

INNER VOICE EXPERIENCES:  
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF  
THIRTY CASES

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Throughout human history, the "voice within" has been described in religion, history, psychology, fiction, and myth. The psychological literature on these experiences has largely focused on individuals often seen as pathological, while the religious literature focuses on individuals considered inspired or possessed. Surprisingly little attention has been directed to the inner voice experiences of adults not in either of these groups. This study of selected reports of inner voice experiences describes an exploratory investigation, and suggests a foundation for further research into the experience.

The term "inner voice" refers to a significant subjective experience—the actual perception of a voice speaking internally and / or a vaguer "felt sense" of some inner communication. Just as the external voice communicates between one human being and another, the inner voice may communicate intra-psychically between one level of the psyche and another (Van Dusen, 1981).

*a  
significant  
subjective  
experience*

PERSPECTIVES ON "INNER VOICES"

Traditional psychology and medicine have long viewed "hearing voices" as equivalent to auditory hallucinations and thus as psychopathologic. This judgment has relegated the inner voice experience to the realms of pathology and abnormal stimuli. Similarly, in ordinary usage, the tone of an expression such as, "You must be hearing things," illustrates how a negative connotation creates reluctance to report inner *voice* experiences. Unless an individual is careful to translate a subjective

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experience of the inner voice into more acceptable terms, he/she may risk being labeled a misguided visionary, or a psychotic (Heery, 1988).

Children have an easier time with an inner voice. They move more easily between different levels of perception, creating imaginary companions, for example. Selective permeability has not yet been impressed on them and the cognitive grids they acquire in the process of socialization have not yet narrowed their range of perceptions (Heinze, 1985). Adults generally place no negative value on such childhood experiences, although the child is expected to "outgrow" such experiences after a while.

There is currently an increasing interest in the transpersonal dimension of human experience (Grof, 1985). Terms such as *superconscious* (Assagioli) are being used to suggest different levels of being within the individual. According to Assagioli (1965, p. 113), "Transpersonal Will is an expression of the Transpersonal Self and operates from the superconscious levels of the psyche. It is its action which is felt by the personal self, or 'I; as a 'pun' or 'call'."

a  
striving  
toward  
fulfillment

The interplay of these intrapsychic levels may express itself as the experience of an inner voice. This experience should not be classified as pathological, but rather be considered as a striving toward fulfillment of various aspects of the individual.

Many individuals who report a sense of the inner voice describe it as a strong, positive directive force in their lives (Raphael-Staude, 1977). It gives them the inner certainty to withstand the conformity demands of the external world. Carl Jung speaks of it as the "call" of a higher principle:

What, in the last analysis, induces a man to choose his own way and so climb out of unconscious identity with the mass as out of a fog bank .... It is what is called "vocation." ... Who has vocation hears the voice of the inner man. . . . To have vocation means in the original sense *to be addressed by a voice*. We find the clearest examples of this in the Confessions of the Old Testament Prophets. Nor is this merely an ancient manner of speech, as is shown by the confessions of historic personalities such as Goethe and Napoleon, to mention two familiar examples, who made no secret of their feeling of vocation. Now, vocation, or the feeling of vocation, is not perchance the prerogative of great personalities, but also belongs to the small ones ... (quoted in Assagioli, 1973, p. 115).

This concept of "call" or vocation as expounded by Jung appears to be closely akin to the Hindu and Buddhist concept of *dharma*, righteousness. *Dharma* literally means the univer-

sal law of nature, which, if violated, causes serious imbalance. This cosmic law is manifest not only in the natural world but also in the human world in conduct which supports the individual's progress toward full unfoldment (Heinze, 1982). There have been individuals who speak quite openly of the inner voice as the source of their conviction and authority. Mahatma Gandhi, both a spiritual and political leader, relied on "inner voice" as his primary guidance in life. Gandhi described the inner voice as full of power and authority. A year before his death the voice told him. "You are on the right track, move neither to your left, nor right. but keep to the straight and narrow" (Chatterjee, 1984, p. 99).

