

Those “Not-You” Voices

By Patricia Burgin, MA, MCC

www.seattlecoach.com



I want to talk this month in my little advice column to you guys who are pushing your boundaries.

Earlier this week I stood in front of forty smart, ambitious, good-hearted, high-performing people and started talking about leadership coaching. In the few minutes before I stood up, I took a deep breath and thought about how the audience and I were both vulnerable to “not-you” voices.

You know the ones: The voices in your head that either trash-talk you or tell you that you’re fabulous at all times. They both suggest that the status quo is the best option, so of course they get extra busy and threatened when we turn towards what’s possible or desirable—or when we’re about to take a calculated risk. And both the members of my audience and I were about to do that! There was the possibility of a lot of static on the line.

I have a friend who used to work for the Secret Service. You may know that those are the people in our government who are charged with spotting and weeding out counterfeit money. You probably won’t be surprised to know that the Secret Service trains its agents not by showing them examples of the fake stuff but by simply having them become very familiar with the real thing.

As loud and convincing as our “not-you” voices can be, they are not nearly as big and compelling as your soul’s truest, highest best voice—and if you’re a person of faith, they’re not as big as God’s either (This of course means I think good theology = good psychology.) In my life, God’s voice and increasingly my own, are marked by grace, clarity and specifics. Both voices are respectful and growth-oriented. Both make me want to do better and get better in these few decades I have on the Pebble.

One of my clients is an aerial fire-fighter—she flies a big tanker that drops tons on water where it’s needed most during our hot Northwest summers. Here’s what her true voice sounds like: *“You know what I love Patty? I love flying in low and saving the town. That and splashing my hot, exhausted colleagues on the ground.”* She is such a good pilot that her company gave her a new aircraft to fly. That’s when her “not-you” voice got busy. I asked her a series of questions to which she had to truthfully answer “yes”: *“Have you logged hundreds of hours? Is your training up-to-date? Are you careful? Do you fly by the book? Good reviews? Is flying fun? . . .”* Then I said, *“Your truest, highest, best voice is far more interesting to me than the other one.”* My smart, successful, motivated client looked back at me and with a combination of authority and mischief, said, *“There’s an old beater airplane on the far side of the airfield that no one ever flies. Maybe I’ll ask the “not-me” voice to go sit in it and make airplane noises while I go up.”*

I’ve done this long enough that when I stood up on Monday, I took an experienced deep breath and listened for a moment to my own true voice. Then I smiled at my audience, trusting that my calm authority would be contagious, and I began. Then, after a few minutes, I invited them to talk about why they’d put themselves in the room. I didn’t have to focus on each person’s gremlin, saboteur, critical voice or imposter syndrome because forty versions of the real thing began to come out to play.

[Click here to read another cool-client story.](#)