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My first recollection of voice hearing was when I was very young, around 6 years old. I would hear a very soothing maternal voice telling me that everything was alright, 'they' would 'protect me' and 'not to be afraid'. It was around this time, shortly after starting school, I found out, quite accidentally, that I was adopted. This voice remained during my early years and was always a great comfort to me. The adoption, however, came to affect me more and more. Everything I had felt so certain about seemed destroyed. Within my family the adoption was considered a secret and was only known to this circle. It was also made very clear that it was an issue which was not to be discussed at any time.

As I approached adolescence the range of voices increased and I was visited by four or five of differing gender and age. They now took on a much more critical tone and made disparaging comments regarding my actions. Still the maternal voice remained to soothe and mitigate the negative impact these voices were having on me.

Over the years I was to gain by subterfuge snippets of information regarding my adoption which added to my sense of loss, betrayal and rejection, as well as undermining my self-esteem. I was to discover that I had been sent back to the adoption agency by one couple as it was believed that I was defective in some way and possibly brain-damaged. In later years I was also to become the victim of abuse. I believe that it was not one specific traumatic event that made me susceptible to voice hearing but a succession of significant, distressing events which established a vulnerability to the repeated trauma I experienced, of being worthless, defective and unlovable.

Upon completing my schooling, the voices became more active and far more intrusive; they invaded all parts of my life and I felt I had no privacy and was constantly being observed and scrutinised. I lived in fear of the barrage of abuse that would follow any action of mine. I became increasingly anxious about mixing with others. I retreated into a solitary world as I endeavoured to make sense of what was happening to me. A complex and mystical explanation developed in which I believed that I had been chosen to receive a message from God. This message would relieve mankind of war and conflict and peace would prevail.

What I had to do was stay home and be ready to receive this message.
In the meantime I was being tested by demons and the devil (the voices)

to prove I was a worthy recipient of the message. I stayed in my house for eighteen years, not leaving except in the most exceptional circumstances. The voices exposed secrets that only I was privy to.

I began to study the Bible looking for references to myself, and my beliefs became more entrenched and even more fanciful. I was seduced by the notion that my suffering and miserable existence had some purpose and meaning to it.

Constantly I failed. I was unable to demonstrate the qualities required of me. The battle was becoming more and more difficult and I started to doubt that I would ever measure up.

I reached a point where I felt I could no longer continue the quest. I had no option but to kill myself. Surely God would grant me peace and then I would no longer be tormented – I would be free. While the desire to gain peace was overwhelming the will to live was stronger. With the help and assistance of a friend I decided I was going to have one last crack at getting the voices under control and, if that failed, I would know I had done all I could. I had been under mental health services for several years and although I was heavily medicated the voices persisted and my body was lethargic and yet agitated all at the same time.

RECOVERY

I decided that everything I was doing so far was not working for me, so doing the exact opposite made sense to me. I began to reflect and to critically analyse what was happening and I concluded that the demons had made a mistake in choosing me. I was not up to the task and if they had made a mistake in picking me then perhaps they were not as infallible or as powerful as I'd initially believed. In this process my friend was of great importance. My friend always allowed me to drive the process and come up with strategies to confront the voices. This demonstrated to me their belief that I was resourceful, competent and able to drive the recovery process, that I did in fact have the courage, resilience and capacity to heal myself. I had not been able to get this validation from clinicians. My friend's support was hugely affirming and established a sense of control within me that had long been missing in my life.

I decided to test this out. One of the first things I did was change my attitude towards them, so, instead of being fearful of them and bowing to their every whim, I embraced them as friends and welcomed their intrusions, greeting them with kindness and respect. As a consequence, my fear reduced, which in turn alleviated the distress I felt. Now when I heard a voice my anxiety level didn't increase.

I decided that I would set the demons some tasks. I gave them a simple task of washing the dishes unaided. They were unable to achieve this and so the seed of doubt as to their actual power was sown. I realised that the only power the voices had was the power I gave them. They needed me to perform tasks and to speak to certain people; without me they were impotent. It was me that held the power. This was a moment of enlightenment and the beginning of my own journey of taking back control.

It was never my intention to get rid of the voices. They had been such a large part of my life that the idea of living in a silent world scared me. I still had a few that were positive and comforting. I decided that they could stay, but the ones that caused so much distress would have to learn some manners if we were going to coexist.

Now I began the process of reclaiming my life. I approached the voices as I would approach any relationship and began to put parameters around how and when they could contact me. I also began exploring other areas of my life. I thought about the role the voices played in my life and discovered they fulfilled a need in me – a need to feel connected to someone, a need for a friend, a need to belong. As unkind as they were, they were only telling me the truth about myself. The voices kept me so busy I had no time for any other relationships and they also spared me the pain and hurt I had experienced by numerous rejections from people in the past. At least they did not desert me. As the voices receded, feelings of loss and grief filled the void.

I decided I needed to take the risk of inviting real people into my world and cautiously and clumsily this became my new quest. It proved to be pivotal to my recovery. Developing relationships and being exposed to people who showed they could be kind, caring and flawed, just like me, freed me from the need for voices. As I put more time and energy into these relationships, the negative voices receded further and further back.

I devoted my time to just getting my voices under control and it took approximately nine months before I felt completely confident that I had mastered this. I eventually got to the stage where I began to venture out from my home. I continued my education, went to university, made friends and gained employment. Instead of having a life totally consumed by voices, now I began to devour my ordinary life.

It was several years later that I decided to work in the field of mental health as an advisor and educator. I was approached by a clinician who wanted to start up therapy groups for voice hearers. She discussed her ideas and we talked about my understanding of the process and the key points I'd learnt from my own process of dealing with voices.

On reflection, these key points were as follows:

- The voices have something important to say, but they only know how to communicate in a negative, clunky way.
- For me to make sense of the voices I needed to interpret what it is that they are truly trying to tell me.
- I realised that what they have to say is important, so they won't let me ignore them.
- There is a strong relationship between voices and stress. Often they are trying to tell me I'm stressed or worried about something and I need to do something about it.
- Arguing with them doesn't help; they always win.
- They can't always be trusted to tell the truth so I need to evaluate what they are saying and see if there are other possible explanations for what they have said to me.
- The only power they have is the power I give them. I'm in charge here, I'll decide what I do as it is only I who must face the consequences, not the voices.
- They react to the way they are approached. Instead of being fearful of them and bowing to their every whim, I have embraced them as friends, greeting them with kindness and respect. As a consequence my fear has reduced.
- They might fulfill a need in one's life; for me, a need to feel connected to someone, a need for a friend, a need to belong.
- They might fill a void of feelings, of loss and grief.
- They might represent the demons in one's life. For me, I took back the power of my demons.

The mind is a powerful tool and I identified my personal strengths and worked with them. I found it almost impossible to change my emotions but I could change the way I thought about things; I could change my attitude to the voices – which influences the way I think, feel and respond to them.

By drawing on my own experience of getting the voices under control, together with the clinician, we extracted the skills and knowledge that I had acquired and converted that understanding into the basic content for hearing-voices group sessions. Then, after feedback from the participants, we refined these skills further. These are the same skills and approach that I use today in order to function and thrive.

I have found my niche. I have had the opportunity to take what was a catastrophic event and turn it into a positive life-affirming vocation. I am surrounded by people who are as passionate and committed as I am about working with people to enhance their well-being and their lives. I have found where I belong.