

Calling Card

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Many years ago, I was at my parents' house when the phone rang. Naturally, I answered it. On the other end I found an old family friend, whose voice I recognised immediately. 'Hello David', she said. 'Ah, no, it's Pete', I replied. 'Very funny, David.' 'It's not David, it's Pete.' A small pause. Some repetition. Eventually, she became rather irate. 'Look, David', she said, 'I'm getting very tired of this ...' She would not accept that my voice was not that of my father, they were so similar. Several years later, on the day he died, the phone rang once again. I answered it. 'Ah, David, it seems rumours of your demise are somewhat exaggerated', joked the voice (which I recognised). 'Sorry ***,' I replied, 'he died half an hour ago'. The voice was silent. This happened five times before I finally refused to answer the phone again.

The word 'voice' is an interesting one as it's homonymic: it's a member of one of the more beautiful and confusing word groups of the English language. That is to say, it's not a word but several words that just happen to be pronounced and spelt the same way. Or, put another way, it's a word which is applicable to many different situations, a word which has different meanings dependent on context. Each of its different meanings sounds the same. Each is spelt the same.

It is the noise made by the squeezing of air over the vocal chords, it is a particular note in a chord played on a guitar or piano, a recognisable writing style, the opinion or interests of an individual or group, one line in a piece of polyphonic music, a form of verb showing the relation of the subject to the action ... the act of making known one's opinion.

Many homonyms have members with radically different meanings, such as bark, bank, and fluke, but the word voice is one of those whose various sub-meanings are at the very least related. Voice, no matter how you decide to use it, is a word inextricably bound up with the concept of communication. And as such requires reciprocal action on the part of the audience. One can voice an opinion as efficiently in writing as in speech, but a voice is nothing if it isn't heard. And when it is heard, it is heard on different levels. The words formed, the tone expressed, the meaning both explicit and implicit.

It also cannot escape from being somehow equated with identity. His Master's Voice.



Your voice is your calling card, indeed. Inimitable, personal, unmistakeable. The country is awash with voice recognition software, voice-activated hardware: it's all about the voice. The voice identifies, it authorises, and all because it is recognisable. It's an irony akin to that of signatures that the very qualities which allow for this, its stability, constancy, reliability, are also those which allow for it to be imitated – what you can measure, you can reproduce, as Francis Bacon so ably suggested.

When it comes to PWP, we are beset by multiple ironies. The disease (which, it has been suggested, might be diagnosed earlier through voice analysis, though to what end has yet, it appears, to be thought through), not only erases our identity, as we are gradually seen more and more as a set of symptoms than an individual, but also royally fucks up our voice. In every sense.

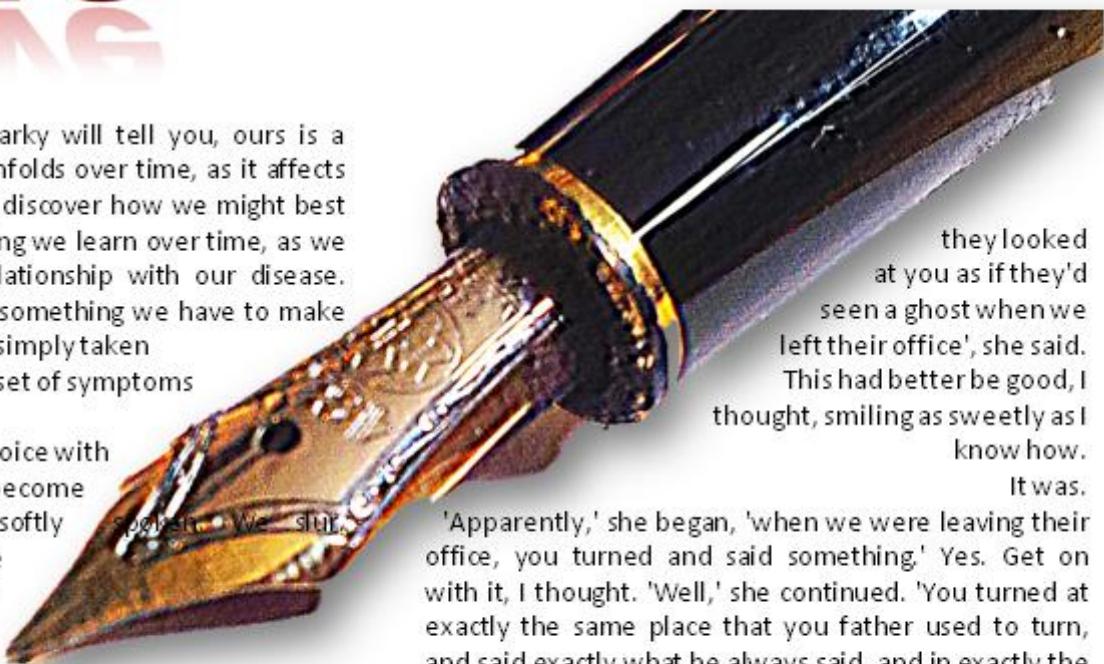
The point of diagnosis, the voice of medical authority that say 'you have Parkinson's disease' changes us from person to patient, from suffering to sufferer, and as it does so we are beset by experts who tell us what our

