

Challenge

By the Book

In search of a book to illustrate the Challenge voice in action

The Challenge voice is the hardest of the nine to exemplify through a book. It has a momentary, spontaneous quality. It occurs - it needs to happen - at a moment in the course of events.

One written medium for illustrating this essential feature of the Challenge voice is the cartoon. I particularly enjoy Gary Larson's *Far Side* series in this respect. In what is usually no more than a single frame (reflecting the momentary nature of the Challenge voice), his drawing sets out the context and takes us straight into the action of the story. Then his caption, often an utterance by one of the depicted characters, provides a punchline that rearranges our initial impression about what was happening.

That's the function of the Challenge voice: to interrupt what's going on and invite a re-think or a different perspective.

But humorous cartoons are too narrow a form to convey a full understanding of the Challenge voice. For one thing, although a humorous remark may be used as a way of defusing tension and preserving relationships during difficult discussions, this is essentially a means of avoiding rather than confronting a difficulty. For another thing, although satirical cartoons often rely on the currency of their subjects for impact, their timeliness is on a different scale; it belongs to today or this week or this year, but not to the micro-currency of this moment, this split second in a conversation.

Furthermore there is a deliberate, contrived quality about a cartoon that is not part of the Challenge voice, as conceived in the VoicePrint model, where it has immediacy and spontaneity. VoicePrint envisages Challenge as springing suddenly out of interaction between or among people.

So we have to look elsewhere for books to illustrate the Challenge voice in action more fully.

Where is the Challenge voice in a challenging book?

There are certainly writers whose books can be considered to have Challenge as their overall purpose and dominant voice. The works of Nassim Nicholas Taleb, such as *The Black Swan* and *Antifragile*, for instance. Or any of the books of contemporary philosopher Alain de Botton, such as *Status Anxiety* or *The News* or *Religion for Atheists*. They all set out to challenge our assumptions, to dismantle received wisdoms, to invite us to consider or adopt alternative perspectives.

But notice how they do it. Much like Larson's cartoons - but at much greater length and with a very different balance between words and pictures - they have to set out the prevailing situation before proceeding to puncture that understanding with a different view. This highlights the fact that a Challenge cannot occur in a vacuum. It also demonstrates that a number of other voices will already have been at work before a Challenge can take place.

A written, book-length Challenge is very different from the Challenge voice as an utterance in the course of a conversation or discussion. Look at the sentences in Taleb and de Botton and other 'challenging' authors. They are carefully constructed, the words deliberately chosen first to present and then to contradict an existing view. These constructed, elaborate and well argued 'challenges' are more a form of Advocacy, an expression of the author's own viewpoint. They use a lot of Articulation and Evaluation to support that Advocacy. They use the exploring voices and moments of Challenge more as rhetorical devices to pivot between their exposition of the status quo and arguing against it in favour of an alternative.

In the mind of the reader

Where 'challenging' books come closest to using the Challenge voice in the sense intended by VoicePrint is not in the book itself but in how they land in the mind of the reader. That is where the interaction with a book takes place. It's a great place, a space full of potential. But it is not a public space. The rest of us can't see or hear or learn from the way their Challenge voice sounds or lands in someone else's head.

VoicePrint is certainly concerned with that inner space, with how the nine voices play out in an individual's thinking and self-talk, and with how that in turn affects the way they behave. Arguably the part played by the Challenge voice in that inner discourse is particularly important. We know, for example, that many people are reluctant to use the Challenge voice, anxious to put a relationship at risk or to act out of turn. We also know that others can be insensitive to these risks and expectations.

The learning point is this. Both under-users and over-users of the Challenge voice in their dealings with the outside world can benefit from developing the Challenge voice in their inner world, learning to use it as a self-monitoring and self-managing device to alert them either to speak out or to hold back more than they might naturally be inclined to do.

But that still leaves us looking for a book that can help people to develop that sensitivity, to understand when and how to use the Challenge voice in practice, in-the-moment, whether in self-talk or in conversation.

Challenge as an in-the-moment utterance

One book which does illustrate the Challenge voice in action in the form of in-the-moment utterance is *In Therapy* by psychotherapist Susie Orbach. If you feel deterred by the title, explore it for its sub-title: *How conversations with psychotherapists really work*. It comprises a series of case study examples of the dialogues between an individual (or a couple) and a therapist. Although the cases are accompanied by Orbach's professional observations and explanatory comments, much of their substance - and the bit that is of most interest in illustrating how the Challenge voice sounds and is used in practice - consists of transcriptions of the actual conversations themselves.

Likewise, although the cases are enactments, with actors playing the role of consultee, neither their utterances nor those of the therapist are pre-scripted. The individuals arrive with a back story and a set of issues and concerns, but the dialogue that ensues is something that emerges from

the interaction with the therapist. The dialogue is unpredictable in both its course and its outcome, as it is co-created from moment to moment by what each participant says, the impact which that has, the response that it generates and so on. In that respect, it's indicative of the nature of most of our conversations in practice, in life and work generally, not just in the specific context of personal therapy.

The Challenge voice features frequently, both in therapy and in life more generally. And as the transcripts show, it typically manifests in conversation through the words 'But...' or 'Yeah but...'

So far, so recognisable. What is more interesting is where the conversation then goes from there. Because acting as an interruption is only part of the function of the Challenge voice. It also serves to re-direct the flow of the conversation. But where?

Frequently, as the transcripts demonstrate, the interruptor uses the Challenging 'but' to pull the conversation back to what they were previously saying. In VoicePrint terms they take it back towards a view or position that they were Advocating or towards the Direct voice and pushing for what they feel others *should* be doing. We've all witnessed the Challenge voice being used in the same, narrow and essentially self-serving way in meetings and discussions at work, where interrupting is used as a means of dominating.

But the consultees in therapy are not the only users of the Challenge voice. The therapist is a frequent user too. Only she uses it for a different purpose. Yes, it's interruptive. But it's interruptive to invite consideration of other possibilities. In VoicePrint terms it seeks to lift the conversation out of being being stuck in fixed positions and to take it instead in the direction of exploration. The form of words too is subtly different, invitational rather than confrontational. 'Or...' rather than 'But...' Or 'I wonder whether...'

Used in this way, the Challenge voice serves the conversation as a whole rather than the speaker alone. It contributes to facilitating the flow of the dialogue, to keeping the conversation alive and open to possibilities. It raises our conversations and discussions out of the conflictual clash of either-or thinking, which is to be found in an extreme form in the therapy room and in forms both milder and more extreme elsewhere in our lives.

Susie Orbach describes this reality neatly towards the end of one of her chapters. '*Much of the time we want to order and classify our world. We plan and strategise. We analyse and we count. We find comfort in binaries such as good or bad, excluded or included, friend or foe, right or wrong. Cultures vary in what is designated in the binary but the existence of these classifications, this splitting of experience into black and white is ubiquitous...*'

It seems to me that she also captures the deep value of the Challenge voice, when she writes, '*I'm spelling this out because complexity and category-making are the dialectical pre-requisites of being human. We all struggle with the tension between the two poles of questioning.*'

In Therapy
by Susie Orbach
is published by the Wellcome Collection
ISBN 978-178-125988-7