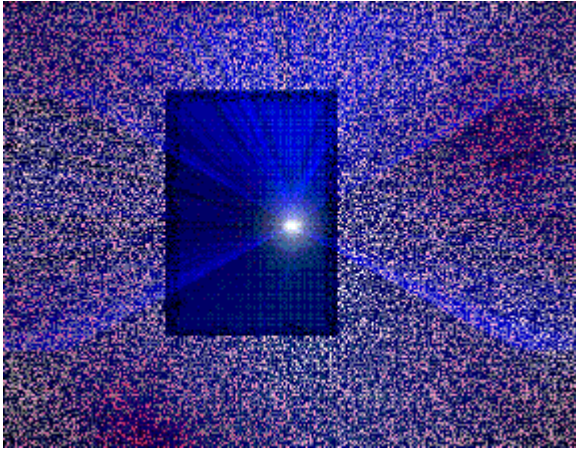


LISTENING IN ON DEAF CULTURE



Ideally, this article would be written by a Deaf person. It seems only logical to me that a member of any culture is better than an outsider at understanding and explaining the complexities of that culture. So in a sense, I write this article for other outsiders--hearing people who may never have realized that there is such a thing as Deaf Culture. To

keep this essay coherent, I have used "deaf" to refer to a physical characteristic and "Deaf" to refer to cultural identity.

STANDARDS Editorial Note: The section headings in this article link to related sites on Deaf culture.

by Carla A. Halpern

In mainstream American society, we tend to approach deafness as a defect. Helen Keller is alleged to have said, "Blindness cuts people off from things; deafness cuts people off from people." This seems a very accurate description of what Keller's world must have been. We as hearing people tend to pity deaf people, or, if they "succeed" in the hearing world, admire them for overcoming a severe handicap. We tend to look at signing as an inferior substitute for "real" communication (let alone language!). We assume that all deaf people will try to lip-read and we applaud deaf people, such as Marlee Matlin, who use their voices to show us how far they have come from the grips of their disability. Finally, when we hear about devices such as the cochlear implant, we joyously hail them as hopeful signs that we can some day eradicate deafness altogether.

Given this climate, many hearing people are surprised, as I was at first, to learn of the existence of Deaf culture. Imagine -- deafness not as a defect, but as a source of connection! Imagine yourself deaf, growing up with a beautiful language, visual literature, humor, and theater. Imagine taking pride in your identity without any desire to become a member of the majority culture. For many deaf people, their community is a comforting relief from the isolation and condescension of the hearing world. But the Deaf community is far more than a "support group" for people who share a physical characteristic.

Members of the Deaf community may have hearing levels that range from profoundly deaf to slightly hard-of-hearing. But no members of the Deaf community are "hearing impaired." Inside this community, deaf people become Deaf, proudly capitalizing their culture. Hearing people suddenly find that they are handicapped: "Deaf-impaired."

Quite a different perspective, isn't it?

My own introduction to Deaf culture grew out of graduate studies in linguistics. I had always been curious about sign language, but had no idea that it would lead me into a completely new world--into a culture which has survived profound oppression, discrimination, and tragedy. The language and history I learned were colorful but painful at times: I learned of the turn-of-the-century Milan conference, at which all kinds of sign language were targeted for annihilation--and the resulting case histories of deaf children denied education; growing up illiterate--or without any real language at all. In addition, I learned of the relentless efforts to make deaf children "normal", whatever the cost.

In other words, I learned of a culture which has survived through the mainstream world's complete denial of its existence.



[Not a Disability](#)

From a deafness-as-defect mindset, many well-meaning hearing doctors, audiologists, and teachers work passionately to make deaf children speak; to make these children "un-deaf." They try hearing aids, lip-reading, speech coaches, and surgical implants. In the meantime, many deaf children grow out of the crucial language acquisition phase. They become disabled by people who are anxious to make them "normal." Their lack of language, not of hearing, becomes their most severe handicap.

