Shattering the Hearing Wall

She leant lazily across the picnic hamper and reached for my hearing aid in my open-palmed hand. I jerked away from her, batting her hand away from mine. The glare of the summer sun blinded me. I struck empty air. Her tendril-fingers seized the beige seashell curve of my hearing aid and she lifted the cargo of sound towards her eyes. She peered at the empty battery-cage before flicking it open and shut as if it was a cigarette lighter, as if she could spark hearing-life into this trick of plastic and metal that held no meaning outside of my ear. I stared at her. A band of horror tightened around my throat, strangling my shout: 'Don't do that!' I clenched my fist around the new battery that I had been about to insert into my hearing aid and imagined it speeding like a bullet towards her heart.

This dream arrived as I researched my anthology of memoir-style essays on deafness, The Art of Being. I had already been reflecting and writing for several years about my relationship with my deaf-self and the impact of my deafness on my life, but I remained uneasy about writing about my deaf-life. I’ve lived all my adult life entirely in the hearing world, and so recasting myself as a deaf woman with something pressing to say about deaf people’s lives felt disturbing. The urgency to tell my story and my anxiety to contest certain assumptions about deafness were real, but I was hampered by diffidence. The dream felt potent, as if my deaf-self was asserting itself, challenging my hearing persona.

I was the sole deaf child in a family of five muddling along in a weatherboard war commission house at The Grange in Brisbane during the nineteen fifties and nineteen sixties. My father’s resume included being in the army during World War Two, an official for the boxing events at the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games and a bookie with a gift for telling stories. My mother had spent her childhood on a cherry orchard in Young, worked as a nurse in wartime Sydney and married my father in Townsville after a whirlwind romance on Magnetic Island before setting up home in Brisbane. My older sister wore her dark hair in thick Annie-Oakley style plaits and my brother took me on a hike along the Kedron Brook one summer morning before lunchtime. My parents did not know of any deaf relatives in their families, and my sister and brother did not have any friends with deaf siblings. There was just me, the little deaf girl.

Most children are curious about where they come from. Such curiosity marks their first foray into sexual development and sense of identity. I don’t remember expressing such curiosity. Instead, I was diverted by my mother’s story of her discovery that I was deaf. The way my mother tells the story, it is as if I had two births with the date of the diagnosis of my deafness marking my real arrival, over-riding the false start of my physical birth three years earlier. Once my mother realized that I was deaf, she was able to get on with it, the ‘it’ being to defy the inevitability of a constrained life for her deaf child. My mother came out swinging; by hook or by crook, her deaf daughter was going to learn to speak and to be educated and to take her place in the hearing world and to live a normal life and that was that. She found out about the Commonwealth Acoustics Laboratory (now known as Australian Hearing Services) where, after I completed a battery of auditory tests, I was fitted with a hearing aid. This was a small metal box, to be worn in a harness around my body, with a long looping plastic cord connected to a beige ear-mould. An instrument for piercing silence, it absorbed and conveyed sounds, with those sounds eventually separating themselves out into patterns of words and finally into strings of sentences.

Without my hearing aid, if I am concentrating, and if the sounds are made loudly, I am aware of the sounds at the deeper end of the scale. Sometimes, it’s not so much that I can hear them; it’s more that I know that those sounds are happening. My aural memory of the deep-register sounds helps me to “hear” them, much like the recollection of any tune replays itself in your imagination. With and without my hearing aids, if I am not watching the source of those sounds – for example, if the sounds are taking place in another room or even just behind me – I am not immediately able to distinguish whether the sounds are conversational or musical or happy or angry. I can only discriminate once I’ve established the rhythm of the sounds; if the rhythm is at a tearing, jagged pace with an exaggerated rise and fall in the volume, I might reasonably assume that angry words are being had. I
I was a pupil in an oral-deaf education program for five years until the end of 1962. During those years, I was variously coaxed, dragooned and persuaded into the world of hearing. I was introduced to a world of bubbles, balloons and fingers placed on lips to learn the shape, taste and feel of sounds, their push and pull of air through tongue and lips. By these mechanics, I gained entry to the portal of spoken, rather than signed, speech.

