

STILL, SMALL VOICE OF CALM

Thomas Enwright

THE LAST TWO LINES of a nineteenth-century Quaker hymn address the Lord as *voice*: ‘speak through the earthquake, wind and fire; O still. small voice of calm’.¹ It recuperates the elemental experience of Elijah, in which the voice of the Lord resounded in a gossamer of silence with the question: ‘What are you doing here?’ (1 Kings 19:11–13). As the Lord became present to Elijah he began to find his own voice. It was not just a matter of searching for words within himself but of allowing the presence of the Lord to evoke the truth within him.

We live in a world where competing voices drown out the faltering ones of those who strive to respond to the truth as Elijah did. It is hard for a single voice to be raised to speak out against the clamour. The yearning for an experience such as Elijah’s, in which our voices are roused by the presence of the Lord, has never diminished. Just as force can bind our voices so that they are scarcely heard, love can unbind them so that they may express truth in authenticity. We need a certain poise to free our voices so that, when we come into the presence of the truth like Elijah, they too will be awoken.

At the Threshold

The voice lies at the threshold between humankind and the world. It comes into being where experience, memory and consciousness meet in the body to create gestures that shape human life. The effort required to raise it from this place and out of the silence is what gives the voice its capacity to move the hearts of others. From this point of equilibrium it receives the tone, colour and rhythm, deepened by images, that give it musicality. But as the ancients already knew it is not eloquence that gives a voice its force but its capacity to communicate the truth.²

¹ ‘Dear Lord and Father of Mankind’, adapted by Garrett Horder from a poem by John Greenleaf Whittier and published in *Congregational Hymns* (London: Elliott Stock, 1884).

² See, for example, Plato, *Apology*, 17a–c; Cicero, *De inventione*, 1:1.



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While speech does not belong to everyone—some are born without it and others lose it through injury or illness—every human being has a voice that deserves to be heard. Its unique character is formed through its privileged acquaintance with the world. The patterns that underlie it are woven in childhood, when the bustle of the playground combines with the intimacy of hearthside. It is not quite right to say that the voice is trapped within us waiting to get out. The door at the threshold swings freely and the voice stands confidently waiting to welcome our interiority into the world. It is the owner of the house and not the guest.

A philosopher once said to me that words are like animals. Just as an otter lives in a river not a tree, so each word has its proper home. Using one's voice is not a matter of simply imitating the words of another, for words are not merely symbols to be copied. They are particular tools that each have a task to fulfil in the place they belong. It is when we see what words can do that we desire to become skilful at using them. We notice quickly how the use of some words enables us to grow in status, knowledge and friendship, while the use of others leads to a diminishment of these things. When we acquire a language we acquire with it a world.

When we realise that we can turn words against others for our own ends we learn to create falsehood. The capacity of human beings to lie fascinated the ancients so much that they developed the metaphor of the word spoken from the heart as a seal of honesty to apply to legal contracts.³ The idiom still exists in our repertoire today. The voice can

³ The history of this practice goes back at least to the Assyrian empire—see *The Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria* (680–669 BC), edited by Erle Leichty (Philadelphia: University Park,

reveal when a word is not spoken from the heart because our tongues feel awkward in our mouths as we speak. The key that unlocks the truth of the voice is authenticity, but authenticity does not come before truth. What it means for the voice to express both truth and authenticity has a deeper significance than merely saying the right thing.

Though fear and hesitancy might interrupt a growing voice, these are the same challenges that lend it character. A friend advised me before leaving home not to lose my regional dialect because otherwise when I returned no one would understand me. He knew of the risk of losing touch with the place where experience, memory and consciousness first began to coincide. The unique patterns that are set up within us prevent us from becoming dry imitators of what we or others have already said.

