

BEARING WITNESS TO ORDINARY EVIL: SELF-CARE AND GROWTH-ENHANCEMENT STRATEGIES

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I wrote the original version of this lecture prior to September 11th. So having experienced September 11, I want to talk about not just ordinary evil but extraordinary evil as well. I am also going to talk about not just how we, individually, as adults, cope with ordinary evil and extraordinary evil, but also we as parents can help our children to do that.

This lecture is divided into two parts. Pre-September 11 and post-September 11. When I was a child, I thought that evil pretty simple. There were the good guys and the bad guys. The good guys were here. And the bad guys were way out there. I'm not exactly sure when this childhood delusion got dispelled. My early memories about evil are more clear when I think of my own kids. I will never forget when my then 6-year-old daughter asking me what rape meant after watching the evening news.

Now, when this happened, I was ready for discussions about the importance of turn taking, peer conflict, anger management and even sexuality. I was not 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 did as most of you have probably done-- or will do. I responded with a version of, it's when a bad person hurts a good person. I probably lectured her again about not talking to strangers, feeling that at least we could feel comfort that those bad strangers were out there on the other side of the tracks. The goal would be to keep it that way.

But then came a bigger challenge. I also will never forget when it became apparent to Allison that her science teacher almost always called on the boys in her class, but not the girls. "Why does Mrs. Smith think girls are stupid and boys are better?" she asked.

Now, rape has never happened in our neighborhood. But we have all encountered the prejudice and discrimination of a Mrs. Smith. This type of thing happens all the time and is not newsworthy. This kind of evil is ordinary.

A sign language interpreter told me another story about ordinary evil. "For years," she said, "all of the unfairness that I have seen happen to deaf people never really bothered me. I never really thought a lot about it. But one day I was interpreting an iep (what is this?) meeting in which a school administrator was giving two hearing parents the run around. And they were being made to feel incompetent to parent their deaf child. I couldn't take it any more. So I went into the bathroom and balled my eyes out. I don't know why it hit me when it did. Objectively it was no big deal. I have seen this happen a million times before. But I couldn't function for several days."

I have a similar story. I was once a witness for a Deaf boy whose native language was ASL. He was suicidal as a result of being mainstreamed and wanted to go to a Deaf school. The town refused to spend the money and a law case resulted. It was obvious why the boy needed to change schools but the lawyer did not care. She harassed me for hours on that stand. I gave her every reason I could why this boy should be in an accessible environment-- to no avail. Her job was to save the town money. And the fact that this town's actions made this Deaf boy dangerously suicidal was incidental. I was angry and enraged. And for the life of me I could not fathom how she could ethically justify what she was doing. But her position wasn't due to ignorance. It wasn't a case of a naive but well meaning hearing person. She knew too well what she was doing and the affects it would have. She simply didn't care.

That occurrence of ordinary evil happened well over 15 years ago. But I, like the interpreter, remember it as if it happened yesterday.

Deaf people are quite familiar with ordinary evil despite good laws such as the ADA. They experience it as a staple of their daily lives. And, at least vicariously, so do all of us who are in one way or another touched by deafness in our daily lives.

We all bear witness to ordinary evil or will do so in the not too distant future, so often in fact that we may hardly notice its presence. You can't protect yourself or your children from exposure to evil. If I had turned off the news, my daughter would undoubtedly heard about the rape from another source. In regard to ordinary evil, we can be sure that there will always be oppression in our world.

Even if you could avoid exposure to ordinary evil, there are times that you may not want to, for the effects of bearing witness to evil are potentially beneficial for you and your children, if we understand how it works and learn to manage it correctly.

To do this we need to understand how ordinary evil works; when and how it happens. About a year or so I sent out an e-mail to about 40 people with the following request: please list five or so examples of ordinary evil that particularly affected you. Ordinary evil being defined as that which seems evil to you, but is not evil enough to make CNN. And I have got to tell you I was shocked. I got hundreds of responses. Here are some representative responses.

They can be categorized under disrespect, abuse of power, deceit and prejudice. There are the everyday things such as rudeness and deliberate nastiness. There was prejudice against women and minorities by those who sprout all the right words and act in all the wrong ways-- and who when they are called on their actions, meet the assertions with shrugs and apologies. Many of the responses talked about deceit. One woman recounted finding out about her husband's extra marital affair. One father of a learning disabled child wrote, "Ordinary evil is seeing adults teaching their children that others with differences are weird or less than human."

