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# Facundo Element

## Exploring Hearing Privilege: An Introduction

Exploring Hearing Privilege: An Introduction

(Part I)

Alison Aubrecht & Erin Furda: August 2012

## Hearing Privilege, Part I



### **Erin:**

For me, it has been important to remember what privilege means. It means experiences, access, rights that I have because I am hearing. One major thing that came up is that my privileges as a hearing person intersect heavily with being white, growing up middle class, and being an English speaker. I tried to focus on privileges that are the most directly related to being hearing.

If I am unaware of the privileges I have, I am going to participate in the oppression of other people, often unknowingly, and I don't want to do that. I have always believed in equality, but thinking or believing in something isn't enough. I need to see what my role is and ask myself how I can act in ways that do not perpetuate audism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression.

When I was invited to write a list of hearing privileges, I was really excited. I started thinking and writing immediately and within a few days had developed quite a list. I started with the more obvious privileges like access to communication, but then got into deeper, more personal items that I found when I really looked at my own experiences. We had agreed to write our lists separately and then share them with each other and compare what we had come up with. Interestingly, as I got ready to send my list to Alison, I hesitated. I felt a little nervous. Here I was, able to generate a long list of hearing privileges, but what would my list reveal about me? Would it show that I don't know enough?

Or, would my list be long and brutal compared to hers? The later thought being quite ironic, as if I would see more hearing privilege than she would.

When we finally did exchange lists, there were many similarities. I realized that the honest risk-taking is what allowed me to understand and learn more. Writing a list of hearing privileges and reflecting independently was a meaningful exercise for me as a hearing person, but sharing my list with a Deaf person was a different thing entirely. I think it's an important form of accountability and a great opportunity to understand these issues more deeply. Just knowing I was going to share my list with Alison pushed me to be more critical and I am grateful to her for this.

### **Alison:**

It has been a challenge to phrase statements so that the “privilege” is reflective of a system that favors or gives advantages to hearing people as opposed to presenting the “deaf can't — and therefore should prefer to become hearing” perspective, where we once again demonize the individual. And that is yet another privilege that hearing people have—that the system comes with that ready-made frame that gives preference to the state of being hearing, that the ideology is so prevalent and so pervasive that it is difficult to present the truth that Deaf beings are living within a system that constantly invalidates their existence without people jumping to the pathological idea that a simple way to “fix” barriers would be to make Deaf people hearing. It is hearing privilege that jumping to this idea is acceptable, that no one expresses concern that “fixing” is equivalent to destroying the Deaf being. And it is hearing privilege that the idea of “fixing” is “the norm,” “benevolent,” “acceptable,” “neutral,” while the idea that this is in actuality a destructive approach is considered “radical,” “militant,” “hurtful.”

Taking this journey with Erin has been both humbling and validating. To watch someone so openly wrestle with her privilege inspires me to also work through mine. And it is a form of love that she would endeavor to stand with me, with us this way. Even in the safety of our dialogue I on occasion catch myself wanting to be gentler, which in itself can be a form of deference to the privileged. Erin does not reach for that refuge where too many of us seek to hide from the rawness of

introspection. She instead continues to push herself and owns every action, every word. And that in itself is a refusal to hold onto power, a parallel process to the very article we are collaborating on.

## **Statements of Hearing Privilege**

The statements below refer to privileges that we feel a person has on the merit of their hearing status alone. We do recognize that there are intersections present and that there are some privileges listed below that are specific to members of the English speaking community (in America). Because of the Deaf-hearing collaboration we have opted out of using I-statements in discussing the privileges below. We invite you to add more statements.

Hearing privilege is not being a “new experience” for others.

Hearing privilege means colleges and employers don’t wonder if you are capable because of your hearing status.

Hearing privilege means wait staff at restaurants, attendants on an airline, doctors, administrators, therapists, service providers all know how to communicate and interact with you on a social and professional level. People do not ignore you, avoid you, get nervous around you or act as if you are a burden on them because you are hearing.

Hearing privilege is having people assume you are a capable parent.

Hearing privilege is people assuming you can drive, ride a bike, operate machinery, be a pilot ... having people assume you can do almost anything for a career.

Hearing privilege means you have never gotten messages that you can’t do something because of your hearing status.

Hearing privilege is people assuming you can care for and manage both hearing and Deaf children in a classroom.

Hearing privilege is having people assume you will be on time.

Hearing privilege is having people assume you will be professional.

Hearing privilege is having people assume you are intelligent (even when you are speaking/signing informally).

Hearing privilege means that you can expect that all members of your family can and will communicate fluently in your first language.

Hearing privilege is always having teachers who are also hearing and who speak your first language fluently.

Hearing privilege is never being labeled disabled. No person, sign, law, or document tells you that you are disabled.

Hearing privilege is never having anyone doubt that you are employable. Hearing privilege is applying for a job without worrying that you will not be hired because of your hearing status.

Hearing privilege is not having people blame your shortcomings on being hearing.

Hearing privilege is not having anyone in your family feel sad that you were born hearing. No one around you went through a grieving process because of who you are.

Hearing privilege is conversing with your friends in public without being stared at.

Hearing privilege means you are never asked to defend or justify your existence as a hearing person.

Hearing privilege is making mistakes without people considering you to be a representative for all hearing people.

