

Here is the full text of Episcopalian minister Tracey Lind's talk titled "How I Met God in a McDonald's" at TEDxClevelandStateUniversity conference.

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Best quote from this talk:

"I believe that the voice whom we call by many names and hear in many languages and meet in many places, even a McDonald's, lives inside of each and every one of us."

TRANSCRIPT:

Thirty years ago, I met God in a McDonald's.

Really. It happened at five o'clock on the afternoon of January 31st, 1984. It was the day before my second semester of seminary.

I'd entered divinity school to wrestle with two questions that had haunted me for years: my religious identity and my vocation.

Like nearly 40% of all Americans, I come from an interfaith background — my father was a Reform Jew; my mother, a skeptical Protestant — and my upbringing was a rich blend of both traditions with a very healthy dose of secularism.

To this day, I joke about lighting Hanukkah lights under the Christmas tree and hunting for Easter eggs at the Passover Seder.

As a child of the '60s, I had a passion for justice, and I wanted to be a religious leader who would change the world. I just wasn't sure whether I should become a rabbi or a minister.

I loved to be in a house of God, and I would often play *'Friday go to temple and Sunday go to church.'*

To this day, I remember setting all of the chairs up in our family room and lining up all of my stuffed toys and dolls and preaching to an inanimate congregation. Some days I wish I still had them.

By the time I was in 9th grade, I was attending synagogue on Saturday mornings and I was playing my guitar for Sunday folk masses at the local Episcopal Church.

And while everyone was kneeling for communion, I sang Gordon Lightfoot's words:

"I'm standing at the doorway, my head held in my hand,

Not knowing where to sit, not knowing where to stand."

Took a long time for me to figure out where to sit and where to stand. And there are still days when I feel like a rabbi in a clerical collar.

By my mid-20s, my quest led me to the Union Theological Seminary in New York City, right across the street from the Jewish Theological Seminary, because I was still hedging my bets.

And my first semester in seminary was this prolonged interrogation of God: *"Who are you? Do you really exist? What's your relationship to Jesus,*

Muhammad, Buddha, and all of the rest? And why are so many bad things done in your name?"

You know those questions. You've probably asked some of them yourself.

And as I struggled with God, I was also trying to sort myself out, trying to figure out what I was supposed to do with my life.

And while I believe that vocation is the intersection between one's passion and the world's need, I just couldn't figure out how to reconcile the contradictions of my mixed religious identity and my gender and being gay with ordained ministry and any faith community.

And so, I sought out one of the sacred shrines of modern American life: *the therapist couch*. Every week, I would go and I would sit for 50 minutes with someone whom I considered to be older and wiser than myself.

And on my way to my weekly session, I would often pass this fortune teller's office. And I would wonder maybe a psychic reading would be time and money wiser spent.

By January, I was utterly exhausted from taking on someone bigger and stronger than me. And so I found myself walking down 42nd street one day, on my way to this weekly session, asking God to let me go and to let me get on with my life. And that's when it happened.

As I was crossing Madison Avenue, a voice called out to me from withinside of me, saying, *"I'm not going to let go of you."*

I tried to ignore the voice. I kept walking. I went into my appointment. I didn't say a word about it, because I didn't want anybody to think that I was hearing voices or that I was crazy.

And an hour later, when I walked out, it was as if the voice was leaning on

the doorpost waiting for me.

"Why me?" I asked.

And the voice said, *"Why not?"*

"What do you want with me?" I inquired.

ALSO READ: The Virginity Fraud by Nina Dølvik Brochmann & Ellen Støkken Dahl at TEDxOslo (Transcript)

And the voice said, *"Your life."*

Well, at that moment, I realized that something was going on to which I'd better [pay attention](#). So I did what anyone would do: I walked into the nearest McDonald's. I ordered a cheeseburger, French fries, and a small coke. I sat down at a table. And I started writing out the most remarkable and memorable conversation that I've ever had with anybody in my entire life.

Scribbling as fast as I could, I wrote "M" for "me" and "G" for the voice.

For the next 30 minutes or so, the voice called me by name, identified itself as God, confronted me with my own issues and my own private wounds, contradicted my newly articulated seminary theology, answered a lot of my questions, called me to ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church, and reassured me when I protested.

In the course of the conversation, I asked, *"So, why are you talking to me?"*

And the voice responded, *"Well, you've been asking for it."*

It's true. I had been asking and begging and praying and even challenging

God to get clear with me, to give me some direction in my life.

And so here I was, sitting in a McDonald's in the middle of New York City on a winter afternoon, having a private conversation with an invisible voice.

At the end of our time together, I asked, *"Okay. So if you're inside of me, then how can you be God?"*

And the voice replied in words that I will never forget as long as I live: *"What's so special about me is that I'm inside of each and every person, and if everyone would hear my voice and follow it, then my realm on Earth would come."*

I then asked, *"So what am I supposed to do now?"*

The voice said, *"Go home."* So I walked home.

What am I to make of this conversation? Was I to believe it to be the voice of God? It certainly wasn't my own voice, and yet it was coming from inside of me.

