



The Three Faces of Voice

Elizabeth Parks and her husband, Sean Taylor, were having some confusion around an upcoming trip they were planning together for their vacation. It was not unlike other confusions they'd experienced in the past – sometimes around trips but also even around smaller decisions. Misfired connection loomed for them around the bigger, ephemeral, intangible parts of life as well – leaving them both feeling a bit disconnected from each other in a way they couldn't quite name.

What they were missing out on having in their lives and in their connection, and what was keeping them further apart than they could otherwise be, were what I call, the Three Faces of Voice. Voice is just the desire to be heard though, isn't it? Wrong. Voice consists of these three aspects working together:

1. The honor of being heard,
2. The honor of being allowed to listen, and
3. The true intimacy, connection, and understanding that voice sharing creates.

When Sean was thinking about the various smaller decisions that go into making up their trip together, he was falling victim to a mental trick that can happen when we are less than diligent in our attention – he was thinking things through and making decisions in his own mind, without Elizabeth and with limited information. He was then compounding the problem by sharing with Elizabeth information on the decision he'd arrived at, only about half the time. Much of the time, he'd not even been aware he'd arrived at decisions. This mental processing without full awareness and without input from others affected by the resulting decisions is a problem even when the person doing it believes they've included some of the likes and dislikes of the other(s) in the process.

It is a problem because what got left out was Elizabeth's right to be heard, Sean's right to honor her by allowing her to hear his thinking, and the greater communication and intimacy they would have arrived at for having shared the process of decision-making – and its preliminary steps of information gathering – together.

On their own, neither one has all the information he or she needs to make the right decisions anyway. He, or she, may feel he is selecting, for instance, the *right* morning of the vacation to hire the snorkel boat as he plans away, given that he knows his wife. He feels good about this. If however, unknown to him, Elizabeth has promised the children the same morning for a jungle tour, frustration abounds. This is only the least challenging example, other examples get into issues of identity and

dehumanization. By talking it through, both parties, all parties, have all the information they need to make all the right decisions. This is what I call, Collaborative Solution Creation. It is far superior to compromise because it gets *all* the information – and the stories behind that information – on the table and into the decision making process where it can help to create not just passable, mediocre solutions, but solutions that maximize total success. Besides, it's just more fun this way, working, playing, together. Both the results and the process then, are superior to other forms of decision making and communication.

It is sometimes challenging enough for people to understand that when they have wronged another, the other, at times, wants nothing more than one aspect of *voice* – the right to talk about what happened to him and how it made him feel. From there, it can be further challenging to understand that sometimes, it is only the right to listen, the honor to be allowed to hear, that is being desired – and in its absence is harming those about whom one cares.

And even that can be a new and different idea – honoring someone? By letting them in on *my* thoughts? That is exactly right, exactly what you *are* doing, when you let someone hear what you think, when you let them into the process. Sean had no idea he was hurting Elizabeth by not talking with her, how surprising for him then, when he began thinking that he could honor her by this sharing.

Interestingly, hearing your own thoughts out loud, and hearing the thought process itself, will often, improve both. So that in addition to the benefit of honoring another, you have also gained the benefit of strengthening your own thinking – and the process that thinking goes through – all by speaking it out loud with a trusted other in attendance.

There is yet one more benefit that this single, simple change can bring. We already know it can cause others around you to feel honored instead of left out, and as a decision-maker in their own destiny instead of spectator to it and that for the speaker him/herself, speaking the thought process out loud can strengthen both the thinking and the process. The last benefit is that it brings two companions closer than they were already, and deepens the trust. It does this not just through the honor and participation – though those do help – but also through the intimacy of knowing another's thoughts and through the opportunity to understand the *whys* behind the decisions and the pieces of each decision. The *whys* are the person's stories, the experiences that affected her causing her to be who she is today. And knowing these stories in a way that is deeper and more connected than simply hearing about them in an anesthetized and one-dimensional telling across a wide table, creates that.

By hearing about it in the present, in the moment and the immediate, with all the aliveness and dynamism that contributes, Elizabeth and Sean can both begin to feel a connectedness, and a living *experience* of the other's experience and not just an understanding of it. Then develops, over time, a special kind of a trust; the kind of trust one gains by knowing another won't be off in one direction, alone, choosing actions which will affect both.

How great that relationship became – for Elizabeth and Sean but also with their friends, work colleagues and families - that yesterday was marked by confusion, sadness, and vague disconnection but is today marked instead, through sharing aloud the Three Faces of Voice, by a feeling of being heard, respected, honored, and of the deep feeling of trust and of sharing *truly* intimate knowledge of another – and the more durable threads of connection those intimacies shared create.

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