

Baseball, Toothbrush, Hot Dog, Airplane: Life as a Deaf and Hard of Hearing Person

The Angel Chime

MANY READERS WILL RECOGNIZE the words *baseball*, *toothbrush*, *hot dog*, and *airplane*. Audiologists, listening therapists, and others typically use these and other two-syllable words to determine speech reception threshold, which is the softest or faintest level of speech that someone can hear and consistently understand. Because I have undergone countless hearing tests and have heard these words repeated dozens of times in a variety of settings, they have become my metaphor for the challenges, as well as the opportunities, of having a hearing loss.

Many people with some degree of hearing loss in their life have written books about their experiences. These include David Wright, whose book *Deafness* is widely seen as a classic in the field, and Henry Kisor, the author of *What's That Pig Outdoors?*¹ Wright and Kisor are both part of the “oral tradition” among deaf people; neither learned to sign and both lived in the hearing world. Neither would be considered part of the Deaf community, either in England, where Wright, a South African

poet, spent most of his life, or in Illinois and Michigan, where Kisor, the retired book editor for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, resides. Another account, written as diary entries that span the 1990s, is *A Quiet World*. In this book, hard of hearing psychologist David Myers describes how he adjusted to using a hearing aid and to his progressive hearing loss.²

Other autobiographical accounts reflect the tradition of culturally deaf (Deaf) people who use sign communication, usually American Sign Language (ASL).^{*} Among the noteworthy contributions here are Gina Oliva's story, *Alone in the Mainstream*, and some of the other books in Gallaudet University Press's Deaf Lives series. Also included in this tradition are books written by children of Deaf adults (Codas), who, although hearing, grew up with parents in the Deaf community. Important contributions are Lou Ann Walker's *A Loss for Words*, R. H. Miller's *Deaf Hearing Boy*, and Paul Preston's *Mother Father Deaf*.³

In addition to these accounts, several people who have received a cochlear implant have discussed how they have adjusted to life as a user and the difference this has made in their everyday activities. One interesting and informative book is *Rebuilt* by Michael Chorost. Others include Arlene Romoff's *Hear Again*, which is also in the form of a diary, and Beverly Biderman's *Wired for Sound*.⁴

Josh Swiller's *The Unheard* is a fascinating account of his life as a deaf person, especially his experiences as a Peace Corps volunteer in Zambia. Although Swiller received a cochlear implant, he does not discuss that experience in his memoir.⁵

Which of these traditions do I identify with? Am I part of the oral tradition, where lipreading and listening skills are emphasized? Or do I identify more closely with those who are part of the Deaf community and use ASL? What about the loosely defined but growing cochlear

^{*}Following convention, uppercase Deaf refers to people who identify with the Deaf community, frequently associate with other Deaf people, and are reasonably fluent in ASL. Lowercase deaf refers to people with an audiological condition usually characterized by a severe to profound hearing loss.

implant community? The best answer is “all of the above.” I grew up as a hard of hearing person who had almost no contact with deaf or Deaf people until I was thirty. In fact, I had not even heard of Gallaudet College (now University) until I was looking for a job during my last year of graduate school, and I had never seen a sign language interpreter. Now, more than thirty years later, I am reasonably fluent in ASL. Whatever else I’ve done in my life, I certainly have experienced many different ways of being deaf and hard of hearing.



As far as anyone knows, I was not hard of hearing as an infant. In fact, according to family lore, the first time anyone noticed my hearing loss was when I was about five or six years old. This event took place around Christmas when my family, including relatives, was sitting around a table listening to the sounds made by a Christmas angel centerpiece. This gold-colored tin angel chime is still available today, and we have one at home that we occasionally dust off in December. There are four three-inch-long candles on a small circular base. When these candles are lit, an angel, catching the updraft, begins to spin, and small hard wires attached to the angel repeatedly strike the two bells that are part of the centerpiece. The high-frequency sound is quite soft. Everyone around the table that Christmas was saying how beautiful it was, except for me, because I was not able to hear the sounds.

