

A new Hearing Voices book: An interview with the author, Gail Hornstein

The psychologist Professor Gail Hornstein has recently published a new book *Agnes's Jacket: A Psychologist's Search for the Meanings of Madness*.

The title refers to a jacket made by a lady called Agnes Richter, a psychiatric patient in Germany in the 1890s. Whilst on the ward Agnes made a jacket from old pieces of hospital uniforms, and then painstakingly sewed her story into every inch of the jacket, inside and out. Agnes undoubtedly wanted to tell the world her story, a world that probably didn't want to listen, and it seems this is the only way she could do it.

Fortunately, thanks to the Hearing Voices Movement, people experiencing voices and visions today are more able to tell their stories, and say what their experiences mean to them. In this book Gail documents her own story of listening to, and learning from the Hearing Voices Movement. It describes her meetings with people from the Hearing Voices Network, from London, to Sheffield to Manchester, and across the sea to America.

Gail writes humbly and beautifully, and her work is a great example of what psychologists who are prepared to listen, and not simply write-off voices as a "brain disease" can learn from what people who hear voices have to say about their experiences, and their meaning.

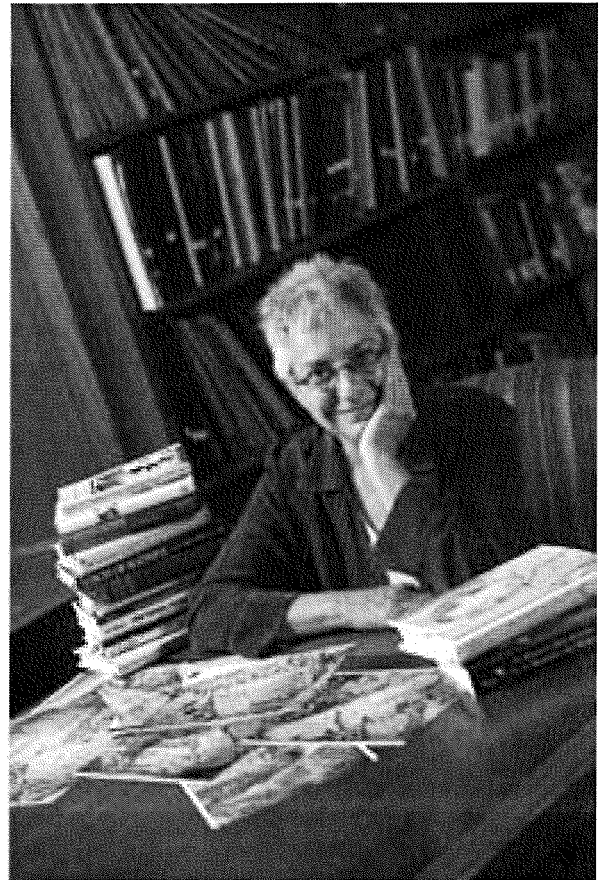


Photo by Paul Schnaittacher

Gail, who will be speaking at this year's Hearing Voices World Congress (see page 1), has been kind enough to take the time to answer some questions from us about her new book.

Gail, what did you find, and how did it differ from what you'd previously been taught?

The most important things I learned during the research and writing of *Agnes's Jacket* were that: (1) psychosis is often not a permanent condition; (2) people can recover fully, even when they have been diagnosed with 'severe and enduring mental illnesses' like schizophrenia, and even if they've been seriously distressed for many years; (3) there are positive, valuable experiences in psychosis that some people embrace and do not want to be 'cured' of; (4) even people in the midst of psychotic states have insight into their experiences, see them as meaningful (as of course they are), and are not permanently 'narcissistic', 'unrelational', or 'incapable of taking the role of the other' as mental health professionals have long claimed; and (5) most importantly, people in acute states of distress and those coping with the long-term after-effects of these states often find peer support from other survivors more useful and certainly more empowering than 'treatment' from professionals.

From the many voice-hearers you have spoken to, what did you find were the most important things for recovery?

Being listened to, taken seriously, not lied to, protected when necessary, and encouraged to create a narrative that can make sense of bewildering and disturbing experiences.



Agnes Richter's actual jacket

How is the Hearing Voices Movement going in the USA?

The hearing voices movement in the USA is barely visible, but I have great hopes for its future. It is extremely difficult to organize a locally-based network in a country as gigantic as the United States, where distance and the expense of travel make it impossible to keep up with one another the way you do in the UK. And given the power of the pharmaceutical companies, who can advertise directly to potential 'consumers' on television and in print media, as well as a health care system that makes medical treatment for mental illness the only kind of help most people can access, it is extremely difficult to for alternative viewpoints to receive any attention at all. But the group that I co-facilitate with Oryx Cohen at the Recovery Learning Community in Holyoke, Massachusetts (the small city in Western Massachusetts where I live) should be an inspiration to everyone in HVN.

