

Lecture 2

On Suicide Threats Getting Laughed Off

Here are some lines that occurred in one of the conversations I collected. This is a woman talking.

A: But about two months ago I was still home on uh one Sunday, oh we had five children and I got home from church and he's got a butcher knife. He told the kids to go to the park and play. This is kind of unusual for him because he doesn't like them, especially the baby, to go anywhere unless we're there.

B: Aha.

A: After they were all gone, I was laying on the couch just reading the Sunday paper and he came over there and started holding this butcher knife at my throat. And I said what is the matter with you. He said I'm going to kill you. I'm going to end it all. And I said oh for goodness sake put it down and go.

→ I started to laugh it off. And he sat there for about an hour. So I thought well, he kept threatening to kill me. And then he would pull it back as if to stab me. And I just laid there and prayed. I almost believed he was crazy.

And then he had been acting fairly good since then. He doesn't have any religion and I'm Catholic. But I said why don't you go down and talk to the priest. Maybe he would help you.

Here's another, from the same conversation.

A: What if you won't come. I mean how do I— about— Oh, the last time he tried to kill me he sat and wrote a long suicide note or whatever. I don't know. I didn't read it. This was on a Sunday when the kids and I got home from church and he wanted to know if I went to church with the kids and they said of course. She always goes to church with us. He said I know she's got a boyfriend. I said quit acting silly in front of the kids. What's the matter with you. He says oh, and then, I don't know. Anyway, this time he tried to kill me. He wrote this long note.

→ I just acted like I thought he was kidding. I didn't want him to think

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HARVEY SACKS

Lectures on Conversation

Lectures on
Conversation



I was taking him seriously. He said well Joey run down to the police station before I do something I don't want to do. I said Daddy quit it. Joey says Daddy I don't want to go down there, they'll all look funny at me when they read the note. I says Joey run outside, Daddy's only kidding. He says no I'm not. You'd better let me do it. Then he got in the car and went tearing off. I looked for the note last night and he didn't have one, so I thought oh maybe he knew I'd wake up and maybe not. But I don't want to leave it go.

Here's another, from an altogether different conversation.

- A: I mean the thing that makes it even more serious to me is the once or twice that I've mentioned it, not deliberately, but kind of slipping, to the family or anything like that, they try to make a joke of it, you know,
- B: Well no, see, here we take all of that seriously.
- A: And believe me it's no joke because as I say I just don't feel my life is worth anything at this point.
- B: Well we take that very seriously and when someone feels that way we try to do whatever we can to try to help them work out of that feeling. And we'd like to help you.
- A: Okay, fine then.

And another conversation.

- A: I want somebody to talk me out of it, I really do.
- B: Uh huh,
- A: But I can't call any of my friends or anybody, 'cause they're just going to say oh that's silly or that's stupid.
- B: Uh huh,
- A: I guess what you really want is someone to say, yes I understand why you want to commit suicide, I do believe you.

Recurrently in these conversations, persons say that when they use the line "I'm going to kill myself," others laugh. And that's not only by self-report, I have things from police reports of suicides where the police then ask persons around, "Well, did they ever threaten to kill themselves?" and those persons say "Well, he said he was going to kill himself but we just laughed it off." And the question I began to address was, what kind of relationship was there between the statement "I'm going to kill myself," and laughter. How is it that laughter would be done there?

Okay, let's hold that problem now and turn to another set of materials, via which we'll be trying to see what might be involved in it. I said about the opening lines of conversations that they seem to come in pairs. And that one person could choose the form of greeting he used. And that if one person

could choose their own they could choose the other's. Now it seems that there is a general class of such kinds of things, which I'm going to call 'ceremonials.' Other examples are, for example, "How are you feeling?" to which you return "Fine." If one person, then, uses a ceremonial, the other properly returns with a ceremonial.

Let's look at "How are you feeling?" It's routinely used between persons as either a greeting or greeting substitute. And it's used between persons who needn't have very much intimacy. But there is a smaller group of persons included in the circle of persons who routinely use this object. Call the larger group 'others' and the smaller, a special class of others. I won't at this point go into describing in detail what the properties are of this special class of others. Roughly, they are persons who, if one has a trouble, one turns to them for help. Without giving some of the ways we could talk about their relation to some 'one' - call that one Ego - like, for example, they may be kin, I want to approach it in a little different way. One of the ways they stand to each other is, if something happens to Ego, then, whoever it is that might be trying to discover why that thing happened, could refer for explanations to these others. So let's say they're 'causally bound' to the person who may have trouble.

