

The World of the Deaf

“When I Was Little I Thought Hearing People Were Weird. They Spoke Without Using Hand Signs”

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By Michael Kernan
Style; G1

“The problem isn’t with deaf people. It’s with the attitudes of some hearing people.” Roslyn Rosen, Gallaudet College

IN THE PAST few years, through sign language, TV programs and films, America has suddenly become aware of its deaf population and their difficulties. Hence, these Notes on Deafness:

“For me, the worst thing is not understanding my children,” said King Jordan, a psychologist who lost his hearing in a motorcycle accident 12 years ago when he was 21. “When I find my small son sobbing so hard he can’t talk, and he can’t be calmed down to explain what the matter is, that’s rough.”

There are other things. He can’t use the telephone any more: When he wants a pizza he can’t order it by phone and then go pick it up; he has to order it in person and wait. When his son has a minor problem with his dental braces, Jordan must drive him to the dentist’s office for an adjustment that could have been made at home.

“The deaf use cars much more than the hearing,” he observed. “That’s something I never anticipated.”

He misses music.

Then there are the little incidents that happen because a deaf person’s handicap is invisible. “I got to know what it’s like not to understand a waiter or clerk. Or riding a bus, when you ask where it’s going and the answer is a mumble. Once I got on and asked the driver how much the fare was, and when I couldn’t hear the answer I held out my hand and told him to just take what he needed. He threw me off the bus. So I waited for the next one and tried again.”

One of the most irritating things for a deaf person is being handed a note on which is written: "Can you read?" The classic response is to write: "No."

What is it like to discover you are deaf?

For Jordan, the first moments were a bad dream. He had been riding his cycle down 14th Street near Independence Avenue, wearing no helmet, when a car turned in front of him and he was flung into the windshield, fracturing his skull. He woke up in Bethesda Naval Hospital's intensive care unit. He had had a tracheostomy, which meant that in order to speak he had to press shut a hole in his throat. But he didn't know that yet.

"I opened my eyes and everything was green: the walls, the furniture, the people, all wearing green. They looked right through me, they weren't seeing me at all. There was no sound, and I couldn't speak. I wondered, Am I dead?"

"Then a friend came in and noticed that I was awake. He wrote me a note, and when they saw him doing that, they finally realized I was conscious."

For six months the doctors told him the deafness would go away. When at last he understood that it wouldn't, he was bitter because he felt they had known all along.

"I'm not a real member of the deaf community. I'm a deaf-hearing person.¹ My habits are those of a hearing person, my wife is hearing, and I talk normally. My hearing aid is hidden in my hair, and lots of people refuse to believe I'm deaf. I can hear loud noises with the aid, but no speech. Speech sounds like a Jonathan Winters version of the dialogue in an airport tower. What it helps me to do is modulate my voice."

For the born-deaf especially, voice modulation is a constant problem. Not able to hear how loud they are speaking, they must check with a hearing friend to learn if the volume is right. Sometimes if they wear an aid it develops a feedback hum, and they are not aware of it and must be told.

Not knowing what words sound like, they learn to speak through a laborious process of mimicking the mouth movements when the various letters and words are pronounced. For this reason, their speech may have an artificial sound, a simple fact some hearing people never seem to understand.

Though some resent the terms “hier-

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DEAF, From G1

The Many Conditions of Deafness

achy” and “subculture” there are in fact many different conditions of deafness, ranging from those who know how speech sounds, to those born deaf or deafened in infancy, from deaf members of understanding deaf families, to those born deaf in hearing families.

The deaf also tend, naturally, to go with other deaf people, attend their parties and join their clubs. It’s so much less hassle.

There is not, however, a deaf personality. Any more than there is a left-handed personality.

Like many born-deaf people, Roslyn Rosen lives in a deaf environment. Her parents are deaf, her brother, her husband, three children (though only 10 percent of deaf parents have deaf children²).

As a fulltime coordinator and director of Gallaudet’s task force on Public Law 94-142, a landmark Bill of Rights enacted in 1975 guaranteeing adequate free education for handicapped children, she also works among the deaf.