So, as we can see, ordinary evil happens much more to oppressed minorities, of which, of course, the deaf are one. As Dr Allen Sussen of Gallaudett, who himself is deaf, has said: "It is a rare deaf person who is not as a child been ostracized, ridiculed, and denigrated by non-disabled children. Such memories are painfully poignant." There is a deaf joke I saw recently that goes something like this: a young hearing boy goes into the kitchen where his mother is baking. He takes some dough and fills his ears with it. "Look mamma," he says, " I am a deaf boy." His mama hits him hard in the face and says, "Boy, go show your daddy." The boy goes into the living room and says, "Look daddy, I am a deaf boy." His daddy also slaps him in the face and says, "Boy, go show your Grandma." So the boy goes to see his grandma and says, "look granny, I am a deaf boy." She slaps him on the face and sends him back to his mother. His mother says, "Well, did you learn something from all of this?" "I sure enough did, replies the boy, "I have only been a deaf boy for five minutes, and I already hate you hearing people."

Now this joke strikes a familiar nerve for deaf people. It's a way of publicly acknowledging their hurt, pain, and rage in the face of hearing people. On my website I have a space for interpreters to send me examples of ordinary evil they have witnessed in their jobs working with the Deaf. One lady told me of

a young boy who was on a team sport and denied the chance to play in a playoff game by a coach who had been consistently resentful at his very presence and the accommodations he required. Every other team member had a chance to play, including all of the third string, but not this boy. He was devastated and her complaints to authorities gained nothing. “ I found,” she told me “that there is something called the good old buddy system.” Afterwards she tried to explain to the boy that it is not always possible to know why some people do cruel things.

When I asked this woman how this made her feel she said that despite the fact that she is well known as a peaceful person “If I had not had control...I think I would have killed that coach. And I still harbor awful feelings for him.”

I then asked how we should handle such experiences with ordinary evil. “Be prepared for the world not always being nice. Know that you can't fix it all. You must be psychologically and emotionally very strong. For that to happen, there must be a support system out there. There must be someone nearby who can listen to you, see both sides of the issue, and then give advice. To this day, I wish I had found that help.”

Those of us involved in the school system have seen this sort of thing: a Special Education Director who doesn't care about the needs of your Deaf child, only about saving money; who tries perhaps to put your child in a mainstream program with an interpreter who only took a few sign language courses; who doesn't care about finding other necessary services. I wish I had a nickel for every story I have heard like this. These are common stories. They are ordinary, if you will.

Now, I have had some interesting conversations with folks about these things. “Well, you know Mike,” they may say, “ don't you think you are overreacting. Not all people are evil. There are many hearing people, for example, who are naive, well intentioned. They are not evil, they just don't know enough. They need to be educated.”

And that is true. Good people can seem evil. There was a woman who while waiting for a plane, and she bought a drink and chips and sat down to eat them at a table where a man sat reading his paper. She took a sip of her drink and reached for a chip, and he suddenly looked up with anger in his eyes and reached out and took a chip from her bag. This continued until the bag was empty. The woman became more and more frightened at a man who would take food without permission from a strangers bag, watching her the whole time with an alert and angry look on his face. When done, she stood up

quickly picked up her bags and walked quickly out of the place. Sitting down at the gate, heart still pounding, she reached into her bag for her ticket. It was there. And next to it was her bag of chips. Somehow, when she paid for the snack, she had put her chips into her flight bag. And at the table she and the mysterious stranger had shared his chips, not hers.

Had this woman simply said: "Excuse me, sir, do you realize they are my chips?" All of this might have been avoided, so indeed, sometimes information and education yields success. That should be the first thing you do in the face of what appears like ordinary evil. But what do you do in fact in the face of real ordinary evil?

It's a common delusion in my opinion that you can reason with ordinary evil. In the early 1900s there was a famous black activist who dedicated his life to holding onto the belief that if white people could be made to understand that there is no rational reason for prejudice, then everything would be fine. He died a depressed broken man in self-imposed exile. For with ordinary evil, we often cannot just reason. And it is for this reason, in my opinion, that we must first pause long enough to manage our own feelings of anger and rage when we meet up with it. Only then can we decide on a strategy that avoids the run of helpless depression or rage.