If experience generates the patterns that underlie the voice, then memory is the reserve where such patterns are held. Just as manuscripts are hoarded in the recesses of archaic libraries, so the memory retains the patterns of voice that have been brought to light through experience. They connect us with a great effort that has run like a fine red thread through the history of humanity. Sometimes unknowingly, our voices echo those of the people who came before us. A wise teacher once told me that it takes more than good parents to bring up a son or daughter. It takes seventy generations of good parents. If language achieves anything at all, it is only because it is a tried and tested way of welcoming us into the world.

At the threshold the voice turns outwards while still aware of our interiority. If its articulation were no more than knowing what words or gestures to use in a particular situation then it would be a simpler affair. Instead it involves understanding the interplay between the unique matrices in which other voices have been created. They might resonate deeply with our own to create a reassuring common ground, or dissonate to fracture the path that leads to communion. What is most important in conversation often falls into the gaps created by misunderstanding. The uniqueness of the effort to discover how these matrices enter into play with each other is the voice's excitement.

Moreover, a voice that has been found can sit too majestically within us, as a source of pride. No longer at the threshold, it sits on the

veranda or takes its place by the window with a view of the world. Its eloquence outshines the poise that once lent it authenticity and truth. This voice has denied the continual human effort that has been passed down from generation to generation. It no longer wants to meet the world as it is. In this way the voice loses its capacity to hold the attention of others. The freshness that marks a voice of authenticity and truth requires constant attention to those who are listening. It takes a long time to discover the standpoint that enables the voice to sit lightly on the threshold.

A Veneer of Anonymity

There is a veneer of anonymity that exists between us as we pass one another on the streets. A walk through a city gives rise to the opportunity for us to imagine other lives, but few of us transform our images into relationships. At one time in my life I would regularly go out on the streets of the city to start conversations with strangers. I braced myself for failure, unsure of what to say on the steps of the town hall or in the middle of an art gallery. Yet the conversations started easily enough and quickly became the opportunity to talk about deeper matters. From there they would often develop into conversations about faith in its varied forms.

The veneer of anonymity between us is only gossamer thin. It is waiting to be broken so that our need for communion can be fulfilled by the meeting of voices. If we break it, then new horizons of communion open up within us. Reading helps us overcome anonymity, too. In the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, Atticus Finch explains, 'You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... until you climb in his skin and walk around in it'.⁴ When we read about others their voices are woven into the matrix of our own. We become capable of empathizing with them as if their experiences were ours.

Languages and Landscapes

The voice expresses itself equally in writing, speech, gesture and any other medium it chooses. It is possible for the voice to value one medium

⁴ Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960), 36.

at the expense of all others. Some cultures value writing so much that it tightens the spoken voice until it can hardly breathe a word. At that point gestures begin to overflow into writing like a flood that cannot be contained.

The emotional and spiritual content of a language is no greater or lesser in one culture than another. The voice finds a way to express interiority any way possible, like water seeping through the ground. What is communicated through a gesture in one language is communicated through intimate spoken words in another. Some languages have elaborate pragmatics for entering into conversation, while others just talk about the weather. Each culture has its own landscape that maps this emotional and spiritual content. It is covered with hills and valleys like geographical contours. When the content appears in different places on the map for different cultures, then misunderstandings can occur. These differences do not mean the landscape is any more or less beautiful in one culture or another.

Bound in Silence

The same openness that allows voices to enter into communion with others leaves them vulnerable to force. The teacher who yelled at us at school, the relative who coerced us with violence or the manager who shamed us before our colleagues could all have left our voices bound. A society in which our identity is constantly jostled by questions can leave us hesitant to reveal who we are. Not everything that is within us is designed to be expressed in the light of day; some things shine brighter in the twilight of intimacy. It is in situations such as these that the veneer of anonymity begins to form. The voice must be able to stand lightly at the threshold of our interiority so that we can still look into the deepest dimensions of our being. If it has to become the protector of interiority, then it runs the risk of being driven into silence. Perhaps the appearance of that thin veneer of anonymity protects us, but it also deepens our hesitation.

