

First, a word for Mother's Day, from one of my favorite mothers, Erma Bombeck. She wrote: "Grown children call their mothers when they're out of work, out of love, or out of money. There's one other moment when they are breathless to hear mom's voice – when they've been exposed to a childhood disease.

"It's something mothers are supposed to remember. It's a womb thing. A child has such importance that his every move and spoken word is entered into a mother's mental computer. I have few things in my memory bank. Other than the year Columbus discovered America, I haven't a clue who did what, and when they did what I can't remember. That is because for a period of 15 years or so, our house looked like the Atlanta hospital in GONE WITH THE WIND. All the rashes began to look alike. We had no friends or social life. My mother would cover her face, drop off a pot of soup outside our front door, knock, and run away.

"One year, my Christmas present was a druggist who delivered. I wore Dr. Spock's book on a string around my neck.

"All of the childhood diseases sort of ran together for me. Now when a child calls and asks if he ever had measles, I just try to associate a date with something significant. Anything.

"What dog did we have when the daylight hurt your eyes? Was that the rash where I wouldn't let you on the brown sofa, or did we still have that tired chintz one? Wait a minute. Did you have braces then? You never had braces? Who are you?"

"A firstborn will have every breath recorded in a baby book. Indulgent parents have been known to write 'Upset tummy' in calligraphy, followed by a date. We all know what happens to the children who follow.

"There is only one date that really stands out in my mind. On a Wednesday morning at 7:30 am, in March of 1951, I awoke with the mumps. It was the first day of my honeymoon. Some things you never forget." (GOOD HOUSEKEEPING, July 1994, p. 28). HAPPY MOTHER'S DAY TO ALL OF YOU WHO KNOW THAT PRIVILEGE!

Now on to the gospel. Jesus says "My sheep hear my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life." (Jn 10:27)

But there are a lot of voices that beckon us, and it is not easy to discern the voice of truth among them. Indeed it is difficult even to discern when we are genuinely sincere: Who am I really? What is in my genuine best-interest? Among the many voices I hear which voice will ultimately bring me life? Which is the voice of God in my life? Which is the voice of the Good Shepherd?

Countless voices assail us from without: billboards, television, magazines, the internet, ideologies, religion, the arts, pop culture, fashion, the lure of celebrity, among others. But it is usually not difficult for us to recognize that we are in fact being assailed by these voices – for they make little pretense. Each has an angle: they want our money, our vote, our support, our sympathy, our allegiance, our attention, our participation, our admiration, or something from us. Subtlety is not their strong suit, and we are generally not so naïve as to think they have our best interests at heart; though in some cases, like healthy religion or good art, their best expressions are for our benefit. But we are not so easily taken in by these outside voices.

Where we are on more shaky ground is with voices that beckon and make truth claims from within. Because these voices are inside us, it is easy to believe that they have our best interests at heart, that they speak for us, that they are the voice of truth.

There are just as many voices that assail us from within as there are voices from without. For example

--the voice of personal grandiosity, ego, self-interest, and laziness. We are not altruistic by nature. Thanks to our human nature, we come into this world instinctually prideful, self-centered, narcissistic, and concerned first of all with our well-being, pleasure, and comfort. As we grow into maturity, we hopefully learn that the voice of self-interest is not the voice that calls us to healthy and holy life; but, this side of eternity, that voice never dies, and remains inside us always as a voice that is ready to undermine all other voices. Jesus reminds us "I have come not to be served, but to serve, and give my life as a ransom for others." (Mk 10:45) The voice of Jesus is a voice that calls us to serve others.

--the voice of wound and rage. Nobody comes to adulthood whole. It is not a question of whether we are wounded but only a question of the what and the where of our wounds. And the voice of wound is speaking always, subtly and not so subtly, inside us, calling us to feel distrustful, slighted, offended, angry, and vengeful. None of us are immune. This voice is forever telling us that others are against us, that we need to take care of ourselves first, and we need to look out for number 1. The voice of our Good Shepherd says "I say to you forgive 70 times 7 times." (Mt 18:22) The voice of Jesus calls us to wholeness and peace.

--the voice of emotional and psychological depression. Depression easily disguises itself as depth, as altruism, as holiness, and hence it can fool us by having us believe that this heaviness of spirit is life-giving when, in fact, it is draining our bodies and souls of oxygen and life. The voice of depression is very often confused with the voice of religion because it appears to honor asceticism, other-worldliness, and the cross, when it does not. Just because something hurts doesn't mean it's holy. The voice of Jesus says "I have come that you may have life – and that you may have it abundantly." (John 10:10)

--the voice of sentimentality and piety. Sentimentality and piety are very easily mistaken for genuine empathy and genuine devotion. But there is a not-so-subtle difference: in genuine empathy and genuine devotion, the tears we cry are for others. In sentimentality and piety the tears we shed are for ourselves. We can say we feel so sorry for the poor, but then do nothing for them. Jesus says "Love one another AS I have loved you." (Jn 13:34)

--the voice of obsession, of inner 'angels' and 'demons.' There is a long-standing argument as to what ultimately most influences our behavior: nature or nurture? Genetics or environment? A number of thinkers, including James Hillman, would suggest that what most influences our behavior is neither nature nor nurture, but various 'angels' and 'demons' inside that assail us, trigger obsessions, and rob us of freedom. Anyone who has ever fallen helplessly and hopelessly in love will recognize exactly what a 'demon' or 'angel' inside can do. There are few more paralyzing forces in our lives and there are few voices that can so deeply make us believe that a certain person (and only this person) can bring us happiness. If we are a romantic, this voice will be both the biggest source of energy and the biggest source of grief in our life; and, as bitter experience has shown, it isn't always the voice of life. Jesus says "Follow ME." (Mt 4:19)

--the voice of genetics, ethnicity, and gender. Blood is thicker than water and it is also a very powerful voice inside us that is never fully silent. We do not come into this world as unused photographic paper onto which nothing has yet been imprinted. Rather we enter this life with a powerful DNA, inside both our bodies and souls, within which many things are already indelibly stamped. Our DNA, physical and psychological, remains always a powerful voice inside us and, like the voice of personal grandiosity, it doesn't always have our ultimate best interests at heart. Jesus says "You are my beloved one in whom I take my delight." (Mk 1:11; Mt 3:17; Lk 3:22) THAT'S our deepest identity, and it comes directly from God, and is being spoken to us at every minute of our lives. THAT'S the voice we need to hear, for it is the voice of Christ. Amen. (this adapted from "Powerful Voices Within," posting of Ronald Rolheiser, 15 July 2012)