One question people ask frequently when a physical condition not considered “normal” occurs is “why?”: Why is my child deaf or hard of hearing? What could I, as a parent, have done to cause this to happen? What did the doctors do wrong? Explanations include spinal meningitis, another childhood illness accompanied by a high fever, accidents, maternal rubella, and various genetic etiologies.⁶ Perhaps surprisingly in this day and age, a common answer is still “we don’t know.” So it was for me. I did have the usual litany of mid-twentieth-century childhood diseases, including the mumps and chicken pox. It is possible that my

hearing loss is a result of one of these illnesses. I also had my tonsils and adenoids removed as a child, another common medical rite of passage for many people in my generation. Perhaps some undetected complication from that surgery, an infection perhaps, led to the progressive loss that I've experienced. Perhaps there is another reason. At this stage of my life, I suspect that I'll never know. Like many deaf and hard of hearing people, as well as many parents of deaf children, I don't spend a lot of time thinking about this since it makes little practical difference in terms of choosing among the variety of educational and communication strategies, as well as among the various technologies, that are available.

I don't recall much of what happened in the years immediately after the revealing moment with the angel chime, except for the fact that one of my aunts, Grace Christiansen, happened to be a teacher of deaf children in Stevens Point, Wisconsin. Like many schools for deaf kids in the mid-twentieth century, this school practiced an oral method of instruction. Aunt Grace did not use any form of sign communication; lipreading and using residual hearing were emphasized. Because I was hard of hearing and could hear most voices reasonably well, I tried some lipreading training and speech practice with her during the summer. No one suggested that I learn how to sign; no one considered it necessary, and in fact, it was not something I even knew about.

For most of the year, my parents and my younger brother David and I lived in Salt Lake City, Utah, but almost every summer we drove fifteen hundred miles on pre-interstate highways to my paternal grandparents' home about forty miles north of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The house, which everyone called the "ramshack," sat on the shore of Lake Michigan near the small town of Cedar Grove. Cousins came to visit, other friends and relatives were always around, and water sports and swimming took up much of our time. Consequently, my lipreading training with Aunt Grace often was relegated to the proverbial back burner. One positive result of this training involved my own speech. I had a noticeable lisp as a youngster, and because I've long since learned how to say my *s* sounds and other difficult-to-hear consonants correctly,



With my younger brother Dave, December 1952.

I'm sure my limited work with Aunt Grace was both productive and worthwhile. I'm also a reasonably good lipreader, and I have my aunt to thank for much of this ability as well.

Salt Lake City

My early childhood experiences in Salt Lake City were not exceptional, although some were no doubt unique to a hard of hearing son of a Presbyterian minister and his wife. My parents, Don and Betty Christiansen, had moved to Salt Lake from Milwaukee in 1946, a few months after I was born. My parents had served as missionaries in Ketchikan, Alaska,

for five years before World War II. Soon after the war started, my father enlisted in the Army Air Corps as a chaplain, and my parents lived at air force bases near Dayton, Ohio, and Macon, Georgia, before finding their way to the Salt Lake Valley. Protestants were scarce in Utah in the 1940s, even more so than they are today, and my parents were deeply involved in helping the newly formed Wasatch Presbyterian Church develop into one of the largest Protestant congregations in the state.

Neither of my parents had much experience with deaf or hard of hearing people, and I recall only fleeting contact with any deaf people as I was growing up. Two Deaf people I do recall meeting were old acquaintances of my parents from Iowa. I'm not sure how my parents came to know them or how they communicated with them, but they stayed with us for a few days while they were visiting Salt Lake. I must have been about ten years old when this couple visited us, and I had little interaction with them. In fact, I had no clue how to communicate with them.

Some fifty years later, the fact that their names came up in an unrelated situation says a great deal about the remarkable cohesiveness of the Deaf community in America. I was having lunch in the snack bar at Gallaudet University one day when Ron Sutcliffe, a retired faculty member, approached me and said that he had gone to school in Iowa with two friends, had heard from them recently, and said they wanted him to say hello to me. I didn't remember their names but did remember the couple who had visited with us. How they remembered me from their visit to Salt Lake, or how they even knew I was at Gallaudet, I have no idea. Perhaps my parents had told them I was hard of hearing when they visited us and they remembered this, or perhaps they simply recognized my name in a Gallaudet publication.



