

## Hearing Voices

by

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1983 was for us a year of bereavements, of family and close friends. One was the death of a young priest who, after an all too brief ministry in a neighbouring group of parishes, was diagnosed with cancer. While he was in hospital in Aberdeen, my wife and I visited him frequently and spent as much time as we could with him. Then, when the hospital could do no more for him, he went home to his mother in Perth who insisted on nursing him at home to the end and discouraged visitors. Having a strong heart, he was, like Charles II, 'an unconscionable time dying'. He was in great pain and the situation was very distressing. One afternoon Careth (my wife) was crossing the concourse of Aberdeen railway station when she distinctly heard his voice, saying, "It's all right now". He died early the next morning. As far as I am aware, nothing quite like it has happened to her before or since.

Let me move on to a very different instance of hearing voices. One day I was asked to go to the mental hospital in Aberdeen to see a young woman who was very distressed. She said she was hearing voices, malevolent voices, which assured her that she had sold her soul to the Devil and was irrevocably damned and destined for Hell. I told her that she should not believe the voices because the Devil was a liar and the father of lies, and she could not possibly have sold her soul to him without knowing it. I then suggested a Celtic-style circling prayer to keep the devils at bay and blessed her. Shortly afterwards she was discharged. I honestly doubt whether I had vanquished the voices (most spirits seem allergic to the appropriate medication), but at any rate she seemed grateful and turned up on two or three occasions at evensong, the second time bringing a boyfriend. Thereafter I lost track of her.

These two incidents represent, it seems to me, the two extreme ends of a diverse range of phenomena that are generally lumped together as 'auditory hallucinations'. This is an unfortunate term, implying as it does that there is something wrong with hearing voices; that it can never have a positive value. Yet many perfectly sane and normal people have at some time in their lives heard voices when no source could be found and no-one else heard them, and it is often a memorable experience and a turning-point in their lives. Probably more people than we realise do hear voices but tend to keep quiet about it out of a fear of being classified as insane. The experience is, in fact, far too diverse for there to be a single, simple explanation. I propose to consider three different kinds of voices.

There is, firstly, the single significant moment, a voice conveying a message of importance to the hearer. Secondly, there are the persistent voices suffered by otherwise normal people which they would gladly do without. Such voices are akin to tinnitus or to the phenomena described by Oliver Sacks in *Musicophilia*, a kind of broadcast or gramophone record which the sufferer is powerless to turn off: a great distraction and a hindrance to proper concentration and normal activity. Finally, there are the voices which are symptomatic of certain kinds of mental illness. These three I propose to discuss in reverse order, so as to get out of the way at the outset the idea that anyone who hears voices is necessarily mad and probably a danger to himself and others.

When a psychotic patient tells others that he hears voices, it seems obvious that there is no external source: it is all in the mind, and such voices can properly be described as auditory hallucinations. Even so, Wilson van Dusen, an American psychiatrist greatly influenced by the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, found it profitable to treat the hallucinations of his patients as realities to them. He even found it possible to speak directly to the hallucinations and carry on a dialogue with them. He was able to classify the spirits with whom hallucinators appeared to be in contact as of two kinds: a lower order who displayed a limited vocabulary and range of

ideas, but with a persistent will to destroy and marked hostility to any sort of religious belief and practice. For those who suffer from them they can make life hell. Much rarer are higher order spirits, of which he says, “in general the higher order is richer than the patient’s own experience, respectful of his freedom, helpful, instructive, supportive, highly symbolic and religious. It looks almost like Carl Jung’s archetypes, whereas the lower order looks like Freud’s id.”<sup>1</sup> This distinction is similar to that drawn by Mark Fox between psychotic hallucinations and mystical experiences. There is a difference in *feeling*: mystics find their experience joyful and positive, psychotics find theirs negative and frightening. Both differ from what we regard as ‘normal reality’, but for psychotics their unnatural experiences are involuntary and unwelcome, whereas mystics return to normal, function successfully in the so-called ‘real world’ and can communicate their experiences coherently. Thirdly, psychotics have delusions of grandeur, whereas mystics become less egocentric, cultivate a quiet mind and experience a self-emptying.<sup>2</sup>