While I support any method that works to give a child a richer life, I think a system which focuses on abilities rather than deficiencies is far more valuable. Deaf people have taught me that a lack of hearing need not be disabling. In fact, it need not be considered a "lack" at all. As a hearing ally, therefore, I feel I have an obligation to follow the suggestions of deaf adults and work for both the use of American Sign Language and a positive portrayal of Deaf culture in the classroom. Deaf children are entitled to know that they are heirs to an amazing culture, not a pitiful defect.

In order to follow through on that obligation, one of the best things I feel I can do is try to educate other hearing people about the realities of American Sign Language and Deaf culture. Language is one of the most critical aspects of most cultures, and one which sets deafness

aside from other "defects", such as blindness, physical disability, or illness. And no, sign language is not "universal." Nor does it always correspond to the spoken language in the same country. For example, American Sign Language (ASL) is native to the United States and Canada. Deaf Canadians might use English, French, or both as a written language. But deaf people in Great Britain, while they may write in English, use a completely different sign language.

American Sign Language

ASL is essentially the offspring of indigenous "new world" sign languages and French Sign Language (La Langue Signe Francaise, or LSF). LSF merged with the indigenous sign languages when it was brought to the United States in 1817 by Laurent Clerc, a Deaf Frenchman who opened the first American school for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut. One of these native sign languages which fed into the development of ASL arose in Martha's Vineyard in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. The Vineyard had a large genetically deaf population but no Deaf culture as such--hearing and deaf people both used the sign language as a primary means of communication among themselves.

Grammatically, ASL is far removed from English or even British Sign Language (BSL). One common misconception is that ASL is simply "silent English"--a means of representing English with the hands. Codes such as this, (e.g., Signed English) do exist, but they are rough and unwieldy hybrids of English grammar and ASL hand positions (known as "handshapes"), rather than languages in their own right. ASL has a grammatical structure suited to a visual medium; there is no direct correlation between English words and ASL signs.

The one spoken language which has the closest grammatical similarity to ASL is Navaho, because both languages use a similar pronunciation system. Rather than the standard "he", "she", "it", and "they" of English, Navaho and ASL use a much wider array of pronouns that match the person or object they refer back to. These are known as "classifiers." For example, ASL has no discrete sign for "it" but instead uses any of a series of classifier signs which vary with the category, size, and shape of the object referred to. In this way, ASL pronouns carry much more information than do English pronouns.

ASL also avoids one of the biggest scourges of English: the "pronoun problem"-- the tendency of English speakers to use "he" as a generic singular pronoun representing any unknown person, male or female. However, once a person is mentioned in an ASL conversation, she is

given a location in space which represents her for the remainder of the conversation (As you can see, my attempt to describe this difference butts right up against the pronoun problem!). Different ways of pointing to this location can indicate the number of people who occupy it, and their role in the conversation (subject or object, for example) but not their sex.

Deaf Culture

Because about 90% of Deaf people are born to hearing parents, they absorb their culture from their peers, not their families. Most Deaf children who attend residential schools for the deaf pick up ASL from their classmates (usually from the few classmates who are born to Deaf parents). Because of this source of cultural identity, one of the first questions Deaf people ask upon meeting each other is where they went to school and who their teachers were. In this way, the Deaf community can become very close-knit, as each member becomes familiar with residential schools in various regions of the country.

Deaf culture also places a great deal of emphasis on physical contact. Hugging is far more common than shaking hands, especially when parting. Deaf good-byes are unusually drawn out and even in passing not taking time to chat for a few minutes is considered rude. The Deaf community easily becomes a second family to many people whose own families are hearing.

Deaf churches also play a similar extended family role in the community, even for non-religious or non-Christian people. Often, Sunday is the only time that a person might have to escape from the working world (perhaps in an office with hearing people, where the language barrier is severe) and have actual conversations and socialize.