I attended three different elementary schools in Salt Lake, including one that started about seven o'clock in the morning. Such an early start was not something that my friends and I looked forward to, but in the

days when baby boom children in a state with a very high birthrate were flooding the school system, at least some of the public schools in Salt Lake had to operate two shifts. I don't recall being asked which shift I preferred, but it was nice to have my weekday afternoons free, particularly when the weather was warm.

My public school experiences long predated Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which was enacted in the mid-1970s (and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act—IDEA—about fifteen years later). Among other things, this legislation requires “free and appropriate public educational services” for children with disabilities. Even though this was not the law when I attended school, I did receive a small number of school-based services. The most obvious one at my repeated request and sometimes the more vocal request of my parents was to be seated at the front of the room and to be in a class where the teacher spoke clearly. I also was seen periodically by a speech therapist in lieu of attending music classes while I was in elementary school. Music classes were difficult for me in the days before assistive listening devices or other forms of classroom amplification were used and before creative music teachers emphasized movement and playing instruments, not just sitting around singing songs. Most of the therapy consisted of listening to various war stories the therapist, a World War II veteran, told during these sessions. I don't think this speech therapy lasted for more than a year, but the experience is somewhat ironic because my wife Arlene was a dynamic and creative elementary school music teacher who focused on movement and having the children play sophisticated musical instruments such as recorders, glockenspiels, and xylophones. Moreover, with my cochlear implant, I now enjoy listening to many types of music, especially modern and classical jazz, Japanese taiko drums, and Spanish flamenco.

Baseball

As a youngster, I was especially into baseball and, in my wholly objective assessment, was quite good at it, at least during the little league years

when I was between nine and twelve. (In Salt Lake City, this was not the formal Little League but something called the Western Boys Baseball Association.) I was a bit chubby and tall, played first base, hit a lot of home runs, and made the all-star team. This brought a certain amount of status, which I enjoyed. We also played pickup baseball games in our neighborhood and frequently played late into the summer nights.

At that age, baseball skills (and athletic ability in general) counted for quite a lot in the adolescent pecking order, and whatever communication difficulties I faced as a hard of hearing youngster were typically ignored or quickly forgotten, especially after I hit a few home runs. Although not of major importance, communication issues were not completely absent on the ball field. The first time my hearing loss became an issue while playing organized baseball was when, as a nascent nine-year-old, I was in right field (the usual position for first-year players) and collided with the center fielder as we were both running to catch a fly ball. I had not heard my teammate yell, "I got it," and we all became conscious of the need to communicate more clearly on the field. This incident had little lasting significance beyond that, however, since my hearing was still good enough for me to communicate in most situations with my friends, teammates, and coaches. Even though I was hard of hearing, that aspect of my identity did not become a major issue when I was a young adolescent, especially when I was involved in sports.

One of the highlights of my little league years came early one spring morning when a friend and I, fully decked out in our baseball uniforms, strolled around the restaurant of a fancy local hotel and asked the major league players who were having breakfast there for their autographs. The players were in Salt Lake to participate in one of the last games of spring training before the major league season began a few days later. The team was the 1956 (or perhaps 1957) New York Giants, a team that had won the World Series in 1954. As every older baseball fan knows, the star of that team was the incomparable Willie Mays. My friend's mother, who worked at the hotel, arranged for this experience. My friend and I each had a new baseball for the players to autograph as we circled around

the room, interrupting them while they were eating. I even had the chutzpah to ask one of the players—Wes Westrum, the catcher—what his name was because I couldn't read his handwriting. Fortunately for me, I heard him mumble "Westrum" the first time and didn't have to ask him to repeat it. The highlight of the morning came when we were ready to leave: Mays, the "Say Hey Kid" himself, emerged from the elevator in his slippers and signed the balls for us. Unfortunately, I have no idea where the autographed baseball is now—its value would probably support me in grand style in my retirement.



Following little league, there were basically two baseball options in Salt Lake. One was the so-called Cops League and the other was the Babe Ruth League. I don't recall why one of the leagues was called Cops, but presumably the police department sponsored the program. Like many of my friends, I tried out for both leagues, fully expecting to be selected by a team in each league.