In the fifth century B.C. Socrates told of a voice that had spoken to him at crucial moments since his childhood. He referred to this voice as his "daemon," a spirit of that intermediate world where communication passes between the divine and the human (O'Brien, 1967). This voice "always forbids [when there is danger] but never commands [when there is no danger] me to do anything [ am going to do" (Jaspers, 1964, p. 10). For Socrates, the voice did not bring knowledge or suggest definite action, but merely said "no" when necessary. These two examples point to a major difference in inner voices: one with more mystical elements, and another working through the level of the superego.

*mystical  
elements  
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of  
superego*

The history of the world's major religions makes it clear that saints, sages, prophets, and teachers (such as Moses, Mohammed, and Teresa of Avila) have relied heavily on the inner voice as their inspiration, their guidance, and their authority. The inner voice experiences of these men and women have had tremendous impact on our world. But just as psychotics and schizophrenics have no monopoly on the inner voice, neither do saints and sages. Ordinary men and women in that broad continuum between these two extremes also report hearing inner voices. This study deals with the inner voice experiences of thirty adult men and women who are neither saints nor psychotics.

#### METHOD

Thirty subjects, all reporting having had inner voice experiences, participated in this study. Fifteen subjects, known to the author to have had inner voice experiences, were selected, and fifteen subjects were randomly selected from 50 respondents to a questionnaire on inner voice experience mailed to two hundred subjects on a psychological-educational mailing list in California.

The subjects' experiences of "inner voice" were explored in a naturalistic manner, allowing the various aspects of their experience to emerge with as little observer contamination as possible. My intention was to explore their experience in depth-especially its positive relationship to their exterior life.

I gathered demographic data from and administered the Thematic Apperception Test to these subjects, and conducted individual subject interviews (DeVos, 1975; Bugental, 1966). All thirty subjects were interviewed twice, with approximately two weeks between first and second interviews. The format was the same for all subjects, and the interval between the two interviews gave respondents an opportunity to reflect on the first interview and report any additional insights.

#### DATA ANALYSIS

*natural  
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The demographic, TAT, and interview data were analyzed to discover natural groupings of inner voice experiences.

Nine subjects (18 interviews) were selected as representative of the thirty subjects interviewed. This selection included a variety of inner voice experiences, occurring under varying circumstances, and a wide range of occupations, incomes, education levels, and life styles. The material was analyzed by the author, and a colleague who had extensive experience in evaluating subjective interview data. We independently read verbatim transcripts of the interviews, along with my notes of intonation patterns and silences during the interviews. We met and discussed our findings. There were some very obvious areas of agreement, and for those areas we questioned, we went directly back to the transcripts and tapes for clarification. Fairly stable categories of inner voice experiences began to emerge.

Three major categories of inner voice experiences emerged from the first nine interviews, and these were used as guidelines to analyze the data from the remaining interviews, refining and redefining the categories in the process. In addition, the results of the TAT were used to build a fuller picture of the subjects. The author and two colleagues with two and five years of experience in TAT evaluation reviewed the TAT results to determine if and how the material supported the three emerging categories of inner voice experiences.

The three categories in their final form are:

1. Inner voice experiences as a fragmented part of the self.
2. Inner voice experiences characterized by dialogue providing guidance for growth of the individual,
3. Inner voice experiences where channels opened toward and beyond a higher self.

### THREE CASE STUDIES

The following case studies represent each category of inner voice experience. The identities of the respondents have been disguised to protect their anonymity.

#### *Inner Voice Experiences as Fragmented Parts of the Self*

Eric is a thirty-three-year old liberal arts college graduate, married, with two children. His former job involved managerial work, but he is now unemployed and living with his wife and children at his in-laws. He has begun to study for his teaching credential, and is studying social work as well. His hesitation to commit to a career and support his family suggests that he is still fragmented in major areas of his life.

*fragmented  
parts  
of  
the  
self*

Eric reported the inner voice as having control over some situations, including leaving his last job, as if he had abdicated his free will to it.

I was absolutely a victim of the whole thing. I just sat back and the thing [inner voice] did it to me and I didn't have a vote about it. It was another takeover.

The experiences Eric reported led him in a positive direction, but he denies that the inner voice is a part of him. He sometimes questions its guidance but feels strongly that the inner voice has the final say in the matter.

I had stopped some relationships that were getting real negative, and I didn't have the courage to do that, but I got myself into the situation and a voice-over just came out of my voice and I said things that destroyed the relationship. I mean it [inner voice] finished the relationship, which was the appropriate and healthy thing to do at the time. I, in my individual personage, didn't know how to do that, so the voice took over.