And so, contrary to my extroverted nature, I kept the conversation to myself. You see, I didn't know if I was talking with God, but I knew that if there was a God, I wasn't going to get a clearer message. And so I decided to receive it, to receive it as a gift.

That conversation in McDonald's changed my life. It gave me the courage to live and work in some pretty tough communities; gave me the conviction to stand for justice alongside those whom society often rejects; called me to embrace the complexity of religious diversity and to see the world in shades of gray rather than black and white.

And it also compelled me to be honest and transparent about myself, about

who I am, who I love, and what I believe.

Over the past decade, the essence of that conversation has accompanied me on my life's journey and has influenced nearly every decision I have ever made.

It's the alter... the alter at which I worship. It's the angel with whom I wrestle. It's the burning bush in which I stand in front of, bare-footed. It's the blinding flash of light that forces me to my knees when I want to run away.

But you can also say that the voice is my dancing partner who guides me on the dance floor of life.

The conversation I had with an invisible voice in a McDonald's is akin to what Jews call the Torah; and Christians, the Gospel; Muslims, the Quran; Hindus, my Dharma; and Buddhists, my Kōan.

The voice might be what some theists call that of God or Allah or Jesus. Some religious and spiritual folk would simply say it was a voice of an angel. Those in 12-step programs might say it was that of my higher power.

Agnostics and atheists, they might interpret it as my conscience. It could be what Jungians speak of as my "Self" with a capital "S."

And skeptics and cynics, well, they might insist that it was simply a figment of my imagination.

It might be all of the above or some of the above or none of the above, but it was as real to me as I am here talking with you today.

And while the conversation was pretty personal, the message to which I have devoted my life and I think is worth sharing here today on this TEDx

stage is that the voice of the one whom I call God and you might describe by another name or another word resides in you.

ALSO READ: Why Democracies Fail - And Why That's Okay: Sheri Berman at TEDxNewYork (Transcript)

And if you would hear it and you would follow it, your life would be enriched, your imagination would be set free, your creativity would flourish, and this fragile and endangered world would be a better and a safer place to live.

So you might be wondering: *"How can you hear this voice?"*

Well, I think of it as a simple **Four Step: Ask, Wait, Listen, and Receive.**

As in any conversation, somebody has to begin it, and it might as well be you. My experience is that the voice is really very gracious and waits for an invitation to speak.

And then, once you ask a question, you have to wait for an answer. And the voice might take its time in accepting your invitation, so you have to be patient and persistent.

It might come in unexpected ways, through a conversation or a dream or even silence. And it might manifest itself in unexpected times and places, even a McDonald's on 42nd Street.

And then, in order to hear the voice, you have to develop a habit of listening — the Zen masters call it mindfulness, contemplatives speak of it as meditation, and mystics call it contemplation.

Whatever you call it, you can't hear the voice without listening, and that means that you sometimes have to silence all of the other noise filling up

your airwaves.

You know, some of my best listening time is on my commute, when I actually turn off my radio and get off my cellphone.

And then, you have to receive it. The day after my McDonald's conversation, one of my professors said that faith is a two-way street — it's a gift and it's a willingness to accept the gift.

And whether you name the voice God doesn't really matter to me. I think of it as holy wisdom, a gift that can only be actualized by receptivity.

But it's also a gift that has to be tested to ensure that it's calling you to build up and not destroy, to love and not hate, to do good and to resist evil in the world, and to respect the dignity of every human being and all of the rest of creation.

So ask, wait, listen, and receive — these are the four basic steps to dancing with your inner voice. And oh, what an amazing dance it is! It's dancing with the best dance partner you'll ever get.

You know, in my home — A number of years ago, we discovered this artist and storyteller named Brian Andreas, and he makes these interesting people sculptures out of wood and tin that explore what he calls a human community.

And we have one in our entrance foyer, and it reads: *"In my dream, the angel shrugged and said, 'If we fail this time, it will be a failure of imagination.' And then she placed the world gently in the palm of my hand."*

I see this piece of art every time I come and go from my home, and it's a reminder of what the voice expects of me. I truly believe that human responsibility is about using the imagination that we have been given to

help create a better world.

I also believe that the gift of imagination to create that better world comes from the voice.

And finally, I believe that the voice whom we call by many names and hear in many languages and meet in many places, even a McDonald's, lives inside of each and every one of us.

And if we'd all hear and follow it, then the peace that we long for will come and the world will be made whole.

So remember, there's really four simple steps: ask, wait, listen, and then receive the voice that resides in you, and follow wherever its dance may lead.

Thank you.

Resources for Further Reading:

[The Roots of Religion: Genevieve Von Petzinger at TEDxVictoria \(Transcript\)](#)

[Denzel Washington: Put God First Speech \(Full Transcript\)](#)

[My Failed Mission to Find God - And What I Found Instead: Anjali Kumar \(Transcript\)](#)

[Krista Tippett: The Art of Generous Listening \(Full Transcript\)](#)

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