The tryouts for the Cops League occurred first. After they were over, there was a general meeting on the baseball field, and each team's manager read the names of the boys who had been selected for their team. There were at least five or six teams. I was not selected on the first team, or the second, or the third . . . and I became puzzled. I found it hard to believe that they wouldn't pick me; after all, I had led my little league in home runs the year before. Surely someone knew that! But after all the teams had been announced, there I was sitting on the bench, almost by myself. I couldn't believe it. That was more than fifty years ago, and I still remember crying my eyes out as I slowly walked home (it was a long walk) and wondering what I was going to do next. In fact, I walked and stumbled right into my father's office at our church, perhaps seeking some type of divine, or at least paternal, intervention.

So much for the Cops League; at least the Babe Ruth League was left. Lucky for me, I was selected for a team in the Babe Ruth League,

a league that was obviously much better than the Cops. In fact, one of my friends who had been selected for teams in both leagues decided to join the team playing on a real baseball diamond. (The Cops League didn't play on a full-size field.) I was not a star on my team as a thirteen-year-old, but I got some hits and some playing time in the outfield and at first base. I also lost some weight, something that the manager of the team strongly suggested I do.

My major league prospects took a turn for the worse the next year when I decided to spend the summer in Wisconsin, at the ramshack, playing golf and working around the huge yard (where I designed my own miniature golf course). I also had time to get some speech and lipreading therapy from Aunt Grace. I still thought I was a pretty good baseball player, however, and tried out for my high school team a year or so later, which proved to be Cops League *déjà vu* all over again (although I didn't cry, at least not all the way home, this time).

I was surprised that I wasn't chosen for the baseball team in high school. It is certainly possible that I was not as good as I thought I was and that the other guys were better. However, I think it is entirely possible that my hearing loss had something to do with it. Baseball is played on a big field, and with managers and coaches yelling instructions from one end to the other, it is certainly possible that I missed hearing their instructions. Moreover, there was no way I would have known that I had missed something. If, for example, they yelled at me to "hit the cut-off man" while I was in center field 250 feet away, and I threw it to the wrong base or over the guy's head, the obvious conclusion was that I wasn't paying attention or didn't even know what a cut-off man was.

I must admit that I didn't come up with this air-tight explanation until recently. At the time, in high school, it wasn't cool to tell everyone that I was hard of hearing (not that it was particularly cool to make this an issue in elementary or junior high school, either). I had to tell the teachers, or at least give them a note from my parents, because I wanted to sit in the front, but otherwise I wasn't eager to spread the word. I had been told by the ear, nose, and throat specialist that I had

been seeing off and on since the encounter with the Christmas angel chime that a hearing aid would not be useful for me. I don't know if that assessment was accurate for the type of hearing loss I had—I could hear lower frequencies fairly well but not the higher ones. However, because I wasn't anxious to have an aid, I wasn't about to argue with him. (I have what is called a *sensorineural hearing loss*, a term I didn't know existed until much later; at the time, I was simply told I had “nerve deafness.”)

A few years ago I was reading Gina Oliva's book, *Alone in the Mainstream*. Part of the book includes her account of her formative years as a deaf girl growing up in Connecticut. One thing Gina and I have in common is that we are both still quite active. (Gina was a physical education professor at Gallaudet until her retirement in 2009, and although my baseball-playing days are long gone, I'm always on the lookout for opportunities to ride my bicycle—more on that later.) In her book, Gina describes the same kind of thing I recall experiencing as a frustrated adolescent baseball player: not getting chosen for a school team and wondering why, especially since she, like me, had usually been selected first for sports teams when she was younger. Gina attributed her exclusion, at least in part, to communication difficulties and perhaps missing something important along the way. Talk about the proverbial light bulb going on in my head! This must be at least part of the explanation for my truncated high school athletic career. What could I have done differently? Why didn't I think of that explanation in high school and do something about it?



Questions like this have come up consistently throughout my life. Judging from the conversations I've had with other deaf and hard of hearing people as well as some of the memoirs they have written, these kinds of questions are fairly typical for those of us with a hearing loss. After mentioning a few more of my experiences, I will discuss some sociological concepts and insights that might help explain the reluctance

to “do something” that many people experience when faced with ambiguous and frustrating communication situations. Although this reluctance is sometimes difficult to deal with, there are nevertheless some situations that can be structured or changed in ways to make communication easier and more rewarding.