When I was eight years old, my parents moved me from the Gladstone Road School for the Deaf in Dutton Park to All Hallows, an inner-city girls’ school, for the start of Grade Three. I did not know, of course, that I was also leaving my world of deaf friends to begin a new life immersed in the hearing world. I had no way of understanding that this act of transferring me from one school to another was a profound statement of my parents’ hopes for me. They wanted me to have a life in which I would enjoy all the advantages and opportunities routinely available to hearing people. Like so many parents before them, ‘they had to find answers that might not, for all they knew, exist . . . How far would I be able to lead a ‘normal’ life? . . . How would I earn a living? You can imagine what forebodings weighed on them. They could not know that things might work out better than they feared’ (Wright, 22).

Now, forty-four years later, I have been reflecting on the impact of that long-ago decision made on my behalf by my parents. They made the right decision for me. The quality of my life reflects the rightness of their decision. I have enjoyed a satisfying career in social work and public policy embedded in a life of love and friendships. This does not mean that I believe that my parents’ decision to remove me from one world to another would necessarily be the right decision for another deaf child. I am not a zealot for the cause of oralism despite its obvious benefits. I am, however, stirred by the Gemini-like duality within me, the deaf girl who is twin to the hearing persona I show to the world, to tell my story of deafness as precisely as I can. Before I can do this, I have to find that story because it is not as apparent to me as might be expected.

In an early published memoir-essay about my deaf girlhood, I Hear with My Eyes (in Schulz), I wrote about my mother’s persistence in making sure that I learnt to speak rather than sign, the assumed communication strategy for most deaf people back in the 1950s. I crafted a selection of anecdotes, ranging in tone, I hoped, from sad to tender to laugh­out­loud funny. I speculated on the meaning of certain incidents in defining who I am and the successes I have enjoyed as a deaf woman in a hearing world. When I wrote this essay, I searched for what I wanted to say. I thought, by the end of it, that I’d said everything that I wanted to say. I was ready to move on, to write about other things. However, I was delayed by readers’ responses to that essay and to subsequent public speaking engagements.

Some people who read my essay told me that they liked its fresh, direct approach. Others said that they were moved by it. Friends were curious and fascinated to get the inside story of my life as a deaf person as it has not been a topic of conversation or inquiry among us. They felt that they’d learnt something about what it means to be deaf. Many responses to my essay and public presentations had relief and surprise as their emotional core. Parents have cried on hearing me talk about the fullness of my life and seem to regard me as having given them permission to hope for their own deaf children. Educators have invited me to speak at parent education evenings because ‘to have an adult who has a hearing impairment and who has developed great spoken language and is able to communicate in the community at large – that would be a great encouragement and inspiration for our families’ (Email, April 2007).

I became uncomfortable about these responses because I was not sure that I had been as honest or direct as I could have been. What lessons on being deaf have people absorbed by reading my essay and listening to my presentations? I did not set out to be duplicitous, but I may have embraced the writer’s aim for the neatly curved narrative arc at the cost of the flinty self-regarding eye and the uncertain conclusion.
Let me start again. I was born deaf at a time, in the mid 1950s, when people still spoke of the ‘deaf-mute’ or the ‘deaf and dumb.’ I belonged to a category of children who attracted the gaze of the curious, the kind, and the cruel with mixed results. We were bombarded with questions we could either not hear and so could not answer, or that made us feel we were objects for exploration. We were the patronized beneficiaries of charitable picnics organized for ‘the disadvantaged and the handicapped.’ Occasionally, we were the subject of taunts, with words such as ‘spastic’ being speared towards us as if to be called such a name was a bad thing. I glossed over this muddled social response to deafness in my published essay. I cannot claim innocence as my defence. I knew I was glossing over it but I thought this was right and proper: after all, why stir up jagged memories? Aren’t some things better left unexpressed? Besides, keep the conversation nice, I thought.

