



The Voices Model helps you find your one true voice. J. S. Park identifies the false voices we listen to as four inner and four outer voices. In *The Voices We Carry* you'll learn how to identify and silence these voices so you can grow fully and freely.

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CHAPTER 1

I Don't Know How Much I Didn't Know

They all carried ghosts.

—TIM O'BRIEN, *THE THINGS THEY CARRIED*¹

MY VOICES: YOU ARE (NOT) AN ACCIDENT

These are some of the voices I used to wrestle with.

Do you hear them, too?

You are an accident.

I was born an accident, out of wedlock, to two hesitant immigrant parents who didn't know if they would keep me or stay together. The one before me was aborted.

I found out about the “accident” around my twelfth birthday, and for a while I walked around like some kind of superimposed hologram, a ghost in debt. I apologized a lot, bowing my head in short little bobs, always sorry about everything. You might have seen a guy figuring out how to get through a crowded hallway

without bumping into everyone and making a mess of the world: you have seen me. I moved with the finesse of rolling a boulder up a stream. My head-space was always haunted by second-guessing, and I had nightmares of jumpstarting the butterfly effect and ripping a hole in the sky. Real plague-type stuff. It was a crazy thing, walking around with a drag of cosmic displacement—a life on loan—wondering about parallel timelines. My every good deed was a deposit in a black hole; my every bad deed was a confirmation that I should not be around so much. I was possessed by a phantom of deficit.

The story I believed about myself was: *You're an interruption to the order of things.*

That was the voice in my head.

You are sick and something is wrong with you.

My parents married because of me. They divorced on my fourteenth birthday. It was probably because of all the cheating, but those were symptoms, like they say, of deeper stuff. I was an extremely sick child—chronic bronchitis, asthma attacks, bouts of vertigo, allergies to fruit, dairy, and dogs, and there was the one time that penicillin nearly killed me—and for a year I took a daily dose of medicine through a nebulizer. In my culture, there's a belief that disease comes from some rotten place in your soul. I was told my constant illness was a symptom of something, a stench rising from bad soil.

My uncle had schizophrenia and suffered from hallucinations. He always thought someone was after him. I mean it, like really chasing him. He put red beans in his ears to stop all the radio

signals, and occasionally he hopped on his bicycle with nothing but a backpack full of underwear and would ride from Florida to California. He did this once or twice a year. I don't think it helped. My grandmother was a fully practicing Shintoist. I still couldn't tell you what it's all about. She chanted these intense Shinto prayers for hours in a closet by incense, and I decided early on I was an atheist. My grandmother developed dementia. I remember her cooking for me and my brother as my parents lived their separate lives, the dinners becoming more and more bizarre, my grandmother shouting at spirits in the kitchen as smoke rose from the pots and pans.

You are not welcome.

My father was a second lieutenant in the Vietnam War and served alongside the US. He was captured by the Viet Cong in an assault called the Tet Offensive—he was blindfolded, bound, and transported barefoot to a prison camp. He was a POW for years. He escaped, just barely, by killing the guards. He still gets phone calls from families looking for their fathers who were captured. He moved to New York with fifty dollars in his wallet, as he tells it, and through his charm and investors, opened a martial arts dojo. He moved to Florida and opened another. I was around for the one in Florida.

One summer, someone spray-painted a swastika on the front wall of the dojo. My father painted over it, but I could still see the red crosshairs under the paint, throbbing like an angry scar in the summer sun. Another time we got a message on our answering machine, maybe the same Nazi artists, and they left a ten-minute message making fun of my father's accent. I remember seeing my

father play it several times, staring quietly out a window. He noticed me and turned it off. “Just boys playing a joke,” he said. He knew as well as I did that the voices were not from boys.

You cannot lose.

