

Cincinnati Friends Meeting
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Close Encounters of the Vocal Kind
by **Donne Hayden**

When I was a child, I attended the 1st Baptist Church in Clovis, New Mexico. At the end of the sermon, the preacher would have the congregation sing every verse of several hymns as he urged people to “Come on down, come on down and admit that God has spoken to you this morning. Accept Jesus into your heart and be saved—you know God is speaking to you.” I used to sit in the pews and wait—fervently wait—for God (or Jesus—in my mind there was no difference) to speak to me. But He didn’t. And I grew suspicious that He didn’t actually speak to all those tearful people going up to the front of the church, especially some of the kids, who—I knew—weren’t as nice as I was. Surely Jesus wouldn’t speak to them and not to me (I was a bit of a spiritual snob at the time).

Hearing the voice of God is nothing new in Hebrew and Christian traditions, which are filled with references to the Voice of God— the voice that spoke to Moses from the burning bush; the still, small voice that spoke to Elijah out of the silence; the voice from the Heavens the disciples heard as the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus—“This is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased.” Nor is hearing the voice of God a new thing in Quaker tradition. Take George Fox, for instance, and the well-known account in his *Journal* of the voice that spoke to him: “And when all my hopes in men were gone,” he wrote, “so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could I tell what to do, then, oh! Then I heard a voice which said, 'There is One, even Christ Jesus that can speak to thy condition.' And when I heard it my heart did leap for joy.”

Not only did Fox and other founders of the Religious Society of Friends receive guidance through hearing a voice, but Friends’ traditional understanding of vocal

ministry is that God or the Holy Spirit may use our vocal cords and speak Truth *through* us, “playing” us as a musician plays an instrument. Friends spend much of worship time in quiet waiting, *listening* for guidance from the Inner Guide, the Inner Christ, the Holy Spirit.

More than most other denominations Friends are open to and indeed, actively seek, first-hand encounters with the Divine. As B.A. Robinson, writing for the Religious Tolerance website says of Friends, “Their religion does not consist of accepting specific beliefs or of engaging in certain practices; it involves each person's direct experience of God. . . . There is a strong mystical component to Quaker belief.”¹

I’ve been thinking about this “mystical component” in Quakerism partly because I’m reading a book that Charlotte Hullinger gave me—*Entering the Castle: An Inner Path to God and Your Soul* by Caroline Myss. (By the way, Charlotte is planning to offer discussion of this book as a spiritual nurture group.) In the introduction, Myss makes some statements that deeply resonate with me. For instance, she writes: “It is very risky to speak on behalf of God, especially with a tone of absolute authority. . . . But it is possible to speak with integrity of our own experiences with the God who has come to us individually” (page 3).

George Fox is a good example of this. He had exhausted all avenues of inquiry about God; he had questioned traditional religious authorities whose answers left him uninspired and dissatisfied. Then he had a first-hand encounter which changed his life—and subsequently, all of ours. Most of us have heard this story so many times we may not actually “hear” it any more, so let us examine the *nature* of George Fox’s first-

¹ B.A. Robinson, “Quaker Beliefs and Practices,” *Religious Tolerance* website, www.religioustolerance.org

hand experience of God: First, he heard a voice which he recognized as not coming from himself nor any other being around him. Second, that voice responded directly to the question that troubled him, i.e., how can I learn what is true about God? The answer was that Jesus Christ *himself* could “speak to” Fox’s “condition, “ Jesus Christ himself could teach Fox what he needed to know. That’s it. “There is One, even Christ Jesus that can speak to thy condition.” One sentence. On the face of it, a one-sentence response from God hardly seems enough to warrant an all-out rebellion against religious authorities and institutions of the time and the founding of a new movement and eventually a new denomination.

How many of us really believe George Fox heard an actual voice? Do we, from the vantage of 21st century rational and scientific thought, dismiss his experience as some sort of hallucination or vision? Sort of a brain burp that happens to some people like George Fox and Moses. Perhaps even a touch of schizophrenia. Those who suffer from schizophrenia hear voices, yes. But my understanding of schizophrenia is that frequently several voices exist who identify themselves by name or function; in schizophrenia voices speak often and may give confusing information that leads a person to destructive behavior.

I wager, however, that some of *us* have heard a Voice, perhaps only once. We rarely if ever talk about it because to do so we risk being considered mentally unstable. “I can’t tell anyone I heard a voice—they’ll think I’m crazy.” And yet, having heard that Voice, we are changed forever. The kind of voice I’m talking about, the kind that George Fox heard, speaks rarely—perhaps *once* in a person’s lifetime. It does not self-identify, though the hearer may understand it to be the voice of God or of something higher. This voice will not command actions that cause pain or suffering to oneself or to others. And

hearing this voice results in a permanent change of attitude and approach to life for the person who hears it. Such first-hand encounters, for instance, go a long way toward banishing religious doubts our rational minds toss around. Think about it—how many times does God have to speak to you before all doubts are erased and your life changed forever?

In the Quaker publication, *What Canst Thou Say?* contemporary Friends share mystical experiences, like the following one by “Anonymous,” who fears exposure and judgment, even to an audience of readers one would expect to be fairly open to the idea of hearing the voice of God.

Anonymous explains that his friend, Sarah, has “myriad health problems, massive financial burdens, and a spirit like no one I’ve ever met.” One day as Anonymous works in his garden, he writes,

I stood up to admire my handiwork and out of nowhere came a voice, as pure and sweet as the breeze I’d been enjoying all day.

