

THE MAKING OF A WORD: AUDISM

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The other day I experienced a need to have an English word that is to deaf people what "racism" is to Black people. After some consultation with friends about various possibilities, I decided on the word audism from the Latin "audire" (to hear). I think the definition of audism might be listed in a dictionary as:

Audism (o diz m) n. the notion that one is superior based on one's ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears.

From audism we can derive "audist" which needs no explanation.

Having coined this word, I immediately felt better for it. Why would one feel better for having invented a word that carries such negativity? Why invent a word that might be used in the future in conflict situations? I think I felt better because I have experienced again and again the full power of what I will now call audism. Recently, I have begun to recognize it for what it is and needed a name for it in the worst way. Naming it makes it somehow less frightening. But it is no less a problem now that it has a name.

It is only in the past few years that I have been able to recognize some of the forces working against me as a deaf person as being audism. Most of my life, I have been an audist myself, and even now still have some behavior and values that are basically audist. I believe this to be the result of being brought up as a hearing person with basic hearing person behavior and values.

What is this audism? It is the bias and prejudice of hearing people against deaf people. It is the bias and prejudice of some deaf people against other deaf people. It is manifested in many ways. It appears in my own life in the form of people who continually judge deaf people's intelligence and success on the basis of their ability in the language of the hearing culture. It appears when the assumption is made that the deaf person's happiness depends on acquiring fluency in the language of the hearing culture. It appears when deaf people actively participate in the oppression of other deaf people by demanding of them the same set of standards, behavior, and values that they demand of hearing people. It appears in the class structure of the deaf culture when those at the top are those whose language is that of the hearing culture or closest to it. It appears when deaf people in positions of power keep that power by oppressing other deaf people. (The oppression is rationalized in various ways such as not being fluent in the language of the hearing culture, not having the ability necessary to perform in the hearing culture, i.e., speech, not having the credentials of the hearing culture, not having the experience necessary to fill a position.)

It appears when deaf and hearing people have no trust in deaf people's ability to control their own lives and form the systems and organizations necessary to take charge of themselves as a group to seek social and political change. It appears when deaf persons in power are in reality holding this power only as long as they continue to play the hearing role. It appears in many other

ways subtly and obviously, directly, and indirectly, intentionally and unintentionally, consciously and unconsciously.

It occurs in the form of tokenism. Again and again, organizations and committees have gotten their token deaf person or two and considered themselves to be doing a good deed. There is never any thought of a majority of deaf people in these organizations and committee. One deaf person is still one vote. And what is one vote? Another form of tokenism is in the hiring of schools and colleges which have deaf student bodies. Where do you have a school or college with a majority of deaf faculty? You don't. But you do have institutions feeling pride of 25% of their faculty is deaf. What kind of pride is this? 25 percent?

It occurs in one million and one excuses and rationalizations. Some examples are:

"The deaf must learn English (forget ASL) because when they grow up they will have to function in the hearing society and need it to find good jobs, find happiness, and have full and useful lives."

"We want to hire more deaf people but there just are not any deaf Ph.D.'s"

"But he/she can't use the phone."

He/she is nice and very intelligently but his/her English is just terrible."

"Oh, you have such beautiful speech. What is your hearing loss?"

"He/She's a very exceptional deaf person."

"But we don't need a TTY. There are no deaf people in this office."

"But I don't need a TTY. My wife/husband can hear on the phone."

"I really can't stand him/her. He/She's deafie deaf."

"He/she doesn't understand being deaf. He/She wasn't born deaf." (To a person deaf for 22 years.)

"But why should I sign? He/She's not interested in our conversation. He/She's not watching me."

"ASL isn't an academic language so we can't use it to teach high level subjects."

How can we give a liberal arts degree to someone who can't read and write?"

"No, no, no. Language work isn't college level work. What? P.E.? Of course it's college level work."

You get the idea? Most of these statements could be made by either hearing or deaf people. They are endless. They are subtle. They are blatant.

So ends my little treatise on audism. Is it a work worth maintaining? Do we really need a name for all I have described here? I think I'll keep it for awhile. It helps to deal with the anger and frustration.