



Thank you for taking the time to answer the feature questions below.

For starters; please tell us a bit about yourself – where were you born and raised? What was life like growing up in childhood?

I'm born in Leidschendam the west of the Netherlands in the year 1976. When I was 3 years old my mother had a haemorrhage. This was very difficult for her as a young, beautiful, talented woman, wife and mother. She started having psychosocial problems and eventually got the diagnosis manic-depressive. She got hospitalized. In this period my parents divorced and my father became the guardian over me and my brother. I think this broke my mom's heart. She committed suicide when I was 4. All this had a big impact on me and my family. My father remarried to a nice lady and she became my second mom. My early youth was also a time of being bullied a lot.



When I was 9 we moved to the south of the Netherlands, to Geldrop. There a good time started for me. I had lots of good friends and my school grades were going up. I started doing music and theatre. Later on in my teenage years partying entered my life and I started experimenting with smoking weed. When I was 17 I started living on my own in Tilburg to study for Math-teacher. From the first night in my own room I started smoking weed every night.

The fondest memory of my childhood was playing with all my toys at the same time. :-)

Would you please share about your voice hearing experiences and what was happening for you at the time?

I started hearing voices for the first time when I was 25. Before that I was a mentally and physically healthy psychology student. I had lots of friends and things were going good study- and workwise. I was finishing my cognitive neuroscience master thesis about emotions, consciousness and the brain. I've had the chance to be one of the first students to do an fMRI study which was new back then. The thesis was taking longer than planned because I wanted to combine a lot of different findings into a new model. At the same time I got a job at the new brain-imaging centre. I was to control the fMRI scanner, a responsible job for which I had to study a lot of extra math, physics and biology. So you can say; there was quite a lot of pressure there.

At the same time I've come to be very interested in mysticism and shamanism. I listened a lot to the esoteric band Tool and read books by Carlos Castaneda. I had experimented a bit



with altered states of mind using magic mushrooms and MDMA. In August of 2001 I decided to do an LSD-trip at the Landjuweel Festival in the squatted village of Ruigoord, near Amsterdam. This is a place known for its psychonaut tradition. During the trip I started thinking about my mother. I wondered if my behaviour as a little kid had any influence on her decision to commit suicide. At that moment I heard a woman's voice. She said: "But you didn't kill your mother"... After that I met a woman and an Indian from South America. He gave me a joint with God-knows-what in it. I think this gave an extra blast to the trip. I got into a trance state and started seeing visions. I saw a great temple of white light. This experience turned out to be a life changing moment. Until then I was interested in spirituality, but now it became clear to me that there is a whole spiritual reality to life that I never fathomed before.

The voices and visions, and also smells, tastes and spontaneous behaviour kept on going through the next period. The trip didn't end. A couple of days later I got a Reiki-healing from the American globetrotter with whom I did the acid trip with. I reacted very intense, with spasms and crying. The next day when my friend left, the crying and spasms came back. I tried to keep on working and studying but all these strange experiences and volatile behaviours made it difficult to continue. I kept on hearing voices. The voices started saying frightening things to me; "that I would lose my soul". I thought the voices were part of some kind of evil conspiracy. By this time I entered an existential/spiritual crisis that evolved into a psychosis.

After that I entered psychiatry and a year later I got hospitalized. First voluntarily, later forced. I also got forced meds and they threw me in the isolation cell.

As for the voices: For me the voices were mostly unknown voices. I've heard many different ones, over a hundred, male and female. Most of the time I would hear the voices inside my head, but also outside. For years I've heard the voices many times a day, but each time not for very long. The content was cryptic, puzzling and confusing, straight up negative and sometimes positive, helpful or funny. I remember one time a heard a lot of women have an orgasm, like in the movie Amelie. That was funny - but seriously, most of the time it was hellish. Sometimes it seemed pretty paranormal. For instance, one time the voices said that things were not going well with Martin. I didn't know which Martin they were talking about and what was going on, but I later heard a Martin I knew committed suicide around that time. In my experience voices always have had a spiritual quality to them. It's like a parallel consciousness of normal awareness and spiritual awareness.

How did you seek help and start on your road to recovery?

At first I didn't seek help at all. In fact I socially isolated myself, because I found it difficult to cope with people and voices at the same time.



