies of Hayao Miyazaki. That opened a door for our conversations to begin. Christoffer seemed very happy knowing this and as well it made me happy as well. At first, I was not comfortable speaking about 'Spirited Away' as it had scared me the first time I watched it. But since then I have come to appreciate it very much as it has proven very helpful for us. There was something else that was different about Christoffer. He never scolded nor was unkind to me when I was reticent as so many other professionals had. It took me at least three years to be reassured that he would be consistently kind as I had very good reasons for such skepticism. He reassured me that I was trying my hardest and did so explicitly and often. In other interactions with professionals, I ended up with a sense of not doing my best and as well being responsible for how badly I felt. He didn't discard me like others had. He didn't say I was impossible to help because I didn't progress immediately.

It took me a long time to get that impression because I was so afraid and nervous in the beginning. But that was not because of anything pertaining to Christoffer. It was because of the state that I was in and how I was feeling. But once he started giving The Others cigarettes, I thought, "okay this is different". Some time later, we really got to work with The Others and I experienced that Christoffer had a completely different approach to 'hearing voices'/magical

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beings in general. He didn't want to get rid of them!!! This surprised me a great deal. It was a positive surprise. He wanted for me to coexist with The Others because we both knew that getting rid of them would probably be too much to ask for at first - I've lived with them since I was a child and the earlier approaches to make them go away hadn't worked. I didn't know if it would work but I thought it couldn't hurt to try it. I had a lot of faith in Christoffer so if he thought it was a good idea, I thought I would go along with it. Still his approach to The Others baffled me as it was so different to the other professionals I have met. He gave me 'Max' and 'Victoria' to read and after that we made the discovery, more or less by accident, of the offer of cigarettes. And from there, we started making discoveries.

Closing Remarks

Alice and Christoffer kept the practice of treating The Others to a chair, cigarettes, coffee and a gory movie from mid-2018 and until Denmark entered lockdown due to covid-19 in March 2020. Since then, we have corresponded over the telephone and discovered that The Others, who at that time had been very calm and undistruptive for some time, did not react negatively although Christoffer could not extent his usual hospitality over the phone. In fact, it proved to not be necessary to maintaining the wellbeing of The Others at this time. As of December 2020, Alice very rarely visits Christoffer's office, and we only keep in touch over the phone. However, Christoffer's promise to The Others still stands, and at any time when Alice does decide to visit, he will provide the hospitality that he has promised The Others.

A striking and consistent element of this period of discovering a way for Alice to live with The Others, has been their response to basic hospitality. They have consistently expressed their satisfaction and joy with being offered cigarettes and coffee. It would appear to have been a game changing discovery. It may seem very odd indeed that a 'phenomenon' like The Others would respond to something like that. None the less, it consistently proved to be the case. In addition, Alice discovered that:

- It is easier to deal with The Others when they are not in her head. Knowledge about voices and talking to them assisted in this.
- Alice wondered if being kind to The Others and taking care of them could help The Others to evolve, perhaps even to become friends. Our experience seems to indicate that this is indeed possible. The Others did become calm and likable over time and increasingly desired friendship. They even gave Alice pleasant images of caring for her rabbit after having been introduced to such an idea during our explorations.
- Trying to understand The Others and not trying to get rid of them, made them easier to live with and made Alice feel significantly better.
- Responding to The Others in a mild and positive way provides a way to respond and be active in relation to them. Alice found this to be preferable to "just taking it" or fighting with them.





- Exploring ways of relating with The Others and getting to know them, created a sense of excitement and adventure that contributed to feeling better.
- Accepting that The Others are there, rather than rejecting them, provided Alice with a different approach that she found preferable as it made her feel better.
- She discovered at least part of the motivation for the aggression of The Others: They were suffering and wanted to die by means of Alice's death. Their suffering was related to being unable to express their aggressive energy through Alice.
- Gory movies and martial art seemed to provide an aggressive outlet for The Others, perhaps helping them to feel better.

I (Christoffer) wonder:

- What is the significance of such gestures of giving directed at 'magical beings'?
- Are 'magical beings' able to learn or evolve from observing and participating in practices of kindness, diplomacy and hospitality?
- Does the behavior of 'magical beings' depend to some extent on how the people they are attached to, as well as other people around them, respond to the 'magical beings'?
- Are some 'magical beings' in distress? And if so, is it possible to assist them to find peace of mind?

Acknowledgements

Christoffer:

I would like to thank Alice for allowing me to accompany her through this part of her life's journey and to thank her for her confidence in me. Knowing Alice is a great joy, and I have come to know her as a very considerate and caring person who has always treated me with great kindness. I am impressed and inspired by her courage in striving to find ways to co-exist with The Others and her persistence in the face of fear and despair. These explorations have been a huge contribution to my knowledge of magical beings and how to interact with them. I look forward to her further journeys with excitement. Thank you very much for collaborating with me to also make some of these discoveries available to other people by way of this paper. I hope and do believe it may help others.

I would also like to thank The Others for receiving my hospitality and appreciating my attempts to make them comfortable. Including their forgiveness when I have been clumsy and gotten things wrong at times. I really hope that I have managed to provide them with some peace and relief. I would also like to thank them for taking an interest in some of the things Alice is doing with her life. The Others have on several occasions expressed their interest in friendship with me, and I do truly hope that I may count them as friends and that Alice may as well. I have asked a lot of them at times and I hope to have provided them with some significant measure of respect, acknowledgement and relief in return. There will always be a place for The Others

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when Alice visits my office. My thanks also for their approval of this publication. I hope that their example may encourage others to explore respectful relations with beings like them.

Thank you Victoria, Max and Rose for sharing your knowledges of living with voices with Alice and me.

Alice and Christoffer would like to thank David Epston for participating in this journey of discovery. Thank you also to David Epston for his help work on editing this paper.

Consent

The name 'Alice' 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. Alice has contributed directly to this paper by means of comments, corrections and she is also explicitly quoted in the text. Prior to submission and publication, Alice 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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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 a 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.

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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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