

### Limiting the Limitless

Splash, Ellis jumped in the small rapid. He was just standing next to me on the rock. I signed to him “stay,” “wait,” “danger,” and “ow” as emphatically as I could so he would understand my seriousness. Hurriedly, I pulled the four-year-old boy out. He had not listened to me. Angrily, I gave-up and left him with the deaf friend who could explain the finer points of a rapid. Ellis, my nephew, was born profoundly deaf. It was delightful to watch him grow, celebrate his first signs, and be introduced to the deaf culture. His speech was obviously missing, but not his voice. He laughed and cooed like every baby. My family was happily challenged to figure out new modes of communication to understand and know him. Yet, I worried about how I would communicate with him when he was older. Through my times with Ellis I have learned the capabilities and limitations of language.

When he was two he underwent surgery for a cochlear implant. It does not perfect his hearing, but aids it. The internal and external processor work together to send electrical waves to the brain in lieu of the parts of his natural ear. The audiologist is able to adjust the decibels on the external processor to Ellis’s comfort. It was incredible to see him hear for the first time. I thought my worries were solved.

Those worries were awakened when he jumped off that rock into the water. The problem though, was not that he did not understand me, but rather he was a four-year-old boy. Another boy who spoke English would have done the same thing. This episode made me realize how stuck I was in my own language. How unwilling I was to take the risk of communicating with this child, because I was always afraid of the inability to communicate someday. I became frustrated and numb when I should have shown compassion and interest.

The capabilities of language are limitless. We can learn to speak another’s language, or, like Ellis, have an instrument that bridges the gap. We all understand a lot through basic body language. The limitations come when we are too stubborn to utilize our energy in making an effort to wholeheartedly understand. Our fear and pride can keep us from understanding anyone, whether they speak another language or our own. So, obviously, the answer is, get over yourself. If you come across a new challenge with language, embrace it fully, and with compassion.