And that could quite easily make it apparent how it is that if such a one is turned to for help, they have a feeling of obligation. They would have a feeling of obligation by virtue of the fact that if, let's say, a suicide occurs, then, even if they hadn't been approached for help in the first place, the question would be asked, well what was up with that family that she should have killed herself? Many things that might happen to Ego will be causally explained by virtue of something that the other did. And if others want to avoid that happening to them, then when some Ego turns to them, they feel like giving help. And of course the fact that these others walk around with all kinds of guilt turns in part on that causal relationship. Now this is among laymen; you don't have to have scientific theories to feel this causal involvement. Any layman would ask, if somebody says "My brother killed himself," "Well what's the matter with the family?" That's where you would look for the source.

Further, somebody who is not a part of this small group of others can become causally involved by virtue of the fact that Ego has asked them for help in some way and been turned down. If something then happens to Ego, it seems that even if you aren't one of that small group of others, you know about the fact that Ego was troubled, how come you didn't do anything? So knowledge of the trouble is often sufficient to bring one into causal involvement.

Now these people, the whole circle, are going around constantly saying "How are you feeling?" Properly, the return is "Fine." And this can be fairly dramatic. I've sat around in hospitals, and in a hospital persons who are, say, recuperating from serious diseases may be sitting in wheelchairs outside their room or in the common room, etc. A doctor walks by a person who looks like they're just about to go, and says "How are you feeling?" and they say

"Fine." Sometimes, however, a person may take that "How are you feeling?" and attempt to use it to present their troubles. And one sort of thing that happens in that case is that persons who listen when somebody begins to tell them their troubles, talk about themselves routinely as 'softhearted,' 'fools,' and that sort of thing. And when persons talk about themselves as softhearted with respect to others, it's probably something like this that's happened to them: They listen, then they find themselves 'involved.' Involved, however, without the basic properties that would initiate their relevant obligation, but not knowing what to do. And not knowing how to get out, either, because they 'know too much.'

On the other hand, the fact that there is that ceremonial relation between "How are you feeling?" and "Fine," may set up the following situation. Routinely, if you look at first interviews (and perhaps later interviews also) between psychiatrists and patients or possible patients, they begin like this:

- A: How are you feeling?
 B: It's a long story.
 A: That's alright, I have time.

What is this "It's a long story," and things like it, doing here? The person knows that the line "How are you feeling?" is a ceremonial line, and it's a breach of the proper forms to begin to launch right then and there into what it is that's bothering you. So what they then do is try to initiate another ceremony which would provide the basis for them talking. Typically this other ceremony is nicely done, in that what one does is offer a tentative refusal, like "It's a long story" or "It'll take hours," which turns it back to the other, referring to their circumstances; for example, their schedule. And it invites the other to then say that their schedule does not control your activities, so go ahead and talk.

Now, persons who are causally bound are obliged to give help when help is asked for. That means in part that they're in bad shape if they don't give help and trouble occurs. They're responsible for someone. Others hold them responsible, and they feel responsible. The question is, is there some way that they can go about refusing to give help without 'refusing,' in the same way that I've talked about refusing to give one's name without 'refusing'? One solution would be to find a way to set up the first remark as the first remark of a ceremonial. Because then the proper return is a ceremonial. While there are some ceremonials that come off strictly by virtue of the particular object that's used, there are others that are classes of ceremonials. Three common classes are jokes, games, performances. They all have the character that the next move – or some other given move in the sequence – is the end of it, and that's the end of the whole thing. You tell a joke, there's a laugh. A game has a set beginning and end. A play has the same character.

That is, I think it's the fact that we have ceremonial relationships between various objects and their proper returns, that sets up the sort of business we started off with: "I'm going to kill myself" followed by laughter. When

somebody says "I'm going to kill myself," if the other can cast it into one of the ceremonial forms, then that can end the interchange. One wouldn't have heard the 'cry for help.' One would have heard a joke. And one would have behaved properly with respect to a joke. And it appears that, alternatively to giving help, one gets cases of just those three common classes of ceremonials. Somebody laughs, or they say "Nice performance," or "Quit playing." And that would provide, then, for closing that thing off without, however, having been in the situation of refusing help in the sense of saying "no," or other such things. So we can see how that form provides for this thing to happen.

We can also see how awfully painful it must be for persons who are deeply troubled, and who constantly have people coming up to them and saying "How are you feeling?" when they can't come back. Now and then we see that very problem referred to in a joking form. Here is an instance.

- A: How are you feeling?
 B: You really want to know? ha ha
 A: ha ha

That is, someone, asked "How are you feeling?" jokingly proposes: What if I were to take this, not as a ceremonial form, but as a serious invitation. Then where would you be? And when people are asked "Well why don't you tell somebody?" they say "It'd be like a melodrama!" or "How can you tell them, they'll just laugh!"

