

Finding a Voice

Jim W. Corder



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Preface

Finding a Voice uses many questions to focus on a single question: How can we justly and decently make our voices, at best imperfect instruments given to saying things only incompletely, worth hearing? It seeks to promote answers to that question by providing a wide variety of statements in which people have found good voices, or failed to do so, or have flailed about, sometimes rising, sometimes falling. While the urgency of the question scarcely seems to need authentication, the particular form in which I have put it and its apparent usurpation of the entire book do require some accounting; this the Introduction attempts to give. If the question is urgent and general, the answers must seem sometimes plodding and always specific: this person succeeds just here, and here; that person fails just there, and there.

For this reason—and for others—*Finding a Voice* includes a wide variety of forms and genres from a wide range of time. The exigencies of time and place and the needs of speaker and audience (reader and writer) make a shifting burden; a human voice speaks for good or ill through the possibilities of the form it takes and out of the premises and silent colorings of its backgrounds. It seems likely, then, that we may learn more about human voices, and discover more good answers to that initial question, if we hear many voices taking many forms in many times than if we listen only to the voices of a single time, a single form, or a single prevailing set of ideas and assumptions, however complex.

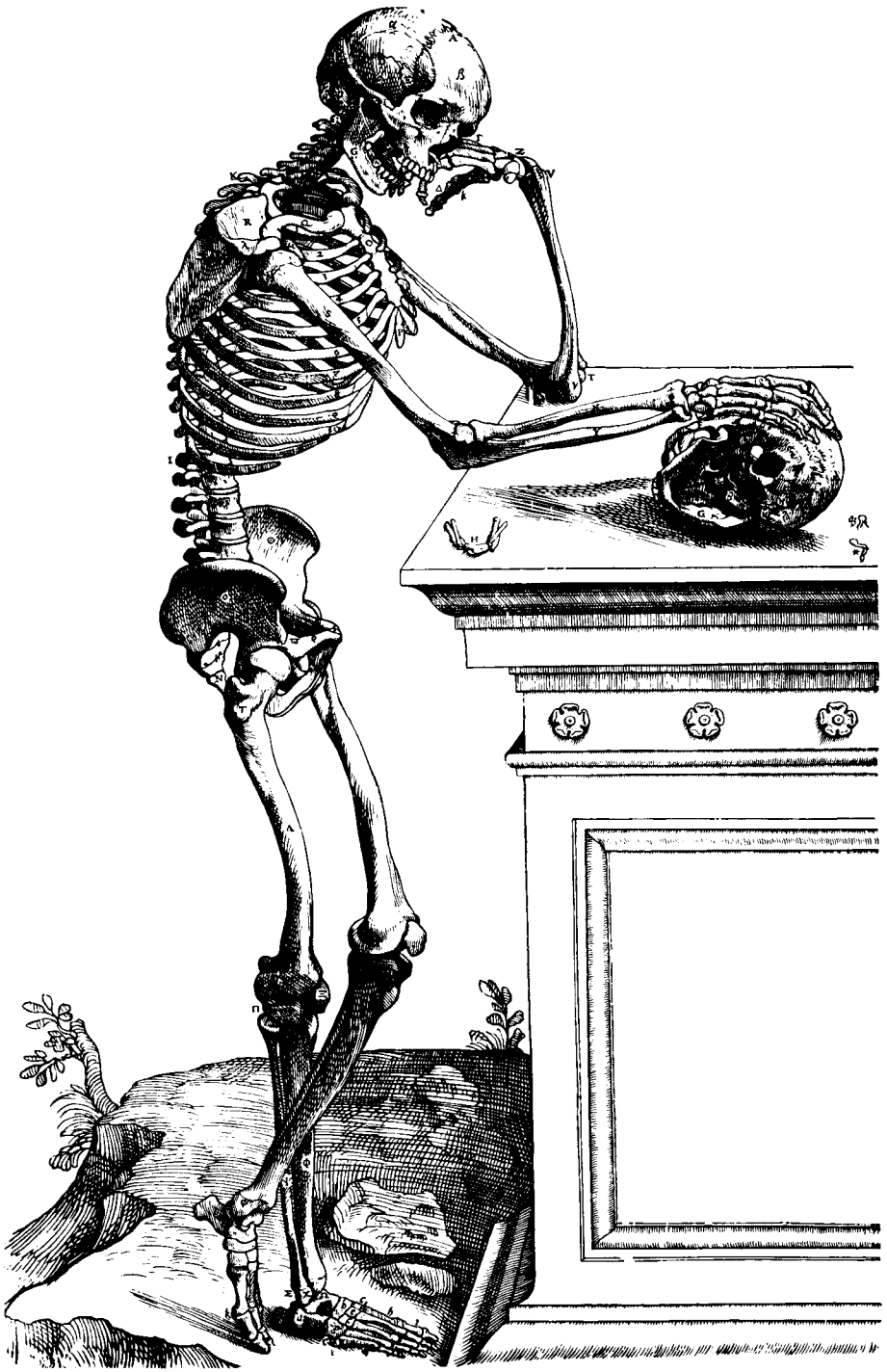
The readings are in three groups, each identified by a question that has been often, or always, crucial to human concerns. I have tried to frame the questions in language that would make them native to many times and places and not just our own. The readings in each section are arranged in smaller groups, each addressed to a more specific version of the same general question. Being varied in perspective and method, yet related to a common question, the readings will enable us to remind ourselves, I hope, that today we speak out of a history, our words hooking onto or being colored by other people's words; that if we speak in ways unlike those of others, we nevertheless speak, much as they did, in some context, whether or not fully recognized; that while we may have escaped what seem to us the naive presuppositions of earlier people, we too have our presuppositions; that our voices may be emboldened, enlarged, or otherwise made more fit by our knowledge of how others have spoken; and that if we do not know these things, we must someday grow shrill in our pride, or fall into silent despair, or succumb to delusion.