Eric's inner voice experiences strongly suggest an expression of fragmented parts of himself, and this fragmentation seems to be leading him toward integration.

*Inner Voice Experiences Characterized by Dialogue Providing Guidance for Individual Growth*

Ruby is a married thirty-eight-year-old former educational consultant. Within the last year she has left consulting and is devoting her life to painting.

My inner voice is what tells me when to paint, when it's time and when it's not time, and when it would be futile. And my inner voice gave me the direction about quitting my job and doing what I'm doing with painting.

Note the emphasis here on dialogue with the inner voice, rather than its dictates, as in Eric's case.

I checked that [what I'm doing with painting] out a Jot. Last spring I was given an opportunity to apply for a state grant and become a consultant, and it seemed on the outside to me a real exciting possibility, but when I checked it out with my voice, my voice said "absolutely not," that it would get in the way of my painting. . . it wouldn't have given me time for painting, so what I see it [inner voice] really doing a lot now is directing me more towards my original intent, which was to paint.

*guidance  
for  
inner  
growth*

Ruby's change in profession is a direct result of her inner voice experiences. Note Ruby's phrase, "I checked it out with my voice." Ruby engaged in dialogues with the inner voice, actively using it for guidance in releasing creative energy; quite different from Eric's resignation to the dictates of his inner voice.

*Inner Voice Experiences Where Channels Opened Toward and Beyond a Higher Self*

Rob is a sixty-three-year-old writer and counselor, with three grown children. He lost a fourth child twenty-four years ago in a sudden illness. Rob resolved this loss slowly. He feels that parenting has been the most rewarding and humbling experience of his life. His thirty-eight-year marriage has been an enriching experience and seems to provide a secure base for Rob's sense of being deeply rooted in life.

Rob's belief system includes the inner voice as "a deeper level of my own being." The experience of inner voice was a significant part of Rob's life as he finished his doctorate in divinity and became involved in work characterized as nonviolent, selfless action. He recounted an experience which happened when he was thirty-three.

It operated once, that I can remember, in the civil rights movement, when I was in Mississippi in 1961, and I was part of a visitation to Jackson, where the Freedom Riders were. There were a group of 40 or 50 of us in this room in a black college, and they were asking for people to volunteer to go with seven or eight into the airport restaurant, which meant we'd be arrested and go to jail.

They needed a white Protestant *minister*, and they asked two or three times. They were about ready to leave, and the Rabbi who was heading up the delegation said, "Well, we haven't got a white Protestant minister yet," and then I heard this voice say, "Well you've got one now," and that was me. I was so surprised that it was me, that I had said that. It came from some very deep place in me. I was hearing it and saying it at the same time. . . .

I wasn't uncomfortable about it. That's what I wanted to do, that's what I believed in, and that's what in my deepest self I wanted to do. I was never dissatisfied or upset or distressed by what I had said, but it surprised me.

Rob feels that there is a spiritual dimension, which he defines as "the I being part of a larger process," operating with his inner voice experiences. He sees the inner voice experience as closely related to intuition, but he made the distinction that his inner voice experiences were consistently a part of the spiritual dimension of being. There is an element of volition in Rob's inner voice experiences. He finds prayer and meditation helpful in contacting the inner voice when he chooses to do so intentionally, Rob also has inner voice experiences without deliberately seeking them, but intention is an important aspect of his relationship with the inner voice.

*toward  
and  
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#### INTERPRETATIVE SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The major interests reported by these subjects were, for example, astrology, parapsychology, and meditation. Participation in such interests suggests the possibility of a certain psychological openness on the part of the subjects. Also, twenty-one subjects (70%) of a sample of thirty reported practicing some form of meditation. Twenty-three subjects (76%) have been involved in some form of psychotherapy. These facts suggest a group of subjects who combine both psychological and spiritual interests.

The subjects showed a wide range of occupations, including both professional and blue collar work; annual incomes ranged from \$10,000 to above \$60,000. Twenty-eight of thirty (93%) had a college education, or a higher degree. These are subjects

who value education and can support themselves in a variety of occupations. Their age is also notable, ranging from 28 to 68, with the majority reporting that their inner voice experiences occurred between ages 35 and 45. On this basis, inner voice experiences may be age-specific. Midlife has been noted as a significant time for individuation (Jung, 1965, p. 196), and Heinze (1982, pp. 30-31) found that shamans reported first occurrences of inner voice experiences, predominantly either after puberty or at midlife.