Our group, which has met weekly for almost two years now, was the direct result of my having participated in a training course for HVN facilitators that Jacqui Dillon offered in 2005 in London. I learned so much from that training, and Oryx is such a fantastic colleague, that our group could begin with a really strong foundation. Although Oryx is not technically a voice hearer, his lived experience includes many unusual states and distressing feelings, and both of us have drawn on our own coping strategies in meetings of the group. We have gotten so much interest in HVN's approach that we will begin doing formal trainings this coming autumn for others in Massachusetts who want to facilitate hearing voices groups. There are also people in other locations in the US trying to get hearing voices support groups going on a continuing basis, and it would be wonderful if one day we could truly have a network of such groups in the USA.

Towards the end of your book you pose the question "What are the meanings of madness?" What is your answer to this question?

There are as many answers to this question as there are people with madness experiences. That's a key point in the book, and is the reason I insisted on using the word 'meanings' (plural), not 'meaning' (singular) in the title.

When you listen to the voice of those who have experienced "mental illness", what do you hear?

I hear people intensely interested in understanding the complexities of psychological life, who vary in the extent to which they have a language to talk about this or a sense of empowerment about their right to do so, but who are invariably insightful about their own experience.



Based on your research, what do you think causes the experience of hearing voices?

I think voice hearing is an extraordinarily complicated experience, which can have many different kinds of causes and mean many different kinds of things. The most important lesson I learned from HVN is to value many different kinds of explanations. Of course trauma is a hugely important antecedent to voice hearing, but not for everyone.

Why do you think the voice of voice-hearers, much like the voice of Agnes, have been neglected by psychiatry?

I think voice hearers are often profoundly distressing to other people, because they challenge so many of our taken for granted assumptions about psychology. They are in contact with a dimension to which the rest of us have no access, and this can be inspiring (as when it happens among religious figures) or terrifying (as when it happens among people who behave violently). I think psychiatrists are just as distressed by these challenges as anyone else, and in response, they have often found it difficult to talk with voice hearers about what they are really experiencing. But of course now we see that there are terrible consequences to this attitude, which can keep psychiatrists from being helpful to voice hearers.

What feedback have you had from voice-hearers about your book?

I have given talks about the book all over the US and UK and in Europe, and many, many other people have written to me through my website. It has been deeply moving to receive so much encouragement, validation, and support from people who have first-hand experience of what I'm writing about.

How can academics act as allies with voice-hearers? (not that the two are mutually exclusive of course)

I think that academics who are not themselves voice hearers can be crucial allies by teaching about HVN and the research that supports its approach as part of the standard curriculum in mental health fields. The reason that mental health professionals believe the medical model viewpoint of 'auditory hallucinations' is because that's what they've been taught in their training. Changing the standard curriculum, and educating students to take HVN's approach seriously is crucial to the development of more useful perspectives. The second important contribution that academics can make is to conduct research that helps to provide an evidentiary base for the claims that HVN has made. Research collaborations between voice hearers and academics can be particularly effective in moving toward this goal.

You state in your book that ‘we can all help create better ways of responding to emotional problems’. What do you see as the key things that need to change to prevent “mental illness” occurring?

It is impossible to say what precisely needs to change to prevent mental illness from occurring, because to do that would require our being able to say what its causes are. Like many people in HVN, I see trauma as a key underlying or antecedent experience that leads to hearing voices that are distressing, but the definition of what constitutes trauma for any individual is complex. And for many people, it may not even be the trauma itself that is most destructive, but rather the necessity of lying about it or hiding it afterward. Certainly, taking seriously what people say about their own experience, believing children who report abuse, and fostering resilience in as many ways as possible would all go a long way toward preventing some of the suffering that is diagnosed as ‘mental illness’

You've been involved with the Hearing Voices Movement for many years now. Where do you see it going in the future?

I see it becoming even more powerful and effective than it already is now (which is a lot!). Having world congresses to encourage international connections is a fantastic new step that I think will make a big difference. The fact that HVN's model is so easily applicable to different cultural contexts is itself further evidence in support of its fundamental assumptions. Finding more opportunities to train mental health professionals in HVN's approach is, of course, also crucial, as is starting support groups in as many locations as possible.

Interview by Simon McCarthy-Jones

Full details on Gail's book and how to buy it:

Agnes's Jacket: A Psychologist's Search for the Meanings of Madness. New York: Rodale Books, 2009; Audio book, Gildan Media, 2009.

It can be ordered through any good bookshop, directly through Gail's website, or through sellers such as Amazon.co.uk. You can also get an audio version from www.audible.com;

Copies of Gail's *Bibliography of First-Person Narratives in English* and *Resources on Hearing Voices* are available for free download from her website, www.gailhornstein.com.

