



HEARING VOICES - MY OWN EXPERIENCE

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A ramble around hearing voices

Why do some people hear voices without anyone being there to account for them? I guess that is the million-dollar question!!

From what I have read on the subject and also discussed in groups with the Hearing Voices Network, a traumatic incident precedes the onset of voice hearing in a large number of cases. What the figures are with regard to that number I am bound to say that I have no idea, but it seems that the loss of a loved one or the breakdown of a relationship, or any other stressful life event can lead to auditory and other hallucinations.

I am vaguely aware that psychologists and sociologists do surveys and distribute questionnaires etc in order to research such phenomena. Plainly I cannot hope to aspire to such dizzy social heights and conduct my own research!

As a voice hearer myself though, I think that my experience of hearing voices must give me some validity to speak on this matter and that my knowledge and even my theorising are at least worth listening to. It is not the issue of why some of us hear such things but rather 'How' we hear them that I would seek to shed some light on.

The actual policy within the Hearing Voices Network is that members can have any explanation that suits them with regard to how they explain to themselves their own personal experience of what psychiatry call 'auditory hallucinations'. This means that theoretically at least there can be as many explanations as users of the group.

It is not my intention in writing this to undermine anybody's beliefs or to take anything away from them which they may have formed their life or lifestyle around. My intentions simply to help people who may be confused or in deep distress.

When I myself first became ill, a whole file in my mind concerning telepathy was already in place. It consisted of material gathered from sci-fi movies and novels, from rumours of people called mediums and from something called spiritualism. It was mixed with ideas of ghosts and the dead but the most

influential item in that file was from something I read, I don't remember where, that said the Russians had sunk a lot of money into investigations of ESP.

The investigation was, I read, done scientifically, mostly with cards, each printed with one of five signs, people reputed to have some sort of sixth sense would try to predict the order of the cards. The method of testing those people sounded extremely tedious and involved simply logging the results of their predictions repetitiously and comparing them with the results of random selection.

This superpower involvement though, lent credibility to the other more sensational contents of all the rest of the things that I knew about ESP. When there is that much information about, the layman is bound to give the possibility of clairvoyance, mediumship, even telekinesis and so on, at least a second glance. I gave telepathy a second glance! I even gave it a third glance!

When I heard voices the first thing that I noticed was that they were extremely realistic, I do not mean that they sounded real (though they did). What I mean by seemed real is that the content was fitting and appropriate to whatever subject the voices involved. They were logical. I will give one example and try to explain how I think they work.

I am fairly aware of the less well off people in the third world and one day I was pissing in the toilet when I heard an African voice say "Who's that pissing in the water, I'll fucking kill them!"

Now that would seem like a third world person who is angry that we in the west have so much. He was obviously having a go at me for pissing in a couple of gallons of water when for him water is a matter of life and death.

At the time, that is exactly what took it to be. That is to say, I took the voice to be telepathy! At around that time, I came up with the term TP meaning a telepath. I told everyone that I was a TP and tried to make something of that, adapting a matter of fact attitude, and acting in a very positive pro telepathic way that was actually rather foolish, in retrospect.

All this sprang from a little knowledge of the work of Carl Jung and his posited 'levels of consciousness below the personal'. Jung was one of the pioneers of exploration into the human mind and though his work is now rather dated he remains popular, especially amongst those people with a mystical leaning.

My understanding of his ideas was that there was even a national consciousness down there, below our personal level, by which I mean the parts of our mind that we are aware of thinking with. That national consciousness would be along with familial, tribal, animal and other levels of shared consciousness, there below our thoughts, influencing them and certainly having a powerful effect on the realms of our dreams. To get into the spirit of the thing I suppose that I could suggest that the national and tribal areas of consciousness might be placed above a personal level! That is really the stuff of paranoia, a sort of 'super' super-ego!

I used to fake up ideas like that the French National consciousness was ranged against me, inside my own mind. This was with regard to the international rugby matches. That was because I worked on a farm in France and the farmer's daughter's husband, the farm manager, played rugby for France. The voices said I got into her pants (the farmer's daughter's). She actually lent me pair of jeans! Such voices were guaranteed to put the French off their game.

