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The Right to be Heard

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THE RIGHT TO BE HEARD

Lily Corbett

A few years ago I was asked to be a moderator for a student panel in a TRIPOD workshop. There were five deaf students from a state school for the deaf. The night before the panel I met with them and went over the questions that were to be used in the panel. Several of them asked me if it was “safe” to express their thoughts and feelings about some specific issues. I was rather disturbed by their apprehension and concern about their getting into “trouble” if they say something on the panel. I told them to be open and frank and that they could say anything they wanted the audience to hear. I had to reassure them that they would not get in trouble as long as they were honest with their thoughts and feelings. Later that night their principal confronted me and stuffed a piece of paper in my hand with the questions and answers that he had made up for the students and me to use in the panel. He warned me that he didn’t want any controversial or negative responses from the students and that if I did not use his questions, I would be in “some kind of trouble.”

It was a threat from a professional in deafness. I had trouble sleeping that night. I was shocked and hurt. I pondered and wondered about his threat and what I should do. . . “Should I use his questions to prevent any trouble or should I go ahead and use the questions that the students have agreed to respond to and discuss during the panel?” Finally I made my decision and went to sleep in the wee hours of the morning.

The day of the panel I saw the principal sitting in the front row with a threatening grin on his face. I gave him my prettiest smile and winked at him. He then relaxed and leaned back in his chair. Do I need to tell you what

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his reaction was during the panel when he heard my questions and the students' brilliant and honest responses? The point here is that the principal tried to undercut, through me, the students' right to speak out and be heard.

There is much manipulation of deaf people's rights, let alone manipulating them as individuals or as a group. Manipulation is worse than denying a deaf person's rights. Manipulation is a subtle and sneaky way to deprive deaf people of their rights. When a parent, an educator or a professional tells a deaf child that he has a right to express his thoughts and feelings, but he cannot do so in sign language, it is an attempt to manipulate the child's right to express himself. More than that, to me, it is an attempt to *deprive* the child of his right, if he chooses, to sign to express himself.

Here is one experience I had with the parents of a deaf teenager that will illustrate the deprivation of the teenager's right to communicate and to be heard. The parents contacted me and invited me to come to their home to talk with them. I spent an entire evening listening to them. The parents complained about their son's poor speech, poor language, poor social relations with hearing people, and many other problems. They asked me where and how they had failed. I looked at their son from time to time while listening to his parents. Not once was he able to give *his* input during the conversation. The teenager did try to say something several times but his father told him to be quiet. I was getting annoyed. Finally, I turned to the teenager and told him that he may tell us anything. He started to cry and in sign language told me that he was afraid to say something because his parents would get angry and punish him. His father, not knowing sign language, jumped on him and told him not to sign. There was much fear in the boy's eyes. I turned to his father and asked him to please let the boy express himself in any way he chooses. He screamed at me and said that his son had nothing to say and once more the child was not permitted to sign because the parents did not understand sign language. We can see where and how these parents have failed.

It is an awful, awful feeling when a deaf person cannot be heard because it is very difficult for him to express himself when he is not allowed to sign and/or has no English language skills to use. It is even more frustrating, especially, when he has so much on his mind and wants to be heard.

Take a look at the overwhelming majority of deaf people who have limited communication skills; relatively poor speech despite years of training, relatively poor reading and writing skills, and inadequate education, underdeveloped work skills, and limitations in their ability to relate to others within various social situations. With all these drawbacks, how can a deaf person become aware and really understand that he has equal rights like anyone else. Take one deaf person from this overwhelming majority and try to teach him the concept of "the right" or "*your* rights." You will no doubt find it very difficult and very frustrating.

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I have been asked many times by professionals and parents, "Why do deaf people allow others to manipulate them and their rights?" "Why don't deaf people speak out?" "Why don't deaf people come to us and tell us their problems and their needs?" and on and on. I often answer by asking them, "Why don't you go into the deaf community and talk with them to find out?" Many times they make excuses such as that they cannot sign or sign very well or cannot understand "deaf people's language." That takes us back to where we started and, again, this is the root of most, if not all, of the problems we all face. Not understanding and accepting a deaf person as he is and how he communicates is another way to subvert deaf people's right to be heard.

Manipulation of deaf people's right to be heard is not limited to only this overwhelming majority of deaf people I have mentioned. It also applies to well-educated and concerned deaf people, including deaf professionals.

