



DISABILITY

Is There a Right Way to Be Deaf?

I’ve always felt like the object of a constant tug of war between the deaf and the hearing communities.

By Sarah Katz

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“Your whole life, they’ve been trying to take you away from me,” my father says to me, referring to the deaf community.

But the deaf community could just as easily say the same about my father.

More than 90 percent of deaf and hard-of-hearing children are born to hearing parents like mine, who have little to no experience interacting with deaf people. When it was discovered that I was profoundly deaf at six weeks old, my parents faced a common decision: Should they adapt themselves to their deaf child, learn sign language, and embrace deaf culture, or have their deaf child adapt to hearing culture, give her cochlear implants or hearing aids, and train her in the precarious art of lip-reading?

My parents chose the former, believing that sign language would provide me with equal access to the opportunities afforded my hearing twin brother. So, when I was 6 months old, my parents welcomed educators from a local deaf school into their home to give signing lessons. Over several months, my mother learned to sign with me.

I soon began to sign back, newly capable of asking for “milk” (one hand in a squeezing gesture, as if milking a cow, but without the vertical motion) or “juice” (brushing the pinkie finger shaped into the letter “j” by the corner of the mouth, with an otherwise closed fist). Using sign language, I communicated a lot — even more than my brother. But then something strange happened. I began speaking. Aloud. In English.

“Dress pretty, you like?” my mother recalls me asking her when I was around 3 years old. I did, it turned out, have residual hearing, as later tests confirmed. But I spoke using classic American Sign Language word order, which involves a grammatical structure closer to French than English — A.S.L. is derived from early-19th-century French Sign Language. And, although my mother knew that my syntax did not indicate limited cognitive ability, but rather an acute, developing awareness of the language, she began to wonder if sign language was the right choice after all. Was disregarding an aural-oral approach restricting my natural gift of gab?

After more research my parents found what they thought was a middle path. Rather than have me undergo cochlear implant surgery — the underappreciated difficulties of which are outlined by Sara Novic in her essay “A Clearer Message on Cochlear Implants” — my parents hoped to supplement my sign language education with cued speech, a visual communication system invented in 1966 at Gallaudet University that functions as a supplement to speech-reading (only 30 percent of speech is visible on the lips).

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Dr. R. Orin Cornett, then the university’s vice president for long-range planning, had believed that the deaf student population struggled to read English due to inadequate access to phonemes — the distinct percussive and tonal sounds that hearing people use to speak words. Dr. Cornett developed eight handshapes and four placements around

the mouth that renders phonemes visible as a person speaks. Although cued speech was still in its infancy, the data at the time showed that early exposure to it helped deaf children develop the phonological and phonemic awareness of spoken English necessary for learning to read at the same rate as, or better than, hearing children.

Cued speech can be learned in just 48 hours. My mother was convinced that this bicultural-bilingual approach involving a combination of cued speech and sign language lessons could give me the best of both worlds: full visual access to English and the hearing community, and concurrent access to sign language and the deaf community.

But we apparently couldn't have it both ways. When the educators from the local deaf school learned that my parents were considering cued speech, they became livid. "If you choose cued speech," my mother recalls one of them saying, "we're not coming back here."

In the deaf community, some feel that cued speech, like cochlear implants, threatens deaf culture because they believe it arises from a medical model of deafness, through which deafness is perceived as an undesirable trait that needs to be treated or cured. A "social model," on the other hand, suggests that the environment must adapt to the deaf person, whose "natural language" is sign language. The educators even asked my parents to consider sending me to their residential program, where, surrounded by fluent signers, I would absorb sign language at a faster pace and have full exposure to deaf culture. They believed that, as long as I had a strong command of sign language as a first language, I would have the foundation necessary to acquire English later on.

My mother was stumped. On the one hand, she didn't know if cued speech would work, but desperately wanted to succeed at finding a way to communicate with me quickly and effectively. On the other hand, she didn't want me to be alienated from the deaf community. My father, however, was resolute: He would not send his child away. Together, they decided the promise of cued speech was worth the risk for at least a year at the nearby public school. If it didn't work out, they would have the deaf school's residential program as a fallback option.

Today, I'm a 30-year-old who wears hearing aids, never attended a residential deaf school, and who can sign proficiently, but not fluently. I attended public schools, surpassed most of my hearing peers in reading ability, graduated with a bachelor's degree in English and a master's degree in creative writing, married a hearing man, and work as a full-time freelance writer. Yet despite my father's insistent confidence — "I have zero regrets," he often tells me — I'll never know definitively whether my parents made the right decision.

Throughout my life, I've felt like the object of a constant tug of war between the deaf and hearing communities. Although I'm rewardingly self-employed, married and highly literate, I still struggle in hearing-centric environments. I have to remind my husband more frequently than I would like to turn his head so that his lips aren't obscured while we're out with his family at dinner, or to cue what he's saying. Well-meaning hearing people frequently insult me with "compliments" about how well I've assimilated, like, "I can barely tell you're deaf!" (We call comments like these "audist"— akin to "racist" or "sexist" — because they assume deaf people like me must speak aloud and sound like a hearing person to be deemed fortunate or successful.)

On the other hand, when I spend time with deaf friends, I'm often chided by them for not being more fluent in sign language, or otherwise embracing a more culturally deaf way of life. According to them, I've succumbed to audism by using my voice to speak more often than my hands, and cued speech to absorb information. All this, despite performing in deaf theater throughout childhood, and, during my college years, taking sign language at Gallaudet; interning as a sports reporter covering United States soccer and swimming at the 2009 Deaflympics in Taipei, Taiwan; interning at the National Association of the Deaf; and, after graduate school, cofounding an online, intersectional journal of deaf and disability literature and art called The Deaf Poets Society. Right now, I can't be deaf without drawing criticism from somebody.

I still hold out hope that the deaf and hearing communities will come to a compromise. One Maryland-based, deaf native cuer, Amy Crumrine, believes she has the answer: through her national nonprofit organization, CueSign, she is promoting an approach that involves both cued speech and sign language. Founded in 1998, the organization provides resources to several stakeholders — educational programs, organizations and families of deaf children — in the service of "manual bilingualism."

Amy met with me recently in a coffee shop in Bethesda, Md., to discuss her project. During the interview, we transitioned seamlessly between sign language and cued speech, and, as we commiserated over the tensions between the hearing, deaf and cued speech communities, she repeatedly asserted that the one thing that matters most in raising deaf children is language access. “I strongly believe in a family foundation,” she said. “It’s important for the child to be able to communicate with parents. Find a way. Whether it’s cueing or signing.”

This conclusion suddenly struck her during the early 1990s while she was a junior studying social work at the Rochester Institute of Technology, which is known for its National Technical Institute for the Deaf.

“For the first three years, I didn’t tell anyone I cued,” she said. “I was ashamed. I remember one night, my sorority floor, we’re all sitting around, and we were just having a conversation and signing. And one person decided to say, ‘Tell us something you wish we knew.’ So, I said, ‘I grew up with cued speech.’ People looked at me — and then maybe two or three girls raised their hands and said, ‘Me too.’ And that night I cried. Because I had just come out. For the first time in my life, I felt safe.”

“Looking back,” she added, “it helped me discover that I have so much to offer. And I was not going to let the politics of cueing and sign language stop me.”

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New Book: *“About Us: Essays From The New York Times Disability Series,”* edited by Peter Catapano and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, published by Liveright.

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