What helped me later on and throughout the years were people that are open to these kinds of experiences. People that accept me, my experiences and my behaviour as it is. Most of the time this would be people with a more spiritual world view, but later on also people in the Hearing Voices Network and the recovery movement.

Like I said; I entered psychiatry, so I met a lot of psychiatrists and nurses. I got a lot of meds with a lot of nasty side-effects. The voices never went away because of those meds, but after a while I did find a medicine that would help me stabilize without many side effects.

As for the voices I had to find a way to cope with them myself. One time a nurse had a good talk with me. No official talk. We just had a cup of tea and he asked how I was doing. I explained to him that I heard voices and they were nasty. He asked me if I could say anything back. I said I didn't know how. I still remember that I was lying in bed that night, looking for my own inner voice and I couldn't find it. It has always been a one-way communication from the voice to me. Later on I started praying a lot. I figured I was dealing with negative spiritual beings, so started asking positive spiritual beings for help. I think praying definitely helped me on a spiritual level, but after a while I discovered that as a side effect of praying, I had developed my own inner voice. Using my inner voice later turned out to become my principle coping mechanism. I started dialoguing with them. I started to be assertive towards them. I let them know what my views are and what my boundaries are. Later on I managed to change the relationship with the voices from a bully-victim relation to a friend-friend relation. I discovered I could block the voices out when I used my own inner voice. My inner voice also helped to counter negative voices and thoughts and reinforce positive ones. I gained back control over my own mind, started making my own decisions again. I also decided to become my own best friend. I used my inner voice to talk to myself, to coach myself, to comfort myself, to have fun with myself. So this little talk with that nurse turned out to have helped me a lot. Funny thing is that his name literally means "Am Thankful".

All this contributed to my taking up responsibility over my own life. I started to believe I could recover and reach my goals in life; goals that the diagnosis of schizophrenia had taken away. Like a home of my own (I've been homeless for while), finding a nice girlfriend, finishing my studies, getting a job, getting off meds, traveling. Since 2005 I've been taking small steps towards these goals and one by one I have reached them.

On your road of recovery, what has been some of the hardest parts and how did you overcome this? Was there an easy part?

Well there's a lot of talking about the trauma that can cause voices and for me I guess it was the suicide of my mother and being bullied as a child. But for me, and I think for a lot of



people, the psychoses themselves were very traumatic. Really hellish; I literally thought I lost my Soul to the devil or some other evil beings. For me this is the biggest trauma in my life. To recover from that I started showing myself and the people around me that I am a good person. I became very idealistic. For instance, after my psychological recovery the first volunteer “job” that I did was organizing more than 50 benefit parties and festivals for good causes. In hindsight I can definitely say that parallel to my recovery I became a more spiritual and idealistic person and I’m thankful for that.

How are your experiences now, in relation to years ago when it all started – and do you have ‘coping strategies’ that you have learned to use along the way?

Yes a lot. When I started studying psychology again I chose hearing voices as the subject of my thesis. By that time it was the first Hearing Voices World Congress. I visited the congress and a whole new world opened for me. I found out there are a lot of mentally healthy voice hearers, that trauma plays an important role, that you can become an expert by experience and so on. I decided to join Weerklank (the Dutch HVN) and Intervoice and learned so much. In my study I looked at brain-imaging research and found that Jullian Jaynes’ theory of the bicameral mind turned out to be pretty much what's going on in our brain. After my study I decided to become an expert by experience. Since then I had the pleasure to work with people like Marius Romme, Sandra Escher, Dirk Corstens and Rufus May. Two years ago I founded the Hearing Voices Support Centre at the RIBW N&R in my hometown. Throughout the years I learned so much about different ways to understand voices and to cope with them. Some general principles are: 1) Taking good care of myself and reduce stress in my life, 2) Focus attention on nice, meaningful and useful things, 3) Talking about experiences, thoughts and feelings with good people and 4) Have a lot of fun! For years I thought “I hear voices and I can’t cope with them and that's it”. The last few years I noticed when I do all these things on a daily basis, it finally becomes silent in my head. A real surprise for me!

May I ask what are your personal beliefs surrounding the explanation of the voice hearing experience?

