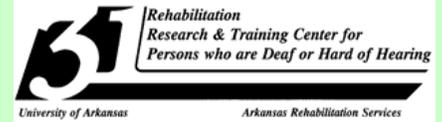




## Selected Proceedings of ALDAcon 2004 “Green Mountain Odyssey”



### BEARING WITNESS TO ORDINARY EVIL Michael Harvey, Ph.D.

**Dr. Harvey:** I would like to tell you a little bit about what I have come to call ordinary evil. When I was a child, I thought that evil was anything but ordinary. There were the good guys and there were the bad guys. The good guys were here, the bad guys were way out there, and my parents made sure it stayed that way. I'm not sure when this delusion got dispelled. It could have been when Johnny taped a stink bomb to my bike. It was probably at the time that I got a big, stuffed bear for protection against the bad guys. My memories are clearer when I think of my own kids. I will never forget when my then six-year-old daughter, after watching the evening news, asked me what rape is. I was ready for discussions about conflict resolution and anger management; I had even read books. I was prepared. But I was not ready for that question. I was tempted, frankly, to use the standard, “Ask your mother,” response. I did what most of you would say: It's when a bad person hurts another person. I lectured her again about not talking to strangers. At least we could feel comfort that those bad strangers were way out there on the other side of the tracks.

I will never forget when I became a parent to my daughter Allison, her science teacher always called on the boys in the class, but not girls. She must think the boys are better and the girls are stupid. Why does she do that? Rape had never happened in our neighborhood. If it did, it would have definitely made the news. Not true with that teacher's brand of prejudice and discrimination. Although it felt like big time evil to me and to Ally, it wasn't news worthy. It happened all the time. That kind of evil doesn't make the news. That kind of evil is what I call “ordinary evil.” Now, ordinary evil happens much more to any minority who is oppressed, including deaf people. Let me read you a quotation from Alan Susman, who is a professor at Gallaudet University. In his words, “It's a rare deaf person that has not, as a child, been ridiculed, denigrated by non-disabled children. Such memories are painfully poignant.” I will give you other examples.

For the last several years, I have had the pleasure and honor to be the sponsor to What's On The Mind column in the *Journal of Hearing Loss*. A lot of fun, wonderful letters and I enjoyed answering them. Let me read you a couple letters that I got. One is from a child:

Dear Doctor Harvey, I'm a hearing impaired child and I wanted to know if there is an invention of hearing aids that are hidden inside your ear. The reason for that is that when I'm at school, I get bullied by a number of children. I have told the teacher this. They tell them off, but they keep on calling me deafie and stupid and dumb. Please, can you tell me whether those hearing aids are invented yet and if I'm able to have them or not?

It breaks your heart, right? Now, another letter:

Dear Doctor Harvey, I am a middle-aged woman who has become deaf. I found myself becoming much more irritable with hearing people who don't seem to care. It's not so much the obvious kind of discrimination that bothers me, like no captioning, no visual systems, etc., it's the more subtle reactions of people like being ignored or treated like I'm some kind of defect. Frankly, I'm beginning to feel like there is something wrong with me. Signed, Desperate and Fed Up.

A hearing spouse of a deaf man who had become deaf tells this story:

In 1994, as the Americans with Disabilities Act began to take effect, I watched my husband be fired for requesting an interpreter for a two hour training session. This was after working for this employer for four years. And then the employer claimed that my husband had quit rather than being fired, so they wouldn't have to pay unemployment. The discrimination lawsuit dragged on for three years. During this time, I watched my husband change from an empowered deaf man to a bitter, angry person, consumed by the inequities of oppression. I watched the result of his unemployment take root and foster in our relationship. The insidiousness in which it occurred was like a cancer spreading with every rejection letter he received. We won the settlement, but from that day on, things were never the same. It grew to represent the hearing world that we both resented, simply by being there.

So, there are effects of ordinary evil. Let me give you a preview here. We are going to talk about managing the effects, coping with those, and we are going to understand much more of what those are, potentially. Then we are going to talk about reaping some positive benefits of all this stuff. So, the trick is to, number one, not delude ourselves that there are not very subtle insidious effects of ordinary evil. We are going to do a more complete description of what the psychological effects are, and talk about some ways of managing the negative effects and reaping the positive benefits.

