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Hearing Loss

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There's been a lot of discussion lately about the term "hearing loss" and its appropriateness (or inappropriateness). I swore I wouldn't get involved with the "In response to..." frenzy that has taken DeafRead.com by storm, but BrowneyedGirl65 over at What's That You Said? made some excellent point that crystallized my own thoughts about this controversial subject.

It was BrowneyedGirl65 who correctly pointed out that "hearing loss" is not a great umbrella term for "deaf" because it implies that somebody *lost* something and thus *misses* it.

As we all know, there are many people who were born deaf and thus don't miss their hearing because they never "lost" it in the first place.

On top of that, there are people who lost their hearing later in life but no longer "miss" it. Some of these people gravitated towards Deaf culture and thrive in it. Then there are those who may or may not have found Deaf culture after they lost their hearing, but either way they'll tell you they find any form of amplification to be rather annoying (check out this article at DeafDC.com for an example of what I'm talking about). These guys, too, do not suffer a "loss." They actually prefer the silence.

Of course, I know there are those who do feel a genuine sense of loss, and empathize. I also know there are those who have their hearing aids and cochlear implants and are very happy with them. I'm just saying that for the reasons described above, I agree with BrowneyedGirl65 that "hearing loss" doesn't qualify as an umbrella term because it clearly doesn't apply to *everyone*.

That said, I'd like to add something to the discussion about "hearing loss."

My son has one.

That's right. My oldest son, Darren, now 8, has just learned that he's going deaf like his old man. For him, right now, this is a hearing loss. He's been hearing for the first 8 years of his life. He's forged a hearing identity. He goes to a hearing school. He has hearing friends. He participates in hearing karate classes, sports teams, and so on.

While nothing is going to stop him from participating in whatever events -- deaf or hearing -- that he wishes to participate in, the rug is still going to be pulled out from under him. It is for this reason I believe it would have been easier if he were just born deaf -- his identity would not have been abruptly shaken. As it stands, here he is at age 8 finding himself in need of an identity overhaul.



He's going to *lose* his hearing identity. It's going to hurt. In fact, he's already made remarks that he's "failed" hearing tests, he's "not as smart as the other kids anymore," and that some of the kids he knows are already teasing or ignoring him.

He's going to be all right. Even as he loses his hearing identity he's going to *gain* a Deaf identity. His Deaf parents, his Deaf friends, his CODA friends, et cetera, will see to that. Once he gets through the transition, I guarantee you it will no longer be a hearing "loss." I have no idea how long this transition will take and I fully understand he will mourn his loss before he celebrates his gain. And we will definitely reach a point where someday, "hearing loss" will no longer be an appropriate description.

And now we arrive at the part where I turn this whole thing upside down. (You knew this was coming, didn't you?)

Like I said, I'm not overly concerned because I know Darren's going to be all right. His Deaf identity is waiting for him when he's ready for it. He's already halfway there with his signing ability and his participation in his parent's Deaf world. All that's left for him is self-actualization, and this is something that will come to him on his own.

In the meantime, I can't help but think of the term "hearing loss" and how I believe I got the whole thing backwards when I was the one who went through the very same transition Darren is going through now.

Back in my day (yecch, I sound like the grandfather who walked five miles to school in two feet of snow), the world wasn't as accepting of ASL and Deaf culture.

In fact, when I first experienced my, um, "hearing loss" at age 5, I was already culturally Deaf. I already had a considerable ASL vocabulary. On several occasions I had accompanied my Deaf parents to the infamous Central Club in downtown Philadelphia, where Deaf people from all walks of life got together to blow off steam. (Don't ask me what a 5-year-old kid was doing in a wild place like that. I'm just happy no one called social services.)

So when the word came in that I was, um, *losing* my hearing, there were hearing doctors and relatives who somehow managed to convince my Deaf parents to stop signing with me. They also told my folks to stop exposing me to that sinful, corrupt, isolating, speech-hindering world of ASL and Deaf culture. For whatever reason, my parents complied.

A few years later, there was a time when I got to visit the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf. I was amazed at the ease of communication between all of the students. It was like night and day when I compared it to the stressful and isolating environment of my mainstream school. These kids at PSD clearly had a sense of *belonging*. I wanted to belong. I asked, and the answer was no. One of the reasons my request was denied happened to be the fact that I was (oh my, can you believe the *irony*?) "not deaf enough."

Fast-forward to today, and I see all of these semantics over "hearing loss" hotly debated over the Internet. I think about my own background -- about how I was forbidden from participating in the Deaf world until much, much

later in my life -- and I wonder: would it be appropriate to say I had an, um...

Deafening loss?

This, folks, is the kind of weird stuff I conjure up in my mind when I have a spare moment or two. Just thought I'd share.

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