Good question. For me it's still a bit mysterious, even though I've learned so many explanations throughout the years. I see them as pieces to a puzzle; a puzzle of which the final picture is unknown. Sometimes a couple of pieces fit together and the more pieces fit together the more you get the big picture. For me it's very important to keep an open mind. To admit that there's so much you don't know.

I fundamentally stay open for both scientific and spiritual explanations. Science tends to explain the voices as coming from the person's own mind and brain, while a lot of spiritual traditions say it can come from outside the person, like telepathy or contact with spirits.



From even before my first hearing voices experiences it's been my interest to see how you can combine these worldviews. I now have a worldview where there is room for individual consciousness, collective consciousness and universal consciousness. In this worldview I can give both the scientific and the spiritual explanations a place.

As for scientific explanations, I do think that things like trauma, stress, sleep deprivation, sensory deprivation, social isolation, the use of drugs and in some case genetic inheritance can play a role.

I think the bicameral mind thing is an important key. You see, most right handed people process their language with their left brain. This is the more verbal, rational side of the brain that deals with things that we can easily categorize. When we talk, listen to speech, read and write we use this side of the brain. During voice hearing, however the language area's at the other side of the brain (right side) become active. The more negative the content of the voices, the more the activation is on the right side of the brain. These areas activate the auditory area's resulting in a voice heard. At the same time you see areas in the left brain active that are involved in evaluating the current situation. So the left brain is wondering who or what are these voices from the right side and what are they saying?

This finding may explain why people do not recognize this is their own voices and also why it's difficult to control them. Compare it to trying to write with your left hand while you're right-handed. At the next Hearing Voices World Congress I will present a new integrated theory in which I integrate the trauma based theory of Marius Romme and Sandra Escher with the bicameral mind theory: When people have traumatic experiences, many times they don't want to talk and think about them. They avoid it because it's just too painful. Or they cannot talk about it because it's just unspeakable. This way the information never enters the language areas on the left side of the brain. The right brain seems to offer a place where you can put all these unresolved emotional problems... Until the intensity becomes too much and it activates the language areas on the right side of the brain, resulting in voices talking about that problem. Does this make sense to you? For me this is an example of some pieces to the puzzle that seems to fit.

Enough about the science; for me the experience of hearing voices has always had a spiritual quality for me. It still feels like spirits talking to me. It is true that the circumstances in my life, mind and body play an important role, but that to me doesn't necessarily mean they solely originate from my own mind/brain. To me spirits, Soul, telepathy are a reality. How they rhyme with our scientific understanding is still mysterious to me. I like the spiritual emergency and transpersonal approaches, as well as indigenous and religious traditions.



What projects are you currently working on?

The Hearing Voices Support Centre! We are growing now. We got 3 new experts by experience who do a 'learn & work' trajectory. And we got a student investigating the effects of the support we offer. Basically we offer information and support to voice-hearers, their family & friends of voice-hearers and to mental health care workers. We offer both individual and group support. The aim is to support recovery & emancipation. We want to help voice-hearers find their own way of living with voices, their own path to recovery.

We have received funding by the Dutch Foundation for Mental Health to develop a course about voice hearing and to give it in the whole of Netherlands. The course is for voice-hearers, family and friends and MHC workers as well. Voice-hearers who want to become an expert by experience can do a train-the-trainer course after they've finished the living with voices course. For this project I'm writing a book, which will hopefully be presented as a free download on our website. It's a lot of work, but it's exciting!

What does the future hold for you?

Like I said: developing the courses and writing the book. I hope it will be a big success, in that it will help a lot of voice-hearers and emancipate voice hearing. In the far future I hope to translate the book to English and give courses all over the world.

And in the near future: The World HVN Congress in Thessaloniki. It will be great reuniting with the HVN tribe!

Favourite Quote?

*"If you hear a voice within you say 'you cannot paint,'
then by all means paint, and that voice will be silenced."*

- Vincent Van Gogh -

Web link

Hearing Voices Support Centre (Dutch)

www.ribw-clientenplein.nl/Herstel/Steunpunt-Stemmen-Horen

Dutch Foundation for Mental Health

www.psychischegezondheid.nl

2 movies about voice hearing (English)

www.hearingvoicesmovie.blogspot.nl

Social Media links

<https://www.facebook.com/robin.timmers.961>

<https://www.facebook.com/SteunpuntStemmenHoren/>