I want to say another thing about ceremonials. Here is something very nice. Very lovely. Lovely in a way, but quite awful, also. When I was thinking about this stuff, I came across a very frequently recurring kind of statement. I'll just give one case; a long extract in which a widow is telling a psychiatrist of some problems she is having with her married daughter.

- A: Well, I'll tell you really what got into me last week. You know I was just talking about Thanksgiving being Thursday, and she had to → prepare, but she didn't invite me. And I go home and I start to think about it, and you know, when I spoke to you alone there a couple of minutes, I shouldn't have talked about that, because there was something else that was— I mean I touched on it, but there was something else.
 → I just had a feeling that I wasn't wanted anymore in their house. At least by her husband. Naturally she can't do anything about it. You know, I mean if she could, she would start fighting with him, and I wouldn't want to be a cause of that you know. But I thought that because, when I first went to the doctor that I went to, this internist I was going to last July, and she suggested that I go to a doctor in the Valley that she knew. She says well, it's a good idea because if you have to be hospitalized, or if you're depressed or anything, you could stay with me for a couple of days. She says I can't get down to see you

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that often, with the children. But I'll take care of you if you stay at my house.

So this is in July. And I wasn't able to go to him because I didn't have the money to go. I finally in October, had to go to the hospital. And I was there for three days and got these tests, which just made me awfully weak, and when I got out she called for me because she had my car while I was in the hospital. She called for me and didn't
→ ask if I wanted to stay over that night. I get out of the hospital and I have no— and I have to drive home, and I felt so weak by myself. I mean, she couldn't because otherwise she couldn't have gotten back.

I mean it was just one of those things. But the better thing would have been if I could have stayed up there at least overnight and when I felt
→ fresh, take the trip down. But she didn't even ask. And I know it isn't like Lila not to ask, when this was the original reason for my going up there. And I just know that she was warned that she better not bring me home.

And of course I started feeling sorry for myself. And then, when we were there Wednesday, she said something about preparing a
→ Thanksgiving dinner next Thursday and she didn't say anything about me. I figured, well, instead of the family, which we always had, the family together, it's not at my house, it's at her house. I mean during the time I was married I used to have seventeen or twenty for dinner because the whole family. And then she had taken over lately. So I thought well, maybe she's gonna have her son. And it's not up to me to expect her to have me. And then I thought well, maybe she figured Jay

that's the son

is going to be there, and we're not getting along right now, and she is leaving me out in the cold. And I just began to feel sorry for myself.

Etcetera. Then she goes on to say:

Well, it turned out that she said to me, when I said for Thanksgiving,
→ "Well don't I always have the family?" I said "Well you didn't ask me, how am I supposed to know what's going to be this year?" I mean generally I don't stand on ceremony, but conditions are, they've been different lately, you know.

A recurrent thing that I've seen throughout this stuff is persons talking about not feeling wanted anymore. The question is, how is that kind of feeling provided for in this society? And what would be interesting about it would be if we could see some way in which, quote, the structure of society, provided for the focussing of kinds of troubles. That's what I think we can see

with this,¹ if we just consider ceremonials a little further. We can note that there are classes of events which, between persons who are not terribly intimate, get initiated via ceremonials. "Would you like to come over for dinner tonight?" "Sure." That is, for these kinds of events to occur, there has to be an invitation, an offer of some sort. So that's one task of ceremonials – they do the job of providing for these events to take place.

They do another job, in a way. When persons are quite intimate, then one way they measure that is by virtue of the fact that invitations are no longer relevant. You can go over to their house without being invited. And people will say to each other, "Come over any time you want." Now with a husband and wife, one gets a version of this not feeling wanted, which goes something like this:

Wife: Why don't you ever ask me to go out to dinner anymore?
Husband: If you want to go out to dinner why don't you just say so?
Wife: I don't want to go out, I just want you to ask me.