All of the individuals in the third category of inner voice experiences as channels toward a higher self practiced some form of meditation on a regular basis, and expressed a deep sense of spiritual connection through these inner voice experiences. The sense of certainty expressed by these individuals was very similar to the certainty Arberman (1963-70) reports in mystics experiencing inner voices. It is possible that this last category of subjects attained a certain level of mystical experience which is in part auditory and which leads to positive selfless action, as described above in Rob's case.

*three  
reactions  
to  
spiritual  
awakening*

Assagioli (1986, p. 25) outlines three reactions to spiritual awakening which parallel the three categories of inner voice experiences emerging from this study. Assagioli speaks in terms of energies and levels of organization with regard to peak experiences. According to Assagioli, superconscious energies work with the individual according to the levels at which he/she can receive and integrate these energies. He observes that one possible outcome of a peak experience is that it fails to bring about a higher level of organization. Such experiences are often painful, and the individual may not recognize their transpersonal origin.

The positive outcome of such an experience is that the individual can be directed to the next steps necessary for fuller integration. Such an outcome of a peak experience, in Assagioli's schema, parallels this study's category of inner voice experiences as fragmented parts of the self. For instance, Eric has not yet recognized the transpersonal origin of his inner voice experiences, but they have continually led him to piece together various fragments of himself. He is searching for a career that will reflect his talents as well as support his family. He is no longer content to simply do a job, but through his inner voice experiences has formed a commitment to find work that reflects him.

The second outcome to peak experiences according to Assagioli, is less intense and involves a temporary neutralization of personality patterns. What remains is very important: "an ideal

model and a sense of direction which one can use to complete the transformation through his own purposeful methods" (1986, p. 25). This sense of direction is precisely what emerged with individuals in my second category of inner voice experiences, which essentially created a dialogue furthering the growth and development of the individual. For instance, Ruby's inner voice experiences guided her in the direction of changing her career to painting. This change, she reports, *has* been very fulfilling for her, and she continues to change and grow in a positive direction.

A third possible outcome of a peak experience, according to Assagioli, is a higher integration of personality. The individual's life is permanently transformed as a result of the experience. This type of integration is rare and can be compared to the third category of inner voice experiences. Individuals in this category are integrated and open to the higher self through inner voice experiences; they experience a permanent shift in their lives. In this study, this permanent shift in personality also was associated with selfless service-work without monetary or obvious ego gratification.

These findings suggest an ongoing interior education with the inner voice as the teacher. Alschuler (1987) proposes an inner curriculum based on a study of religious figures who had inner voice experiences. The experiences reported by subjects in the third category, where channels opened toward and beyond a higher self, showed some similarity with this inner curriculum.

*an  
"inner  
curriculum"*

First, according to Alschuler, contact with the inner voice brings into question the individual's prior beliefs about reality. Then, the individual goes through a process of intensive instruction, which may involve periods of isolation. The last stage of the curriculum is union, characterized by a fuller identification with the other world, a *tour* of heaven and hell, and a spiritual marriage with the inner teacher. Those individuals who have experienced this level of inner education go on missions of unification in the exterior world. Their knowledge of the "other side" is so clear that they want to make this side more like the other *side*. Although none of the subjects in this study reported this level of experience, the subjects in the third and most integrated category of inner voice experiences were consistently involved in missions of selfless service. Sometimes selfless service preceded, but it was always intensified after inner voice experiences. These subjects were in touch with an experience that transcended their individuality.

These findings suggest that psychotherapists might do well to consider a wide range of possibilities when a client reports

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investigation

hearing an inner voice. The possibilities could include such diverse processes as a fragmented voice, psychotic or integrated dissociation, extrasensory perception experience, intuitive experience, "vocation," or a spiritual awakening. The three categories emerging from this study may provide a beginning and much needed cartography for inner voice experiences. They may also serve as a foundation for further investigation into a little understood, but widely reported experience.

Finally, this study may help dispel the common stereotype of the inner voice as the prerogative of saints and psychotics, and thereby encourage research into its liberating effect on our human capacities.

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