So, what are some of the effects of ordinary evil? Anger and rage. Let me give you an example. I don't know about you, but I would say I get an average of five or six Internet jokes every day on my computer. I usually delete them. I don't pay much attention to them. I would never get any work done. One caught my eye; it was from a colleague, a friend of mine, Bahan. He is a wonderful human being at Gallaudet University, himself, Deaf. He circulated a joke on the Internet called Kid Pretends to be Deaf. Let me read the joke to you:

A young hearing boy goes into the kitchen where his mother is baking, he puts his hand in the flour, mixes it with water to make it become dough and fills his ears with it. "Look, Momma! I'm a deaf boy!" His mama slaps his face and says, "Boy, go show your daddy." The boy says, "Look, Daddy! I'm a deaf boy." He slaps him in the face and says, "Go show your grandmother!" He says, "Look, Grandmother! I'm a deaf boy!" She slaps him in the face and sends him back to the mother. The mother says, "Well, did you learn something from all this?" The boy shakes his head and says, "I sure enough did! I have only been a deaf boy for five minutes and I already hate you hearing people!"

Now, that's not a funny Joke, no one is laughing. Maybe it was my delivery, maybe it was too early in the morning, or maybe the joke is just not funny. Maybe the significance of the so-called joke is why it merited being circulated on the Internet in the first place. It obviously strikes a familiar chord--something which all of you know better than I do from personal experience, which I will talk about later. It's a way of publicly acknowledging one's pain, anger, and rage in the face of hearing people.

Low self esteem—you have already heard about from the letter I read to you. Remember the letter complaining about other people not caring? She sends it and comes to ask, "What's wrong with me?" as opposed to "What's wrong with them?"

Another woman sent me this letter, which I will read to you. The resulting feeling of being ignored often mounts so substantially that anger takes over.

"I find myself blaming my normal hearing friends for not helping me to participate more effectively. Why can't they sense my frustration and come to my rescue, I often ask myself. It is getting difficult for me to maintain a healthy attitude and to hang on to my self-confidence in these situations. How can I make significant others understand my struggle? Perhaps if I was a stronger person, I could make other people see reason."

Perhaps, if I was a strong enough person-- as if we have the power to make other people think certain things. And I will never forget one quote that an interpreter sent me: "I sometimes wonder, if tomorrow I lose my hearing, whether people will treat me in the same way, as if I suddenly become stupid." It's an amazing quote, "as if I suddenly become stupid." This brings us to the subject of interpreters.

Let me tell you what I have been doing for the last three or four years. For a long time, I have been interested in how oppression, or so-called ordinary evil, not only effects the person that it is being done to, but also how it effects those who observe it, those who "bear witness to ordinary evil," those who learn about it, and see it happening. One group of people, who, as a matter of their work, routinely observe subtle and not so subtle instances of ordinary evil, are interpreters.

Interpreters are, by definition, present during encounters between deaf and hearing people. Our captioning people also are witness to the ordinary evil--the injustices that happen to you as deaf and deafened people. So, on my web site, I decided to ask this question of interpreters: if you would be willing, please describe an interpreting situation in which you felt that a hearing person somehow oppressed a deaf consumer. It can be

any situation that kind of got under your skin. While we are talking about interpreters, please remember other situations that you yourself have experienced, because I suspect you have many, many stories.

That's the request I made of interpreters. I got about 70 responses from interpreters across the world. Most are around 36 to 45 years old, white, women, from an assortment of religions (mostly Christian), and a variety of settings. A lot of inpatient medical settings in which, quote, "ordinary evil" took place.

This is not "valid" information per se, because of the sampling, but it's a way of talking about this stuff and the so-called ordinary situations. I will give you a few quotes here. And, as I read some, think of the fact that this happens all the time. It's not going to make the news. For example, one interpreter said that at a staff meeting with a deaf person, hearing people were talking over each other, making remarks about the deaf person under their breaths, and talking too fast. The hearing people were rude and irritated with the delayed responses of the deaf person because of the interpreting process. They all rolled their eyes.