The nature of readers’ responses to my essay provoked me into a deeper exploration of deafness. I was shocked by the intensity of so many parents’ grief and anxiety about their children’s deafness, and frustrated by the notion that I am an inspiration because I am deaf but oral. I wondered what this implied about my childhood deaf friends who may not speak orally as well as I do, but who nevertheless enjoy fulfilling lives. I was stunned by the admission of a mother of a five year old deaf son who, despite not being able to speak, has not been taught how to Sign. She said, ‘Now that I’ve met you, I’m not so frightened of deaf people anymore.’ My shock may strike the average hearing person as naïve, but I was unnerved that so many parents of children newly diagnosed with deafness were grasping my words with the relief of people who have long ago lost hope in the possibilities for their deaf sons and daughters.

My shock is not directed at these parents but at some unnameable ‘thing out there.’ What is going on out there in the big world that, 52 years after my mother experienced her own grief, bewilderment, anxiety and quest to forge a good life for her little deaf daughter, contemporary parents are still experiencing those very same fears and asking the same questions? Why do parents still receive the news of their child’s deafness as a death sentence of sorts, the death of hope and prospects for their child, when the facts show – based on my own life experiences and observations of my deaf school friends’ lives – that far from being a death sentence, the diagnosis of deafness simply propels a child into a different life, not a lesser life? Evidently, a different sort of silence has been created over the years; not the silence of hearing loss but the silence of lost stories, invisible stories, unspoken stories.

I have contributed to that silence. For as long as I can remember, and certainly for all of my adult life, I have been careful to avoid being identified as ‘a deaf person.’ Although much of my career was taken up with considering the equity dilemmas of people with a disability, I had never assumed the mantle of advocacy for deaf people or deaf rights. Some of my early silence about deaf identity politics was consistent with my desire not to shine the torch on myself in this way. I did not want to draw attention to myself by what I did not have, that is, less hearing than other people. I thought that if I lived my life as fully as possible in the hearing world and with as little fuss as possible, then my success in blending in would be eloquence enough. If I was going to attract attention, I wanted it to be on the basis of merit, on what I achieved. Others would draw the conclusions that needed to be drawn, that is, that deaf people can take their place fully in the hearing world.

I also accepted that if I was to be fully ‘successful’ – and I didn’t investigate the meaning of that word for many years – in the hearing world, then I ought to isolate myself from my deaf friends and from the deaf culture. I continued to miss them, particularly one childhood friend, but I was resolute. I never seriously explored the possibility of straddling both worlds, despite the occasional invitation to do so. For example, one of my childhood deaf friends, Damien, visited me at my parents’ home once, when we were both still in our teens. He was keen for me to join him in the Deaf Theatre, but I couldn’t muster the emotional dexterity that I felt this required. Instead, I let myself to be content to hear news of my childhood deaf friends through the grape-vine. This was, inevitably, a patchy process that lent itself to caricature. Single snippets of information about this person or that person ballooned into portrait-size depictions of their lives as I sketched the remaining blanks of their history with my imagination as my only tool. My capacity to be content with my imagination faltered.

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Despite the construction of public images of deafness around the highly visible performance of hand-signed communication, the ‘how-small-can-we-go?’ advertorials of hearing aids and the cochlear implant with its head-worn speech processor, deafness is often described as ‘the invisible disability.’ My own experience bore this out. I became increasingly self-conscious about the singularity of my particular success, moderate in the
big scheme of things though that may be. I looked around me and wondered 'Why don't I bump into more deaf people during the course of my daily life?' After all, I am not a recluse. I have broad interests. I have travelled a lot, and have enjoyed a policy career for some thirty years, spanning the three tiers of government and scaling the competitive ladder with a reasonable degree of nimbleness. Such a career has got me out and about quite a bit: up and down the Queensland coast and out west, down to Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra, Adelaide and Hobart, and to the United Kingdom. And yet, not once in those thirty years did I get to share an office or a chance meeting or a lunch break with another deaf person. The one exception took place in the United Kingdom when I attended a national conference in which the keynote speaker was the Chairman of the Audit Commission, a man whose charisma outshines his profound deafness.