Sarah needs some money. I stood up and looked around. No one. Nothing but the wind and the brilliant, clear sunlight. And I knew instantly Who it was.

“How much, Lord?” I asked.

“I’ll tell you. Get going.”

As Anonymous considers taking a shower before leaving, “a great weight” came upon him and “the Voice came again. *‘I said, get going. \$254.’*”

Anonymous goes to the bank, withdraws the money and takes it to Sarah’s house, but she is not home, so he leaves a note for her to call him. When she does, he blurts out “Hey Sarah, . . . God said you needed \$254, and I’ve got it here.”

Later, when Sarah arrives at his home, she tells him she has been praying for help with her financial needs; she shows him the piece of paper on which a list of expenses is written with the amount of money she had to have that day highlighted. \$254.²

Here is another example. When I met Mary, she was a woman in her late 50s, a factory worker, and a student in my beginning composition class at Ivy Tech Community College. She wrote a personal narrative about a “significant event” in her life.

As a girl living in Richmond, Indiana, she and her friends used to go to the movie every Saturday during the school year. One Saturday morning in April, 1968, when she was about 13, Mary woke up. As she sat up in bed, a voice spoke to her: "Don't go to town today." She looked around to see who had spoken, but no one was there.

Mary talked her two girlfriends out of going to the movie as usual, coaxing them to stay outside and ride their bikes because it was such a nice day. So they rode their bikes around the hillside neighborhood on the west bank of the Whitewater River in Richmond. This is what they were doing when they heard the explosion, and rode their bikes up the hill to look across the river at the smoke and fire.

On that day in April 1968, four square blocks in downtown Richmond were destroyed in a natural gas explosion; forty-one people were killed and 150 more injured. The movie theater, where the girls would normally be on a Saturday, was demolished.

Mary is an ordinary person—not a George Fox or a Moses, not even particularly “religious”—certainly no one “important” in the world’s eyes. Yet something—or Someone—considered Mary important enough to speak to her, to warn her; and because she *listened*, she survived. If hearing the voice of God is any indication, we’re *all* important to God.

² Anonymous. “Get Going,” *What Canst Thou Say?*, August 2008, No. 59.

And here is an example of a scientific type, a non-Quaker, whose life was changed because he heard a Voice say *one word*. On a spring morning in 1979, Dr. Jon Klimo, a psychology professor at Rutgers University in New Jersey, woke up and lay in bed, as he says, “procrastinating getting up and started.” It is worth reading his experience in his own words:

As I lay there, without much of anything going on in my head, just lazily lying there with my eyes open and no particular sensate stimuli occurring in my local environment, I heard, absolutely clear as a bell, loud and clear, unmistakably and distinctly, right in the middle of my head, just as if I had stereo headphones on, what sounded like a fairly deep mature male voice. It only said one word. It said my first name, "Jon."

But it was how that voice said my name that had a whole world in it for me experientially. It drew that one word out slowly, but only in the realistic way someone might if they were cajoling, teasing, coaxing me. I have never before or since heard a voice in my head to which I could attribute no external stimulus. agent, or person. And, never before or since have I experienced so much connotative affective/cognitive association and meaning in any voice, inner or outer.

The source of the voice seemed to know me intimately. . . . And I sensed that the source was mildly bemused by my just lying there, by my procrastinating. So the tone was mild, humorous, rebuking, teasing: Jon.... It's time to get up, Jon. Time to get going. Come on, Jon, you know what you need to be doing here. That was the sense for me behind that one, loaded, drawn-out word, my name.

I just sat bolt upright, in shock, with goose-bumps, excited. I had no doubt whatsoever that the voice was not coming from my normal external senses. I also knew equally for certain that it was not a voice that I was in any way making up. It was not me, it was other than me, external to me, belonging to someone or something else entirely. But it was meant for me. And in this sense, I am one of so many people, who have had anomalous experiences, such as an N[ear] D[eath] E[xperience], who will tell you that what they experienced is not open to discussion so far as whether or not it's real or just an hallucination . . . Like so many other such experiences and reports, it is experienced as even MORE real than "normal real."³

Whether or not you've ever heard a Voice, I hope you will remain open to the possibility that perfectly sane folks can have such an experience. And these "first-hand encounters of the vocal kind" have more powerful effects on our lives than any religious instruction or dogma.

Though we tend to want direct communication, and we wish God would just make it clear what we're supposed to do, like tell us *exactly* how much money our friend needs: "254," direct address is only one way the Divine reaches out to communicate with us—there are *many* other ways if we are open and pay attention.

We all know at some level, however, that even *one* encounter, *one* first-hand experience with God, hearing the Voice of God just *once*—this is enough to change our lives, and most of us fear what that change will do to the lives we've built. As Caroline

³ TASTE (The Archives of Scientists' Transcendent Experiences) website <<http://issc-taste.org/arc/dbo.cgi?set=arc&ss=1>>

Myss puts it, “Even as we crave spiritual intimacy with the divine . . . we also have deep fears about God and the ways that an encounter with the divine will change our lives. We long for guidance but are terrified of revelation. We pray to know God but fear God’s answers” (14) ⁴. Sometimes we may hear God’s voice and talk ourselves out of listening to it. . . .

⁴ Caroline Myss. *Entering the Castle: An Inner Path to God and Your Soul*. New York: Free Press, 2007.