My parents worked a lot, my father at his martial arts dojo and my mother working nights at her laundromat and days at her grocery store. We fit the stereotypes neatly. I’d watch my mother leave at midnight, come home before the sun rose, sleep an hour, then get right back to work. The TV was always on. Somehow we still made it to dinner together every night on the floor of my parents’ bedroom at a raggedy wooden table. We watched whatever my father wanted to, which was boxing mostly, or an action movie. If we had a good week, we’d go to Stacey’s Buffet in the next town over, and my father always said the same thing while holding up a fried chicken leg: *This is when I feel like I’m in America.*

We were poor, but I didn’t know what that meant. We lived in what I’m sure was the projects. I loved our little place, a huddle from the world, stains and all. My brother and I chased the cockroaches that visited us from the walls and we threw them at each other and I’d land the most and win. When I was seven, I got in a fight with a single mother from the projects, and I lost. To my credit, she started it. My mother scolded me later, telling me, *Always fight to win.*

My parents lost the laundromat and grocery store, but the dojo took off. At twelve years old, when I found out I was a mistake, we moved into a three-story house with twenty-two windows out front. But my parents’ marriage went sideways. It was probably the money. They argued about everything in an instant. I could

feel the heat building in the room like a copper electric taste in my mouth, and then one wrong word set the world on fire. Lamps were thrown, wardrobes tossed, windows broken. My mother sliced open my father with her middle fingernail from his elbow to his wrist. They punched each other in the face, with wild, full-swing haymakers. The police visited with some regularity. I missed the roaches.

You are not one of us.

In sixth grade, I had allergies, glasses, braces, and a stutter all at the same time. That was social death. Two girls passed a note to me one time in homeroom, and I got pretty excited. I mean a note from two girls. On one side the note said *Ugly Pass*, and on the other it said, *You can show your ugly face in school today.*

I sat alone at lunch in the cafeteria. One guy took a swing at me because “your dad fought my dad in the war.” Another time I guess I was sitting too close to this table of acceptable people, and they threw French fries at my head. The fries were drenched in ketchup, naturally.

The popular sixth graders, about five of them, one time cornered Victor, a smart Jewish kid with glasses, in the locker room and beat him unconscious. I saw Victor’s face later; the violence was startling. The guys who beat him up were suspended from school for a week and Victor ended up switching schools.

A few weeks later, the popular kids told me that Landra liked me. Landra, to me, was the prettiest girl in the entire school. She was the leader of the popular girls. For days, the guys took turns telling me, *Landra likes you, man, she thinks you’re cute, she likes Chinese guys, she thinks you’re funny, you should ask her out.*

I didn't believe it at first, thinking this was some kind of Victor locker room situation. But I mean, the guys were actually nice to me, and that was all they ever talked about: *She likes you, seriously, you and her could go steady.*

The power of their voices got to me.

So at lunch in the cafeteria, I approached Landra as she left the lunch line. I remember what she was wearing that day: a blue dress imprinted with white flowers, a black headband, a lace choker. Believe me, I was sweating from everywhere. I was sort of giddy and dizzy and nauseated at the same time. But I had it on good intel that this would go really well. This was my chance to turn my sorry life around.

I tapped Landra on the shoulder. She smiled at me.

I knew it, I thought. She really does like me.

I said, "I like you . . . too?"

To her credit, she wasn't mean to me or anything. She put her hand on my shoulder and gave me this sad sort of smile. I still think about that sometimes, the way people can be kind in a hard situation.

She said, "No." And she walked away. I can still see her dress, the way her headband fit her hair.

At one side of the cafeteria, where the popular guys sat, I heard them laughing. They were muffled at first, but soon busted out in a roar, holding their sides and pointing at me and slapping the table. I ran out the back of the cafeteria and went to the restroom and I sat on a toilet and cried. I didn't come out of the restroom for the rest of the day.

I ended up switching schools too.

You don't have what it takes.

My father took me to this audition for a TV show on Nickelodeon when I was about six years old. I mean, imagine that. At six, that's a really big deal. I was part of this pre-selected group of *potential stars* because I had shown up in a newspaper article about my father's dojo, and my father knew some hotshot studio executive and showed off my face from the metro section—and so began my career in show business.

It ended pretty quickly.