While this is getting a bit ahead of the story, my baseball career did end on a happy note, but not until my junior year of college, when I took advantage of a junior year abroad program and attended Silliman University in the Philippines. I played on the varsity baseball team and, with all due modesty, helped lead our team to a very successful season. It was also a wonderful opportunity to travel to different cities in the Philippines. Was communication a problem there? No doubt, but communication was a bit of a problem for all of us from outside the Philippines, and people didn't take trouble-free interaction and communication for granted.* By then I was wearing a hearing aid, and most of my friends and acquaintances knew I was hard of hearing.

Perhaps one thing I might have done differently to satisfy my high school athletic aspirations would have been to focus on individual rather than team sports. Certainly, sports such as golf, tennis, and track didn't have the status that team sports such as football and basketball had, but communication difficulties might not have been such an issue in these sports. In addition, there is less subjectivity involved in deciding who makes the team: the lowest scores in golf, the best times or the longest distances in track and field, and the most victories in tennis. Given my

*In this sense, my experiences in the Philippines were similar to Josh Swiller's experiences in Zambia, which he recounts in *The Unheard*. Although Swiller was in the Peace Corps and I was a college student, we both discovered that being deaf or hard of hearing was not a big deal when everyone was by necessity more conscious of communication issues and when people were obliged to take more time to make sure they understood each other.

quarter-century obsession with cycling, maybe that would have been a good choice, except for the unfortunate fact that we didn't live in France (where the Tour de France takes place) and few people in America knew much about bicycle racing before Lance Armstrong and Greg LeMond won the Tour. Another drawback for many individual sports, especially golf and tennis, is that they require a lot of practice and instruction. When I was in high school, this was typically available at country clubs, which we were in no position to afford.

An “Awful Incertitude”

If my adolescent, post–little league athletic career was largely characterized by unfulfilled ambition, what about the rest of my life during these formative years? At the very least, my status as a hard of hearing kid made life more difficult than if I had been either deaf or hearing. Moreover, the phrase *hard of hearing* itself is very ambiguous. One can have a mild or moderate hearing loss or a hearing loss that is quite pronounced. In both cases, the label *hard of hearing* is generally used to describe the conditions. In actuality, life for someone who can readily communicate on the phone, for example, which someone who is mildly hard of hearing can do, is quite different from life for one who can't.

When I was a teenager, I had enough residual hearing to hear well enough on the phone to call friends, including girlfriends (potential or actual), to talk or ask them out on a date. For me, it was much easier to hear on the phone, where only two people were trying to understand each other, than at a noisy party. My experience in this regard is quite different from that of Henry Kisor, who recounts in his book *What's That Pig Outdoors?* that because he couldn't hear on the phone he had to ask his mother or father, and later his sister, to call and try to arrange dates for him. Needless to say, he wasn't too thrilled with this arrangement. I didn't have a sister, so I couldn't have used his approach in any case (my brother, who is three years younger than I am, would not have been a good option), and I can't imagine having to ask one of my parents to do the job for me. As a hard of hearing kid, at least I

Degrees and Types of Hearing Loss

The terms *mild*, *moderate*, *severe*, and *profound* are frequently used to roughly delineate different degrees of hearing loss. A mild hearing loss means that a person might have difficulty following conversations, particularly in a relatively noisy setting, often without using a hearing aid. A person with a moderate hearing loss probably would need to turn up the volume on a television or a telephone and would almost certainly benefit from using a hearing aid. A person with a moderate hearing loss might also benefit from closed captions on television programs. A severe hearing loss means that the person needs a powerful hearing aid and will likely have considerable difficulty understanding conversations without lipreading, especially in noisy situations. Many people with a moderate to severe hearing loss are candidates for cochlear implants, especially if they do not derive much benefit from using a hearing aid. People with a profound hearing loss can hear only extremely loud sounds, such as a lawnmower or fire truck, without amplification. Given the likelihood of poor discrimination ability even with an aid, most individuals in this category would be candidates for implants.

