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A Different Voice, A Different Autobiography: Letting My Authentic Voice Speak

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At times it manifests in an unnecessarily loud, aggressive tone of voice or a disproportionate amount of talking rather than listening. Eye rolling, smirking, sighing, and interrupting are also parts of my sometimes-negative communication style.

For the past few months I have been given the unique opportunity to explore my many selves, and my communication issue particularly, on a micro and macro level within the framework of various readings, films and discussions on self and society. I have had the chance to view an aspect of my life within the broader social context and to form linkages between my actions and the society and world to which I belong. C. Wright Mills points out the significance of this when he reminds his readers that “by the fact of his living [the individual] contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of society” (349).

My study did not begin as a desire to deepen my understanding of myself or my selves, or even an aspiration to explore ways in which individuals influence society and visa versa. I simply wanted to get some self control in social situations and find a

way to be my vocal self without disrespecting others in the process. I wanted to look at my *empirical self*, the self that can be studied, as a way of understanding something that is mostly unconscious (Zerubavel, 16).

When I decided on the topic for my self-exploration I tried to become more conscious of my communication style in various social settings. It was not long before my goal went out the window and I found myself right back in my usual ways of acting and reacting in social settings, displaying a trait in human thinking G. I. Gurdjieff calls forgetfulness. Observing this abandonment of the very objective of what I had set out to do, as I was going about doing it, solidified the importance of personal exploration into the reasons behind my ineffective communication style and why I had difficulty breaking away from it.

I hoped to understand my motives in a clear, concise way, but have come to realize that this is not a possibility, for human beings are indescribably complex creatures. In writing about motives, author Diane Bjorklund points out that “the concept of motivation includes both conscious and unconscious motives and therefore is not limited to voluntary activity as is the concept of will” (91). In other words, the so-called motives behind my communication can not be easily figured out, understood, written about, or changed at the conscious level. They are deeply rooted, profoundly multifarious, and forever changing.

George Herbert Mead writes about how having many selves is normal. “A multiple personality is in a certain sense normal,” he writes. “...There is usually an organization of the whole self with reference to the community to which we belong, and the situation in which we find ourselves” (24). Actions vary according to our inner forces and outer circumstances and are significantly influenced by both.

In her chapter on G.I. Gurdjieff’s teaching entitled “The Psychology of Ordinary Human Beings,” Kathleen Speeth explains

why in Gurdjieff's view it is important for us, and me, to explore and examine ourselves. It is important to consider "our condition as it is now, and our condition as it would be if we were to realize our possibilities, our destiny, to the fullest" (Speeth, 31). Studying the self in this framework gives us an opportunity to observe and examine our selves of the moment while working toward freeing our more essential selves. Self judgment and hatred are thereby removed from the equation in Gurdjieff's method of self-observation.

In Gurdjieff's view (Speeth, 48), personality is not static; it grows and transforms throughout the life course. Individuals go through stages in which they act in specific ways, and even within the same life stage different parts of personality emerge in various situations. In this exploration I have found myself questioning my true personality, as if there were such a thing. I am beginning to realize that the problem lies in my narrow definition of "personality." I had been thinking in terms of one "I" that should remain consistent.

In her essay, "Narratives of the Codependent Self," author Leslie Irvine writes, "in speaking of 'having a self' or 'finding oneself', people tell themselves a story that there is indeed a self to 'have' or 'find'" (140). When writing autobiographically I am challenged to view my selves and all my complexities, rather than focusing on solving a problem, or understanding an issue in its entirety. The goal has transformed to exploring my selves rather than *finding* myself, as if I were one simple entity. Similarly, in her writing on the "Uncertain Self," Bjorklund views *finding oneself*, as gaining a sense of identity (107).

Applying the knowledge I have gained through various readings on the relationship between self and society, viewing several films within the context of sociology, and learning from other students in classroom discussions, I have begun to understand the complexity of human behavior.