Now, let me ask you, can you imagine the headline for CNN: "Hearing People Roll Eyes at Deaf Person"? It's not going to happen, right? How many of you have had this experience of feeling ignored by hearing people? Often? Daily? Virtually everybody. This is ordinary. Ordinary, meaning statistically frequent. But, these are situations that with those who bear witness to it, it got under their skin and made them uncomfortable. They remember it for years afterwards. And I suspect that many of you can recall similar experiences. One interpreter wrote, "The church I interpret for refused to supply an interpreter for a deaf person at a retreat and refused to refund her registration fee." One interpreter had to interpret for a teacher who was trying to force the deaf person not to look at the interpreter. This happens all the time. Deaf people not being acknowledged, they are being blatantly disrespected and receiving inadequate treatment.

What I'm saying is that all instances of hearing people ignoring your needs or being disrespectful are intentional. They are because of "ordinary evil." Yes, there are many, many, well-meaning hearing people who simply don't know. They need to be educated. And when they are educated, they say, "Oh, I didn't know that." And life goes on happily ever after. That's not the group I'm talking about. I'm talking about instances when hearing people *do* know what the effects of their behavior are, and choose, for some reason, not to care. I'm talking about that group and how it affects those who bear witness to it, either from personal experience, being directed at them, or from observing it.

I would be very appreciative of a discussion of what struck you about this and then we will move on to talk about how one manages and how one can actually benefit from all this stuff.

**Audience Member:** I think sometimes people have different expectations in how to communicate with me, because I can voice very well. I grew up hard of hearing. That was interesting to me, because my wife is an interpreter, and often she comes home from situations and says things similar to what was discussed. Sometimes I feel very angry. I look at her and I wish that she were deaf. That's not a reasonable thought for me, but sometimes the things that she says, like when she talks about her feelings, just being numb, and what it takes to survive, make me angry. There are so many bad situations that we have gone through. I became deaf years ago.

**Dr. Harvey:** Thank you. Let me respond to a very important point that you said. There is an interesting term called compassion fatigue, which has come out of the trauma literature. It means, you hear about bad experiences so much, that you become tired of caring—even tired of caring about yourself. And it's not unusual for a person who has lost their hearing for many, many years, to become numb to all the crap that happens to them. An observer might say, "Oh, my god! How could you take this?" The deaf person says, "Take what? I'm used to this. Get real; this is my life." And numbness results.

By the way, in many ways, it's very adaptive, and, in fact, it's one of the hallmark symptoms of trauma. People on are traumatized again and again. Not only extraordinary evil traumatizes people, but ordinary evil traumatizes people, too. As repeated experiences of ordinary evil happen to you, numbness often goes with it. The good news about numbness is that if we didn't become numb to all the crap that happens to us, we probably couldn't function too well—brush our teeth, etc. We would be bedridden. The bad news, of course, is that it has long term effects unless we notice it and do something about it.

**Audience Member:** In my own experiences, I have worked as a clinical psychologist in a mental health treatment program, and there is only one hearing impaired person among the clients. So, when I'm seeing this ordinary evil, as you have said, it confirms that it's a very pervasive phenomena. I remember years ago, there was an article about how psychiatrists ignored their patients. But it's even worse when you're in a community mental health treatment program and the staff seems to think that because they feel superior to the people they are supposed to treat, they can treat them with disrespect. They do not allow them to have input or allow the client to say how they think the program should be run.

Now, it's changing. They say you have to have consumers on advisory boards. To really have input, you have to have consumer satisfaction surveys and everything. They are trying hard to make all the treatment programs responsive to the needs of the consumers. I remember last year, we were talking about a new requirement—that we are supposed to give persons who were in a community treatment program, mentally ill people who have been in psychiatric hospitals many times, skill training and they are supposed to be part of the assertive community treatment team. Some people were upset about this. They ask why these people are being treated as if they are equal to me. I worked for years to get myself this job; Why are they now equal to me? They really were in an uproar about it. Do you know that there are many mental health

professionals who are mentally ill themselves? This is very real. It's very true and we need to do everything we can to reverse things. We will all benefit from consumer empowerment.