More technically, a person who is moderately hard of hearing might be described as having a 50-dB (decibel) average hearing loss, whereas a person who is severely hard of hearing might have a 90-dB loss. This means that if a person with “normal” hearing can hear a sound (a dripping faucet, for example) at 20 dB (very soft), it would require amplification to 50 dB for a person who is moderately hard of hearing to hear the same sound and amplification to 90 dB for a person with a severe hearing loss to hear the sound. It is important to keep in mind that because the decibel scale is logarithmic, rather than linear, each 10-dB increase corresponds to a *tenfold* increase in sound pressure level. That is, a sound at 50 dB is 1,000 times greater than a sound at 20 dB ($10 \times 10 \times 10$). In this example, for a person with a moderate hearing loss to hear the dripping faucet, the sound would have to be 1,000 times greater than it needs to be

for a person without a hearing loss. And for a person with a 90-dB hearing loss? The sound of the dripping faucet would have to be 10 million times greater—that is, more intense—for the person to be able to hear it ($10 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10$).

In addition to these different degrees of hearing loss, there are also several different types of hearing loss, including *conductive*, *sensorineural*, and *mixed*. A conductive hearing loss occurs because of a problem in the outer or middle ear that interferes with the transmission or conduction of sound waves to the inner ear. This type of hearing loss is frequently mild or moderate and often can be corrected by surgery or by draining fluid from the ear. A sensorineural hearing loss, which is caused by damage within the cochlea—especially damage to the thousands of microscopic hair cells in the cochlea or to the acoustic nerve linking the cochlea to the brain—is permanent and usually cannot be corrected by surgery. A sensorineural loss can range from mild to profound. A mixed hearing loss would be a combination of both conductive and sensorineural types of hearing loss.

had more flexibility and freedom in this regard than Kisor, a nonsigning deaf person, did.

If I had been either deaf or hearing, my status would not have been in doubt. Of course, if I had been severely hard of hearing or profoundly deaf as a youngster, there still would have been the question of what type of educational and communication strategies to use, where to attend school, and so on. But at least it would have been clear that I was not “hearing only what I wanted to hear,” as some people accused me of doing. As David Wright writes in his memoir, *Deafness*, in some ways, “the partially deaf . . . have the worst of both worlds.”

I think, too, that embarrassing social situations, missed conversations, awkward silences at parties and other occasions inevitably had a dampening effect on my self-confidence. I still recall a time in junior

high school when I was walking in the hall and one of the prettiest girls in the school said, “Hi, John,” to me. Not quite sure I really heard what I thought I heard, I momentarily didn’t say anything in return. Alas, by the time I figured out what I thought she had said, it was too late for me to say anything. The next thing I thought I heard was “stuck up,” presumably what she said after getting no response from me. And then there were the parties and dances in high school, which usually took place under less than ideal lighting and acoustical conditions. For example, once I was with a small group of friends at a dance and I managed to figure out that they were talking about the “Y.” I innocently asked which YMCA they were talking about. This happened to be the wrong Y, an error that should have been obvious to me even before I got the usual assortment of puzzled looks from my friends. This being Utah, they were talking about BYU (Brigham Young University).

Issues and situations like these are recurrent themes in many of the memoirs written by deaf and hard of hearing people. Making inappropriate comments as a consequence of not being able to clearly follow the conversation, social isolation, and the “awful incertitude” (to use David Wright’s poignant phrase) of not knowing what is going on are problems that many deaf or hard of hearing people have to deal with on a regular basis. Many of those who have written about these matters tend to put the blame for instances of failed communication squarely on their own shoulders. Although I agree that much of the responsibility does, in fact, lie with the deaf or hard of hearing person in this regard, it is equally important to focus on social and cultural factors in an attempt to explain why problems such as these continue to occur.

In any case, split-second conversational decisions that people are faced with on a daily basis are frequently difficult for deaf and hard of hearing people to make. This is because we may not be sure what we thought we heard is what the speaker actually said, and we have to momentarily weigh a number of alternative scenarios before deciding how to respond. This takes a little time, and, by the time we have sorted through the various alternatives, the conversation has often moved on to another topic.

The Looking-Glass Self

As I grew older, it became increasingly apparent to me that there was often a poor fit between what I thought about myself and what others thought about me. I continue to have an image of myself as a reasonably friendly and outgoing person (as my daughter Amanda, who is no doubt totally objective in these matters, reminds me). However, many of my former high school friends and classmates, in the unlikely event they remember me at all, might not see me that way. This would be perfectly understandable. The guy sitting quietly on the sofa, or off in the corner during a party and not contributing much besides some embarrassed head nodding and an occasional and often irrelevant comment is not likely to be invited back to many parties. In such situations, good friends in elementary school or junior high (middle) school have a way of becoming more difficult to stay in contact with by the time high school rolls around.