Like many minority groups, the Deaf community has its own stereotypes of the dominant culture. Often in Deaf theater and "oral" tradition, hearing people are portrayed as rigid and unemotional. Much of this perception comes from our use of English. Information in English is conveyed almost completely orally; by contrast, ASL builds grammar into facial expressions and body movement. Hearing people certainly do use some visual cues when communicating, but these are known as "body language", as extra-linguistic nuances rather than as grammatical features. As a result, when compared to Deaf people, hearing people can come off as expressionless and unfeeling. Hearing people may find themselves the butt of Deaf wordplay; if they are a bit slow on the uptake, they may be described as "hearing-and-dumb."

Deaf culture is also harsh on "traitors"--those who are deaf, but not

Deaf. The sign used to denote such a person is the sign for "hearing", only made in front of the forehead. This epithet is emphatically not a compliment. It indicates that the individual represented is "hearing-in-the-head"; that she thinks of herself as a hearing person. This Uncle Tom analog is exactly the same kind of person that mainstream culture tends to applaud for "getting beyond her disability." But in the Deaf community, someone who rejects her Deaf identity is leaving behind a rich culture, not a disability. For these reasons, many members of the Deaf community look with disfavor on deaf people who try to assimilate.

Another group of people who earn comment, both favorable and unfavorable, in the Deaf community, are alphabet card vendors. You've seen these people at airports and malls, handing out plastic cards printed with the manual alphabet, along with a note that says they are deaf, asking for a donation. In one sense, these vendors are seen as beggars--as people who discredit the Deaf community by making their deafness pitiful. But alphabet card vendors are also seen by some as crafty equalizers who play on the guilt of hearing people to bring their money into the Deaf community. For my part, I tend to view alphabet card vendors the first way and never give them money. Additionally, it is worth noting that some of these vendors are simply scheming hearing people--if you watch them carefully, you can see them responding to auditory cues. In the Deaf community, for a hearing person to intentionally try to "pass" is not only dishonest, it is phenomenally rude.



[Deaf Rights](#)

The Deaf civil rights movement is the political arm of the Deaf community. Throughout history American deaf people have been denied the right to vote, to marry, and to raise children. The Deaf civil rights movement is dedicated to fighting this kind of discrimination and raising awareness of Deaf history and Deaf culture within the Deaf community.

Although the denial of rights to deaf people smacks of discrimination, Deaf parents even today have their children taken away under the logic that a lack of hearing makes them "unfit" parents. Nothing backs up this "logic." Deaf parents of hearing children often raise kids who become sign language interpreters; whose bilingual background is a social and professional asset. And Deaf parents of deaf children tend to raise the leaders of the Deaf community, as "Deaf of Deaf" are often the first to learn language, the most adept at ASL and English, and the ones who teach ASL to their peers at residential schools. These residential schools are often a social joy for the deaf children who experience their first introduction to ASL (and sometimes language itself) from their peers and form social networks that may

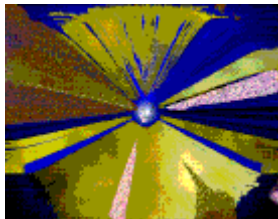
last a lifetime. This is one of the major reasons that parents send their children to residential schools rather than "mainstreaming" them in hearing classrooms (where they are often directed to "special education" instead).

Unfortunately, residential schools for the deaf are often sorely deficient in actual education. The teachers rarely use ASL or teach Deaf history and in most places are not required to. The administrations are often made up of hearing people who are still bent on assimilating the students. The focus is on "word attack" and speech skills, rather than science, math, history, and literacy in English. As a result, many deaf students in this country graduate from both residential and mainstreamed programs with a third-grade reading level and little chance of going to college or ever holding more than a minimum-wage job. Therefore, another major goal of the Deaf civil rights movement is parity in education--development of an educational system where deaf children can become both Deaf and literate.

Hearing people can have a place in the Deaf community. Each minority group tends to welcome genuine allies and the Deaf community is no exception. But it is important for us "hearies" to remember our role as allies. We join the community to show our support, not to lead. We can help educate other hearing people, but we are not missionaries to bring Deaf people into the mainstream. Deaf people are the appropriate leaders of their own civil rights movement and teachers of their children. Our role is not to give Deaf people a voice; it is to make sure that the voice already present is heard. And we can do that. We can teach other hearing people to listen.

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