The Dutch psychiatrist Marius Ronne has concluded that “the real problem is not so much the hearing of voices as the inability to cope with them.”<sup>3</sup> Van Dusen remarks that “the similarities between Swedenborg’s findings and what hallucinated patients reveal is striking”:

From this some might conclude that Swedenborg was simply mad. Yet a lifetime of appropriate behaviour and an almost fabulous productiveness belies this. I only wish I had such a madness. In contrast, my psychotics have lives that have spiralled in on themselves and are more than usually unproductive. It appears Swedenborg traversed a realm experienced by these people but did so with a great gift of intellect and a capacity to understand, describe and relate to others. Swedenborg, a very gifted normal, passed through the same region which besets and psychologically destroys the mentally ill.<sup>4</sup>

Moving on from voices which are one of the symptoms and possibly one of the causes of certain kinds of mental illness, let us consider next the problems of ordinary, otherwise normal, people who find themselves involuntary listeners to voices they have not summoned and seem unable to dismiss. The American author Daniel Smith begins his study of voice-hearing, *Muses, Madmen and Prophets*, as I have done in this paper, with a personal reminiscence. In his teens he and his brother were charged by their father with transcribing the autobiographical notes their grandfather had made. In doing so, they came on a brief section of just over three hundred words entitled ‘Voices’, which began:

I have always heard them, but it took some time for me to recognise they had a significance. Mostly they appeared when there was a decision-making problem. You had to listen carefully or you missed it. More often than not you did miss it. When after a decision was made, incorrectly, I would think back in retrospect and recall that a voice in my head had told me the proper thing to do.<sup>5</sup>

The old gentleman was obviously quite happy with his voices, made no attempt to conceal their existence and found them useful, though he apparently put them to fairly mundane and trivial uses like betting on horses and playing card games. The really startling thing, though, was that when the boys’ father read through the transcript they had made and realised that his own father had spent a lifetime listening to what others might consider imaginary voices and was quite comfortable about it, it came as a considerable shock to him because he too had spent a lifetime hearing voices, but had gone to great lengths to conceal the fact because he thought that if it became known he would finish up in a lunatic asylum. In the end, the strain of keeping the voices secret had led to a nervous breakdown, but even after the discovery that his father had all along been hearing voices without being bothered by it, he never really came to terms with *his* voices, and his family learnt that it was wiser not to talk about them.

In this instance, the gift or curse seems to have been inherited, though not into a third generation, since Daniel Smith himself does not hear voices, though he once experimented with

a tape designed to simulate the experience of those who do. The voices on the tape definitely belonged to van Dusen's lower order category – mindless, malicious and embarrassing. It is not an experiment I would care to replicate. Smith comments that whereas in the past – indeed, for the greater part of human history – hearing voices almost always produced a positive reaction both in the hearer and in those he told about what he heard, nowadays the reaction is invariably negative. As one of J.K. Rowling's characters in the Harry Potter series remarks, "Hearing voices no one else can hear isn't a good sign, even in the wizarding world."

All this may, however, be set to change, because of pioneering work by researchers at the University of Maastricht. After interviewing hundreds of adult voice hearers, many of whom had no signs of mental illness, they concluded that people could learn to control disturbing voices by talking back to them. Then, since voices mostly emerge during childhood, they undertook a four-year study of children who were having problems with 'voices'. Half the sample had been having mental health care at the start of the study, half had not. By the end of the four years, more than half of those who had initially needed psychiatric help no longer needed it. They concluded that it is quite normal for young children to have imaginary friends but that most of them grew out of it; that hearing voices is often triggered by some trauma such as illness, bereavement or abuse. A broken home or bullying at school frequently results in an outbreak of initially scary and disruptive voices. Three quarters of the children in the survey had ceased to hear voices by the end of the study, and the others heard them less often and were less bothered by them.

