

Moving Toward Human Liberation: My Experience of the Hearing Voices Network Movement—A Declaration of Interdependence

By Berta Britz, at World Hearing Voices Day Celebration, 2016

Tonight I want to tell you what the Hearing Voices Network Movement means to me and what it might mean for others in Montgomery County and around the world. I invite you to open your hearts and minds to a different way of seeing and hearing—to step over thresholds of fear and disbelief to enter into an experience of being together in community. Each of us is free to turn away. Our paths to healing and wholeness may diverge, detour, or meander—what is important is that we never stop, that we continue striving.

The poet, Audre Lorde, wrote “We must recognize that difference is a reason for celebration and growth, rather than a reason for destruction.” Tonight we gather to discover who we are in community, to appreciate our differences and our common humanity. We are here to celebrate, learn, and grow—we are the changers and the changed, knowing as we are known. A network is a web of relationships, and we are the Montgomery County Hearing Voices Network. We are dedicated to building a stronger, more loving, peaceful, and inclusive community.

We are part of a movement which began with one Dutch psychiatrist, Marius Romme, and one patient, Patsy Hage. They met in 1984 when a friend of Patsy’s mother referred her for treatment. Patsy has since described herself as having been “very scared....I more or less locked myself in with the protection of two dogs. I did not go out any more as the voices would not let me.” Marius Romme considered Patsy’s voices as symptoms of a disease and prescribed medications which were not very useful. He reduced the dosage and taught her to increase and decrease the dose herself depending on how challenged she felt. Patsy was not satisfied with this arrangement and continued to push Marius to accept the importance of her voices and her need to understand them. Patsy declared, “*You believe in a God we never see or hear, so why shouldn’t you believe in the voices I really do hear?*” She was challenging him to see her subjective experience, to validate her as a person, not merely as a diagnostic object.

Romme recounts that “It took her a year to convince me that the voices *problem* is not the potential *disease*, but it was *the bother* that it caused her.” Due to his concern about her isolation and feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, he introduced her to other voice hearers to talk about their experiences. He observed a lively connection among them but also a shared sense of powerlessness in relation to their voice hearing experiences. The Movement was born from Patsy’s and Marius’s relationship and spread to others as Patsy and Marius told their stories on a Dutch TV talk show in 1986. They asked people who heard voices to phone in and leave their names, so that more could be learned about the lives of people who heard

voices. Marius hoped to use what they learned from the voice hearers who lived full and happy lives, to enhance the experiences of those people who felt distressed and powerless in relation to their voices. Patsy and Marius partnered in developing questions which eventually formed the Maastricht Interview, and those voice hearers who called in to the TV show later became the first participants in their research. In October 1987, as an outgrowth of that TV appearance, three hundred voice hearers attended a conference to share their thoughts and experiences with each other. Foundation Response, a service user's movement, was formed to break the taboo of voice hearing as well as Resonance, a self-help organization. In 1988 another conference was held in Maastricht, in the Netherlands. This one titled, "People Who Hear Voices," was jointly organized by Foundation Response and the Department of Social Psychiatry of Limburg University and was introduced by the Chief Inspector for Mental Health from the Ministry of Health and Welfare of the Netherlands. The speakers were voice hearers and the audience consisted mainly of professionals. The voice hearers hoped that by talking about their experiences—telling their stories—the professionals would hear their realities rather than relying on the professionals' *theories* about their experiences. As a psychiatrist, Marius Romme considered that his profession was assuming a parental responsibility for adults and that it would be necessary for voice hearers themselves to speak out and act, to declare their autonomy and enable change in the attitudes of psychiatrists and society.

The World Hearing Voices Movement formed as *Intervoice* in 1996 and is now represented in at least 32 countries. Montgomery County has been one of the pioneers in the Movement in the United States. We offered the first Hearing Voices Network Group in Pennsylvania, and our Training Institute has provided ongoing individual and systems training for understanding, working and living with voices. *Intervoice* is an international partnership among people who hear voices, clinicians, researchers, family members, and others interested in the voice hearing experience—an international community. The Montgomery County Hearing Voices Network consists of those same stakeholders in our local area. We are partners capable of spreading Network values to enrich our communities through dialogue—learning and growing together. The foundation of a hearing voices network is:

- Accepting that hearing voices is a valid human experience
- Respecting each person's framework for understanding and beliefs
- Promoting hope
- Creating safe spaces to meet and share experiences and to network for deeper connection
- Believing in each person's resilience and capacity to reclaim their power
- Fostering self-determination and self-empowerment
- Encouraging service providers, families and friends to join us as allies