“When I was little,” she said, “I thought hearing people were weird. They spoke without using hand signs! The schools I went to in New York City had deaf programs, and the biggest problem I had in school was getting there, through the traffic. I didn’t go to an integrated school (deaf and hearing students together) until the graduate level.”

Since getting her BA and MA at Gallaudet, she has nearly completed work on her PhD in education administration at Catholic University.

The law she is concerned with tackles a situation whose enormity few hearing people fully realize. For generations many school systems have gone in for “mainstreaming,” educating deaf children along with the others as though the problem didn’t exist. Lipreading was emphasized, and often parents were

discouraged from having their deaf children learn sign language. This is like discouraging blind children from learning Braille.

Even the most skilled lipreaders catch only about 30 percent of what is said. (Look in a mirror and see if you can tell the difference between “chew,” “Jew,” “shoe,” “choose,” “sure” and “j’you.”)

All too often, faced with such unfair competition, deaf children lose all self-confidence. The deaf are apt to be bitter on the subject. Leo M. Jacobs, in “A Deaf Adult Speaks Out,” describes the “substandard language ability”³ of many a deaf adult:

“He has trouble distinguishing between active and passive voices ... He has appalling difficulties with the use of articles ... His level of reading is way below that of the average hearing adult.”

Subtleties of language, “idioms, allegories, metaphors, similes, euphemisms, ironies and other figures of speech” and even word humor may be lost to such people because of a lack of input information and background. Isolated from their peers at school, unable to chatter with them about last night’s TV shows, they may retreat into a life far too limited for their capabilities.

Intelligence, Jacobs emphasizes, has absolutely no correlation with speech and speechreading competence.

English is an idiom-rich language. Consider these sentences: “I told Mary that after I finished running off some copies, I was going to run off with her husband. She told me if I would stop running off at the mouth so, she might believe me. We almost had a run-in about it, but then she noticed she had a run in her stocking and ran off to change. Then I ran into Tom and he told me there would be a runoff election for his class. He ran on and on about it...”

How is a deaf person, taught to recognize the word “run,” going to cope with that?

Scene in the open classroom at Kendall Demonstration Elementary School:

There are three teachers, all young women, and 11 pupils ages 7 to 9. Most of them wear hearing aids and battery packs fixed to their chests on little halters.

Snack time is nearly over. Three boys seem to be swimming across the rug in a fiercely noisy race, but then they throw imaginary grenades and you realize they were playing commando. They whoop with laughter. A teacher blinks the lights: signal for end of snack time.

Settling down, more or less, into three study areas, they still bounce around constantly. One boy talks to the visitor in sign language, but when he learns the visitor is a hearing person and knows no signs, he runs off.

“Karl and Michael, when you finish your problems you can play the car game.” The teacher signs as she speaks, a nearly universal habit on the Gallaudet campus. The boys race through a set of sums, rush off to play a spin-the-dial game, actually an arithmetic tool. “Brrrm! Brrrm!” They move the little cars over the rug.

In another area, a teacher repeats words for a girl pupil with endless patience: “Mouth. Finger. Eye. Face ...

The walls are covered with signs: “Friends Do Not Stick Out Tongues.” “Again, Please.” “Again, Slower Please.” One drawing shows an impressionistic skeleton with brain, stomach, lungs, heart labeled. It was done by David, who is ahead of the others in vocabulary and verbal concepts.

On a table: a box of hearing aid batteries.

Attached to the Gallaudet campus is the Model Secondary School for the Deaf, the country’s first such federally funded school. Eventually 600 boarding students from a five-state area will use its spectacular modern facilities.

“We cover a wide range of ages,” said Sue Ellis, public relations director for Gallaudet’s precollege programs. “If we can reach children as soon as they are known to have a hearing problem, we can do much more with them.”

Several Gallaudet teachers commented on the tragic loss of time caused by doctors with a wait-and-see attitude or a reluctance to give hearing tests to preschoolers. MSSD audiologist Vern Larson urges that deaf children be fitted for hearing aids before they’re a year old (most deaf people have some residual hearing) to get them started coping with sounds as soon as possible.