If we have children, how do we teach them to do this? Well, we need to talk about it. One pivotal way of managing ordinary evil is simply to talk about it; share it; process it; even joke about it.

One of my favorite sayings about how to manage strong emotions is: pain has a size and a shape, a beginning and an end. It takes over only when not allowed its voice. Or, to put it another way: pain has a size and a shape, a beginning and an end. It's potentially finite. It will start. It will stop. It doesn't go on forever, if it's allowed its voice. It takes over only when you don't give it enough words. The more you talk about, experience, the less power it has over you. The less words, the less space, the more it takes over.

So, my first and probably primary recommendation for how to help our children and ourselves with ordinary evil is deceptively simple. Talk about it. Give it voice. Validate feelings. Now I say this is deceptively simple because it's easier said than done.

As parents there's nothing worse than seeing our children in pain. A bee once stung my daughter Emily, when she was about five years old. I swear it hurt me more than it hurt her. So, in a reaction

to evil, you and/or your child will feel a host of different feelings. I think the two that come up most often ordinary evil is anger and rage.

The difference between these two feelings are that you might compare anger to a snow flurry and rage to a blizzard. Rage is big time anger. And an essential developmental task, particularly if you are part of any oppressed minority is learning how to handle this internal storm how to manage rage in the face of evil. If rage and anger isn't managed correctly, aggression may be the result.

You know, it's tough to remember prior to September 11th. It seems so long ago. But it was only last march that the shootings at Santana High School occurred in California. And as of April of 1999, a new phrase was entered our lexicon: "To pull a Columbine." So, we shouldn't kid ourselves and think of ordinary evil won't happen to us or to our kids. We must talk about it, both amongst ourselves and with our children. Because silence is poison. To give a painful experience words is to detoxify it. Contain it. Give it a size and a shape, and then to realize its benefits.

That may sound like a strange thing to say. But given that we are stuck with ordinary evil, and extraordinary evil, if we can manage it correctly, we have no choice but to find ways to realize its benefits to us.

So now let's talk about how on earth benefits can come from bearing witness to evil.

I think there are several benefits to us and to our children. First is that bearing witness to ordinary evil is potentially beneficial to our self-esteem. Let me explain why. It is easy to see evil people as evil others—as people unlike ourselves who should be banished from this Earth. Kids do this a lot. This is very good for our self-esteem in the short term. The problem though is in the long-term. For we forget, as we righteously criticize others for their foibles, it is but a matter of time before we commit some similar foibles or crimes of ordinary evil.

An interpreter wrote to me about her experience working in an Equal Opportunity Office and seeing an ethics officer discriminate against a deaf adult. "To this day I haven'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. I am still working on my way through this though. As I type this I feel the old anger and frustration welling up inside of me. We are all works in progress, aren't we? Some perhaps more than

others." So coming to terms with the ordinary evil of others is also a way that we can come to terms with our own dark sides and shadows.

Another related benefit of bearing witness to ordinary evil is that it can help us become self-reliant and resilient in the face of crises. When we were young mommy could make things all better. But there comes a time as parents when we cannot make bad things go away. On a rational level our children know we are not responsible for the oppression in world. But, human beings are not always rational.

As a child when my brand new hoola hoop was stolen I was given a big stuffed bear. I was angry with my parents because they could not eliminate the evil. And I grieved in a very real way the loss of my parents because I had viewed them as omnipotent to fix anything. So there is a healthy and normal grieving process that kids go through once they realize that as parents, you cannot do magic. You cannot make ordinary evil go away. And you must realize this: that they may be angry with you, and you, in turn, may feel guilty for not doing a good enough job. I know the feeling well.

This is both good and bad news. The bad news I just described. It's rough water and doesn't feel good. The good news is by talking about ordinary evil with your child, you are helping your child get a bigger, internalized stuffed bear. Not the external one such as I was given, but an internal one that your child can use to soothe themselves in the face of adversity.

