

Growing Up Hearing in a Deaf Family

I have a clear memory of myself at the age of 4, lying in bed, paralyzed with fear. Like many children of that age, I was imagining little monsters under the bed that were most certainly intent on chewing off my feet if I dared to step down. At such moments, most children would cry out, "Mommy, Daddy, come in here, I need you!" But for me, being the only hearing person in a house full of deaf people, a scream would be rather pointless. By this age, I knew that my deaf parents would not respond to sounds coming out of me. Ours was a visual world, and in order to get my parents' attention I needed to get within their line of sight and wave my hands around or, if they were looking away, I would approach and gently touch their bodies to signal my presence. Sometimes causing a vibration would work, if I produced just the right level of stomping on just the right flooring. In this bedtime setting, I would usually comfort myself, but if my imagination cast the monsters as particularly vicious, I would hold my breath, take the big leap off my bed, and run into my parents' room and crawl into their bed for safety and comfort.

Looking back on such episodes, I don't recall feeling neglected, nor did I think anything was missing. Instead, there was a certain sense of bravery being cultivated in me. This wasn't the only context in which I felt responsible and competent. My deaf parents would often ask me to interpret for them. When I was about 4 years old, my parents had a telephone installed in our home. I felt proud and responsible when I could help them communicate with hearing people. Having made sure that I had consistent exposure to spoken language through hearing relatives, neighbors, and even the television, my parents still remained careful not to put me in inappropriate interpreting situations. They always supported me and helped me understand the "big words" that were being transmitted through me. Once, when I was about 7, an insurance agent came to our home. He smiled and asked, "Where is your older sister, the one who helped your father communicate with me on the telephone?" My school reports emphasized how advanced my language skills were, yet I don't think my teachers ever realized I was finger-spelling words underneath my desk during spelling tests. This tactile rendering of the spoken word was intuitive for me, resulting in a perfect test score every time!

While growing up, I didn't fully identify with the "outside hearing world." Nevertheless, I knew that I was not deaf. I felt between two worlds. I had an insider's knowledge about the Deaf community and their ways of being. I would never make silly comments such as "Can deaf people drive?" or "Your house must be so quiet!" or "It must be weird to have deaf parents!" I always cringed when hearing people, upon finding out that I was the only hearing member of my family, would pronounce me "lucky," implying that the rest of my family was unfortunate. Often, when I was out shopping with my mother, after she had paid for the goods, the hearing cashier would

hand the change to me with a special look that indicated she thought I was generously taking this poor, afflicted lady out for a daily outing, or a look indicating how remarkable I was to endure the hardship of having such a parent.

What outsiders couldn't see was that my parents enjoyed life to the fullest. They were educated, held fine jobs, and provided for us all. We were neither isolated nor suffering. We were participants in a vibrant sign language—using community with its own social, political, and educational networks. Yet few outsiders knew the inner workings of our "Deaf-World." Some even seemed to hold the view that being deaf was equivalent to having an intellectual impairment. What they couldn't accept was that I might even feel a desire to be deaf! That I didn't feel "lucky to be hearing." That I even fantasized that I would grow up to be deaf. In fact, without my parents' knowledge, I investigated whether I could enroll as a student at the deaf school. (I was told the state wouldn't allow it.)

I now understand my bilingual/bicultural identity and appreciate being part of both deaf and hearing worlds. I can also see how some of my adult behaviors are the result of my upbringing in a deaf, visually oriented family. Even though I can hear, I require face-to-face contact for any conversation; visual engagement is essential for signers and simply carries over to my interactions with hearing people. I am a visual communicator; I use abundant facial expression and gesture when communicating in English. I have heightened sensitivity in my peripheral vision and a strong sense of the physical relationship between my body and my environment. I am intuitive about whether people around me understand things, and I am a good facilitator when communication breaks down.

I am empowered by my Deaf identity and can now better explain to others why my hearing identity does not always fit with the hearing world's template of being hearing. I closely identify with other hearing children of deaf parents. We share an indelible bond. I participate in conferences of the international organization for Children of Deaf Adults (CODA). There, I celebrate my dual identity. These are hearing people to whom I never have to explain what it was like; they understand the real reason I feel lucky to have been the only hearing member of my family. Through CODA, future generations of hearing children will grow up feeling lucky, as I do, and proud of their deaf parents, instead of feeling the shame projected onto them by hearing people who do not recognize that difference does not have to be thought of as a loss. Difference enhanced my life.

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FURTHER READING: J. L. Singleton and M. D. Tittle, "Deaf Parents and Their Hearing Children," *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 5, no. 3 (2000), pp. 221–36. • Children of Deaf Adults International, <http://www.coda-international.org>