In Montgomery County I named our self-help/peer support groups “Taking Back Our Power” groups for people who hear, see, or sense what other people don’t. Supporters and allies have asked to participate in the groups and haven’t always understood when we declined their requests. Excluding non-voice hearers might seem inconsistent, given our stances of equality, partnering through relationship, and our belief that Network values and ethos create an excellent climate for growing compassionate communities. It is because we people who hear, see, or sense things that the majority of people don’t, have often experienced ourselves as outsiders, marginalized by the majority culture. We have found ourselves disconnected, disdained, pitied, or feared by others and often by ourselves. We have received help from caring people who often seek to cure or reduce our suffering—good people who assume they understand our “affliction,” and that confirms that we are something “other,” damaged, broken—“less-than.” And we have learned to seek that quality of traditional support and have internalized identities of recipients and depended on the good will of those in the “majority” in western cultures. Many of us have not been ready to meet those in the “majority” from positions of equality because we haven’t been treated as equals and we haven’t felt worthy of equality. Supporters have tried to “empower” us, without noticing that their good will does not restore our dignity, that their desire to use their capacity to enlarge our capacity does not work. No one can give another person agency, recovery or make us whole. No one emancipates another. We must do it for ourselves first, and then meet others as equal partners to declare what sorts of support or relationships we want or need. Harriet Tubman is said to have remarked, “I freed a thousand slaves. I could have freed a thousand more if only they knew they were slaves.” To quote Audre Lorde again, “If I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive.”

The Hearing Voices Network Movement is a liberation movement, like other civil and human rights movements—as is the Recovery Movement. Unfortunately many people mistake “movement” for “model.” Models depend on theoretical frameworks and fidelity to particular worldviews, “objectively” defined data, and associated techniques—they are not dynamic or fluid. Theories are not experiential—our experiences are subjective and in process—in movement. If recovery was a theoretical model, then we could receive the wisdom or support or the magic and be transformed—“empowered.” Many of us waited a long time in anticipation that the experts would eventually hand us the correct solution. Some of us are still waiting—we are praised for our fortitude in hanging in there and adhering to expert advice and tools. Our patience and passivity will not free us. It might allow us to lean on the goodwill of strangers for as long as they have enough goodwill to give, and sometimes that will depend on the adequacy of resources—knowledge, political, and social capital. The helpers stop being strangers and become allies once they realize their own worth and equality as well—each person needs to find their centers.

People who define their worth based on the “other” find themselves scared and overwhelmed when change happens. And change always happens. We are each of us in process and we each need each other. We cannot live outside of relationship. Human life cannot be sustained without other humans. Infants thrive when touched and die without it. Adults need relationships to learn and grow—to sustain ourselves and the planet, but dominant/subordinate relationships eventually shrink or damage us all. Marius Romme’s view of helper attitudes as “parental,” reflects his own perspective as an elder who values the freedom of friendship among equals—a grandparent who needs to see his adult progeny build their own lives of meaning and purpose, so that he can also experience the fullness of his journey and liberation. Our network creates a climate of opportunity for knowing ourselves and each other. A network is a circle of friends—a compassionate community for mutual liberation. There are no margins, only centers.

So, “Taking Back Our Power” is not taking back power from voices, symptoms, helpers, or society. It is finding the power within each of us—centering. Once we do that, we know who we are and can relate with others who also have found their power from within. Then we can form groups with equality—to share power-with—not power/over or power from beneath. That is how I see Network Movements transforming our communities and the world. A Hearing Voices Network approach is a way of life—of becoming whole—of connecting in healing relationships. Meeting a person with curiosity about what’s happened in their lives creates a healing context, a way of seeing, hearing, and listening. It is an approach that is not merely doing—not what we do, but how we do it. Listening and generating dialogue is more important than dominating adversities or “symptoms.” It is a perspective that encompasses the whole environment—human and natural and spiritual—to see that no one can be reduced to an “either/or” view, that we are all **interdependent**. We are in the world and of the world, and we make choices that can sustain ourselves and the world. When we develop our trust agreement at the beginning of Hearing Voices Network Groups, we often say that every person counts and every voice matters and deserves the opportunity to be heard. In our new monthly Voices Learning Community Group each person is invited to the table as an equal—voice hearer, family member, professional ally, friend—to learn and grow together. Our quarterly Network Meetings, like tonight’s meeting, provide an even bigger table. Won’t you take your seat at the table? I invite everyone to engage with us in moving towards connection and love—join a Movement that listens. Yes, join a Movement to be heard! Together we face adversities—fear, trauma, poverty, loss, disease, violence, and injustice, and we move through these adversities with eyes, ears, minds, and hearts wide open in interconnection. We share acceptance and experience joy. Please, reach for the truth in yourselves and join us. Let us lift **all** our voices to celebrate connectedness and community!