

The Three Voices: An Embodied Modality of Pastoral Supervision

Kate Beer¹

While innovation often comes from the margins, sometimes a new way of doing things seems to emerge from integrating known approaches in a fresh way. In this paper, I am proposing an integrative model of pastoral supervision, inspired by the work of Jonathan Chambers, which marries narrative and embodied approaches to supervision.

Pastoral supervision (hereafter supervision) is a redemptive and formative yet accountable process which provides intentional space for Christian professionals to reflect on their practice and its impact with the purpose of enlarging insight for the sake of those they serve. In Australia, two significant factors have led to a huge increase in demand among pastoral workers for supervision of a type historically only undertaken by those in the clinical helping professions. Increasing awareness of the unacceptably high rates of burnout among Christian ministry professionals has led to pastoral workers themselves seeking out professional support, for which relational supervision is well suited.¹ Additionally, the recommendations to religious institutions from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has led to workplace mandating of supervision, including funding, in many cases.² However, as funding for independent supervision is often stretched for charity and nongovernment organisations, through whom much pastoral work is offered in the community, there is currently a growing interest in team and group supervision models which will enable the same spiritual and reflective processing but at reduced cost when compared to individual sessions.

The Three Voices Modality offers an embodied approach to the reflective process that is suitable for both individual and group supervision of pastoral workers looking for ways to integrate rational, emotional, and spiritual perspectives on their work.

A reflective person by nature, the Reverend Jonathan Chambers (1950–2020) brought to his care for others a vision of how people could grow in being their whole self. Much loved and appreciated, Chambers was a priest in the Anglican tradition, a chaplain in both the criminal justice and social justice spheres, and a pastoral supervisor to the end. He valued independent supervision as a gift, both one he had received and one he could offer others. The Three Voices Modality of supervision is Chambers's legacy. As one of his former supervisees, I write both to honour him and to share the legacy of this supervision modality he developed. I also write for my own students and supervisees, who more than once have asked: "Where can I read more about what we just did?"

¹ Kate Beer is a pastoral supervisor and a member of the faculty of Ridley College, Melbourne (part of the Australian College of Theology). She lectures in practical theology, including the training of professional pastoral supervisors. Email: k.beer@ridley.edu.au.

THE THREE VOICES MODALITY

The Three Voices is a model of reflective practice which offers a supervision process for deepening insight and self-awareness. At its heart, the simple schema calls out different perspectives in any given situation. Yet rather than looking to others to gain insight, The Three Voices approach invites the supervisee to alternately give full volume to different internal voices, to notice ‘from where they are listening and responding’ in the situation they have brought to supervision. Chambers was inspired to develop this model after reading an article by Tilden Edwards titled ‘Aging from the Contemplative Heart.’³

The first voice in the model is that of the “small ego.” This voice is usually about feelings and may sound defensive in posture.⁴ It vocalises our coping personality—the ways we’ve developed for navigating the world to get the love we need in response to whoever the powerbrokers were in our world when we were growing up. The small ego is often an “othered” voice in Western culture, given the high value it places on logic and rationality, so listening to it can connect us to unconscious processes which drive action. Yet, listening from the narrow self-centredness of the “little ego self,” as Edwards calls this voice, will skew our view of the world, limit our freedom for self-in-God centredness, and filter what we hear and how we respond to our world.⁵

An alternative perspective is heard in the “rational voice,” which expresses the thinking mind. The rational voice is that filtered and justifiable voice which enables us to argue our case with the world around us. This voice articulates the facts as we see them, sometimes with cold logic, resisting the small ego voice’s capacity to skew reality. Yet, if we trust the rational voice to hold *all* truth, we are asking more of it than it can possibly give.⁶