My many I's (Gurdjieff, 32), the different aspects of my personality/personalities that emerge at various times, are illustrated in the fact that I communicate differently depending on the social situation.

My voice is the product of countless influences, inner and outer, micro and macro, exploratory and mysterious. It has been fascinating to explore my voice within the framework of *inner forces*, which Bjorklund describes as instincts, drives, and traits, and outer forces, or society (125). From birth, my society, community, and genes have helped to form what I now refer to as my personal voice. In this way, it is not entirely personal, but instead a mirror of the world. As Mills explains, it is important to gain "an understanding of the realities of ourselves in connection with larger social realities" (351).

As a child, my voice was silenced at times and strengthened in others. As the middle child I was offered less attention, for I was the second girl, not the first child, not the baby. For this reason alone I melted into the background in some cases within our family. Contributing greatly to my role within our family was the circumstances of other members. The shaping of my voice during the formative childhood years was significantly influenced by each of the four people to whom I was closest.

My older sister was difficult as a child, more than outspoken, entirely out of control. Earliest memories are colored by her screaming and fighting, aggressively attacking those around her, including me. She had a particular vendetta against me and I was very afraid of her from a young age. Around her, I was silenced. My younger brother was the closest person in my life, and in his company, an authentic part of my personality was let out to breathe. When he was diagnosed with terminal cancer at seven years of age, my voice was quieted more, as I was expected to be in the background. Dealing with an out-of-control teenager and a young cancer patient was more than parents could handle so I did my best to be

quiet and undemanding.

The influence my parents had upon me was quite the opposite. Both political activists and community leaders, they always strongly encouraged me to develop the ability to speak out, especially against injustice. They urged me, by words and personal example, to step outside the box, to voice my opinion, even if it was not popular or excepted by the outside world. Especially as a female, my mother and father pushed me to use my strong voice and fight for my right to be seen *and* heard.

As a preteen I can remember speaking up when I thought things were unjust, illustrating a life stage written about by Carol Gilligan. In Gilligan's stage two, girls "feel compelled to 'blow the whistle' on acquiescence and applaud assertiveness" (204). As years past, my communication style transformed into what Gilligan accurately described in her following stage. "It is during adolescence," she writes, "that girls are in danger of losing their voices and thus their connection with others" (204).

The stage she explained was precisely what took place in my young life. I became introverted and silenced again, losing my voice, finding myself more concerned with fitting in and acting according to society's expectations of how a teenage girl should be. Instead of speaking up I began to say "I don't know," just as Gilligan describes in her stage theory. Sociologist Erik Erickson similarly describes this stage. He explains that "adolescents are concerned with who they are, how they appear in the eyes of others, and what they will become" (283). As an adolescent I was less concerned with using my voice, especially if it involved any controversial matter. Like many teens, I was conscious about what others thought of me, who I was, and what I was going to become. When I became an older teen I reclaimed my voice full force. In a relationship with a long-term significant other, I used my voice as a way to feel superior. I spoke in a manner that made me feel intelligent and my

partner feel inadequate. Similarly, in friendships I gravitated towards people around whom I could be the aggressor and they would take on the submissive role.

In addition to my family, society is tremendously influential in every individual's many I's. The world affects me internally in countless ways, even in relation to my work on this self-exploration. At first, I was concerned with writing in a way that would please others, putting their needs in front of my own. As author Charles Horton Cooley writes regarding ideas about the self, I am concerned with "the imagination of [my] appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification" (26). My original writing colored others as the victims and myself as the "bad guy." My initial thoughts on the communication issue were limited to thinking of myself negatively, as a subconscious way of seeming humble and gaining acceptance from my potential readers.

Through deeper investigation I have allowed myself to come out of the "bad guy" role and emerge as a complex person who is *part* of communication. In social settings my communication is influenced by society, for it often reflects social norms. For example, among women I am more apt to dialogue effectively. For years, women in our society have been taught to be good listeners, quiet and polite. With females, my communicative style consists of both talking and listening, sharing and responding. Among males, I find myself more apt to use my voice in an attempt to prove my worth; to show that I am smart or funny, that my ideas are valid.