I went with my father in his beat-up Lincoln Continental to this casting place between a dry cleaners and a pawn shop. The second I walked in, I saw a bunch of other kids with their parents in the waiting room. The kids were practicing with their parents. They were dead serious; it was like a haunted nursery. And they were *good*. Have you ever seen those precocious glassy-eyed kids who act like adults, and it's sort of cute and creepy all at once? This waiting room had all of them. I was still trying to figure out what to do with my arms; these kids were method acting and reciting lines from Othello.

I had questions. *Should I have been practicing? Do I want to do this? Am I wearing pants right now?* I sat down with my father and tried to practice, but I noticed my own voice for the first time and it was really loud in my ears. I expected a certain noise and out came another.

I walked into this room as one kind of kid and sat down a completely different kid. From elated to deflated, in the span of one iambic pentameter.

It was my turn. My father and I walked through a tiny door that revealed half a set: an empty desk, an ottoman, a fern, a couch,

a studio light, and a video camera on a tripod. Everything was a teal and burgundy color, which made me want to brush my teeth. The casting director, an impossibly tall guy with a headset and a clipboard, gave me the assignment. I was supposed to jump out from behind the couch and say a catchphrase: *Not in my house!*

Suddenly I was feverish. The casting director looked me up and down and jotted some notes. He looked intensely uninterested. The light was hot, I mean oven hot. I noticed the fern was fake, a sickening greenish plastic, and the ottoman was faded and peeling at the corners. I got behind the couch. It had no backing, just some plywood covered in cobwebs. The floorboards squeaked. I became really aware that my arms were a thing I could control with my brain. My hands felt disconnected from my body, sort of flopping around on their own. The room spun. I wanted to run.

The casting guy said *action*—and I jumped up and yelled my line.

“Not in my house!”

I stood there and looked at the casting guy. The casting guy looked at me. He made a note. A really long note. A couple notes. Then he looked up and said, “You have to put in *more*. Put more into it. Okay? More.”

I reset. I was sweating a lot, half from the light and half from myself.

“Not in my house!” Reset. “Not in my house!” Reset. “Not in my house?”

I never got a call back.

You are Bruce.

In my senior year of high school, this administrator told me about a multicultural festival that would be attended by the entire high school. Hundreds of students, maybe. *Would you like to be a part of that?* he asked. *Would you like to show off your martial arts?* he asked. Yes, I said. Yes, I would.

I trained. For weeks I ran and kicked and jumped and kicked some more until my legs just about fell off. I put together music on a cassette tape. On the big day, I drove up in my beat-down Toyota Corolla with my uniform and black belt and nunchucks and I froze. I stayed in the car and sobbed these heaving, panicked sobs. Oh man, a big black belt baby. I couldn't do it. No one liked me here, anyway. They would laugh me off the stage with French fries and ugly passes. *You wanted to be one of us, huh? One of us?*

One of my father's students, a middle-aged guy named Dom, had agreed to meet me in the school parking lot to help me out. He volunteered to hold boards and be the *uki*, the fall guy. Dom believed in me, I think. He thought I was all right. He knocked on my car window and it sort of snapped me out of the crying fit. I think he had seen me crying in the car but he didn't say anything.

I grabbed my belt, my nunchucks, my boards, and my cassette tape, and I strode into the high school gymnasium and handed the tape to the DJ. Everyone was there. Hundreds of students. It felt like a million. They didn't look mean or anything; more like surprised, or sorry even. The music queued up, and for a second I was going to run out of the building. I looked at Dom. He looked sort of hopeful and sad and kind all at once, the way you look at a

kid who gets picked last for the team but you want him to have a good time. I picked up the chucks and spun them like crazy. I did all my flashy moves. I jumped around and threw all the kicks I had practiced, those hours and hours of kicks in the mirror until my legs had turned to jelly. And the students cheered. *Cheered*. Not the polite kind, but the gasping kind, like can you get a load of this guy?—he’s all right. I did more flashy stuff on Dom the *uki*; I threw him left and right and he really sold it. Then I lined up eight football players to crouch on the ground and Dom held a board at the end of the line, and I jumped over all eight football players for a flying side kick finish. When I landed, no one moved for a full two seconds. I thought I had lost them. But the place went wild. Someone yelled *Bruce!*—for Bruce Lee. I was Bruce for the rest of my senior year.