My heart was heavy recently when the Virginia Council for the Deaf received a letter from a deaf woman, the wife of a hearing man and the mother of a deaf child. She was not happy nor satisfied with her child's school program. The teacher and the supervisor of the program threatened the deaf woman that her child would be taken out of the program if she did not "shut up." Also, the deaf woman was having serious problems with her husband. Here are some of the quotes from her letter:

My husband and the teacher and the supervisor do not even want to take anything I say seriously where it concerns my child. Things I have tried to do, no one wants a part of it. . . they are down on everything I am trying to do for my child. They say I'll hurt my child if I did such and such to a point. Well, my husband and I have been fighting every other week. I cannot stand it anymore. . . I am not allowed to have any part in my child's education, conferences at school or anything. . . I feel I am being treated like a criminal. I need help but no one is listening to me. My husband told me to pack my bags and leave. . . I love my child and cannot bear to see myself without her. . . I want the best for her. . . I really need help. I feel I am losing my mind. . . no one will listen to me!!!

This is not an unusual kind of letter. It is one of many, many letters we have received from deaf people with all kinds of problems—their jobs, their education, their marriages, their deaf children, their need for services, and their fears. Very often they end their letters with "No one will listen to me!" and "Who can help me?" Any letter like this gives me the shakes. I get so desperate that I want to crawl under my desk and cry. I know crying would not help, in fact I have been warned and even been reprimanded for being too emotional. I was even told that it was unprofessional to be emotional. No wonder we have so many cold-hearted and unyielding professionals today. Many professionals believe that emotions override/interfere with objectivity.

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But what is wrong with being compassionate and empathic? These are good emotions. With these emotions, we could have done so much to meet the needs of deaf people. Yet, we have so many professionals who are being too objective while there are so many deaf people with tremendous emotional and mental problems waiting and waiting for help. There are many deaf mental patients in institutions and, to compound the depressing picture, many mental institutions and mental health clinics do not have programs for deaf people nor specially trained staff to work and communicate with them. In Virginia, there is not one psychiatrist who can communicate with deaf people who so desperately need services.

This fact is alarming—especially to deaf people. There have been times when I'd wake up in mornings and look in the mirror thinking that I am going to lose my mind. I am sure many of you have thought the same thing. But you would quickly be assured knowing that you could go to the Yellow Pages in the telephone directory and find a doctor, a psychiatrist, or a mental health service agency that could help. You can communicate with him or them and he or they can communicate with you. You know you will get help. So you are relieved when you think about it. But what about deaf people? Fear and frustration develop and deepen when deaf people know there is no one listed in the telephone directory who can communicate with us and help us. When I realize this awful fact, I can only tell myself, "Hang in there, Lily. You'll make it through the day." That takes much courage and determination, and a lot of convincing. But when the day does come when I need help, where can I go?

There is another group—a very, very select group, however small; deaf professionals. They are, in most cases, postlingually deafened, have better language skills, many have master's degrees, and some have a Ph.D. I find it interesting when I meet and talk with other deaf professionals about our jobs. While we consider ourselves very fortunate to have good positions, we still experience the deprivation of our right to be heard. We have been patted on our backs with, "You are doing a fine job but don't do too much." "Don't say too much." "Don't be aggressive." "Don't demand too much." "Don't rub them the wrong way." "Don't step on their toes." "Don't get emotional." "Don't, don't. . . ." and it goes on and on. How in the world are we going to get our jobs done to meet the needs of deaf people with such a list of "Don't's"? More and more deaf people are depending on us deaf professionals to help improve services to meet their needs and to make their lives easier.

I would be remiss if I did not mention that we are very fortunate to have many outstanding deaf leaders in this country who have struggled long and hard to be where they are now. With their perseverance, determination and courage to make the impossible possible, deaf people are becoming more aware of their rights and of how to protect their rights. We have many fine and outstanding deaf professionals and leaders. They have much to say and it is my hope that you will listen to them.

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Nevertheless, regardless of deaf people's backgrounds, whether they are included in the statistic of 30% functionally illiterate, 60% below fifth grade reading level, 10% at or above tenth grade reading level, or whether they have a master's degree, they *all* have equal rights like everyone else, especially when it comes to the right to be heard. They have an enormous wealth of information and input that can help and assist in planning, developing and implementing services for deaf people of all ages. Listen to them and use them as resource people in your professional field.

Professionals, parents, and deaf people; both professionals and consumers must work together to get things done today. Without each other, nothing will be accomplished. If you have compassion, empathy, and the objective to help improve services for deaf people, then you do believe in the right of deaf people to be heard.

To help support and protect deaf people's right to be heard, listen to them!