It is imperative to explore ourselves by attempting to gain "an understanding of the realities of ourselves in connection with larger social realities" (351) which is what C. Wright Mills describes as *the sociological imagination*. Have I internalized the stereotypical gender roles that oppress the voices of women in this society, often rendering them silent or lacking confidence? Is my cri-

tique of my personal actions largely based on the looking glass self, judging myself based on the way I assume others judge me? Am I forming an opinion of myself based on the way I imagine others view and judge me? And, if that is true, do my goals around communication illustrate a desire to conform to the imagined view of others, and try to gain more acceptance? The irony in this possibility is seen in the fact that I often talk in hopes of gaining acceptance, and now I am considering silencing myself for the same purpose.

Mills urged his readers to ask several sorts of questions when performing social studies regarding society and history. He writes that it is important to question “what varieties of men and women now prevail in this society?...In what ways were they selected and formed, liberated and repressed, made sensitive and blunted?” (351). The work of Mills led me to consider the ways my self-judgment regarding my communication is a product of a society in which females have been silenced and oppressed for generations. I have internalized some of these social norms, thus I approached the exploration in terms of judging my voice rather than nurturing it and working on developing my listening.

I am not always the same when it comes to my ways of communicating with others. The many I's that form my personality, or personalities if you will, lead me to act in different ways depending on the social situation. When I am in school, for example, I am much more likely to get into a heated debate and lose my cool. If I am part of a discussion having to do with information about which I am familiar, I am likely to speak out excessively, whereas if I am ignorant of the particular subject matter I would probably not speak out for fear of embarrassing myself. I become both subject and object (Cahill, 21) in the conversation, and have a habit of attempting to manipulate discussions to go in the direction I want. I use attention-holding devices, loud talking

or interrupting (Cahill, 145) in hopes of captivating my audience and encouraging them to pay special attention to my thoughts.

I did an experiment recently, as a way of testing my behavior. I sat in a class during which the students were sharing their opinions and a certain social issue. People said things I strongly disagreed with and I felt myself physically reacting. I found that as soon as a classmate mentioned something about which I disagreed, it became difficult for me to focus on any of their further comments. My mind would latch on the particular thing they said and become stuck. I would then start thinking about how much I disagreed with them and almost not be able to contain myself, feeling the strong need to make my counter opinion known. In a case such as this, I would either use physical distancing (Cahill, 144), indicating that I was not paying attention, or would create an atmosphere in which my classmates knew that I disagreed.

In such situations I experienced increased bodily tension, as explained by author Ronald Wardhaugh to be physical reactions that come about when a person is waiting for a turn to speak (145). I actually had to breathe deeply, applying self-will (Bjorklund, 45) and restraint as to prevent myself from sighing, smirking, rolling my eyes, or some other form of unnecessary talking (Gurdjieff, 44). In her essay, “The Roots of Procrastination” (2003/4), Jennifer Kosmas explains that “as individuals, we communicate to each other through the use of symbols such as gestures, which are physical indicators of a predictable action and can stimulate a reaction.” Through my gestures, I can convey my contrary beliefs without words, which can be equally, if not more, ineffective, potentially damaging and inappropriate in communication. In many cases, my conversation techniques end up leading to an application of what Erving Goffman calls *corrective process*, actions taken to correct a miscommunication (Cahill,

161).

Societal norms significantly influence individuals. In this case conversational norms have led me to question my actions. Author Holtgraves explains that “people can’t just say anything during a conversational exchange; their utterances are constrained in various ways by the context, most notably the utterances of other interactants” (Cahill, 192). In learning environments, work settings, or during social gatherings, my communication style is governed in part by societal norms; therefore, when one goes outside of these norms he or she is judged as a rebel or an outsider. Author Bjorklund calls this the influence of the *outside force*, or society, on the autobiographical account (125).

