

Listen up: Do dead people ever speak to us?



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

I woke up thinking about this question, pondered by humanity since the beginning of time. My initial response to hearing it in my head again was: "Absolutely not. Yet...sure they do." Attending a neighbor's memorial service could have "resurrected" these thoughts. Then again, I've always wondered why so many of us listen for voices beyond the grave.

Continuing to ponder this while driving, the classic song "The Sound of Silence" came on the radio (recorded 60 years ago!). "Hello, darkness, my old friend; I've come to talk with you again; Because a vision softly creeping; Left its seeds while I was sleeping; And the vision that was planted in my brain, Still remains; Within the sound of silence." A hauntingly beautiful song, with curious lyrics. Making friends with the dark unknown is a rather fascinating concept. Talking with it, listening for something or someone — even in wordless silence — brings to mind the birth of religions. The Abrahamic faiths are steeped in appearances and sometimes conversations with the dead: King Saul conjuring up the deceased prophet Samuel; the disciples eating beach barbecue with Jesus after his crucifixion, etc. Biblical religion loudly proclaims the sounds of silence, attempting to shine a bright light on the darkness of death.

The contradictory nature of my response to the

question whether the dead speak to us, emerges from my secular sense that once we're gone we're gone, while I remain connected to the notion that it's natural to listen for voices from the past. What is history but hearing the voices from the distant or recent past? Of course we hear them; of course the dead speak to us. On the other hand, my humanist sensibility is suspicious, to say the least, that anyone ever hears anything from the departed.

I may hear my father's or mother's voice in my head now and then, and find that comforting or humorous. But I always keep in mind: it's in my mind, in my head; my dearly departed parents aren't actually speaking to me. Have you ever considered how terrible it would be (as well as embarrassing) to know your departed ancestors were "watching over" you? Has it occurred to you what it would mean if once we are dead we can still observe the living? That sounds like hell to me. Why do we hope that a person "rests in peace," if we believe they never rest because they're keeping an eye on our lives every day? (btw, I have a similar thought about beliefs that God, or angels, are spying on us. Not only creepy, but I wonder if they would have better things to do than peek down on billions of believers with approval or disapproval. A very strange idea).

So, I can't prove this, but I would state unequivocally the dead do not speak to us because they cannot. I appreciate this line from the song: "The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls, and tenebrum halls; And whispered in the sounds of silence." Sure, I get that. We read their words, we "hear" their voices, in our literature, stories, myths, traditions. That's reasonable. In this sense, we certainly can hear the dead speak to us. However, I would call attention to

the fact that history cautions us to beware of those who "hear voices from beyond" and build empires or religions on personal visions. It's simply too easy to use and abuse the powerfully manipulative claim: "God spoke to me" or "One of the saints appeared to me," to prey on the vulnerable and credulous.

It may be a good, healthy exercise to try this experiment: imagine you are dead — sorry, I know that's an uncomfortable thought, but this will only take a minute. Can you imagine what you would want to say to anyone, and why? Would you want to know everything going on in the "land of the living" and have some influence over the actions of anyone, especially loved ones? How does that thought feel for you? Alright, let that go; it's a bit depressing to even imagine this, isn't it? So, next time the question comes up, in your own head or from someone else, it may be helpful to remember this experiment. Putting ourselves in the place of a person who claims to speak with the departed can help us understand why they desire that relationship with the dark mystery of silence we call death (I haven't even touched on mental illness. I've known people who "hear voices," living with the suffering of their broken brains. It's a serious disorder, and with compassionate therapy and medications a person can find healing).

The question is as old as human history. Do religious beliefs offer an empathetic, rational response?

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