Bringing these two “voices” into dialogue as equally valid truths which inform our presence in the world opens the way to listen for the “contemplative heart” which is the third voice in the model and expresses our spiritual depths. As a Christian, I have always understood this voice as the liberating perspective of the living God, with whom redemption is always on the table and whose Spirit is at work in me.⁷ The wisdom of the contemplative heart is its capacity to respect and hold more than one truth, somehow giving due honour to both the small ego and rational voices yet proposing a more life-giving way forward than either could offer alone. Like the prodigal father of Jesus’ parable,⁸ who loved both his sons, the contemplative heart is “inclusive, holds your truth and gives due honour.”⁹ This gracious Presence is heard in that moment of spontaneous compassion when we feel ourselves back down or suddenly unstuck, free from fear and able to move in any direction called for. The contemplative heart is heard in the “gentle whisper”¹⁰ which fuels the courage to let go of our stuck narrative and embrace curiosity, gifting us instead with that sense of wholeness which leaves us feeling we have shared a little of the humble confidence of Jesus as he walked in the world.¹¹

So often, I would come raging into supervision, feeling utterly trapped in my ruminations as I sought to process issues arising from my work. Listening from the

rational voice came easy but seemed only to reinforce my stuckness. It felt interesting and sometimes childish to give agency and validity to my buried feelings about the issue, giving voice to the othered small ego within. Yet, while it was restorative to bring these voices into equal dialogue, alone, that did not take me far enough to move on. Time and again, the transformative moment would come as I was encouraged to seek the contemplative heart, that divine perspective that could accommodate everything that was true, offering a robust, usually astoundingly simple counter-way of seeing. On one occasion, the voice from the contemplative heart offered: "Compassionate boundaries run in both directions." It honoured me and my feelings without denying the facts or the humanity of the other in my story. Listening with equanimity from the Three Voices, with the accompaniment of a trained professional ally, has dialled down fear and invited me into a new way of being which honours all that is true in the situation.

Chambers's wife, Susanne, recalls that from the moment Jonathan read Edwards's article, "He grasped it like a dog with a shoe!"¹² The possibilities captivated him, and he would talk about it with anyone and everyone. He applied it in his own life and then started to share it as a way of working with some of his supervisees, which was well received. In 2019, Chambers wrote to Edwards to thank him and share what the concept had inspired:

My excitement is that those with whom I've been working are recognising their voices using your simple and practical method and what you were saying in 2013 is happening!¹³

In that letter, he also sought permission to continue to use the concept as a model of supervision, which Edwards granted with encouragement. This paved the way for Chambers to lead a workshop on the Three Voices for Spiritual Care Australia, which, again, was very well received.

Beginning in 2020, I began using the Three Voices as a modality with my own supervisees. Like Chambers before me, I have seen supervisees experience powerful insights in individual narrative sessions. However, my own contribution has been to offer an embodied approach to the Three Voices model, where the different voices are allocated different spaces in the room. Subsequently, I have discovered that Edwards actually suggested the potential for complexification of his schema to Chambers, noting the body as another place we may listen from. However, I only became aware of this suggestion after I had already incorporated movement into my use of the modality.¹⁴

OUTLINE OF THE MODEL

Using chalk, or wool, I mark out a large Venn diagram to draw out three separate but overlapping spaces on the floor, as in figure 1. Those present are invited to give expression to each listening perspective by physically moving around the room, starting where they wish and moving where they wish at their own pace. In well-established groups, many close their eyes. I've had the privilege of bearing witness as engaged participants explore and listen to an issue from different places. I've wondered as I've watched some shifting their weight back and forward as they cross the boundary lines, exploring how their thinking shifts as they prioritise one voice over another. I've been prayerfully captivated as I've noticed a participant's posture or breathing alter upon moving to a different space.

This embodied approach to the Three Voices Modality has been particularly powerful in group supervision, where each participant can begin by engaging in the reflective process simultaneously yet in the privacy of their own mind. After adequate time has been given for those present to embody each of the three voices in personal reflection, members may be invited to return to a space where they heard something they would like to share with the group—perhaps a new or surprising thought—or to return to the space which offered them their most important thought during the reflective time. While the sharing is voluntary, teams who are able to offer generous hospitality to one another's "voices" have reported profound shifts in both personal insight and their ways of working together.

