

Voice

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On my way home from the grocery store last night, I listened to a woman reading her poetry. (Yes, it was public radio.) The poetry was lovely, but I could only listen for a little bit because the woman was reading in Poetry Voice.

Do you know what I mean? Poetry Voice is serious, measured, cultured with very little inflection or change in tempo. Poetry Voice, for me, is so unnatural sounding that I have a difficult time listening to what is being said.

Perhaps poets use Poetry Voice because poetry is Serious Literature. But it makes poetry hard to listen to. Spoken poetry without Poetry Voice is wonderful.

This kind of Voice isn't restricted to poets. Other professions have their own Voice. When I was in preaching class in seminary a classmate told me I needed to find my Preacher Voice. You've heard Preacher Voice. Preacher Voice is the way preachers talk in movies and on TV. And it is the way some real preachers preach also. Closely related to Preacher Voice is Prayer Voice. This is not restricted to preachers. Anyone who prays in public is susceptible. Prayer Voice is similar to Preaching Voice. "God" becomes a multi syllable word. God has God's very own pronouns—thee and thy. Prayer Voice has its own particular cadence and rhythm.

Lots of professions have their own Voice. There is Teacher Voice. And Theater Director Voice. And Police Officer Voice. And Lawyer Voice.

And I need to confess to Doctor Voice. I didn't even know I had it until my husband pointed it out while I was working as a veterinarian before I went to seminary. But he was right, I spoke differently when I was speaking professionally. There was a certain seriousness and tone that crept into my speech.

I shouldn't be too hard on poets and preachers and pray-ers. They may be just as oblivious to their Voice as I was to Doctor Voice. The difficulty with Voice is that it makes us difficult to listen to. It makes it hard to actually hear what we are saying. Of course sometimes we use Voice to hide the fact that we're not saying much.

And I suspect some of us (well, okay, me) developed a Voice because we were insecure when we began our careers. The Voice was a way for me to appear to be the doctor that I didn't feel that I was. It allowed me to be what I thought others expected of me. It took a while before I could stop hiding behind the Voice.

As I was listening to the poet tonight, I thought that before I could really like her poems I needed to re-hear her poems in a normal voice, with normal cadence and normal inflections. And so, it occurs to me, it might be a good thing for me to listen to myself and be sure that my voice is not Voice but is indeed my voice.

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