

Did I Hear God?

Before I ever met Patton Dodd, I knew I'd like him. Captivated by a colorful snapshot of his life in *My Faith So Far*, I was keen to interact with this down-to-earth, laid-back guy with a love for Jesus and unmistakable disdain for religion. As we sat in the downstairs lobby of one of my favorite boutique hotels, we chatted about the trials that come with life as writers, the challenges he faced as a religion editor for Beliefnet and our random observations on the spiritual landscape of our country.

Though Dodd needed to get to a meeting and I was late myself, neither of us wanted to leave. When we finally got up, I felt a sudden impetuous impulse, a surge of energy I could only attribute to something outside myself, to give something to him.

Like most metropolitan cities, downtown Denver has homeless men and women on almost every block. Rather than hand out cash, which can be used for less-than-stellar purchases, I stock up on McDonald's dollars—hoping the recipient will at least enjoy a hot (though not particularly healthy) meal.

As I shook hands and said my goodbyes to Dodd that evening, all my thoughts centered around the five McDonald's dollars crammed into my pocket. My fingertips confirmed the bills were still there. I felt a soul-penetrating urge: *Give them to him.*

The only thing stronger than the impulse to give was the anxiety of actually handing over the bills. Though I had more than a hunch the impetus was from God, my mind ping-ponged with self-doubt. This was my first time meeting Dodd, and I wanted to make a good impression.

What would he think if I gave him the bills? What would God think if I didn't? The tug-of-war was raging in my mind as we said our goodbyes.

When Dodd turned to go, I said his name with an unmistakable sense of urgency. "Wait! This is going to sound strange, but give these to someone you see on the street who you think needs them."

He looked at me, mildly surprised, and said, "Uh, OK," and walked off. For fear of embarrassment, I have never asked Dodd what happened to those McDonald's dollars.

I couldn't help but wonder, *What was that?* Where did the impulse to give away the dollars come from?

As I reflect on the experience, I can make a strong case that the desire to give away the gift certificates was not my own. Partly because the fiery impetus was not just a fleeting thought, but a powerful, compelling urge that consumed my mind, soul and spirit. It consumed my every thought.

In the moment, it was clean and clear—the only thing I could think about. I couldn't shake or dismiss the thought no matter how hard I tried.

The impulse was also strangely familiar. I recognized the overwhelming urge as the same unexplainable desire to do something, say something or give something away I had experienced in the past.

The impulse went against my own selfish, prideful tendencies. The action required me to humble myself and trust that God was up to something I could not comprehend.

Even though I still don't understand, I quietly trust that God was at work. I was merely invited to join the party.

Maybe God wanted to do something in my life. Maybe He wanted to do something in Dodd's life. Maybe He wanted to do something in the life of someone on the streets I've never met.

What was the result of my obedience? When it comes to

recognizing and responding to God's voice in our lives, all too often we never find out what Paul Harvey describes as "the rest of the story."

In my own life I've been on the receiving end of other people's impulses to give something away. I've had people approach me, faithfully speaking words of encouragement, wisdom or hope into my life. I even save the small gifts God sometimes urges people to share with me.

These items I've received are not mere mementos; they are testimonies to the beauty that emanates when we respond to God's voice, the sacred echo, in our lives. Though we may never understand the full effect of our obedience or faithfulness, we become part of the greater story of what God is doing in our community and world when we take the risk.

Expect to Make Mistakes

Though it's natural to want to avoid the mishaps of mishearing, one of the things I'm discovering about recognizing God's voice is that He doesn't have the same concerns I do. If I could hear from God on my own terms, His voice would be audible and crystal clear. I wouldn't budge without 100 percent assurance that I was moving in the proper direction.

But then relationship would be unnecessary and faith merely an afterthought. Even the disciples, as close as they were to Jesus, were not immune from misunderstanding.

In John 21:22-23, Jesus addresses Peter: "'If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me.'" John explains: "Then this saying went out among the brethren that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, 'If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you?'" (NKJV).

The disciples misunderstood Christ. They were listening. They heard the audible words of Jesus leave His lips, yet as the news spread, those known as “the brethren” still misinterpreted.

The story remains a beautiful portrait of grace, a gentle reminder that we will sometimes fumble when it comes to hearing His voice. If the disciples made such a blunder after three years of hands-on ministry with the Son of God, how much more will you and I? And if they still discovered God’s grace and gentle correction in the process, then how much more hope is there for us?

I used to listen for God’s voice as if I was taking a hearing test, hoping my ears were sensitive to identify the lowest and highest frequencies. Now I take a different approach to hearing from God and learning to respond. I imagine myself as a young child learning to speak. Like parents who celebrate their child’s first word, even when it’s a jumbled version of “mom,” “dad” or “no,” God lauds our efforts to communicate with Him.