I’ve seen those high schoolers again, at the mall or a doctor’s office or some place, and they silently whisper, *Bruce*. That was my one moment of high school redemption, like the gawky kid who does a cool dance number at prom, except I beat up Dom and jumped over football players.

Everyone should get one of those memories. Not everyone does, I know. I was lucky.

THIS TIME (AND EVERY TIME), IT’S PERSONAL

By the time I entered the hospital chaplaincy program, I found out a sad thing: I wasn’t healthy. Despite a few good voices, all those hard ones had done a number on me.

The chaplaincy program wasn’t what I expected. I thought we would learn how to counsel patients in their grief. That was a part

of it. But to figure out how to counsel grief, we also had to counsel our own. The program was basically one long self-surgery, with a mirror overhead.

The job interview was a big indication of all this. Instead of asking the usual stuff like, “What do you think you’ll contribute here?” or “What’s your leadership style?”, they asked “How did your parents’ divorce affect you?” and “How did you feel about your previous boss when he fired you?”

“How did I feel?”

“Yes. Your feelings.”

“Oh. Those. My feelings . . . felt bad.”

“*Bad* is not a feeling word.”

I remember thinking these were *personal questions*. Let’s be professional; you can’t ask me that.

How did you process your friend’s death in college?

What made you want to take your life twelve years ago?

What happened just now when you flinched at that question?

What did you feel?

The interview went on like this for an hour. It was icky and uncomfortable. Like a fork across my gums. They told me they would call me in a month. I thought I had bombed it. Afterward, I drove around for a while, recovering from digging through my old wounds. I had those mad tears. I mean, they asked me about my *life*. A few hours later, they called. Congratulations, they said. You’re hired.

“The interview,” a supervisor said at orientation, “was only to find out two things: to see if you’re teachable and to see if you can lean into your pain.”

I laughed a little. I sort of wanted to punch him. But I was afraid they would spend an hour asking me why.



The whole program was like the interview: we would dig deep, tap a well of stories, then dig some more. Into our *feelings*. It was ridiculous—maybe self-indulgent—but it was revealing.

The entire thing was a six-month internship and a yearlong residency. There were five interns and five residents. We varied in age, gender, race, religion, and background. We called it an arranged marriage. Imagine you get thrown into a rock tumbler and at the other end you hope the friction will make you a gem. That was the idea, anyway.

We'd meet up weekly for a few hours of classes, patient discussions, one-on-one supervisions with the supervisor, topical reflections, and group time. This was hard stuff. Especially the group time, called IPR—Interpersonal Relations—where we dug into each other's stories, called each other out, and put "why we do what we do" under a microscope. Sometimes all of this was harder than visiting the patients. In IPR, with our different ears and eyes and perspectives, we discovered things in ourselves that we never could have on our own.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN: ANOTHER CURTAIN

In chaplaincy, we were tasked to ask ourselves: *What are the stories under our stories? And what's underneath those stories?*

I discovered, slowly and painfully, that the failure to confront all my voices had produced a fractured, nervous, anxious, and self-shaming sort of person. I flopped over quickly at criticism. The slightest feedback would send me into a tailspin of self-loathing. But then I had an ego big enough to see from space. I found out I was more judgmental than I could ever admit, exerting a mental control over the actions of other people who were “lesser” than me. At the same time, I exalted others so much I was always living out their vision for me.

I discovered that I suffered from a contradiction of self-doubt, egotism, bigotry, and people-pleasing. There was no Dr. Jekyll, only Mr. Hyde and Hyde and Hyde. I identified these voices that had burrowed their way in, carving subterranean divots from which they whispered their commands. I found these same voices in hundreds of my patients from all walks of life—and at death. I found them in the other chaplains as we traced our histories together. Mostly I found them in myself. It was in hearing these voices that I really began to *see*.