Conversations typically happen in a certain manner, within a *conversational structure* (Cahill, 192), varying depending on the social setting, of course. In classrooms, when discussion is encouraged, there still exists norms and standards. The way individuals interact to show that they are worthy of getting respect are called conversation *rituals* (Goffman, 162).

There are positives in the way I communicate. I have a strong, self-assured voice and enjoy debating and dialoguing with others. I feel a closeness with other humans when I converse with them. I value engaging and gaining understanding of one another through verbal discussions. At times, in classrooms, my participation influences other students to contribute, to find their own voice. I am politically active and within that context, my voice and ability to express myself is invaluable.

On the other hand, my often impulsive nature sometimes leads me to dominate conversations, not allowing others to speak. I have a need for attention and validation, so oftentimes my motivation is rooted in *self-interest* (Cahill, 115) or personal gain, more than a desire to contribute. When debating I often use *defensive practices* (Cahill, 113), a conversation technique in which the

speaker attempts to protect their own projections. When I am discussing or voicing my opinion in an aggressive manner, I often become more concerned with being “right” than showing respect and working toward mutual understanding. Sometimes I feel as though I am outside myself looking in, and noticing that I am saying things and acting in ways that do not reflect my essence (Gurdjieff, 49). Erving Goffman would notice the danger in my negative communication techniques. “The ‘true’ or ‘real’ attitudes, beliefs, and emotions of the individual can be ascertained only indirectly, through his avowals or through what appears to be the involuntary expressive behavior” (Cahill, 75). There have been several instances, especially in school, in which I communicate in ways that separate me from what I would consider to be my essential self, therefore leave me feeling separated from others because, through my actions I have possibly given them a perception of me that does not reflect my true personality (Gurdjieff, 48).

I sometimes feel as though I am an actor in a *performance*, taking part in an interactive *routine*, acting in an attempt to influence others (Cahill, 79). In Goffman’s writing on the presentation of self in everyday life, he uses the preceding terms to illustrate the way people act among others in society in ways that are not necessarily reflective of their true nature. Instead they are acting to influence other people in one way or another.

Further exploring the dangers of communication, Goffman continues to explain that “the performer can be fully taken by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality” (79). I have observed myself reacting in precisely this manner, speaking in a way that leads me to lose touch with the possibility of varying opinions, and start to believe that the point I happen to be arguing is real and true, even if I do not actually accept it to be true—deep within my core.

In the film *Tuesdays With Morrie*, a stu-

dent, Mitch Albom, reunites with Morrie Schwartz who is an influential teacher from his past. Through his graceful communication techniques, Morrie is able to deeply influence his former student, and create a comfortable atmosphere in which they learn from each other. In the film, Morrie is an example of the kind of conversationalist I would like to work towards becoming. Instead of simply preaching his ideas, or attempting to force opinions upon others, he calmly and wisely speaks about what he knows. He asks questions of others to get them thinking for themselves, and values silence and what Gurdjieff would call external considering, i.e., the ability to empathize with others and put oneself in their shoes.

Similarly, Sean, a psychologist character in the movie *Good Will Hunting* uses similar methods to get through to Will, who becomes his client. Sean shares his experience with Will and due to the nonjudgmental, conciliatory manner in which he communicates, he is able to effectively convey his thoughts. He uses physical distancing and feedback to assure Will of his careful attention and interest without being intrusive in his life (Cahill, 144). These conversation techniques show the speaker that the listener is present, using physical signs, such as nods or facial expressions, and verbal cues to encourage the speaker to continue. In addition, Sean is concerned with understanding another human being, not simply attempting to make another person understand *him*.