What she's picking up here is the absence of ceremonials. And ceremonials have this double use. On the one hand they are properly used to provide for persons to do things – come over, go out to dinner, etc. – at some state of a relationship. At another state those things happen without them. And they're not absent. Indeed, it surely happens that somebody might say, "Well why don't you come over tonight?" and the other says "Why are you suddenly making a big deal of it?" But this double use then provides that when somebody has some doubts of some sort, they could focus right in there; that

¹ Throughout this volume many of Sacks' pronominal uses have been changed. Here, the operation is more or less innocuous. What is rendered as ". . . if *we* could see . . ." and "That's what I think *we* can see . . ." actually goes, ". . . if *we* could see . . ." and "That's what I think *you* can see," i.e., the second '*we*' is actually '*you*.' This change instances an editorial policy concerned with solving 'direct address' as a problem to a reader (e.g., "You ought by this time to be quite aware of the fact that . . ."). The policy takes as a resource and license Sacks' own use of the pronouns '*you*' and '*we*' in alternation (e.g., "We want to do [X and Y]. You want a method that generates this."), and his somewhat eccentric use of '*we*' in particular. For example, he will use '*we*' when he himself is the obvious referent (e.g., "Remember we said about the opening lines of conversations that they seem to come in pairs") or when the class is the obvious referent (e.g., introducing a "much more interesting thing that I doubt we've noticed"). For a more elaborated discussion, see Appendix A.

Of the range of changes made to the unedited transcripts, very few are marked and explicated. It might also be noted that the faithfulness of the unedited transcripts to the very words is in principle suspect. Such preservation of the very words as there is, is variable. That was not part of the enterprise – with the exception of the retranscribed Fall 1964 lectures, which were produced after Sacks' death. All of which is to say that the spontaneous nature of the lectures themselves, the variable fidelity of the transcripts, and the manifold changes made in the editing, result in a version of Harvey Sacks' work which from start to finish was in one sense or another not under Sacks' control.

May relate to how patients
in med encounters can be made
to feel relatively weak or powerful ←

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they see this thing is absent, and see the absence via the position of one who is not in the position of intimacy. And they don't know quite how to handle that matter. Because if they complain, they get "Why are you standing on ceremony?" and if they don't complain and don't get the invitations, they figure "Jeez, it's the case that I'm not wanted anymore."

Now I can't make any statement psychiatrically about why persons would pick up that double use of ceremonials and use it - or feel used by it - with their doubts. But in any event, one can see how it is that the fact that those things get used that way, provides a locus for troubles to get focused on.

Here is another, related, phenomenon.

A: Hope you have a good time.

B: Why?

The "Why?" here is quite apparently a paranoid return, and the whole conversation from which this comes makes it quite clear that the person who produces it is paranoid. I won't quote the whole conversation, I want to just focus on this interchange for reasons I'll make clear.

One of the things that's reported about persons who have to deal with paranoids is that they feel weak, experience a terrific lack of control when they encounter them. Now you could go about trying to examine that, perhaps by studying let's say the comparative dynamics of the persons, or various other things. But I think you can get an idea of how they would have that feeling of weakness by just examining an interchange like this. We're talking about ceremonials. The normal answer to this "Hope you have a good time" is "Thank you." And if one uses a line like "Hope you have a good time" one can expect to control the return of the other. In this case the line doesn't control the return of the other, and we can at least begin to see what it means to feel weak: Having an expectation of doing something as controlling, and finding out that it isn't that at all.

But furthermore, this "Why?"-return casts this "Hope you have a good time" into the character of an 'accountable act.' Normally, when one does an accountable act, one knows that one is doing an accountable act. This one comes off like this:

A: Hope you have a good time.

B: Why?

A: Why? Well, I just would like- you know, you ought to have a good time if you're going on a trip.

What seems to be involved here is, doing something that wasn't seen as accountable, having it turned into something that is accountable, one doesn't have an account. One offers, then, an account which one feels is quite feeble. It's feeble in a special sense: Not only is it inadequate, but it's inadequate by virtue of the fact that there's no reason to have had an account in the first

If patients are 'empowered' to ask ques. they previously wouldn't have thought of asking a doctor's intended closing "anything you're still concerned about?" could lead to

place. But when one delivers the account, one may only see that it's feeble, and get the sense that, "Jesus I'm behaving inadequately here."

And that character, that others can by virtue of their return cast your activity into something other than it was produced to be - or that they can by virtue of their return cast it into what you thought it was - is a very basic problem. I call it Job's Problem. Remember the Book of Job? Job is a rich man, doing marvelously. Then everything is destroyed. Job's position is that he didn't do anything wrong; this was not 'punishment.' And now his friends come, and they say to him, "Just confess to what you did wrong and everything will be fixed up." That is to say, the appearance of his pain and of his loss is sufficient indication for them that he did something wrong. And the problem as they see it is that he isn't about to confess to it. Job, then, is in this position of, "Well Christ, the world has changed for me. And maybe I *did* do something wrong." But he is not about to acknowledge that. But most people do. Most people, when they get into a situation, will say, "What did I do wrong?" or "What did I do to deserve this?" That is to say, treatments are 'proper treatments.' And one isn't in a position of saying right off, "You're treating me wrong." Rather, one finds, the treatment occurred and it must be about my action.