The silencing of the human voice by force closes the door to authenticity and truth. Throughout human history people have been silenced by different forms of oppression. Even unknowingly, a dominant voice can constrain the voices of others. When the door is closed, from outside or within, the voice is locked outside on its own doorstep. Language has the power both to give esteem and to take it away. While



the voice can only be completely silenced by force, it can also be drowned out by other more demanding voices. In such moments gentle persistence is required to keep being heard. Once when I was learning a foreign language, I kept a journal in which I wrote poetry each day. Amid the confusion of everyday misunderstandings it was a still point where my voice could continue to flow unimpeded. For those whose voices are drowned out or distorted by force, creativity can also bring relief. Even when it is kept secret, creative expression can become an underground stream that keeps flowing when everything else is silencing them.

A Love That Enfolds

If the voice is to be unbound then it must be enfolded in love. Once I was praying with a group of women from a slum in Latin America. Their lives were choked by daily violence born in poverty. As we prayed, one of the women spoke up and said that her daughter had been abducted on the way to school and that nothing had been heard of her since. Those gathered were stunned into silence not just by the dreadful news, but by the gentleness with which she spoke. When the voice is surrounded by loving ears it sounds familiar to the speaker even if it surprises or distresses the listener. When the voice is surrounded by ears that are closed it can sound awkward or even embarrassing. A voice that is enfolded in love is unbound to speak the truth even if the truth is difficult. Her daughter was never found, but we were able to surround her with love in the moment when she spoke the truth.

The hidden correspondence between speaking and listening, or teaching and learning, is articulated by the prophet Isaiah, who wrote, 'The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.' (Isaiah 50:4) The human voice is irreducibly connected with our capacity to listen. You could say that the distinction between the two is an artificial one, based on the assumption that those with power are the ones who speak while those without are the ones who listen. Actually listening can exhibit all the qualities of authority and power normally attributed to speech. Attention to another person is the form of consciousness that brings experience and memory into alignment. It is not enough for a faltering voice to be heard; care must be taken that it feels heard.

The same outwardly focused attention strives to place the other at the centre of the conversation. When we find ourselves held in mutual attention, communion can begin to emerge. A spiritual director once taught me that to help someone with a moral problem it was enough to ask for his or her five most important values. When we draw attention to what is important to someone, that person is placed at the centre of the decision being made. He or she is able to harness the ethical impulse of conscience in a way that would not be possible while bound to the values of another person or institution. Being bound to another's values, no matter how laudable, can break someone's back. It creates a costly split between our interiority and the world. Placing someone at the centre of the discernment might be said to be the technique of Jesus, to whom the paralytic was lowered through a hole in the roof right into the middle of a conversation with the Pharisees (Luke 5:17–39).

A Moment's Pause

Some silences are not the result of force, but moments when the voice gathers pace. Such moments precede the alignment of memory, experience and consciousness so that they can express something fresh. A Canaanite woman came to Jesus to ask for Jesus' mercy on behalf of her daughter (Matthew 15:21–28). Although she recognised who he was, he gave her not one word of reply. His pause is a sign that even Jesus learned something new from conversation. When he came into contact with her he discovered that his mission was not just for his own people but for all nations (Matthew 28:16–20). Something new and somewhat

embarrassing emerged in the conversation, marked by her awkward joke. Here a silent pause opens up new vistas and the horizon stretches out before us.

The tradition of the Desert Fathers is contained in snippets of conversation, usually between a spiritual father and a younger monk. In one of them three friends become monks, the first chose to become a peacemaker, the second chose to visit the sick and the third chose to live in solitude away from the distractions of the world. The first two were unable to fulfil their chosen way of life because there were overwhelmed by so many people, so they went to visit the third.

And he was silent for awhile, and then poured water into a vessel and said, 'Look upon the water'. And it was murky. And after a little while he said again, 'Look now, how clear the water has become'. And as they looked into the water they saw their own faces, as in a mirror. And then he said to them, 'So is he who abides in the midst of men: because of the turbulence, he sees not his sins: but when he hath been quiet, above all in solitude, then does he recognise his own default'.⁵

It is in solitude that murky waters become clear, but spiritual conversation with one who has experienced silence can help us understand why they were cloudy in the first place.