**Dr. Harvey:** Thank you very much. What you said was very important. I'm not saying that we are the good guys and other people out there who do ordinary evil are the bad guys. In fact, everybody does this: Deaf, Hearing, white, black female, male, and certainly, mental health professionals are far from being immune to this. I was at a conference the other day. About three or four hundred people having a conference about trauma. A psychiatrist stood up and said something for a few minutes. He ended his comments with, "You know, all of us here, we are not well." And he was right. We are all not well.

**Audience Member:** Thank you. This was very powerful. I used to be an interpreter for many years and could really relate to what you discussed. Having to sit silently and bear witness to it is very, very tough. It led to me changing careers, where I'm now involved in much more advocacy and education, after watching incident after incident. I think that it's helped through education. You are not necessarily working with evil people, but people who really truly don't know. It's frustrating for interpreters to stand there and just not have that role or place where you can make people become informed.

**Dr. Harvey:** Thank you. One more comment about your own experience bearing witness to this.

**Audience Member:** I married a deaf man. We went on our honeymoon cruise, on a kayak for two people. The boss of the kayak company told me that I had to be in the back to control the kayak. My husband had to be in the front. My husband, being a man, wanted to control the kayak. The boss of the company wanted me to control his kayak. I was caught in the middle of who would be more macho and win. The owner of the kayak won, and the entire situation affected our marriage for many years about why I was not able to win the situation for my husband. In two weeks, we will celebrate our 8th anniversary, and everything is wonderful, but it still has affected our marriage.

**Dr. Harvey:** It had to do with your husband being deaf?

**Audience Member:** Yes, because I had to interpret for him, he could not be the one controlling the kayak.

**Dr. Harvey:** This is the point I'm trying to make. What you just said would not make the news, correct? Terribly ordinary—common. But it's something that even though it happened eight years ago, tears are still coming. That's exactly the phenomena. Another hallmark of trauma is remembering it as if it were yesterday. All of you, I suspect, for various Reasons, have experienced what I'm calling ordinary evil. And again, the emotions, the images, the memories of that are readily accessible in your cerebral cortex as if it just happened. That's not because there is something wrong with you. That's a hallmark effect of trauma. And that's the point. Let's move on to what to do about it.

Differentiating evil from ignorance is very simple. We don't have to assume guilty before innocent. If you look at me as opposed to looking at an interpreter, it would be helpful. If the person does it, wonderful. If they don't, that's okay. We try to educate and not assume the person is doing it for malfeasance. But we cannot do this alone. The problem with this ordinary evil stuff is it really has not been talked about enough so that there are many people who experience it and feel shame and, therefore, don't talk about it. They feel alone. People ask for and think it's okay to get support for extraordinary evil as opposed to ordinary evil. But we need to do it with ordinary evil as well.

So, we talked about attempting to educate. There was an activist, W.E.B. Dubois, who dedicated himself to explaining to white people that oppression of black people is irrational. He held that belief until he almost died. If only he could explain how irrational it is, the white people would say, "Oh, my god! What have it been doing? Thank You for informing me. I won't do it again." It didn't happen. He died a broken man.

You don't assume it's going to work. You try. On my web site, I ask interpreters for recommendations. One interpreter wrote, "Be prepared for the world not being nice. Know that you can't fix it all, perhaps only just a small part. You must be psychologically and emotionally very strong for that to happen. You must have a support system—somebody who can listen to both sides of the issue and then give advice. To this day, I wish I had found that kind of help."

A study, which was done at a university, asked a bunch of children how many of them had experienced being called names or being bullied. Guess what percentage. 100%!