Aside from the fact that it was an 'hallucination', that particular little 'delusion' demonstrates a degree of humour and creativity. If you look at your dreams you will see that you are an artist at the back of your mind too, when you dream at least. I feel instinctively that there is a strong similarity between the hallucination and the dream.

The second writer that I was influenced by was Aldous Huxley, who in one of his books theorised along the lines that 'mind' was not something that happened in the brain, but something 'out there' in the world.

He wrote that the brain was in fact a filter to only allow the useful information into consciousness. That is, the information necessary for our survival and normal everyday functioning.

When Huxley experimented with mescaline, he thought the drug impaired the proper working of the brain, (by affecting the supply of sugar) so that he stared spellbound at the sights and sounds of the world, but was unable to get on with anything practical or necessary. He thought that mescaline gave him an overdose of 'mind'!

Both of those theories would explain the example that I have given, of the voice that I heard whilst urinating in my clean and probably drinkable toilet water. One could say that for some reason the anger of an under nourished person somewhere in the Third World somehow found a sort of opening, like an electric current running to earth, and surfaced in my personal consciousness. That would be Jung's explanation. I suppose that Huxley's idea would be perhaps that the raw emotion and anger of such a person was 'around' in this sea of mind and that I somehow latched onto it.

I am not even sure when it was that these ideas first came into being but I imagine that it was perhaps around the turn of the century. Probably it was even earlier than that. The impression that I get is of a fashion conscious 'High Society', theorising about the nature of being and the human experience. I imagine rich people spending time doing yoga and travelling to India and such places to spend time with gurus and fakirs. There is also some literature that would indicate that opium and hashish were in common use at that time.

At the same time, the scientists and philosophers of the age were having difficulty with the fact that the human brain did so much so fast and so effectively. It was inconceivable at that time that the grey matter in the head could control the heart and breathing, at the same time get us from A to B, perhaps as well as talk to someone walking with us, get our cigarette to our mouths and perhaps scratch an itch. How exactly all that is done still is problematic for most ordinary people. Even the scientists of today have a lot to do to explain the tiny micro processes involved.

The scientists of that earlier time could only theorise from the knowledge that they had. Unfortunately, they had no high-speed desktop computer to compare the brain to. (I am not saying brain/computer is a perfect analogy)

Due to the lack of other fruitful directions in which to theorise, an interaction was posited. Not only did the eye see the wall, the wall itself leant out to be seen, all of nature was an interaction, a living thing, God almost!

These were the scientific explanations, in those days, of the experience of being. They were serious studies of what was then known, it was meant to be taken seriously. This is no longer the case, and fortunately science has moved on.

Before we had the camera, it was difficult to understand the eye. Now that the computer has been invented it is within the grasp of anyone to realise that man is a sort of machine. Now that my word processor can arrange and rearrange this text at the touch of a key, it is obvious that no mixing of our consciousness is required to enable you to give a spontaneous answer to a question that you did not know I was going to ask you.

If I say what did you have for breakfast this morning, then you ought to answer straight away and think nothing of it. If I ask if your wife or girlfriend has any red shoes, then I think that most of you will be able to give an answer in a few seconds. It seems plain to me that we are talking information processing here and that we are now able to understand the speed of the human brain. What has previously been called the unconscious or the subconscious is plainly the high-speed processes that whiz along, doing all of the processing and rearranging required for our everyday functioning.

Other less mental actions, like walking, talking and everything else that we do can be thought of as similar to say, a robotic arm in a factory spraying a part of a car on a production line.

To take such a mechanistic viewpoint is obviously distasteful to religious types and the robot arm in the factory is certainly simplistic but I do believe that a sort of cybernetic analogy is reasonable and practical.