THE POWER OF EMBODIMENT

The power of an embodied approach to supervisory practice and reflective practice modalities cannot be overstated. As Michael Carroll writes, "Reflection is much more than a cognitive or abstract process."¹⁵ Not only is movement "as communication" often overlooked,¹⁶ but the agency expressed by physically choosing to move between spaces requires an owned response. When I physically sit or stand in a space, it demands that I test and own the thought in a different way. When I make a choice about which space I will move to, my body is invested and committed to that thought in a deeper way. Mindful exploration of the information

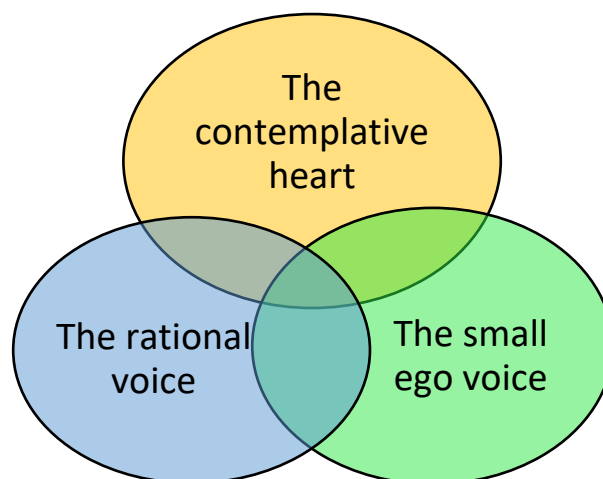


Figure 1: Floor map for embodying The Three Voices modality

offered by a supervisee's "kinaesthetic awareness and feeling states on a somatic level"¹⁷ legitimises these places of self-knowing in the reflection process. As others have observed, "The body can be encouraged to help the conscious mind find out what it knows."¹⁸ Accordingly, the use of a supervision modality that attends to this otherwise hidden information offers an invitation of authenticity to self which may be profound when seeking to enlarge insight.

Another benefit of embodied supervision processes is the potential for play and spontaneity. When offered from a place of congruence, encouraging a supervisee to physically embody alternate perspectives, as Anna Chesner notes, creates a space where "our clients can open up to themselves and to the other, and to achieve authenticity and spontaneity."¹⁹ Jacob Moreno, the "father" of psychodrama, defined spontaneity as "a new response to an old situation or an adequate response to a new situation."²⁰ By this definition, supervision modalities that cultivate spontaneity are of incalculable value to the reflective process.

For a Christian supervisor, an examination of the biblical view of embodiment offers further motivation to incorporate embodied supervision modalities in their practice. The incarnation of Jesus Christ is a profound statement of the value, to God, of physicality and embodiment. Christians believe in a bodily resurrection.²¹ God's response to the waxing and waning of Moses' embodied prayer for the Israelites in battle offers an intriguing affirmation of the value of approaching God with both body and mind.²² With this resonance in view, it would appear reductionist to undertake cognitive reflection, prayer, or any spiritual practice in isolation from bodily awareness.

Accordingly, the Three Voices Modality of supervision offers a rich "locus for the realisation of redeemed embodiment."²³ Participants in this reflective process are encouraged to experiment with adjusting the "EQ balance," or the relative volume of various guiding voices. The boundaries, gifts, and limitations of the rational and small ego voices are externalised so they can be equally validated and both can be heard. And each is brought into perspective as these voices dialogue with the contemplative heart, the sacred voice that comes from outside ourselves yet includes our experience of the love of the creator. By reflecting through action and giving tangible expression to these voices, a continuity is offered between what happens in the session and the supervisee's experience of being in the world.