Erecting a psychological shield is another task. Some of you may recognize the name Bill Russell. He was an amazing basketball player of the Celtics and he recently wrote a wonderful autobiography. He tells the story of when he was five years old. He grew up in Philadelphia, in a largely white neighborhood. He was going outside to practice basketball, and his mother said to him something that he will never forget. Something that has helped him erect a psychological shield against ordinary evil. He said, "She said, 'Billy, some people may come up to you and say not nice things to you. Remember, their words mean more about them than about you.'" I think it's wonderful advice. Again, it's natural to ask yourself *what's wrong with me* when somebody mistreats you knowingly. But, in fact, as Bill's mother said, it means more about them than about us.

My point here is that which isn't talked about, hurts you. Nietzsche, the philosopher, had a saying: "Silence is a poison." What you don't talk about can hurt you. And what you don't talk about in terms of the effects of this stuff, leads to bad stuff. One of my favorite sayings is "Pain has a size and shape, a beginning and an end. It takes over only when not allowed its voice."

Which brings us to how to make use of ordinary evil. Yes, we try to get rid of it as best we can, but it is, in fact, a crisis. The word "crisis," if it's translated, in Chinese, is translated as either a danger or an opportunity. The trick, it seems to me, is to

recognize the dangers and manage them as best we can, and then talk about the opportunities and possible benefits of bearing witness to ordinary evil.

One benefit, is in self esteem when we distance ourselves from others who do ordinary evil. It's easy enough to put all those bad people out there. It's something many people do. We see evil as something out there, not here. The good news, in the short term anyway, is that this strategy works. We all feel much better about ourselves when we do this—that is see ourselves as people who don't do the things those other assholes across the room do. It works in the short term; it makes all of us feel very good. The bad news, in the long term, is that all of us commit acts of ordinary evil ourselves. One Interpreter wrote something interesting: "To this day, when I think about that hearing person, It realize that I hadn't forgiven her for her actions. However, I know that I must forgive her if I want the Lord to forgive me for the wrongs I have done knowingly and unknowingly." We're all works this progress, as they say.

Other benefits have to do with resilience. I will tell you a story about extraordinary evil, which I think will tie in with this. I was working with a flight attendant about two months after 9-11. She came to me for psychotherapy, never having been to a therapist since she was about 10 years old when her mother died. She was probably about 45, and had been having nightmares about the bombs, bodies bloodied, etc. She was one of the people that asked her friend to cover for her on that American Airlines flight. It didn't take a rocket scientist to know where those nightmares were coming from.

We talked for a bit and she told me that routinely, she would wake up at 2 a.m. terrified and alone, sweating. I asked her, during that time when she woke up, did she talk to her mother. She looked at me kind of angrily and said. "I told you that she died when I was ten." I said, "I know you did. But I still wonder if you talk to her? Can you talk to her?" We met a few times, talking about how she could talk to her mother, who lives inside of her heart, during those times that she feels most lonely. And she did. She sent me an e-mail, actually. It's a letter that, in fact, she wrote to her mom:

Dear Mom, I feel a little silly writing this, but I need to tell you something. When I'm up at night by myself, thinking about how our world has changed, I think of us in the kitchen together. Do you remember when Johnny called me ugly? You hugged me, and then we made caramel apples and you let me eat one, even after I'd brushed my teeth. I smile every time I recall that very special night."

My point is that, during times that we experience trauma, ordinary evil (or for that matter, extraordinary evil), we need to talk to somebody. That somebody does not have to be physically with us. That person doesn't have to be alive. When we do that, we become more resilient. One interpreter writes, "Situations like this, bring to me a desire to understand more my reasons for accepting the attitude of others. *I REALIZE THAT ACCEPTING MY BELIEFS MUST ALWAYS BE MY FIRST CAREER.*"

Finally, when one experiences ordinary trauma, one becomes increasingly appreciative of human connections. That's one benefit. Please, some other reactions to this?

**Audience member:** I think I heard a lot about oppression towards the deaf. I'm not a user of sign language, and I've had many traumatic experiences of being oppressed every day in my life in New York City. For example, in 1991, I went to social work school. I use a personal assistive listening device and I had such difficulty explaining the device to my professors. Halfway through the program, I went to the disabilities office, which I possibly should have done before I started, and this woman wanted me to make this case so we could sue. I wasn't prepared halfway during this program to do that, but it was just one traumatic example of oppression that I experienced. I really think this workshop is very important. I've never heard about this kind of study, but it also highlights the differences of deaf people and my own experience. When I tell them I'm deaf, they say they will get me an interpreter. I try to explain that I need technology. I do this all the time, but sometimes I just pull back as it is just too much of an effort.

