

Across the Kisser by Paul Saevig

Deaf and hard of hearing people have unusually low self-images. I've seen it in almost every one of them I've ever met, and you've seen it, too. They're not confident people. They always seem to be dealing with serious problems: depression, alcoholism, substance abuse, failing relationships, unemployment, etc. The hard-of-hearing person always seems to be in trouble. He acts like someone who thinks he's stupid and incompetent.

Is it something in his genes? Are we constitutionally weaker than normal-hearing people?

Of course not.

Then what is it?

The main problem is that we get walloped across the kisser one hundred times a day. But each wallop is subtle. Each blow is unobtrusive, almost concealed. There's never anything you can complain about, or put your finger on.

My hearing aid dealer takes off my hearing aid. "Wow, you've really got this one cranked up!" he says, as if he's caught me stealing pennies from orphans.

Bang. All of a sudden I'm one-down. I was doing something wrong and I didn't even know it.

The phone rings and I answer. I have to make the caller repeat something he's saying six times, and I still can't figure out what he means. So he gets mad.

Bang. Right across the kisser.

I'm at a meeting at work and my wristwatch alarm goes off, but I don't hear it. First one person gives me a dirty look, then a second, then a third and then a fourth. Finally I catch on when they point at my wrist.

Bang. Bang. When people routinely get angry at you and communicate that your behavior is puzzling, you start wondering about yourself... It can't be just them; it's got to be you—they're right. You *are* strange. You *are* different.

I remember how much trouble I used to get into in physical education when I was in High School, because I couldn't wear my hearing aids outside for sports. "Saevig" one coach said, "you're an honor roll student, but when you come out here to PE you turn your brain off." Another coach wondered why I couldn't hear him as I swam in the pool and he stood on the deck "Are you just clowning around or can't you hear me?"

I can't hear you, coach.

All my family and friends have always told me "I'm too sensitive about these things." So I've been trying for 43 years to be less sensitive, but it's not easy. I want people to think I'm a good, intelligent, reasonable person. My experience has proven many times that that's asking too much. I guess I was born naïve.

It helps to talk to other hard of hearing people. Every one of us has a thousand stories of how we got smacked across the kisser. Maybe the trick to survival is not letting yourself be surprised when it happens the next time.

Because it will.

One coping mechanism I see some hard-of-hearing people use is acting as if nothing's wrong. A couple of you who use this mechanism are reading this right now. Nothing wrong, is there? It doesn't hurt? Doesn't bother you? You don't care?

I nominate these brave souls for the John Wayne Blood n' Guts award. They can put the trophy right next to their ulcer medicine.

Then there are the explainers. They wear their tongues out explaining to normal hearing folks

about what a hearing loss is, how the hard-of-hearing person should be spoken to, what he can and cannot hear, ad nauseam.

All this explaining is done in the mistaken belief that any of it makes a difference, the mistaken belief that the normal-hearing person will remember for three minutes that someone is hard of hearing.

The only way for a hearing-impaired person to get along with normal hearing people is to choose to associate as much as possible with decent people. The late Viennese psychiatrist Viktor Frank, recalling a long life in which he survived Auschwitz and Dachau concentration camps, finally concluded that there were two kinds of people in the world. Not Jews and non-Jews, not blacks and whites, not even men and women, but simply people who were decent and people who were not.

People who are decent treat hard-of-hearing people decently, and as Ross Perot would say, it's as simple as that. Decent people will stumble from time to time, and say cruel things unintentionally or even lose their tempers, but their heart, as the saying goes, will be in the right spot.

Always remember that we have PhD's in understanding hearing losses. There's no mystery to us. But to someone without a loss, the hard-of-hearing person is puzzling. They honestly don't understand us.

Now, of course, that doesn't excuse their cruelty and rudeness. That's why we should associate as much as possible with decent people.

About the author

Paul Saevig was born and bred in Orange County, CA. He has been a professional writer for the past twenty years, and currently resides in Culver City, CA. He is working on his fifth novel. He has a 90dB bilateral sensorineural loss. Life after Deafness—Feb.