Looking down on us, He must laugh out loud at some of our more spectacular misunderstandings and mishaps. Other times He gently but firmly corrects us when we’re misguided. God knows our understanding sometimes gets bent in translation.

One of my favorite Bible blooper moments was committed by two of the feistiest disciples, also known as the “Sons of Thunder.” Disappointed and upset by the cold shoulder they received from the Samaritans, James and John suggested that fire come down from heaven and consume the stubborn people.

Though clearly less-than-brilliant, the idea had a biblical precedent in the account of Elijah’s calling down fire to consume the false idols of Baal. At the time, it may even have seemed God-inspired. Yet Jesus graciously corrects: “‘You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man

did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them'" (Luke 9:55-56).

The Scripture does not reveal where James and John got the idea of calling down fire from heaven. Was their own reasoning the source? Did the enemy plant the idea?

Here's what we do know: Jesus challenged the disciples to know the "spirit you are of." That's why when I'm not certain about the source of a thought, whisper or echo, I prayerfully take it back to God. I ask for discernment and then examine the fruit.

Does what I think I heard:

- line up with Scripture?
- line up with the work God is already doing in my life?
- nurture the fruits of the Spirit in my life?
- invite me to grow in faith, maturity and relationship with God?
- increase my dependence on God?

The fruit of a sacred echo is like a litmus test to reveal its source. If you respond to something you feel is from God, what is the fruit? Will responding in obedience to the thought cause love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control to sprout—or wilt—in your life?

One of the gems of the story of the Sons of Thunder is found in the closing sentence of the account, "And they went to another village." I love those final words of Luke. The disciples were ultra-mistaken, and Jesus swiftly corrected them. But then they simply moved on.

Jesus didn't browbeat them. He didn't send the disciples to the end of the line or the back of the class. Instead, He reminded them of their mission and allowed them to move forward.

Is Jesus any less faithful today? If He can keep two renegade, misguided disciples who want to call down a fiery attack from heaven on track, then certainly He can do the same when we're out of line.

Growing Through Risk

As I'm growing in my relationship with God, I'm learning to ask a new question with every spiritual impulse: How will I grow if I take this risk?

Concentrating on the possibility of being misguided naturally changes my spiritual stance to a defensive crouch. However, focusing on the possibility of being right and growing into the fullness of the person God has created me to be changes my stance and posture to hopeful and attentive. I believe that's a life posture that honors God.

Like that night with Dodd. I knew I needed to give him the McDonald's dollars. In a courageous moment, I handed them over.

But what if I had refused? What if I had allowed the fear of failure, embarrassment or simply being wrong to win? I would have short-circuited what God wanted to do in the moment.

I'm convinced that allowing the fear of misunderstanding to dominate my life is a foolish way to live—equivalent to spending a lifetime working on your weaknesses rather than playing to your strengths. You may improve unskilled areas, but you'll never hone the gifts you've been given. In the same way, God invites us to risk mispronouncing, misunderstanding and misinterpreting what He's saying.

Responding to God's voice requires taking the risk that He won't respond and you'll be left to your own devices. Maybe that's why stepping out in faith still terrifies me.

I may be misguided. I may lose five McDonald's dollars. I may

be embarrassed or dubbed a fruit loop by someone who doesn't understand the journey I'm on.

But what if I'm right? That's the greater question.

What if those five dollars jump-start a revolution of giving? What if that one moment of courage becomes the catalyst for spiritual growth and change? What if one homeless person enjoys a hot meal as a result? What if God is pleased with my simple act of obedience?

The reward suddenly outweighs the risk as courage swells inside my soul. I see glimpses of the invisible, the possibilities of what God wants to do, and I want to join. I don't want to miss a nanosecond.

Responding to God's voice is worth the risks of not hearing clearly or not understanding why. As followers of Jesus, we're prone to talk a lot about faith but not enough about risk. Yet risk is the wingman of faith.

The book of Hebrews defines faith as the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen (see Heb. 11:1). Faith is often an active choice to believe or move forward in obedience. Risk is taking the first step. Whenever I risk—whether financially, emotionally or relationally—I can't help but think of the possible outcome.

You can't look into the eyes of those who make up the cloud of witnesses without seeing men and women who took great risks with their lives, families and livelihoods in response to God's voice and in wild pursuit of obedience to God. Responding to the sacred echo will always involve risk.

Yet the rewards outweigh the risk. The rewards are knowing God in ways that you could not know Him otherwise. The rewards are a vibrant relationship, an overflowing soul and a joyful display of real relationship with God. And they are well worth

it all.

Sure, you might be wrong. But what if you're right?

Today, in a rare moment of bravery, I decided to contact Dodd to find out what happened after we parted. I e-mailed him, asking if he remembered the evening I had handed him five crumpled McDonald's dollars and inquiring what he had done with them.

He told me he handed the bucks to a guy within a block of leaving the hotel. I'll have to wait till I get to heaven to find out the rest of the story—but I think it will be worth the wait.

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