But so varied a collection of readings will not answer always or only to a single question, or to a small set of questions, however flexibly they may be put. In the various genres here represented, in the other themes that develop in the readings (some of which are suggested in the part introductions) and in the traditional and emergent concerns of rhetoric there are

other questions and other interests that may be pertinent to composition courses. Because they are samples of our history, the readings may afford some opportunities for study of shifts in premises and philosophies in the history of ideas, for example, and shifts in value systems that take away the import of voices that once led multitudes or that give import to voices that once were alone in some wilderness.

I am indebted for many kindnesses to Mr. John Miller and Mr. Richard Welna. To Patsy I gladly owe a share of what her hands have worked for.

J. W. C.





Arhats bestowing alms upon beggars. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

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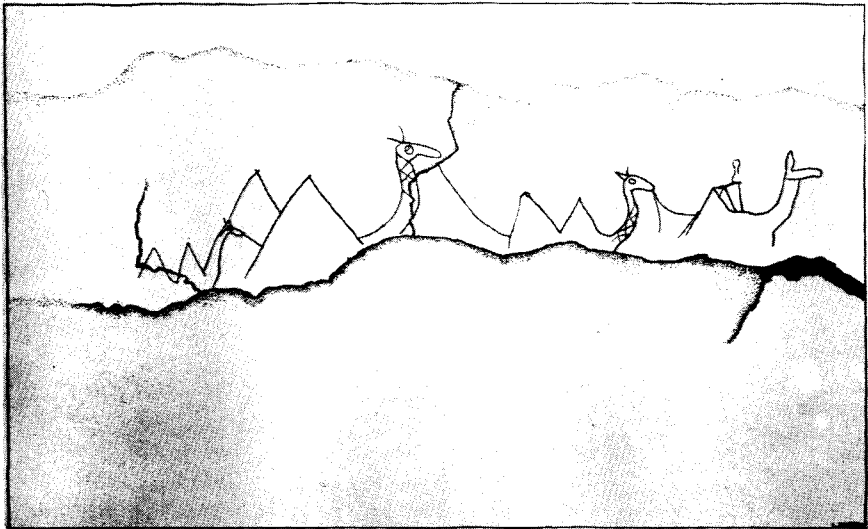
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Introduction

Some Observations on the Book

Whatever else it may claim to be or to do, *Finding a Voice* is a collection of readings. If they have any worth at all, the readings can stand alone, requiring no analysis to substantiate their merit. Analysis, even analysis for its own sake, to be sure, has many clear and certain virtues and values. Presumably objective analysis that has no goal except to be analysis can make possible the discovery of new ideas or the rediscovery of old ideas, and can help us to understand certain strategies and styles and ways of organizing experience. These are things that ought to happen.

Yet to be faced with a thick book of readings waiting to be analyzed one after the other is a prospect with scant comfort, another sometimes bewildering grab bag of experiences in a world that already too quickly brings us to clusters of experience, or thrusts us from experience to experience, pinball style, with neither prior warning nor time for adjustment afterward. The family circle has grown, Marshall McLuhan has told us, and almost from their beginnings the children who will be students are hurried into varied, highly disparate experiences. All the world's their teacher, and as they go mewling and toddling about the house, the television set, not the family, may be the first, and foremost, teacher. With television and newspapers and magazines available at home, particularly the quick-draw news bulletin, and tapes and movies and a hundred retrieval machines at school, they are zoomed here to there to there, from the late movie to a kitchen in Los Angeles, from the Popeye cartoons to a motel in Memphis, from Romper Room to the streets of Dallas. And they grow older and zoom from a class on Shelley to an off-campus tutoring session with hungry kids and back to work on an underground newspaper and thence to a class in medieval history and on to a committee meeting on the perils and promises of open visitation in the dormitories. A large pile of readings, largely unsorted and undiscriminated, may seem only an unappealing model of a world already filled with more experiences than we can grasp.

But each reading—like each experience—is a human thing having the breath of some life in it. Just living at a normal, sometimes regularly accel-