There is also much to be learned from the communication style adopted by the main character in the film, *Patch Adams*. Patch is full of ideas and energetic hopes for his classmates, his school, the workplace, and the world. He finds a way to use his voice to convince others to follow his ambitious lead, all the while maintaining respect for their voices as well. Patch gains the trust of those around him, colleagues and patients, through effective communication.

Patch Adams tells the story of a man who uses many forms of communication to achieve desired goals. His influence on those around him, individuals as well as institutions, is brought about through reverential dialogue and maintaining his self respect. Patch does not attempt to conform to a set of standards or cultural norms. Instead, he goes against the grain to create novel relationships, living as an example of the positives of staying true to oneself.

When one thinks of communication, it is often limited to vocal interaction. In the film, Patch illustrates several forms of interacting without speaking. He listens actively, with eye contact and careful responses, evoking within the other person a sense of being heard and respected. He lives his work; instead of just talking the talk, he walks the walk, as the saying goes. Patch's work and studies exceed what can be conveyed with words. He spreads knowledge, wisdom, and understanding through action and daily life. He proves that there is often more to be gained from the sharing of experiences than simply verbal exchange. He learns, teaches and communicates through expressions of love, respect, and humor.

Viewing the above films within the context of sociology, particularly in relation to my self-exploration, has given me the opportunity to be reminded that communication extends far beyond verbal interaction. Similar to *Patch Adams*, in the film *Awakening* the patients in the hospital have lost their ability to vocalize their thoughts. When they are given a drug that allows them to enter into a different state of consciousness, the viewers glimpse into the world of people who are not able to speak, but are fully able to feel. One patient describes the feeling of awakening as being able to talk and finally be heard, implying that he had been attempting to communicate but those around him could not understand.

In the interactions between the doctor, played by Robin Williams, and the patients,

before they are administered the drug, we see that even when people have no ability to speak, actions impact them deeply. Williams throws things to the patients, and they are able to catch them, proving that they are alive and thinking—though trapped in bodies that will not cooperate. *Awakening* is an example of a film in which people communicate, gain closeness, trust, and mutual understanding through methods that go beyond speaking.

Silence, listening, observing, caring, dancing, playing, acting, working, participating, just *being*, are among the ways that people communicate in *Tuesdays with Morrie*, *Patch Adams*, *Good Will Hunting*, and *Awakening*. Sometimes what is done or not said makes more of an impact than any exchange of words ever could. The interactions of people in these movies illustrate that fact beautifully.

Originally I was approaching this topic in a way that did not leave me much room to grow. By viewing the issue in an aggressor versus victim sense, I was punishing myself unnecessarily, without exploring the ways in which my communication techniques are integral parts of my experience, and positive in many instances. Instead of one-sidedly insisting on changing my ways totally, my goals within the framework of this exploration have shifted towards letting go of the negative aspects and embracing the positive.

Over the course of intense searching and incorporating sociological concepts into my frame of reference, I have transformed my negative self-judgment into a true desire to adjust and cultivate my communication skills. I am attempting to develop *self-recreation* skills, reforming my self image (Cahill, 140). Through viewing my selves in their complexity, I am learning that my voice is something to be proud of, not silenced nor stifled. Instead, it is important for me to interact in ways that reflect my respect for my selves and others' selves. Autobiographical writing combines all aspects

of our personalities, physical, emotional, and spiritual. The very goals of my exploration thereby changed in the course of this inquiry. Through meditation and prayer, I shall try to continually gain insight what I believe or aspire to be my essential selves in order to embrace and realize my true nature. I shall attempt to be conscious of my desire to treat others with kindness and compassion, to listen to others as I would hope they would listen to me.

It is important that I continue to explore why I feel so compelled to get validation from others, whether by talking or being silent. I will try to work on validating myself personally and through spiritual practices, so that I may not be so quick to look for acceptance from outside sources, and instead I may find it within. The first step towards traveling the path of self-understanding is to observe my selves as human and transforming, and attempt to grow with love and self acceptance rather than prejudice.

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