One particular instance I find revealing. A teenager who began to hear voices after joining a Satanic cult was admitted to a psychiatric hospital but made no progress until his father contacted the researchers Ronne and Escher. Their approach, which seems to me remarkably like van Dusen's, was to get the boy to describe his voices in detail. He was able to divide them into two groups: psychotic/evil and paranormal/good. He then began to make good progress; after two years his psychotic voices had disappeared. He still heard a paranormal voice, but was happy with it as it provided moral guidance and kept evil at bay.

Sandra Escher, one of the Maastricht research team, believes that hearing voices is a variation of the norm, like left-handedness, rather than an abnormality. I have never heard voices, but I am left-handed, and although I have never been penalised for it, I am aware that in the comparatively recent past every effort was made to force children to be right-handed, often with dire results. For those who hear voices it could be a great blessing if society could be as open and tolerant as it is about us cack-handed sinistrals. As Escher says, "Some people regard hearing voices as a curse, but others see it as a gift, something that makes them special".<sup>6</sup> In the wake of the Maastricht research, there are an increasing number of self-help groups, such as the U.K. Hearing Voices Network, and an increasing realisation that drugs to suppress voices are not the only answer.

So far I have been considering persistent voices, mostly unwelcome. Let us turn now to those that occur either relatively rarely or only once and that have for the recipient a positive significance. Much of the relevant material is to be found in Mark Fox's book *Spiritual Encounters with Unusual Light Phenomena* and Timothy Beardmore's *A Sense of Presence*: both draw for their examples on the archives of the Religious Experience Research Unit.

Let us consider first cases of dramatic conversion, of which the classic instance is that of St. Paul, recounted three times, with slight variations, in the New Testament. It is true that a major feature of the story is a blinding light: it took Paul several days to recover his sight, and I suspect it was never perfect – certainly when he wrote rather than dictating he wrote with large letters. But the determining factor in his experience was a *voice* – a voice which called him by name and told him what to do: a voice which those with him did not hear. A comparable experience, quoted by Mark Fox, happened to Susan Atkins, a follower of Charles Manson, while she was serving a prison sentence for her part in his crimes. As she tells the story,

As plainly as daylight came the words, “You have to decide. Behold, I stand at the door and knock!” Did I hear someone say that? I assume I spoke in my thoughts, but I’m not certain. “What door?” “You know what door and where it is, Susan. Just turn around and open it, and I will come in.” Suddenly, as on a movie screen, there in my thoughts was a door. It had a handle. I took hold of it and pulled. It opened. The whitest, most brilliant light I had ever seen poured over me. In the centre of the flood of brightness was an even brighter light. Vaguely, there was the form of a man. I knew it was Jesus. He spoke to me, literally, plainly, matter-of-factly spoke to me in my nine by eleven prison cell: “Susan, I am really coming into your heart to stay.”<sup>7</sup>

Dramatic conversions are comparatively rare, but quite often voices come at times of stress and are accompanied by a significant change of mood. Beardmore classifies such voices into a number of subgroups. Some are comforting or reassuring, others offer specific guidance. In both cases the voice heard may be identified either as the voice of God or its equivalent, depending on the religious beliefs of the recipient, or as the voice of someone known to the hearer, usually someone recently dead. Beardmore is emphatic that a change of mood is basic to the experience, and that it does not follow from the words heard but accompanies them. Both Fox and Beardmore chronicle mainly one-off experiences, life-changing or at least mood-changing, but unrepeated. Daniel Smith, however, gives case studies of two historical figures for whom auditory experience was both habitual and important as a guide to action.