Let me tell you about a man I once saw in therapy. A deaf man was learning to use the memories of a high schoolteacher as a comforting inner voice. I asked this man to imagine his teacher, sitting across from him and to thank her. After a little bit of encouragement he began. He said: " I know that I never told you this. As a kid I was too shy and didn't know the right words. Maybe I thought the other kids would overhear and make fun of 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 did not 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 would put your hand on my shoulder, and it made me feel that I was okay." With the support of this teacher he learned to feel fully human, and not broken--even when others tried to dehumanize him.

Another benefit of bearing witness to ordinary evil, and for that matter, extraordinary evil, is that it also helps one's moral development and sense of purpose in one's life. One interpreter had an experience with an insensitive doctor. He was treating a deaf woman with a complicated pregnancy but refused to approve an interpreter for daily communication for her and her deaf fiancé with other attending physicians. The interpreter was distressed, aggravated and upset for the patient. "Situations such as this," she wrote, "bring to rise in me a desire to understand more--my reasons for accepting or ignoring the oppressive or negative and the attitudes of others. I again realize that expressing my ethical and moral beliefs must always be my first career. It touches the very heart of individuals, and truly helps create serious change at the most basic level."

One of my idols is somebody Eli Wisel, a holocaust survivor who won the Noble Peace Prize and witnessed his father being murdered by the Nazis at Auschwitz. To this day he has dedicated his life to eradicating oppression and helping making this world a better place. So even with extraordinary evil, there are potential benefits.

At a memorial service after the Columbine shooting one student said that as he mourned the loss of his friend, strangers put their arms around him and comforted him. It touched him and he said it helped him realize he shouldn't judge people without knowing them and he vowed not to do that anymore.

Another student reflected, "The incident and the aftermath have even changed the way I view complete strangers. I look in people's faces and I realize how important they are. Even if I don't know them. I realize they have a life. People I don't know I feel love for. I feel for everyone."

September 11th is a date none of us will forget as long as we will live. Two days after September 11, I was part of a therapy team for American Airlines. Now to be very frank with you, I wanted, in the worst way to stay home and weed my garden. Like everyone else I was grieving and in shock and was in no real shape to do much of anything except to do something I could control—like weed. But, I knew it was the right thing to do, so I went.

And I saw what I had expected to see. One flight attendant told the story of her having asked her good friend to cover for her for the LA run on the 11th. I talked to a man who was in the control tower when the stewardess broke in saying: "Oh, my god, oh, my god we are going down. I see buildings," right before the connection went dead. There was tremendous pain amongst all of us.

But despite that an amazing thing happened. But there was no time for pretense. There were no airs. There were no power struggles. People showed raw emotion. We hugged and we told each other the truth, and it was an amazing experience to feel the connection between everyone in that room. And it was a connection that in some way, traumatized as we all were, brought to our lives a kind of light, and expelled some of the darkness. For when we face extraordinary evil and ordinary evil and talk about it together we experience our very real connections to each other.

Let me get back to ordinary evil and discuss one success story. It was about 13 years ago when Gallaudet's board of directors, elected a new hearing president. This oppressive act of trying to get a hearing president prompted long overdue national attention for the rights of deaf people. Many of you remember the nighttime telecast when Gallaudet students stated the case before millions of viewers. In a subsequent interview one student admitted to being nervous and anxious. But once the broadcast began the student said "I felt at ease and comfortable. I let the truth take over, and with the truth of our compassion, nothing comes easier than expressing it." (can we reword this somehow it doesn't quite make sense)

That is a wonderful lesson. There is a lot of opportunity as well as danger when we face both ordinary evil and extraordinary evil. Sometimes all our best efforts aren't enough. It is preferable to eradicate oppression. At times while it may be impossible to do so our efforts to do so are always justified.

Eli Weisel has 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." Weisel dedicated his life to fighting against oppression, evil and extraordinary evil. He learned as we all have that often it doesn't work. Often you try, try, try. You educate. And people either can't hear or don't want to hear. Then what do you do?

Well, what you can do is you can control your own attitude. You can at least feel better about yourself for having made the effort. Evil out there does not mean you are unworthy. We must continue to try to lobby for effective change. If it doesn't work, at least hold to our own self-esteem. We must continually try our best to make external change, but not succumb to what is called internalized oppression.

The point of this talk is, at least you take care of your self, and grow into adulthood.

Thank you.

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