For years, hearing aids were considered a stigma, much as sign language was, and many deaf people complained about the lack of technical development. Since hearing loss is not simply a matter of turned-down volume, but may distort or muffle sounds within one range of decibels or another, aids cannot be custom-designed like eyeglasses.

Only in the last two or three years have immense strides been made with small aids worn on the ear. They have become more flexible, trouble-free, powerful.

“It’s true,” said audiologist Gretchen Syfert, “many dealers and audiologists have little exposure to deaf individuals. But with the new electronics and federal regulations, things have improved tremendously. We’ve noticed a spectacular increase in hearing aids among the Gallaudet students.”

In a new surgical technique developed in Paris by Dr. Claude-Henri Chouard, eight electrodes are planted in the auditory nerves and connected to a receiver under the skin near the ear. With a small transmitter and eyeglass antenna, many deaf can hear—after a fashion. He has performed the operation for a few dozen patients. The main problem is that the equipment weighs five pounds and costs \$10,000.

As in any militantly self-aware minority, controversy comes with the territory. One classic dispute concerns oral vs. manual skills, lipreading vs. hand signals. In the past, parents often were sold the idea that signing would mark out their child and that therefore they must rely wholly on lipreading.

Today, the tendency is to see lipreading rather as one of many techniques. The watchword at Gallaudet is “Total Communication,” an eclectic use of all available means of expression.

One interesting development that promises to bring the two schools closer together is cued speech, developed 12 years ago at Gallaudet, where so much has been done for and by the deaf ever since 1817.⁴ (Curiously, Gallaudet was cool to the technique at first, and it made its impact in Europe.)

In cued speech, the hearing person augments the lipreading with 12 hand signs that clarify or break down ambiguous sounds. The value of this method for hearing parent or teacher and deaf child has already been proved in the four dozen schools where it is used so far.

What can deaf people do about television, that common denominator of American social life? There is some captioned TV, but very little. There are closed-circuit viewing boxes that run captions in coordination with TV, but they only run a half-hour a day, at midnight. Captioned films are available from some public libraries, shown on loaned projectors. In the cities there are subtitled foreign films.

Compare this with the average American's six-hours-a-day TV habit.

Hearing loss is a relative term, and many a person has complained of it only to be told by the doctor (after tests involving aurally clean beeps but not the hodgepodge of everyday sounds) that the problem is negligible. This is of little comfort to the patient.

Last year Richard Carmen, in "Our Endangered Hearing," wrote that as of 1977, 15 percent of our population has significant hearing loss, including 19 million industrial workers and 5 million people under 18.

Carmen blames environmental noise: power tools, power mowers,

See DEAF G7, Col. 1

DEAF, From G6

'The Worst Thing Is Not Understanding My Children'

chain saws, jackhammers, ambulances –

Safe time limits on noise exposure go like this: 90 decibels, eight hours; 100 decibels, two hours; 110 decibels, 30 minutes. Sounds over 115 decibels are considered too loud for any exposure. Constant exposure also may cause cumulative damage to the delicate microscopic hair cells that transmit vibrations to the nerve endings.

Compare: normal conversation runs about 60 decibels; a jackhammer is 90 to 110 decibels; live rock bands, 90 to 130 decibels; a jet airline at takeoff, up to 140 decibels; a cannon going off, 190 decibels.

By the year 2000, Carmen predicts, almost no one over 10 will have normal hearing unless something is done about it.

Some hazards of Deafness, by Roy Holcomb (in "A Deaf Adult Speaks out"):

- "You start your car but don't feel the vibrations because the motor is running so smoothly. You push the starter again and step on the gas fully. The car makes so much noise that it sounds like a jet taking off. Bypassers give you the 'Stupid' look..."
 - "A stranger asks you for a match, directions or something behind your back or when he does not have your attention. You, of course, do not know it and say nothing. The stranger then gives you a dirty look when you do see his face and you wonder why..."
 - "While cleaning the house your vacuum sweeper's cord is unintentionally pulled out. You continue to use the sweeper for several minutes before you realize that it is off. Boy, do you feel dumb!"
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About sign language for starters, there is not one sign language, but several. Each has its fierce defenders.