After my return to Australia from the United Kingdom, a newspaper article about an education centre for deaf children in a leafy suburb of Brisbane, prompted me into action. I decided to investigate what was going on in the world of education for deaf children and so, one warm morning in 2006, I found myself waiting in the foyer for the centre's clinical director. I flicked through a bundle of brochures and newsletters. They were loaded with images of smiling children wearing cochlear implants. Their message was clear: a cochlear implant brought joy, communication and participation in all that the world has to offer. This seemed an easy miracle. I had arrived with an open mind but now found myself feeling unexpectedly tense, as if I was about to walk a high-wire without the benefit of a safety net. Not knowing the reason for my fear, I swallowed it and smiled at the director in greeting upon her arrival. She is physically a small person but her energy is large. Her passion is bracing. That morning, she was quick to assert the power of cochlear implants by simply asking me, 'Have you ever considered having an implant?' When I shook my head, she looked at me appraisingly, 'I'm sure you'd benefit from it' before ushering me into a room shining with sun-dappled colour and crowded with a mess of little boys and girls.

The children were arrayed in a democracy of shorts, shirts, and sandals. Only the occasional hair-ribbon or newly pressed skirt separated this girl from that boy. Some young mothers and fathers, their faces stretched with tension, stood or sat around the room's perimeter watching their infant children. The noise in the room was orchestral, rising and falling to a mash of shouts, cries and squeals. A table had been set with several plastic plates in which diced pieces of browning apple, orange slices and melon chunks swam in a pond of juice. Some small children clustered around it, waiting to be served. When they finished their morning fruit, they were rounded up to sit at the front of the room, before a teacher poised with finger-puppets of ducks. I tripped over a red plastic chair – its tiny size designed to accommodate an infant's bottom and small-sausage legs – and lowered myself onto it to take in the events going on around me. The little boys and girls laughed merrily as they watched their teacher narrate the story of a mother duck and her five baby ducks. Her hands moved in a flurry of duck-billed mimicry. "Quack! Quack! Quack!" said the mother duck! The parents trilled along in time with the teacher.

As I watched the children at the education centre that sunny morning, I saw that my silence had acted as a brake of sorts. I had, for too long, buried the chance to understand better the complex lives of deaf people as we negotiate the claims and demands of the hearing world. While it is true that actions speak louder than words, the occasional spoken and written word must surely help things along a little. I also began to reflect on the apparent absence of the inter-generational transfer of wisdom and insights born of experience rather than academic studies. Why does each new generation of parents approach the diagnosis of their newborn child’s disability or deafness with such intensity of fear, helplessness and dread for their child’s fate? I am not querying the inevitability of parents experiencing disappointment and shock at receiving unexpected news. I accept that to be born deaf means to be born with less than perfect hearing. All the same, it ought not to be inevitable that parents endure sustained grief about their child’s prospects. They ought to be illuminated as quickly as possible about all that is possible for their child. In particular, they ought to be encouraged to enjoy great hopes for their child.

I mused about the power of story-telling to influence attitudes. G. Thomas Couser claims that 'life writing can play a significant role in changing public attitudes about deafness' (221) but then proceeds to cast doubt on his own assertion by later asking, 'to what degree and how do the extant narratives of deafness rewrite the discourse of disability? Indeed, to what degree and how do they manage to represent the experience of deafness at all?' (225). Certainly, stories from the Deaf community do not speak for me as my life has not been shaped by the framing of deafness as a separate linguistic and cultural entity. Nor am I drawn to the militancy of identity politics that uses terms such as ‘oppression’ and ‘oppressors’ to deride the efforts of parents and educators to teach deaf children to speak (Lane; Padden and Humphries). This seems to be unhelpfully hostile and assumes that deafness is the sole arbitrating reason that deaf people struggle with understanding

who they are. It is the nature of being human to struggle with who we are. Whether we are deaf, migrants, black, gay, mentally ill – or none of these things – we are all answerable to the questions: ‘who am I and what is my place in the world?’ As I cast around for stories of deafness and deaf people with which I could relate, I pondered on the relative infrequency of deaf characters in literature, and the scarcity of autobiographies by deaf writers or biographies of deaf people by either deaf or hearing people. I also wondered whether written stories of deafness, memoirs and fiction, shape public perceptions or do they simply respond to existing public perceptions of deafness? As Susan DeGaia, a deaf academic at California State University writes, ‘Analysing the way stories are told can show us a lot about who is most powerful, most heard, whose perspective matters most to society. I think if we polled deaf/Deaf people, we would find many things missing from the stories that are told about them’ (DeGaia).