This underscores the particular potential for use of the Three Voices Modality in group and team supervision contexts. For teams with strained internal dynamics, it offers possibilities as a modality that can hold respectful space to explore personal kinaesthetic awareness about a situation alongside the opportunity for interaction with outside perspectives; as a modality that offers hospitality and legitimacy to more than one truth; and as a modality that offers possibilities not for only reflection in action but also for helpful interaction as we examine what we think we know. Of course, it is possible that the culture of some groups may hinder spontaneity, provoking anxiety and keeping participants from being present, even to their own truth. However, I have witnessed the opposite; groups whose engagement and

willingness to listen from different places of knowing have spurred one another on to greater authenticity and have enlarged the team's capacity to embrace different voices. When used in teams and groups, the Three Voices Modality of supervision invites the co-creation of a shared experience that offers opportunity for both private insight and group collaboration to shift a stuck narrative.

As the legacy of a gifted and generous pastoral supervisor, the Three Voices Modality offers something important to the emerging discipline of pastoral supervision. In a frenetic world, it is a modality that invites participants to authentic, embodied, and gently paced exploration, both of deeply personal places of knowing and exploration of their boundaries. The Three Voices Modality invites supervisees to draw insight from how their rational and small ego voices interact and dialogue with the God who speaks and with those around them.

¹ For example, see Judy Adamson, 'In the last 12 months 35% of Australian Ministers Considered Quitting,' *Sydney Anglicans*, 4 June 2023, <https://sydneyanglicans.net/news/in-the-last-12-months-35-of-australian-ministers-considered-quitting/53335>.

² The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report: Religious Institutions*, vol. 16, book 1 (Barton, ACT: Commonwealth of Australia), 2017.

³ Tilden Edwards, 'Aging from the Contemplative Heart,' *Oneing* 1, no. 2 (2013): 47–52.

⁴ Jonathan Chambers, transcript of a private Zoom meeting in 2020 (hereafter 'Transcript') in which Chambers explained the three voices modality in the hope of leaving a legacy for the work.

⁵ Edwards, 'Aging from the Contemplative Heart,' 49.

⁶ Edwards, 'Aging from the Contemplative Heart,' 49; Chambers, 'Transcript'.

⁷ Romans 5:5; Hebrews 3:7.

⁸ Luke 15:11–31.

⁹ Chambers, 'Transcript.'

¹⁰ 1 Kings 19:12

¹¹ Edwards, 'Aging from the Contemplative Heart,' 50.

¹² Sussanne Chambers, unpublished interview with author, August 2023.

¹³ Jonathan Chambers and Tilden Edwards, email correspondence, 3 and 8 July 2019.

¹⁴ Chambers and Edwards, email correspondence, 8 July 2019.

¹⁵ Michael Carroll, 'From Mindless to Mindful Practice: On Learning Reflection in Supervision,' *Psychotherapy in Australia* 15, no. 4 (2009): 41.

¹⁶ Céline Butté and Fiona Hoo, 'Embodiment and Movement in Supervision: An Integration of Theories and Techniques from Body-Oriented, Movement-Based Psychotherapy and Creative Supervision,' in *Creative Supervision across Modalities: Theory and Applications for Therapists, Counsellors and Other Helping Professionals*, ed. Anna Chesner and Lia Zografou (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2014), 127–144.

¹⁷ Butté and Hoo, 'Embodiment and Movement in Supervision,' 128

¹⁸ Leach and Paterson, *Pastoral Supervision: A Handbook*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2015), 146.

¹⁹ Anna Chesner, 'Role as a Core Concept in Creative Supervision,' in *Creative Supervision across Modalities: Theory and Applications for Therapists, Counsellors and Other Helping Professionals*, ed. Anna Chesner and Lia Zografou (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2014), 44.

²⁰ Jacob L. Moreno, *Who Shall Survive?* (1953), 336, as quoted in Zerka T. Moreno, 'Psychodrama, Role Theory, and the Concept of the Social Atom,' in *The Evolution of Psychotherapy*, ed. J Zeig, (New York: Brunner and Maze, 1987), 343, <https://psychodrama.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/moreno-z-role-theory-social-atom-OCR-Version.pdf>.

²¹ John 5:29, 20:27.

²² Exodus 17:11.

²³ Cathy Thomson, 'Pastoral Supervision and Redeemed Embodiment,' *St Mark's Review* 254, no. 4 (December 2020): 5–64.