Sociologists often talk and write about something called the *looking-glass self*, a concept associated with the late Charles Cooley, who taught for many years at the University of Michigan. *Looking-glass* is another term for a mirror, but in a sociologist's conceptualization, a looking-glass is one's audience, typically friends, classmates, family, and coworkers, not an actual mirror. In this perspective, our feelings about ourselves, our self-image as it were, are based to a great extent on what we think others think about us, how we perceive ourselves as reflected in the reactions of others. If we believe others think well of us, this naturally makes us feel pretty good about ourselves. If we think they don't, the opposite is likely to occur. What's important here is our perception of what others think about us, not how they might really feel.

For many deaf and hard of hearing people, there is often a bad fit between the image we have of ourselves and the image other people may have about us (or, more precisely, the image we think other people have about us). I'm sure this observation is true for many other people as well. For example, a well-educated, well-dressed, professional African American man who can't get a taxi may experience a dissonance between

his image of himself and the cab driver's perception. No doubt many people with disabilities that are more visible than being deaf or hard of hearing have similar experiences.⁷

What, if anything, can be done about this? What could I have done differently, growing up as a hard of hearing child? What can any "non-standard" person do to make everyday situations more positive and less frustrating? What can parents do to make life a little easier for their deaf or hard of hearing child? Here, again, sociology has something useful to say.

The Power of Positive Situations

Rev. Norman Vincent Peale was not a sociologist, but he did write an influential book many years ago entitled *The Power of Positive Thinking*. Although positive thinking is certainly better than negative thinking, or not thinking at all, one thing that sociology has emphasized over the years is what might be called "the power of positive situations." That is to say, it is important not only for people to change their thoughts but also for situations to be structured, and changed if necessary, to promote actions that can lead to more positive and productive attitudes. A classic example is the civil rights movement and legislation that accompanied that effort. For instance, in the 1950s and early 1960s, before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and other civil rights legislation became law, there was very little support for marriage between white and black people in the United States. (In some states, antimiscegenation laws made such marriages illegal until the Supreme Court declared otherwise in 1967.) Today, there is much less opposition. According to the Gallup poll, which has been tracking this issue since the 1950s, in 1958 only 4 percent of whites approved of such interracial marriages; by 2007, this had increased to 77 percent. This change wasn't simply the result of people having more positive thoughts or pleas from religious and moral leaders encouraging people to love or at least get along with one another. Rather, this transformation was to a great extent the result of modifications in laws and practices that eventually led to

changes in attitudes. Legislating morality, or changing the culture, is a slow process, perhaps, but a powerful one.*

How might this apply to a deaf or hard of hearing child? Or to another kid with a physical impairment that leads to a disabling situation? It is not only the physical condition itself that is the problem, but also the nature of the situation in which those with the condition typically find themselves. Changing the situation or the environment, especially for children and adolescents, is easier said than done, but considerable progress has been made in this regard during the past quarter-century. For example, Public Law 94-142, mentioned earlier, has led to a massive mainstreaming movement resulting in the inclusion of thousands of children with disabilities into regular classrooms in our public schools. Although certainly not without problems or controversies (many Deaf people prefer educational programs in traditional residential schools because of the special visual needs of deaf and hard of hearing children, and sometimes the integration of children with disabilities into mainstreamed classrooms is far less than ideal), the very fact that kids without special needs are interacting with children with such needs on a regular, day-to-day basis can't help but lead to more positive attitudes. My wife Arlene taught for many years in a public elementary school that had dozens of children with disabilities integrated into regular classrooms. These kids often need special accommodations, but that is what the law requires, and for the other children who grow up in this setting this integration is a natural part of the social and cultural landscape in their elementary school.

*Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who is perhaps better known as a former U.S. senator from New York than as a former sociologist, had this to say about legislating morality in a frequently quoted aphorism: "The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself." Legislating morality—or trying to change behavior and attitudes by changing laws—is not invariably successful, as the failed effort to ban alcohol sales and consumption in the U.S. during the Prohibition era (1919–33) reminds us.