it can be ordinary

help children manage—and even benefit—when they encounter evil

By Michael A. Harvey

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When I was a child, I thought that evil was anything but ordinary. There were the good guys and the bad guys; the good guys were here and the bad guys were way out there. My parents and a stuffed bear made sure it stayed that way. I'm not sure exactly when this childhood delusion was dispelled.

I'll never forget when my then 6-year-old daughter, after watching the evening news, asked me what *rape* meant. I was ready for discussions about turn-taking, peer conflict resolution, anger management, and even sexuality. (I had already purchased reading material with age-appropriate illustrations and narrative.) But I wasn't ready to be asked about rape. I was tempted to use the standard "Ask your mother" line and never turn on the news again, but I responded with a version of "It's when a bad person hurts another person," and I probably lectured her again about not talking to strangers.

Then came a bigger challenge. Allison's science teacher almost always called on the boys in her class, not the girls. Alli noted, "Mrs. Smith thinks girls are stupid and that boys are better!" Rape had never happened in our neighborhood; and, if it did, it would have definitely made the news. Not so with Mrs. Smith's brand of prejudice and discrimination. Although it felt big-time evil to Alli and to me, it wasn't newsworthy. It happened all the time. That kind of evil is *ordinary*.

Photography by John T. Consoli

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We cannot protect our children—hard of hearing, deaf, or hearing—from exposure to evil. The prevalence of evil, perhaps especially ordinary evil, is particularly high for those with disabilities, including hard of hearing and deaf people. We all bear witness to ordinary evil, or will do so in the not-too-distant future, despite good laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act. This is particularly painful when it affects our deaf and hard of hearing children.

The Experience of Ordinary Evil Part of Having a Hearing Loss?

Consider the following story which circulated on the Internet:

Kid Pretends to be Deaf

A young hearing boy goes into the kitchen where his mother is baking. He puts his hands in the flour, mixes it with water to make it become dough, and fills his ears with it. He looks at his mother and says, "Look, Momma, I'm a deaf boy." His mama slaps him hard on the face and says, "Boy, go show your daddy." The boy goes into the living room and says, "Look, Daddy, I'm a deaf boy." His daddy also slaps him on the face and says, "Boy, go show your grandma." So the boy goes to see his grandma and says, "Look, Granny, I'm a deaf boy." She slaps him on the face and sends him back to his mother. His mother asks, "Well, did you learn something from all of this?" The boy nods his head and says, "I sure did. I've only been a deaf boy for five minutes and I already hate you hearing people."

The significance of this story lies in why it merited being circulated on the web in the first place. Obviously it strikes a familiar nerve for deaf and hard of hearing people. It's a way of publicly acknowledging their pain and rage in the face of hearing people.

The theme resurfaces often. A 51-year-old man, who had become hard of hearing as a teenager, recollected that "as a child it was people's insensitivity that was the most difficult obstacle. Most people put up a good front about having compassion and striving for equality until it inconvenienced them in some way. Even now…it's people's cruelty that

traumatizes me more than anything else."

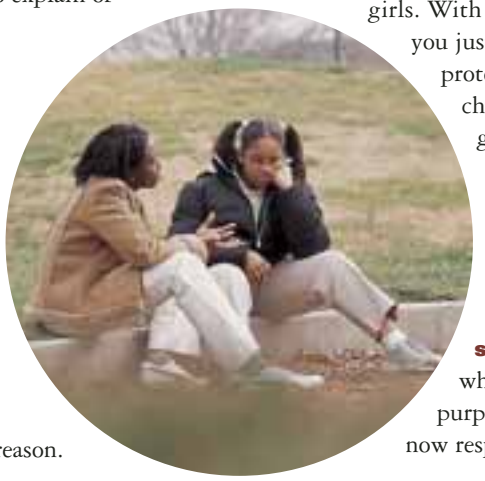
It traumatizes those who bear witness as well. A mother shared the following entry in her diary:

> *"…Today we had Sue's fourth birthday party and I just finished baking her a chocolate cake. It has been three months since the audiologist diagnosed her hearing loss. But until last week, we thought it wouldn't affect her much. We thanked God we lived in a beautiful neighborhood with plenty of kids her age and a community center.*
>
> *"Last Monday, a group of kids were in the playground and they invited Sue to join them. Her exuberance and joy for being included was unforgettable. But then, while she was climbing on the jungle gym, the children ran to the backyard to play hide-and-go-seek. I heard one kid say, "She can't hear us anyway!" When Sue turned around, she wondered what had happened, where her friends had gone. She cried. It seemed a foreboding of things to come that I found unbearable…."*

I am, of course, not making the case that everyone who ignores the needs of hard of hearing or deaf people is evil. Acts of ordinary evil imply awareness, knowledge, and intent. Many people are, in fact, not knowledgeable about the unique needs of children with hearing loss and need to be educated. Many people do not intend harm. If some guy is stepping on your foot, the first thing to do is inform him. Perhaps you say something such as, "Excuse me, sir, but do you know that the weight of your body is causing me excruciating pain?" Hopefully, his response is, "Oh, I'm terribly sorry!" accompanied by rapid removal of his foot. Sometimes information and reason yield success.