The first is Socrates. Because, like Jesus, he wrote nothing we are dependent on speeches attributed to him and accounts given by others. The principal source is, of course, Plato. One feels that like St. John he entered more fully than anyone else into his master’s mind; but unlike St. John (at least in my view) he went on to develop his own philosophy, in the later dialogues using Socrates as little more than a peg on which to hang his own ideas. Nonetheless, two things are clear and, I think, incontrovertible. Socrates was tried and condemned for not worshipping the gods of the city, and he admitted at his trial to a guiding voice, which he described as a *daimonion*, which does not mean a little demon but something like Jiminy Cricket, Pinocchio’s conscience in the Disney film. The interesting thing about this voice, as Socrates described it, was that it never told him what to do; it spoke only to stop him doing something. When it did, he always did as he was told and desisted. As it did not inhibit him from turning up at his trial, Socrates concluded that the outcome was nothing he need fear, even if he were condemned. We have too little to go on to be able to say much more about what Smith calls Socrates’ ‘personal divinity’. That it was important to him is not in dispute. How exactly it operated we do not know.

When we turn to St. Joan of Arc the situation is different; instead of too little information we have almost too much: the transcripts of both trials, the one that condemned her and the one that posthumously rehabilitated her. Both, of course, were rigged. The judges knew before they started what verdict was expected, Joan, an uneducated peasant girl, was cross-examined repeatedly by experts, who had their own ideas about the nature of the voices which she claimed had laid on her a mission to raise the siege of Orleans, see the Dauphin crowned as the legitimate king of France, and drive the English out. In fact, she had been taken up and used as a rallying-point, and dropped when no longer needed or when her unrealistic military ideas had become an embarrassment. In a foolhardy escapade, she was captured by the Burgundians, who handed her over to the English; the French made no attempt to rescue her. To the English she was a witch: her voices must be of demonic rather than celestial origin, and it was up to the Church to prove it, and then condemn her as a heretic. The poor girl didn’t stand a chance.

In Richard Bauckham’s book *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* he remarks that “interviewing techniques, especially leading questions, may serve to feed information to witnesses who come to think that they remember it.”<sup>8</sup> Joan’s first trial illustrates this perfectly. As far as can be

established, Joan's initial experience as a teenager in Domremy was simply a voice. In a letter written by someone at the French court at the time of her early success at Orleans, it is described like this:

Suddenly a luminous cloud appeared before her eyes, and out of the cloud came a voice, saying, "Jeanne, you are destined to lead a different kind of life and to accomplish miraculous things, for you are she who has been chosen by the King of Heaven to restore the kingdom of France, and to aid and protect King Charles, who has been driven from his domains. You shall put on masculine clothes; you shall bear arms and become the head of the army; all things shall be guided by your counsel."<sup>9</sup>

This is closer to the event, but still second-hand testimony. At that stage, however, it seems clear that Joan heard a voice but saw no-one, and did not identify the voice except that it seemed to come from God. In fact, she did not at first believe it. To begin with, she was afraid of her voices, but later she came to rely on them and do what they told her; they became part of her and she could not live without them.

Pressed by her interrogators to be specific, she did not claim to have heard the voice of God. She thought it must have been mediated through the saints, picking out St. Catherine and St. Margaret, virgin martyrs whose images were in her local church, and St. Michael, whose role as captain of the hosts of heaven made him an appropriate figure to direct her military career. Under cross-examination, what had originally been just voices took on the detailed appearance of the saints as portrayed in images she would have seen. At this point the inquisitors had got her where they wanted her, because to them it was axiomatic that the demons could take on the appearance of angels of light in order to deceive the ignorant and unwary. As Daniel Smith says, "Unlike Teresa of Avila, who successfully evaded the Inquisition her entire life, Joan was not equipped with the education necessary to make academic distinctions between the bodily and the spiritual senses. She also lacked the knowledge that there was danger inherent in not making such a distinction."<sup>10</sup> Poor Joan, used, discarded, condemned and then when the political situation demanded it, posthumously rehabilitated. In the meantime, a perfectly genuine encounter with a disembodied voice had been first loaded with meaning and then hideously distorted in order to secure her condemnation.