I have read that the cerebellum, a part of the brain that is located at the back of the head, controls movement. It knows the lengths and angles of the joints and limbs and where they are and how they need to move to perform any given operation. If you are getting out from the back seats of a two-door car with a few bags and packages think about that. You will see if you give it some thought, that such an operation is a triumph of the human brain's ability to order and regulate the human body.

We are talking 'data retrieval' here and 'information processing'. We are moving into an area that you are supposed to need a qualification to understand. I do believe though that mass education by television has accidentally got enough information down to most of us for a general understanding to be had by most of the young. That is in addition to some old heads and almost everyone who has got anywhere near a college.

It is quite feasible that one's unconscious processes have gathered enough information from merely living a life in the technological last couple of decades of the twentieth century to give at least a vague idea of what I'm getting at. We are bombarded with new information all the time now. I wish to posit the possibility of knowledge that we basically don't know what we have.

There is certainly more of us than what we just sense going on in our conscious thoughts. It is my contention that even if one's role in life and sense of place in society precludes any conscious interest in a computer analogy or a cybernetic explanation of what we are, still we are soaking up information as it seeps from our TV sets.

If one's self image is say, a skinhead, then obviously, it will be difficult to access one's discoveries and realisations gleaned from all of the information encountered in everyday life. Such intellectual preoccupations will be of no social use to a person, trapped in a way of being in which the brain need only find clever remarks about football and suchlike. The revelations leaking from the media or even the schoolteacher will also not be of much use to the likes of traditionalist Christians who need socially to have viewpoints that entail the having of a soul and a belief in the divine.

I have heard it said often that the human brain uses only a fifth or a tenth of its capacity in everyday life. The information taken on board in an average day may mostly be of little use. That which is not required or of much use to one's way of being is stored away nevertheless and becomes part of our unconscious, for want of a better word.

I can see no reason why science and religion need to be mutually exclusive by the way. The 'why' the world exists question is situated quite a distance from the 'how' the world works question, isn't it? For myself though, I am wary of anyone who says he knows the answer to the first question and what will happen to me when I die.

For such citizens as the skinheads and the religious, given as examples, any awareness of such radical realisations must be relegated to the realm of dreams and even mental illness.

I can imagine nothing more tormented than being someone who lives in a social world in which he must pay lip service to a violent lifestyle or a blind faith in Christianity whilst outside of his awareness he almost knows, to the extent that one can know anything in this life, what he is, almost, and that is in direct opposition to what he consciously imagines himself to be.

For someone in such a position, say someone convinced that he has a divine soul that may communicate with angels, it is hardly surprising to me that, when their wife leaves them or a parent dies, or whatever

other trauma, they then choose to immerse themselves in a world that has secretly fascinated them for years. That is to say that they dare to take an extremely adventurous step in their despair or grief and create a voice in their psyche.

I do realise that many voice hearers create suicidal and abusive voices in their heads initially but with proper constructive help then who knows what may be achieved. In such conscious ignorance it is imperative that those charged with treating people in such distress are constructive and informative in their dealings with their charges.

Obviously, we can be quick and equally, obviously, we can get our wires crossed and create a little voice or other amusement. Call it a malfunction if you like. I would call it a process of enlightenment!

I think that if our psychiatrists told us reassuringly that our minds are able to do things like create voices, though we are not able to fully understand it, then people would go home feeling better than if they were diagnosed schizophrenic. If they do call us schizophrenics, they ought not to be surprised if we fight tooth and nail to prove we are mediums or that we are receiving messages from God!

If someone out there is having difficulties with voices or other types of hallucinations, then it may help if I try to explain how I got into a mess. I did indeed at one time believe that what messed me up was what was done to me by psychiatry.

I now try to recognise that what was done was well intentioned and that it was the dullness of a working-class education coupled with the confusion of almost constant drug abuse that got me into difficulties. I was not for the most part taking any hard drugs, merely cannabis and acid.

In that psychiatric hospital, Prestwich, in 1983, I was constantly pointing out, to justify my actions, that a significant few of the staff there seemed to me to be the type that belonged to what I called 'a valid sub-culture', meaning the same one that I belonged to. I meant that they were like me, dope smokers, (at least).