As parents of hard of hearing or deaf children, the first approach to what may seem like oppression should be to provide explanations—to educate others about the child's needs, about the nature of hearing loss, about resources to get appropriate accommodations. Depending on the child's developmental level, he or she can also explain or advocate.

However, it's a delusion that reason will always be triumphant. W.E.B. DuBois, a black activist in the early 1900s, dedicated his life to the belief that if he could only explain to white people that there's no reason to be prejudiced, rationality would prevail! But he died a depressed, broken man in a self-imposed exile, realizing his incorrect assumption much too late.



With ordinary evil, we cannot just reason.

Coping Strategies

Preparing Children

So what do you do to help your child if another person doesn't care, if that person refuses to "remove his foot"? How can you help your hard of hearing or deaf child cope with ordinary evil?

- **Anticipate and explain oppression when it occurs.** In my opinion, an essential parent-child dialogue is one in which a parent predicts the occurrence of oppression and discrimination—of ordinary evil, that the world isn't always a nice place. In the psychological literature, this recommendation is referred to as "anticipatory coping." For example, Janie Ward, who wrote *The Skin We're In*, interviewed African American children about how their parents helped them to be resilient in the face of oppression. As Gina, a 15-year-old from Raleigh, North Carolina, put it:

  > *"I've been warned that…even though segregation is gone, racism is still here. So sometimes there have been things said or done that I did not realize were racist, and I went back and told my parents, and we went over whatever had happened. And they pointed out to me where racism could have been the issue…And because I've been prepared for it, it doesn't bother me as much…."*

- **Assure your child that he or she is not alone.** For example, a study conducted by psychologists at Hofstra University asked a large sample of children whether they'd had the experience of being called hurtful names by other children. From my experience, many children guess somewhere around 50 percent, whereas many adults guess around 90 percent. The correct answer is 100 percent.

- **Help your child figure out the "anatomy" of ordinary evil.** Why did he do that mean thing to me? Did I deserve it? Was it something I did? Go over several possibilities. Name-calling is something that occurs frequently and can be hurtful. But some experience it as a mode of intimacy. As the Australian novelist, Phillip Gwynne, put it, "I never knew what to say to girls. With boys it was easy; if you ran out of things to say, you just insulted them." Name-calling can be for self-protection—avoiding intimacy— particularly for children in early grades. The best defense is a good offense. Name-calling is often related to one's development. It is a demonstration of strength, a way of testing one's verbal muscles; a way of compensating for feelings of low self-esteem.

- **Take a look at the sequence of "who started it" behaviors.** Parents can explore whether their child might have inadvertently or purposely done something to anger that peer who is now responding in a mean manner.

Ordinary Evil—The Silver Lining

To the extent that experiencing and bearing witness to ordinary evil is a crisis, it has danger and opportunities. One benefit of facing ordinary evil is the potential for developing one's self-esteem. It is much easier to put all evil people "over there" and cast them as the *evil others*, those no-goodnicks who, unlike us, should be banished from this Earth. It's a tempting option and indeed works quite well for our self-esteem in the short-term. I'm good; they're bad. The problem is in the long-term. For inasmuch as we criticize others for their foibles, it's only a matter of time before we commit the same or similar crimes. One sign language interpreter wrote about her experiences working in an Equal Opportunity Office where, as irony would have it, the ethics officer discriminated against a deaf adult. The interpreter wrote:

> *"To this day, when I think about her, I realize that I haven't forgiven her for her actions. However, I know that I must forgive her if I want to be forgiven for the wrongs I have done or will do, knowingly and unknowingly. I'm still working my way through that. As I type this, I feel the old anger and frustration welling up inside of me."*

We're all works in progress, which is to say we all have some evil in us, admittedly some of us more than others. So coming to terms with the ordinary evil in others is to accept the different parts of ourselves; to always try to do better and to advocate for our rights, but to hold on to our self-esteem in the process.

Another benefit has to do with developing the skill to manage anger. For example, Joe, a deaf adolescent, described a painful scenario which included his best friend, Mark, a hearing peer who had unofficially functioned as his sign language interpreter during school recess time, and Gloria, also hearing and, in Joe's words, "the most beautiful girl in the world." Joe's parents were worried enough to bring him to my office. This was our dialogue:

> *"One day Gloria walked toward me and Mark. She didn't sign so Mark interpreted. My heart was racing! But Gloria said many sentences to Mark, who only signed to me, 'She's just talking about Western Civilization.' They were smiling at each other. Then Mark stopped signing all together and both of them were giggling and making eyes at each other. I then asked Mark to sign, but he made only grunting noises, like he was making fun of my deaf speech. Then Gloria burst into hysterics and they went to study hall together and I had to go to math class. But I couldn't concentrate. Some kids kept giving me weird looks and whispering something, but I couldn't understand them."*

"What did you do?" I asked.