We have established that hearing voices is not as uncommon as all that, but that the phenomenon takes a fair variety of forms, some positive, some very negative indeed. It remains to attempt some sort of explanation of what exactly is going on when someone hears a voice no-one else can hear, and for which there appears to be no external cause. It is, of course, quite possible for sensations of both sight and hearing to be stimulated in the brain without eyes and ears receiving any sense-impressions from outside. It happens to all of us most nights when we dream. Objects and persons in our dreams seem entirely real to us while we are dreaming, but whereas an observer might be able to tell from eye-movements or brainwaves or the kind of twitching one sees in sleeping dogs, it would not be possible for the observer to guess what we are dreaming about. The experience, however vivid, is utterly internal. In that sense, we all hallucinate with no stigma attached. The phenomena we have been discussing happen to people who are wide-awake. While it is tempting to classify them all as varieties of hallucination, I personally think it better to reserve that term for such distortions of perception as are caused by drugs or fever or some kind of brain damage. To class all hearing voices as auditory hallucinations suggests that they are abnormal and dysfunctional rather than just unusual and sometimes valuable experiences. Mark Fox sums up his study of a great many cases in these words:

What are we to make of experiences like these? Should we just dismiss them as fraud, fabrication and/or hallucination? Such an approach may appear attractive to sceptics. It is difficult, however, to invoke it as an explanation for many or even the

vast majority of accounts that form this study of light-forms because ... most come from sane, sensible, level-headed people, who have reflected upon their experiences for many years and who, in some cases have gone to great lengths themselves to consider and ultimately disregard all 'conventional' explanations for them.<sup>11</sup>

That the hearing we are talking about is not quite like ordinary everyday hearing is apparent in some accounts, where it seems that 'hearing' is something of a metaphor or analogy for an experience difficult to put into words. For example, one of the cases cited by Beardmore states, "Suddenly I *felt my name* – no voice – but such a sensation of someone calling me."<sup>12</sup> Again, Paul Beard, in his book *Inner Eye, Listening Ear*, says, "A medium sometimes 'hears' words but 'hears' them silently or in private thought. For others, a sentence can convey itself not in a succession of words but as an instant whole."<sup>13</sup> The Methodist theologian Frances Young speaks of 'loud thoughts'. On one occasion she was driving through Birmingham when it came to her forcibly, "You should be ordained." She says she finished her journey on auto-pilot, wrestling with this unexpected idea.

Common to all these experiences is the conviction that the source of the voice is outside the person hearing it, even though he or she may be perfectly well aware that it is not coming to the brain through the usual channels of the ears and nerves. It can be – indeed, it has been – argued that what one is hearing comes from some part of oneself of which one is not normally conscious. Nasty voices come from the murky depths of the unconscious, reassuring or guiding voices perhaps from some higher self. This may sometimes be true, but it is not a sufficient explanation for every case. Too often the message conveyed is, as far as one can tell, not something that would have occurred to the hearer unless it came from outside; it is so totally unexpected – unwelcome sometimes, sometimes mind-blowing in its implications.

It has been said that behind every ghost there is a conscious projector. I am not sure that this wholly true, since some ghosts seem to be merely place-memories with no entity – good, bad, or merely unhappy – actually present. It may well be, however, that behind every experience of hearing voices there *is* a conscious projector. This certainly seems likely when people hear a known voice. Peter Bander, in *Carry on Talking*, remarks, "I have come to the conclusion that the stronger the affinity has been between two people in their lifetime, the greater the chance of a voice manifesting itself after one of them has died."<sup>14</sup> When people identify the voice as God or Jesus or the Virgin Mary or the Angel Gabriel they are maybe giving form to the formless, but we need to remember that what is nowadays almost universally regarded as a pathological condition to be concealed if possible has for the greater part of human history been highly prized, and quoted as authority for religious teaching or for the adoption of a religious vocation.