I am unable to forget one psychiatrist who said that while her middle-class children could experiment with drug abuse, she did not believe that I could be trusted with such experimentation.

One consequence of that kind of high handedness was that some of the more decent ones working there admitted to me that it was indeed so, that they really did like a toke! Obviously, they were not stupid enough to indulge in any illicit drug taking with me but they were very pally and if I needed someone to talk to I would lean towards them.

They were not the sort of lower working class mates that I was used to and I began with them to make some intellectual ideas that I would not normally have had access to.

What stuck in my mind was something called existentialism, which I never did really understand. I think roughly it means something like this, 'man lives in a terrible state of ignorance, in a world that makes no real sense and seems hostile to him. He has little choice but to continue living this life in that world that is essentially meaningless'.

At that time, I could really not grasp that this was indeed the case and though I tried to understand, it was a bit above my head to say the least. I lived in a state known as naïve realism in which I took it for granted that the world, unexamined in any real sense, was as real and logical as it looked, as it always had seemed to be.

The lads there that I talked to pointed out that the table, for example, was stupidly hardly there at all in any real sense. It was just a whirring mass of atoms, mostly empty space. It is obviously senseless and hardly believable but for quite some time the sharp reality of hum drum life kept me focused on the real world that we 'must' live in.

I was unable at that time to grasp the simplicity of what they explained to me, in spite of the fact that I, we, stand on a sphere that is as enigmatic as the ghost of a table that my nurse friends pointed out to me. That sphere, the earth, is falling meaninglessly around the sun!

For some reason my secondary school education, though it had taught me about atoms and the universe, had failed to bring home to me the enormity of that simple couple of facts. That is that we are falling around the sun and we don't know why we exist here in space and time or even what we consist of. To use the words of an old friend, it is totally ludicrous. It makes no sense whatsoever and there was I leading this life, doing my thing, totally unaware of the fact I, my very self, was as amazing and nonsensical as the world that I seemed to be standing in.

When I finally had taken things into my mind and felt that I could handle the new view of the universe, which took a considerable amount of time, years not months, I was able to understand that old phrase from Descartes, 'I think, therefore I am'. I could prove nothing it seemed.

I had been seriously undermined, I suddenly was like a new born baby. All the things that I took for granted were suddenly doubtful. Even the idea that I was born was problematic, for example, or that turning a corner would bring what was round it into sight. It seemed as likely that I might round the bend and fall into nothingness, a void or something like that.

I am suggesting that deep inside somewhere, most of you out there have also realised this, even though hardly a glimmer of it has entered your consciousness!

Back out in society, having been discharged from the hospital, life was no longer very straight forward, if it ever had been. For a few years, three or four, I had guilty feelings about what seemed to me rejection of what I equated with God. My illness had begun with a religious adventure of sorts and the stark analysis of the universe, cold empty and meaningless, somehow struck terror into my superstitious mind. During the re-sorting of what was and what was not, Jesus had certainly been evicted, even if God had still a tenuous foothold in my mind. I was not very sure about that sometimes except as a sort of opponent in a game.

I can't imagine what would have become of me in that state had I not developed further. In that basic philosophical position, there is, as far as I can see, no commonsense basis for law or morality. It seemed that my body was some sort of windfall gift and that I do as I wished with it.

What little I know of the Existentialists, and I have never bothered really to read about them or study them in any way, gives me a distinct impression of debauchery and excess. Debauchery and licentiousness and other forms of excess go not well at all with poverty and so it is just as well that my mind drifted towards another milestone in my mad life. It was that old friend the computer that saved me from prison and probably drug addiction and who knows what else.

It was a vague analogy in my mind between the computer and the human brain that presented a way forward for me from the probably bad direction I was almost certainly set to take. On closer study, it was obvious that an organism would have a limit to what it could experience with its senses/sensors, (eyes and ears etc). At that point it once again seemed acceptable that I could not prove what was out of sight around the corner. Even a macrocosm/microcosm seemed once again tolerable. With new discoveries on the horizon about my computer/brain I ceased to care that the world was crazy. I was able to handle, mercifully, that, 'I think, therefore I am' logic.