disease means. As any Parky will tell you, ours is a disease whose meaning unfolds over time, as it affects us and effects us, and we discover how we might best manage it. This is something we learn over time, as we gradually develop our relationship with our disease. Our voice in treatment is something we have to make heard, as all too often it is simply taken as the representative of a set of symptoms and not that of a person.

Parkinson's affects the voice with which we speak, too. We become quieter, milder, more softly spoken. We slur. Sometimes we stutter. We become increasingly hard to understand in public places. People notice. They comment. They lean closer (this is not always so bad ...). I imagine that all those things that rely on our voice will gradually refuse to recognise us. Even machines will refuse to see the person.

I'm a writer (though you wouldn't guess that from this prose, I imagine), and my trade is carried on through a keyboard. I'm constantly arguing with those who say the only way to write creatively is with pen and paper, as if it's some magic formula. Not only do I disagree, but my handwriting is, well, let's just say it's extremely creative, in common with many Parkies. My typing is gradually disintegrating, however, even though a change in medication has helped it somewhat. Soon it will become impossible to function efficiently enough with a keyboard. The obvious next move, of course, is, oh ... hang on, voice recognition software. My voice will change, and my voice will change, and my voice will become insufficient, and my voice will no longer be heard.

So. We're at the undertaker's. He knew my father, a local GP and character, well. We're doing the usual stuff, while the new GP is claiming his ash cash in the next room. We leave, business having been concluded, and as we file out of the door I stop, turn, and say something never so witty (naturally, I forget what). The undertaker and his wife simply stared at me gormlessly. I was unimpressed but let it be (unlike me, I know, but then ... my mother was upset enough already). After the funeral and wake (which was suitably bibulous), my mother sidled up conspiratorially to me, and said she'd been talking about dad with the undertaker. 'And he wants me to apologise to you if



they looked at you as if they'd seen a ghost when we left their office', she said. This had better be good, I thought, smiling as sweetly as I know how.

It was.

'Apparently,' she began, 'when we were leaving their office, you turned and said something.' Yes. Get on with it, I thought. 'Well,' she continued. 'You turned at exactly the same place that your father used to turn, and said exactly what he always said, and in exactly the same voice. So if it looked like they'd seen a ghost ...'

I never did find out what it was that I said. But then, I don't need to. My voice is my calling card. Except for when it belongs to somebody else.



WEBINAR 5 "TO SLEEP, PERCHANCE TO DREAM ..."

Shakespeare knew it -- sleep is essential to good health and an average person spends between a quarter and a third of their lives asleep. Yet in Parkinson's, disruption of sleep is commonplace and can drastically affect quality of life. What stops us sleeping at night? Why do we have nightmares and hallucinations? Why are we so tired in the day? Are there steps we can take to get our sleep back on track?

Help is at hand. All these questions and more will be answered as healthcare professionals and expert patients share their experiences and advice in the 5th Parkinson's Movement webinar.

Tune in to www.livestream.com/parkinsons at 8pm British Summer Time, 30th April 2013.