**Dr. Harvey:** Wonderful story. Thank you. You are absolutely right, nobody is immune from oppressing others. There are many times that certain members oppress members of the same group. When I first started in this field, culturally Deaf people who used ASL trained me. They believed that any well-adjusted Deaf person, whether it's a person with acquired hearing Loss or a moderate hearing loss, should only use American Sign Language if he or she is competent. And that was not only wrong, it was oppressive.

I'm Jewish, but my Jewish wedding would not be recognized in Israel—my wedding is not Jewish enough. This happens all the time. So, it's much more complicated than simply hearing people doing it to deaf people. Person A does it to person B, irrespective, sometimes, of hearing loss issues.

**Audience member:** My ophthalmologist traumatized me for about a week in April. I had been going to him 25 years and never had a problem. In essence, he scared the life out of me. I have been severely hearing impaired for 20 years and he knew it. I always tell the medical person, I'm severely hearing impaired. So he said, "Well, your cataracts are the same, but we have to do a glaucoma treatment today." I said, "Excuse me? What cataracts? What glaucoma? Nobody told me I have this. How come I didn't know this?" He kept talking over me. I had to go to have laser treatment. Everything shut down with me. I was in a state of shock. I went in, had the treatment, got in the car and cried all the way home. Oh, on the way out, I said to the woman, "He didn't tell me much. Should I stay out of the water?" He was so non-communicative. I went home and cried. I said, "What do I do about this?" I got on the Internet and I looked up everything. A friend of mine at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Hospital told me: "You can't get an appointment for four weeks. He never told you how bad your eyes are you should call him immediately and tell him that he does not communicate well." Well I slept on it. And when I did talk to him I told him why I was upset, that he had told me nothing and rushed me through things I did not understand. I asked him if I would go blind and he said no. "Could you not have said that yesterday? Before you touch my other eye, exactly why did you rush me into this? How bad is this?"

"It's really preventive," he said. I was furious! My sister, Mary, who died two years ago, was a psychotherapist and helped me a lot. So, I asked myself, what would Mary do

about this? I could relate when you told that other woman to talk to her mother. I talk to Mary. And she would say, "Don't let this bastard get away with that." The apology I got on Friday was, "Oops! Sorry about that." That's not an apology, that's bull shit! So I filed a complaint with the division of medicine.

**Dr. Harvey:** That was a beautiful example of recognizing the effects of this and then converting it into action. The famous example of ordinary evil that had a successful ending is when Gallaudet University wanted to elect a hearing president. But, I guess what I would like to leave you with, if I could, is that it's great if once ordinary evil is recognized, to cope with it, educate people with it, and even try to make changes, like the Gallaudet Deaf President Now movement. The benefits of recognizing, talking about, coping with, and doing something about ordinary evil, don't have to depend on external success.

One of my idols is Eli Weisel, who witnessed his father being murdered, and has since then dedicated his life to making the world a better place and to ending extraordinary evil, as well as ordinary evil. I would like to leave you with one of my favorite quotations from him. He said, "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." Thank you very much.

**Dr. Harvey provides training and consultation on deafness/hearing loss, vicarious trauma and mental health issues. As a Clinical Psychologist, he has a private practice in Framingham, Mass., is an adjunct faculty at Boston University and is a consultant faculty at Pennsylvania College of Optometry, School of Audiology, where he teaches on-line courses relating to the psychosocial aspects of hearing loss. Dr. Harvey writes a regular column, "What's On Your Mind?" in Hearing Loss, the journal for Self Help for the Hard-of-Hearing. In addition to over 40 articles, his publications include The Odyssey of Hearing Loss: Tales of Triumph: Psychotherapy with Deaf and Hard of Hearing.**

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