

THE VOICE OF AUTHORITY ***(and Knee-Jerk Reactions)***

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

On a recent trip, I performed the routine airline passenger drill. At the entrance to the security line, I presented my driver's license and boarding pass for the first leg of the flight to the screener. Trudging behind other passengers in the slow-moving line to the X-ray equipment, I continued with my usual practice: tucking my driver's license in a pocket of my briefcase alongside the boarding pass for the second leg of the flight. All's well.

When it was time to board, I was ready to zip through: I was first in line with my boarding pass in hand, ready for the electronic scanner. But all was not well—the scanner did not beep its approval!

The non-beep of the electronic scanner was, in effect, a VOICE OF AUTHORITY, and the Ticket Taker responded with a knee-jerk reaction. With her own VOICE OF AUTHORITY, she chastised me—loudly and clearly: “You’ve got the wrong boarding pass!” For a split second, I considered arguing with her—this was the same boarding pass I had shown to the security screeners, and *they* wouldn't have let me through with the “wrong” boarding pass. But my resolve quickly evaporated as the Ticket Taker's VOICE OF AUTHORITY continued, telling me to step aside so other passengers could board. I considered pulling out my reading glasses to check the boarding pass—still believing I had the correct one. But the Ticket Taker's VOICE OF AUTHORITY was so powerful and insistent and firm; she must be right and I must be wrong. In turn, I reacted with a knee-jerk reaction: quickly grabbing the other boarding pass from my bag.

All this happened in a split second. One passenger had gone around me, but the scanner didn't beep its approval of *his* boarding pass! The Ticket Taker became flustered and her VOICE OF AUTHORITY turned sheepish as she muttered, “Oh, my scanner's messed up...” As it turned out, the first boarding pass I presented *was* the correct one!

My self-confidence was restored. As a frequent flyer, I pride myself on knowing airport routines, and doing my part to keep the flow of people moving! But why was I so quick to doubt myself and believe the Ticket Taker was right and I was wrong? Because like many others, I've been programmed to respond with obedience to the VOICE OF AUTHORITY!

Once on the plane, I thought about this whole episode—the Ticket Taker's knee-jerk reaction to the VOICE OF AUTHORITY of the machine (her immediate assumption that the problem was with me and not her machine) and my own knee-jerk reaction to *her* VOICE OF AUTHORITY (believing her, instead of trusting that I had the correct boarding pass). And I came to the conclusion that in some instances, it's appropriate to bow to AUTHORITY. But in many situations, the VOICE OF AUTHORITY isn't really AUTHORITY at all, the VOICE *can be wrong*, and we may allow the VOICE to rob us of our common sense! And I saw similarities between my boarding-pass-episode and situations involving individuals with disabilities and their families and the VOICES OF AUTHORITY they encounter.

A physician diagnoses a developmental disability in a child and demonstrates what is essentially a knee-jerk reaction: he responds to the VOICE OF AUTHORITY from his medical training. (Have you considered that, in general, pediatric specialists have little or no experience with *adults* with developmental disabilities? So how do they know what's really possible? Wouldn't it be nice if diagnosing physicians had such experience, were more thoughtful, and shared a variety of information with parents, instead of a narrow, one-sided perspective?)

In turn, many parents react to the physician's VOICE OF AUTHORITY with a knee-jerk reaction of their own (I did, at one time), by wholeheartedly embracing the doctor's diagnosis, prognosis, and recommended treatments. The child's life (and the

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family's) may be turned upside-down overnight, as she and her family pass through the invisible door to Disability World—and services and interventions take over. Contrary to the urgency often expressed by medical professionals or felt by parents, these are usually not life-or-death situations—an immediate decision is probably not necessary. What if parents used their common sense and took some time to think, to seek out other opinions (especially from other parents or adults with disabilities who have real experience), and considered alternatives that might be just as beneficial while being less invasive and less intensive?

Therapists of all types may invoke the VOICE OF AUTHORITY, and many add a sense of urgency that—in the minds of parents—gives even more weight to the AUTHORITY, and a knee-jerk reaction is the result. I'll never forget the day a physical therapist gravely informed me that if children with cerebral palsy don't sit up by the age of two, *they never will*. At that moment, I took her words as the Gospel Truth, and felt panicky about my 18-month-old son's future! But on the drive home, I gave it some more thought and wondered, "How does she know this? Is this true for *all* children with cerebral palsy? What if my son is different?" Many professionals robotically spew the "first three years" mantra, scaring parents to death. But there is *no proof* that the magical window of development closes at the age of three (read John Bruer's magnificent book *The Myth of the First Three Years*).

Many educators react to the unspoken VOICE OF AUTHORITY that accompanies a student's diagnosis when they make decisions about a student and his education *based on the diagnosis*, instead of a child's individual needs: "Students with [this type or level of disability] are placed in this classroom." This is a knee-jerk reaction to the VOICE OF AUTHORITY of *school policy*. It also robs educators of their common

**Authority has every reason
to fear the skeptic,
for authority can rarely survive
in the face of doubt.**

Robert Lindner

sense, for how does it make any sense to place children with autism (or any other condition) in the same classroom? In this environment, many students will simply learn how to have "more autism"! This practice does not reflect what's best for the students; it's for the convenience of educators! It's easier to make the students go to where the "program" is than take special ed services to students in general ed classrooms (per special ed law). And far too many parents accept—or are bullied by—an educator's VOICE OF AUTHORITY, and common sense is replaced with compliance.

Similar situations exist in the world of Adult Services. "Phil" told me he was tired of waiting for his employment counselor to get him a job. When I suggested he find his own job, he wailed, "They won't let me!" I told him no one had the right to stop him from seeking employment on his own. This was news to Phil—the VOICE OF AUTHORITY had left him feeling powerless.

Yes, the VOICE OF AUTHORITY can erase our common sense and provoke knee-jerk reactions which can ruin people's lives—by stripping parents of hopes and dreams, by robbing children and adults with disabilities of the ordinary and vitally important opportunities and experiences they need to live Real Lives, and by transferring one's personal power and responsibility to those in "positions of authority."

All of us—individuals with disabilities, parents, educators, providers, and others—can and should be skeptical and question AUTHORITY. We can ask, "Who says? Where is it written? How do you know? What if..." and many other questions. We can slow down, give ourselves time to think, call on others who have real experience, keep an open mind, try new things, and rejuvenate our common sense.

We can continue to worship at the Altar of Authority, robotically respond with knee-jerk reactions, and obediently comply, or we can choose a different path. The precious lives of children and adults with disabilities hang in the balance.