Hearing the voice of God is not quite like hearing, say, the voice of a deceased parent. Although the prophets regularly say things like 'the Word of the Lord came to me', it is clear that they do not always mean that they heard *words*, spoken aloud. Elijah heard 'a still small voice' – one translation gives it as 'the sound of silence'. St. Ambrose claimed that the Word of the Lord came to him "without utterance ... without the sound of words." St. Teresa, a far more sophisticated person than St. Joan, could describe her locutions thus:

The words are perfectly formed, but they are not heard with the physical ear. Yet they are received much more clearly than if they were so heard, and however hard one resists, it is impossible to shut them out. For when, in ordinary life we do not wish to hear, we can close our ears or listen to something else, and in that way although we may hear we do not understand. But when God speaks to the soul like this, there is no alternative; I have to listen whether I like it or not, and to devote my whole attention to understanding what God wishes me to understand.<sup>15</sup>

At the end of his brief study of *The Presence of Spirits in Madness* van Dusen asks whether the spirits Swedenborg claimed to have encountered were merely pieces of his unconscious, or whether the unconscious is simply a reflection of this interaction with spirits:

That is, which is the substantive reality – the unconscious or the world of spirits? In the first place, I think these two are the same. If one asks which is cart and which is horse, I think Swedenborg’s explanation is the horse – the more substantive explanation.<sup>16</sup>

If he is right, there really are entities out there who are trying to communicate with us, but they use our neural apparatus to do so, feeding thoughts and ideas directly into our brains. Any reductionist explanation that denies this fails to account for all the facts. Interestingly, in a wide-ranging survey of entirely different unexplained phenomena, *Alien Intelligence*, Stuart Holroyd comes to much the same conclusion as van Dusen. he argues that:

Intelligences alien to that of physical human persons of the planet Earth exist; that they exist in forms both higher and lower than men; and that men should acknowledge their existence and attempt to comprehend and participate in their functioning ... We conclude, too, that there exist alternate realities or dimensions, inhabited by non-physical intelligences and that there are ecological relationships between these realities and the sensory and physical realities that are the primary data of our experiences.<sup>17</sup>

To sum up, hearing voices is a fairly common experience and happens to perfectly normal people: it is not a sign of madness, though it may sometimes accompany or even be responsible for mental illness. Some voices come from entities that are of low intelligence and malevolent intention, but others are encouraging, inspiring or challenging. What in the end is the significance of hearing voices for those of us who have not had the experience? As Daniel Smith says, “we are living through a period of spiritual ‘hearing loss’ ”.<sup>18</sup> All authentic and coherent accounts of such experiences from reliable and trustworthy witnesses help us to hold our own against the prevailing reductionist and materialist mind-set, and to continue to answer the sceptics in the words of Shakespeare’s Hamlet,

There are more things in heaven and earth  
Than are dreamed of in your philosophy.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Wilson van Dusen, *The Presence of Spirits in Madness*. New York, Swedenborg Foundation, 1983, pp. 13-14.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Fox, *Spiritual Encounters with Unusual Light Phenomena*. Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2008, pp. 180-181.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel B. Smith, *Muses, Madmen and Prophets*. New York, Penguin, 2007, p. 79.

<sup>4</sup> Van Dusen, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>6</sup> Reported in *The Guardian*, 16 November 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Fox, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2006, p. 356.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 170. For further details, see W.S. Scott (Trans.), *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, verbatim report. London, Folio Society, 1956.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

<sup>11</sup> Fox, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>12</sup> *idem*. p. 90.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Beard, *Inner Eye, Listening Ear*. Norwich, Pilgrim Books, 1992, p. 34.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Bander, *Carry on Talking*. Gerrards Cross, Colin Smythe, 1972, p. 26.

<sup>15</sup> St. Teresa, *Autobiography*. Quoted in Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 98. For St. Teresa, see *The Life of St. Teresa of Avila, by Herself*. (Trans. J.M. Cohen). Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1957.

<sup>16</sup> Van Dusen, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>17</sup> Stuart Holroyd, *Alien Intelligence*. Newton Abbot, David & Charles, 1979. pp. 216-217.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