For another thing, the most widely used, American Sign Language (ASL or Ameslan), is not at all like English but is an entirely separate language, with its own grammar, structure, idioms and regional dialects. It has no tenses, no articles. There is no verb "to be." There are only three hand shapes for all the pronouns. And the word order is radically different from English. If anything, it is more like Chinese.

An example by Louie Fant, formerly of Gallaudet and the National Theatre of the Deaf:

The English sentence, "It was a thrill to watch the sunrise this morning," becomes in ASL, "Sunrise, I look at, thrill."

It is very much a spatial language. Two signs may be given simultaneously, nouns can be repeated to show plurality and verbs repeated to show continuing action. It is also a beautiful language, for it uses the whole body to achieve marvelous subtleties of expression.

The only trouble is, it's not English. It's a foreign language – after Spanish and Italian the most common foreign language in the United States. Just as a Hispanic child living in this country needs to learn English as well as Spanish, a deaf child needs to learn English along with ASL. So we have Signed English, which uses the standard ASL signs and fingerspelling but follows English syntax and word order.

But Signed English also has its grammar problems. So several new systems have arisen to supplement it with word endings, affixes, verb tenses and other extra signs. This is called Manual English, essentially a schoolroom tool, and it comes in several rival forms. The prime issue seems to be how heavily one should rely on the technique of breaking words into components, forget, car-pet and so on.

“For a long time ASL was put down as bad English,” said Dr. Gerilee Gustason, a Gallaudet professor who was one of the first deaf women to earn a doctorate in this country and who has developed a Manual English version. “But then it began to be seen as a different language. People are beginning to be proud of it, and we actually are getting some reaction against Signed English now. Our job is to get the two together again.

“By 1973 there were 80 American colleges giving sign language for language credit. Now there are maybe three times as many, we don't know. Last year 10,000 people took signing classes in the Washington area.”

As with any language, new signs evolve from local usage and gradually spread. Many are variants on so-called old signs such as “family,” expressed by making a bowl of both hands. Preceded by “t,” it becomes “team.” With “o” it is “organization.”

“There are some regional differences,” Gustason noted. “Kids invent their own name signs. And if you're a teacher you'd better invent yours before they do it for you.”

Though the concept of Total Communication is fairly standard today, some educators still insist on lipreading alone, she said, and there is still some resistance where it hurts. In the 1976 election campaign, both presidential candidates agreed to have their televised speeches manually signed, “but the TV networks wouldn't do it.”

“It's getting better, though,” she added. “The National Theatre of the Deaf is a big help in removing the stigma. Signs are coming out of the closet.”

[End article]

GRAPHICS: Picture 1, At Gallaudet College teacher Chris Colbert and Keith Porter, above, Stefan Bergan use hand sings, lipreading and cued speech to communicate and practice lessons. Photos by Harry Naltchayan – The Washington Post; pictures 2-5, no caption; Picture 6, no caption; Photo by Harry Naltchayan – The Washington Post

Footnote 1 (StudentUnityMovement.org): “deaf-hearing” read: “deaf [pause] hearing,” meaning “deafened hearing person.” See: [Benderly \(1980\)](#), pages [13 and 271](#).

Footnote 2 (StudentUnityMovement.org): The author should have written: only 10 percent of deaf children are born to Deaf parents.

Footnote 3 (StudentUnityMovement.org): Jacobs was referring specifically to [difficulties in the English language](#) and did not believe that Deaf people had diminished general language skills. See: [Jacobs \(1980\)](#).

Footnote 4 (StudentUnityMovement.org): Kendall School, on the Gallaudet campus, was first opened in 1857 (as one of the first racially integrated schools south of the Mason-Dixon Line). The American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut was opened in 1817. Kendall School was co-founded by Edward Miner Gallaudet, his mother Sophia Fowler Gallaudet and former United States Postmaster General Amos Kendall. ASD was co-founded by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, Laurent Clerc and Mason Cogswell.

LINK TO DOWNLOAD SCAN OF MICROFILMED VERSION:

http://studentunitymovement.org/ikj_quote_scanned_version.pdf