A Presence That Evokes

When two or more people are intertwined in conversation we sometimes detect the hint of a presence. It is as though someone whom we do not recognise is standing at our side. The disciples on the road to Emmaus had this experience when their gloomy conversation was enlivened by the presence of Jesus. It was only later that they recognised who had been walking with them. Luke describes this experience as a flame burning in their hearts during their conversation (Luke 24: 13–35). The jostling emotions of inauthenticity and falsehood were banished in the presence of authenticity and truth. What does it take for us to recognise that same flame burning our hearts as we stand in the presence of Christ? If we could understand that the presence of Christ evokes a fresh voice within us, then our spiritual conversations would be transformed.

⁵ Helen Waddell, *The Desert Fathers* (Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan, 1994 [1936]), 66–67.

In some circles authenticity is contrasted with truth as though experience could separate one from the other. If authenticity comes before truth might this lead to falsehood? If truth comes before authenticity might this lead to disingenuousness? Perhaps a distrust of our experience lies behind these questions. No matter how poorly understood, each of our experiences is real. It is the experience of others that raise the question of what is true. When we start to acknowledge this experience we allow our authenticity to coincide with the truth. The presence of another can evoke truth within us.

Just as the presence of a lover evokes the voice of the beloved, the presence of a mother evokes the voice of her child, or the presence of a friend evokes the voice of his or her soulmate, so the presence of Christ evokes the truth within us. The image once came to me in prayer of my father soothing my grazed knee with his moistened handkerchief. The tender love of a human father was evoked by the presence of the tender loving mercy of God the Father. It was a moment of great truth when I suddenly understood. It is not as though we need to drive a wedge between authenticity and truth. They come naturally when we allow our voices to be evoked by the presence of Christ.

***The presence
of Christ
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truth within us***

I remember sitting in a shack with a corrugated iron roof in a poor area of a Latin American city. I listened as an elderly man, whose face shone in the darkened room, spoke to me about the birth of his daughter. He told me that the child had arrived unexpectedly in the middle of the night. Without even clean towels or water he had gone around the neighbourhood asking for help while a relative tended to the mother. Finally he came back in time for the birth. He went on to tell me that he imagined the birth of Jesus happening in a similar way. His memory coincided precisely with the Gospel in which Mary and Joseph were also caught unexpectedly without the help that they needed to give birth to a son. What greater authenticity and truth can there be than to recall an experience, no matter how briefly, that coincided with the life of Christ?

When we give voice to our experiences of Christ's presence in our lives, that presence reawakens within us. We feel his presence once again evoking something in our voice. From far away in the in the muffled archive of our memory something asks to be read once more. A skilled spiritual guide can detect the patterns underlying the voice that come

into contact with Christ. The words that are spoken acquire a poise and an intensity because they are spoken in the presence of truth itself. Sometimes the voice is tinged by surprise or embarrassment because the presence that evokes our voice is not our own. If we were to understand those patterns more deeply, our spiritual conversations would be transformed. Along with its characteristic surprise a voice that has spoken with Christ is marked by tenderness, freedom and self-control. It is never coercive but poised lightly at the threshold. It is unlike anything we have ever heard before because it is born in the uniqueness of God.

Once I was speaking to a young father from an indigenous tribe in the Amazon. He and his family had moved away from their traditional lifestyle in the rainforest to settle on the edge of a town. He explained that when they had lived in the forest they used to navigate by the scent of the trees. Though it was easier to find his way around the town he was lost about how to bring up his children. I asked him what he did when he spent time with them. He told me that when he came home at night after a long day's work he sat with his children in the dark and pointed up to the sky to teach them the names of the stars. Through the circumstances of time and place change, the voice continues to stand confidently at the threshold, in the presence of Christ, to welcome interiority into the world.

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