As I not in a position to do surveys and other studies I can't really speak of a hypothesis so we will call this instead speculation. Even guessing is not a bad word and I am sure that a few useful ideas have sprung from guesswork!

I think if we are going to use the word data retrieval, then we might as well go further and speak of a file. I have in fact used that word in the context of a 'separate body of information in a block' already when I spoke of what I knew of telepathy at the beginning of this text.

With regard to such files it seems reasonable to assume that we have a file on say, each person that we know and perhaps every little area of knowledge also. An area of knowledge in this sense might be something like everything that we know about football. There is a difficulty here because the retrieval system in the human animal seems to have not just the files cross-referenced but every single item in every single file cross-referenced as well. It is a fact though that people do forget things, so its best I think, to just say that nobody knows exactly what does go in this area.

The view of the world that becomes accessible if, like me, you succumb to half understand ideas of existential philosophy leads to a total confusion in which even that which is simply out of sight becoming quite questionable.

It could be argued that a person you know is in fact only the contents of his or her file! This is really a stupid thing to say and it can in fact do a lot of damage with regard to how the whole self-reacts to the world if the sort of game playing that can spring from that knowledge is not kept in check. It is vaguely, at least, an existentialist idea and known as solipsism. What am I to make of someone saying they could make me disappear by closing their eyes or that the world was put up in front of me, and then taken down behind!

I would say that the human animal can't in anyway be sure that the world exists but I believe that I live in a world with other human beings and that each one of us shares the same dilemma. This is the human condition and the only way to prove that something exists is to stand and look at it forever then damn it, I can no longer care. Of course, things must move out of range of our senses. On a purely logical basis I realise that solipsism carries the argument, but it doesn't make much sense, does it?

At this point the reader may be asking what this has to do with the voice hearer? In fact, this is really the nitty-gritty and we are close to what may be labelled schizophrenia if you are not coping in this area!

If trauma or drug abuse, or even some kind of educated confusion, has driven you out of reality so that you have rejected the real world and moved into the game of juggling files in your mind then it is here in this area that the games are played. We all go here when we sleep and amuse ourselves, to our own personal games room. I feel that I must stress at this point that I am not speaking of a communal games room. Though our highly efficient computer brain can often and will create an illusion of shared consciousness it really is only you.

It is in the games room that fiction can be fact and fact can be fiction. Most people only go here when they dream and each of you can recall to some extent the magic of the night time hours.

Some of us though, spend all of our time here in the games room, waking and sleeping. Some of us may 'have it under control', and we hear of voice hearers who say that the voices only speak at night or when they are alone. As a sometime drug user I have spent hours, even days leaping from file to file drawing out voices and visions. It has on many occasions taken me on ecstatic voyages around my past and present experiences, even reaching into a would be future to create my fantasy delusions.

So, every person that you know has a file in your head. These files enable you to manage dealings with each individual. It is to that information bank that you refer when you speak to someone else. It tells you what kind of person they seem to be and in what manner and what topics to address them.

With voice hearing etc, these files seem to be mismanaged. In some cases, the whole self, the holistic self, has taken them all out to play with and has them jumbled in masses as he produces his fantastic games. He can replay voices or create new ones and even produce a visual hallucination on a wall should he so desire. Some people playing games prefer that to getting on with their life and doing what

they are supposed to do. Given the lack of quality or the traumatic events in the lives of some of the members of society, who can blame them?

It is our society that has supplied them with ideas of telepathy and ghosts, demons and devils and such things. At the onset of voice hearing it is these things that will be the first explanations for their experiences. Is it not the place of psychiatry to enlighten and help them?

My experience is that the brain produces a reality that is conducive with my beliefs. As I have already explained the incidental 'facts' that I perceived out there in the world contained enough on telepathy and mysticism to tempt me into playing the game of 'let's pretend that we are telepathic'. One of the rules of this game is that the decision to play the game and all knowledge of the fact that it is only a game must be relegated to a part of the brain or mind that I am not consciously aware of.