Really, I shouldn't have been surprised. But I was. Before chaplaincy, I didn't have names for the things I carried with me. Putting a name to them was liberating. Excruciating. Empowering.



In the Philip Marlowe detective stories, shady characters are always walking into Marlowe's office or bumping into him at the scene of the crime. Marlowe has to figure out fast if they're a crook or a patsy, how they fit into the puzzle, if they can be trusted. In the end, he works with them, turns them in, or both.

In some sense, our brains are their own sort of detective story, complete with a cast of characters we've learned to trust or dismiss. Each character—each voice—has either guided us out of the fog or led us into an alley. A lot of times, we've remained in the limbo of mystery, never finding out who we can trust.

But these voices left unchecked can be harmful. They can subtly direct the course of your life. Your relationships. Your marriage. Your work. Your home.

Take it from me: it's worth the investigation. It's worth chasing all these voices as far as they can go.



In this book, we'll go through **four internal voices** and **four external voices**.

The four internal voices are *valuations*. They grade others and ourselves; they confer moral judgments. These four voices—self-exaltation, self-condemnation, exalting others, and condemning others—at first appear negative, since they victimize or demonize. But by getting the entire story on these voices, we can instead *humanize* others and ourselves. We find there's a purpose behind each voice, each trying to say something that isn't what it seems.

INTERNAL VOICES MODEL: VALUATIONS

	SELF	OTHERS
EXALTING	SELF-EXALTATION: Pride and Self-Justification	EXALTING OTHERS: People-Pleasing and Codependency
CONDEMNING	SELF- CONDEMNATION: Self-Doubt, Second- Guessing, and Insecurity	CONDEMNING OTHERS: Judgment, Resentment, and Controlling Others

The four external voices are *precipitations*. They tend to occur from events and situations outside of us, often things we can't control. They are guilt, trauma, family dynamics, and grief. They don't always have redeeming qualities, but there's a way to face them with poise and skill.

EXTERNAL VOICES MODEL: PRECIPITATIONS

	SELF	OTHERS
PAIN FROM	GUILT: What I Did	FAMILY DYNAMICS: What I Grew Up With
LOSS FROM	TRAUMA: What Was Done to Me	GRIEF: What I Lost

Most of the voices I talk about in this book will sound familiar. But some of our voices will have to be dug up, and they might not like it. They might hiss at exposure to light. Some of that's because these voices have been giving orders for a while. They're so comfortable that they've offered a false kind of safety. For example, we may routinely find reasons to belittle ourselves. That feeling of condemnation, then, becomes a cozy and terrible blanket. If we question that voice, it might counter, *But the proof is right there, you messed it up pretty bad, so don't ever try that again.* And so we stay stuck and wrapped up. Other times, we've been taught the wrong way to navigate through these voices: to overpower them, erase them, ignore them. The voices of grief and family dynamics, for example, are supposed to be "let go." Letting go of those voices, we find, is not only impossible, but harmful. They can enrich us, if we negotiate with them.

Exploring some of these voices might be an ugly street fight. Some of this will be challenging. At some point you might get tempted to think, *Oh, I know a guy who does that. I wish that guy could hear this.* And I bet this book would be good for that guy. But really, I'm talking to you. I promise I'm also talking to me and that other guy too. Mainly, though, it's for you. I'm pulling up a chair, eye-to-eye, face-to-face, and with all the grace and hope and love and anticipation in my being. Together we'll find a way through these voices to wholeness. By that, I mean finding the unswayed soul, your truest, most grounded self, moving freely through the clamor and noise.

We'll conclude the book by going through three ways that our voices can be used for good. I'll talk about what it means to

1—i don't know how much i didn't know

uncover lies to find truth worth holding, how to find your own voice amid mixed messages, and how to give a voice to the voiceless. And I'll talk about the one true voice, the one "divine," who has been there all along.

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