Fighting my diffidence in staking out my persona as a ‘deaf woman’ and mustering the ‘conviction as to the importance of what [I have] to say, [my] right to say it’ (Olsen 27), I decided to write The Art of Being Deaf, an anthology of personal essays in the manner of reflective memoirs on deafness drawing on my own life experiences and supported by additional research. This presented me with a narrative dilemma because my deafness is just one of several life-events by which I understand myself. I wanted to find fresh ways of telling stories of deaf experiences while fashioning my memoir essays to show the texture of my life in all its variousness. A.N.Wilson’s observation about the precarious insensitivity of biographical writing was my guiding pole-star:

> the sense of our own identity is fluid and tolerant, whereas our sense of the identity of others is always more fixed and quite often edges towards caricature. We know within ourselves that we can be twenty different persons in a single day and that the attempt to explain our personality is doomed to become a falsehood after only a few words .... . And yet .... works of literature, novels and biographies depend for their aesthetic success precisely on this insensitive ability to simplify, to describe, to draw lines around another person and say, ‘This is she’ or ‘This is he.’

I have chosen to explore my relationship with my deafness through the multiple-threads of writing several personal essays as my story-telling vehicle rather than as a single-thread autobiography. The multiple-thread approach to telling my stories also sought to avoid the pitfalls of identity narrative in which I might unwittingly set myself up as an exemplar of one sort or another, be it as a ‘successful deaf person’ or as an ‘angry militant deaf activist’ or as ‘a deaf individual in denial attempting to pass as hearing.’ But in seeking to avoid these sorts of stories, what autobiographical story am I trying to tell? Because, other than being deaf, my life is not otherwise especially unusual. It is pitted here with sadness and lifted there with joy, but it is mostly a plateau held stable by the grist of daily life. Christopher Jon Heuer recognises this dilemma when he writes, ‘neither autobiography nor biography nor fiction can survive without discord. Without it, we are left with boredom. Without it, what we have is the lack of a point, a theme and a plot’ (Heuer 196).

By writing The Art of Being Deaf, I am learning more than I have to teach. In the absence of deaf friends or mentors, and in the climate of my own reluctance to discuss my concerns with hearing people who, when I do flag any anxieties about issues arising from my deafness tend to be hearty and upbeat in their responses, I have had to work things out for myself. In hindsight, I suspect that I have simply ignored most of my deafness-related difficulties, leaving the heavy lifting work to my parents, teachers, and friends – ‘for it is the non-deaf who absorb a large part of the disability’ (Wright, 5) – and just got on with things by complying with what was expected of me, usually to good practical effect but at the cost of enriching my understanding of myself and possibly at the cost of intimacy. Reading deaf fiction and memoirs during the course of this writing project is proving to be helpful for me. I enjoy the companionability of it, but not until I got over my fright at seeing so many documented versions of deaf experiences, and it was a fright. For a while there, it was like walking through the Hall of Mirrors in Luna Park. Did I really look like that? Or no, perhaps I was like that? But no, here’s another turn, another mirror, another face. Spinning, twisting, turning. It was only when I stopped searching for the right mirror, the single defining portrait, that I began to enjoy seeing my deaf-self/hearing-persona experiences reflected in, or challenged by, what I read. Other deaf writers’ recollections are stirring into fresh life my own buried memories, prompting me to re-imagine them so that I can examine my responses to those experiences more contemplatively and less reactively than I might have done originally.

We can learn about the diversity of deaf experiences and the nuances of deaf identity that
rise above the stock symbolic scripts by reading authentic, well-crafted stories by memoirists and novelists. Whether they are hearing or deaf writers, by providing different perspectives on deafness, they have something useful to say, demonstrate and illustrate about deafness and deaf people. I imagine the possibility of my book, *The Art of Being Deaf*, providing a similar mentoring role to other deaf people and families.

References