"I bashed his head against the wall…and got suspended." Joe then turned his head toward the window, psychologically leaving the room to whereabouts unknown. His final words were *"But it's no big deal."* He had briefly exposed his private pain, only to quickly retreat to a protective persona of nonchalance.

Joe's crisis—and his opportunity—was to learn to manage his anger. He had to handle this both externally, so his face and behavior would not frighten people, and internally, so he wouldn't continue to beret himself and feel bad. After working with Joe for several weeks, I was pleased that he determined to approach Mark. Said Joe:

> *"As I walked over to Mark, he looked like he was going to walk away so I remembered what we talked about—you know, to be curious and find out what was going on in his head. So I asked him nicely if he would explain why he acted so mean and {said} that I really wanted to understand where he was coming from. He said that he was pissed off with me, too. At first, he was kind of vague. He kept saying that I was being stuck up, like a snob, like I was too good for him or something like that. But I kept asking for specifics…I tried not to get angry or defensive. I told him I really wanna know. Then he told me something like, 'You look down on hearing people.' I said 'What?' And he repeated it. And then I admitted to him that I had been bad-mouthing hearing people, saying they were stupid and messed up. I was kind of mean, too."*

I read to Joe one of my favorite quotations from writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn:

> *If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.*

Joe reflected on that quotation and then applied it to himself. "When I listened to how Mark felt, I no longer saw him as a

monster. I could forgive him. Mark screwed up, but so did I," he said.

Lastly, encounters with ordinary evil can promote self-confidence and autonomy. Many of us can remember when, as a young child, we said to mommy, "Make it go away! Make it better!" The "it" may have been a disgusting bug, a scary movie, a shadow in the bedroom. And sometimes it worked! Mommy did make it all go away! Mommy was so strong.

While, on a rational level, children know that the adults around them are not responsible for bad things happening, human beings are not always rational. Hence, there is a grieving process that many kids go through once they realize that their parents cannot do magic, that they cannot make all pain or all bad people go away.

Sometimes parents of hard of hearing children report their child "has an attitude" with them; he or she acts like it's the parents' fault for the discrimination, oppression, and ridicule that the hearing world can foist on deaf and hard of hearing people. As part of that grieving process, children may feel betrayed by their parents. And parents, too, may find themselves feeling responsible. Don't.

And Now for the Good News

The good news is that the process of figuring out what to do about ordinary evil, given that we cannot magically make it go away, sets the stage for a child to become an autonomous adult. By talking about oppression, discrimination, and ridicule, the ordinary evil that all flesh is heir to, in a sense, parents help the child mature. In effect, the parents provide an internal stuffed bear—one that the child will carry around inside, that no one else can see which has the parent's "voice," a voice that the child will use when he or she is faced with adversity.

I once worked with a hard of hearing man who was learning to use the memories of his high school teacher as a comforting inner voice for himself when he was confronted by oppression. I asked him to imagine Mrs. Thomas sitting across from him in my office and to thank her. At first, he squirmed in his seat, obviously thinking this was either silly or perhaps deeply personal. But after only a little encouragement, he began:

> *"Mrs. Thomas, I know I have never told you this. I guess as a kid I was too shy and didn't know the right words. Maybe I thought the other kids would overhear and laugh at me."*

He paused, obviously struggling to find the right words.

> *"I want to thank you for believing in me, for noticing me, for showing me that I deserved your attention, and that other kids saying I had broken ears didn't mean I was a broken person. I never thanked you for how many times you sat with me after those hearing kids teased me so much. You have no idea how important what you did was. I can still hear you saying to me, 'You can rise above it, you can rise above it.' You would put your hand on my shoulder, and it made me feel that I was okay."*

Because of Mrs. Thomas's support, he could learn to feel fully human—unbroken—even when others tried to dehumanize him.

Importance of Advocacy

The Deaf President Now Gallaudet University revolution is perhaps the most well-known example of successful advocacy of deaf rights. It was 1988 when the University's Board of Trustees announced that a hearing educator had been selected as Gallaudet's seventh president despite all the evidence and support for a deaf president. That's when the rights of deaf people began to receive long overdue national attention.

On a "Nightline" telecast, a Gallaudet student stated the case before millions of viewers. In a subsequent interview, he admitted to feeling very nervous and anxious until the broadcast began. "But once it did," the student said, "I felt at ease and comfortable because I allowed the truth to take over the entire time. With the truth of our compassion, nothing comes easier than expressing it."

Although we will always try to prevent evil from happening, it's going to happen anyway. More laws and even the biggest stuffed bear cannot protect us. Therefore, our task is to figure out how to help our children and ourselves. Sometimes advocacy won't yield change, but it is always a valuable endeavor. Said author Elie Wiesel, "In the beginning, I thought I could change man. Today I know I cannot. If I still shout today, if I still scream, it is to prevent man from ultimately changing *me*."

And sometimes advocacy does work. The bully stops bullying, the services improve, discrimination and oppression are reduced. And the positive effects, such as the success at Gallaudet University, continue to ripple throughout the world.

Reference

Ward, J. (2000). *The skin we're in*. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc.