

The voices in your head

Almost all of us carry on an internal dialogue with ourselves. We put up for own private consideration various plans or ideas and shoot them down – ‘Ugh, no that’s a terrible idea’ – or big them up – ‘Yes, that’ll work, that’s really good’. (I tend to find that ideas I think are good at night look much worse in the morning – I don’t know why my judgment is affected by the time of day.) We do the same to ourselves – we put ourselves up for inspection and cast judgment on ourselves, either putting ourselves down – ‘You were such an idiot that time’ – or patting ourselves on the back – ‘That was a real zinger!’. And we do the same to other people. Just walking through Cambridge, particularly when it’s really crowded and people are getting in the way, is enough to give rise to a frenzy of judgments in my head: ‘Agh, that person is so inconsiderate!’, ‘Well, maybe they’ve got something on their mind...’, ‘No – there is no excuse!’, and so on and so on until I can escape the madding crowd.

So let’s admit it: we all have voices in our heads, and we listen to them. Now – the thing you have got to grasp is that just because there a particular voice that is prattling on about something or other is in *your* head – that does not mean that voice is *yours* or that what it is saying is *true*. It follows that if a voice that is rattling around in your head is not necessarily yours, and is not necessarily saying anything is true, there is no particular reason why you should listen to it or pay it any attention. So when should you listen to a voice inside your head? A useful test is to ask – Would a friend say this to me? So suppose that you are feeling down on yourself and inside your head you’ve got a voice saying, ‘You’re such a waste of space. You might as well give up on what you’re doing – it’ll never come to anything. Just stay in bed and keep out of trouble.’ Ask yourself – Would a friend say this to me? Obviously, the answer is no, a million times no. So if that voice inside your head is not the voice of a friend, why on earth would you listen to it? If someone followed you around saying the same thing, you’d tell them to sod off – so do the same to the voice in your head. Or suppose you are feeling pretty up about how things are going for you generally, and you’ve got a voice inside your head saying ‘You’re so amazing. You have so many fantastic insights – I don’t know why you bother wasting time listening to other people’s opinions. You should just do whatever you want, and start demanding that people rally round and help you get what you want.’ Would a friend say that to you? Again – no, a million times no: so why listen to that voice?

Only listen to the voices in your head that sound like they are coming from someone who has your best interests at heart. If you follow this one piece of advice, you will do far better than if you act on every passing notion that finds itself rattling around in your head. And, in time, the stupid voices may just quieten down, so that all you ever hear is sweet reason. But until then, be on your guard and try to visualise someone saying the things that go through your head and ask yourself: Is this really a friend? If they aren’t, then don’t listen.