Obviously, a withdrawal into one's self is commonly a reaction to trauma as it is also a symptom of drug misuse. It can be seen as an attempt to create a reality that is preferable to reality out there in the world, 'a world of our own!'

It is far easier for the perhaps less traumatised drug user to see that he is only playing a game than it is for those that have suffered the loss of a loved one or any other kind of real trauma. For the druggy types, it is merely a fashionable accessory, an interesting addition to your repertoire, to give yourself 'cosmic experiences' that you can chat about to your fellow drug abusers.

It is sincerely my hope though that this description of the experience that I have had may be of use to those who truly traumatised real voice hearers in genuine distress. The fact of the matter is that a psychiatrist in the prison system many years ago, produced genuine distress in me by telling me that I was a schizophrenic. As a consequence of that I went badly off the rails myself and spent a full three years in a psychiatric hospital. I am certain that the events of my life since then closely mirror the experience of many other voice hearers.

I am sure that if someone will make the effort to understand the mechanisms of the hallucination in themselves they will find eventually a hidden bonus that springs from their experience. They will be well on their way to discovering man, the machine made of meat that we are. For many years, the voice hearing experience has been one of hospitals, psychiatric drugs, and for some of us, incarceration. We have lingered, lost on the fringes of religious mania, believing ourselves beset by devils and demons, not even to mention a frightening preoccupation with suicide. In this state, psychiatry has marginalised us and made some of us the outcasts of society.

In many cases the initial traumatic event has been overshadowed by the terrible trauma of having an expert label us schizophrenic. If you have been diagnosed as a 'schizo' then you have been damaged. The fact is that when the experts label us so, the damage done far outweighs, in most cases, the damage done by the original trauma that first troubled us.

Having been pronounced mad we become mad. After that there is ample instruction out there, in books and films, in TV documentaries etc to enable our damaged selves to create dutifully for the doctor a tolerable impression of a madman. Your family and friends will help the process along by treating you as mad once they have heard the message. All that is necessary to begin this process is that you believe that psychiatrist!

Most of the ordinary folk that I spend time with have no idea that man, that meat machine, has been now discovered; that he reigns supreme with his ability to do ten or twenty things at the same time. Instead of this knowledge flooding out to release Man from his enslavement to his devils and demons, the purveyors of this and that temple of worship are out in even greater force. It seems to me that more people than ever before are chanting mantras and twisting their legs into almost impossible positions. Freedom is what people want and freedom is what they should get and the idea of a God is as much a mystery to me as to them.

I am concerned though that many people who hear voices do not seem to be aware that a good case can be made for those voices emanating from within their own mind. People who do understand these things are well on their way to discovering their own 'meat machine' and so experiencing some of the peace that comes with simply knowing what you are.

I am concerned that the fashionable chatter of the Edwardian or Victorian drawing room or whatever is now fit fodder for someone who has become mentally ill. It is dangerous to go around believing that someone has access to your thoughts. If the boundary of yourself is understood to be physical body you have and only that, then at least you understand that you are responsible for your own actions. The idea that psychiatrists have, that patients must not talk about the voices and hallucinations they experience, it seems to me dangerous. Nothing could be more dangerous potentially than the unenlightened psychiatric patient, his devils and demons still intact, wandering the streets of our inner cities.

To return to the pissing in the water, I do not have to tiresomely think 'Oh God, I have to piss in this water and it could save the life of someone in the Third World'. What is wrong if I beef it up a bit and use my brain to give a much more dramatic representation of my thought. I would call it arty perhaps and I resent any attempt to explain my own self entertainment machine's functions as a mystical or in any way outside of my control.

If psychiatry believes that chemotherapy is the cheapest way to treat people, I for one at least, disagree. People may need some medication initially but a simple classroom situation where they learn some of the mechanisms of hallucination could be much more fruitful in the end. Medicine forever and ever must end up being more costly in the long run.