Hearing privilege is having opportunities over Deaf people such as: teaching positions, presenting at conferences, job promotions, and committees.

Hearing privilege is teaching ASL or working in jobs requiring ASL fluency without providing evidence of ASL skills.

Hearing privilege is being able to interpret in some states with no certification.

Hearing privilege is being able to jump in and out of “the fight.” You don’t have to live it everyday if you don’t want to.

Hearing privilege means many Deaf people will make you feel you are okay, even if they don’t think you are doing the right thing, because they are not comfortable challenging you as a hearing person.

Hearing privilege means you are never pitied for who you are. Hearing privilege is not having someone apologize to you when they discover your hearing status.

Hearing privilege means you can call businesses and agencies without worrying that they will hang up on you.

Hearing privilege is turning on the television and expecting to access anything that’s showing. Hearing privilege is being able to go to any movie theatre, anytime and enjoy a show. It is know that you can enjoy the arts (plays, museum tours) anywhere, anytime.

Hearing privilege is going through a drive through to order your food.

Hearing privilege is going to the emergency room and expecting to get service immediately; all nurses and doctors can communicate in your language. In an emergency, all police, firefighters, and EMT personnel speak your language.

Hearing privilege is taking any classes, anywhere—as well as workshops—and expecting to access the information. You can expect that you will be allowed to take the classes...

...And then hearing privilege is building a strong resume because you have had access to those opportunities.

Hearing privilege is being able to change jobs and stay within the same city or state.

Hearing privilege is being allowed to opt out of signing if you so choose.

Hearing privilege is being able to choose a religion based on your spiritual beliefs instead of which ones provide services in ASL.

Hearing privilege means having the option to serve your country if you so choose.

Hearing privilege means you are not subject to repeated and painful medical probing (ears, brain, throat). Hearing privilege is never being pressured to have surgery to “repair” something that is very much a part of your identity.

Hearing privilege is being able to make mistakes in written English without people assuming you are not capable of proper English.

Hearing privilege is sitting in any room and feeling comfortable with how it is set up. Cars, trains, airplanes are all designed to fit your aural and spatial preferences.

Hearing privilege is knowing that when you go to court, you can expect a jury of your peers. It means knowing that you will not be denied the opportunity to serve jury duty because of your hearing status.

Hearing privilege is being able to struggle with a task without someone stepping in to take over, assuming that you can't do it because of your hearing status.

Hearing privilege is expecting to access speakers anywhere (airports, ballgames, auditoriums, trains).

Hearing privilege is expecting to find support groups, activity groups, sports groups where my language is used even in small towns.

Hearing privilege is representing yourself. Knowing your exact choice of words are used. You do not have to wait for an interpreter. You do not have to wonder if the interpreter will be skilled or qualified.

Hearing privilege is being able to expect to have direct conversations with teachers, with supervisors, with board members anywhere.

Hearing privilege is showing up at your city council, senator's office, congress person's, governor's, or president's office anytime and being able to have a direct conversation in your language.

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# Facundo Element

## Hearing Privilege & Unpacking in Action: A Story

Hearing Privilege & Unpacking in Action: A Story

(Part II)

Alison Aubrecht & Erin Furda: August 2012



## Hearing Privilege, Part II



### **Erin:**

I want to share this story because it's true and it helps me see how audism and privilege prevail in my everyday life. I am becoming more aware of my own position of power and privilege as a hearing person and a big part of that is participation in events that other hearing people give me permission to participate in. Even when I realize the situation isn't ethical, I tell myself it isn't my fault. I didn't set up the interview without any Deaf people present. I didn't conduct an interview for an ASL teaching position over the phone. I didn't decide there should be all hearing presenters at the conference. While I wasn't the person "in charge" in these situations, I have always been left with an ill feeling, a feeling I am now learning to identify as participation in unethical or oppressive activity. I want to contribute to the dialogue on privilege and power and offer a real-life story ...

I had been teaching ASL for three years when I found myself in a meeting at OSPI (Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction). A chance meeting with an OSPI supervisor at the high school where I teach ASL led to an invite to a meeting in the state office. It was here where I met a woman named Amanda, also a hearing teacher of ASL at the high school level. We participated in a meeting that day together and a few weeks later I received an email from her inviting me to run a full day workshop at a conference later in the summer. I felt flattered. I was excited for the opportunity and accepted her offer. I contacted

Bianca, a close friend who is a Deaf ASL teacher, and asked if she wanted to co-present with me but she already had plans to be out of town. I was disappointed but I let it go.

As time went on and I shared with some of my Deaf friends that I was going to present at the conference, I learned that none of them planned to attend. They said many Deaf teachers had stopped going because they didn't feel respected when they had gone in the past. This is when I began really questioning the situation. Why was I asked to present when I was so new? Why wasn't a Deaf teacher asked to present? Why were so many Deaf teachers choosing not to attend the conference?

I emailed Amanda and asked why she had invited me to present. She said it would be nice to have some "new blood" at the conference. Again, I felt flattered and thought maybe I could be something new and different for the group. I told myself even if there weren't many Deaf people there, that I would be a good representative for them. I would do my best to uphold the standards they would expect and I would learn what it was really like there and be able to make more informed decisions for myself in the future.

The more I thought about it, though, the more uncomfortable I felt. What had I gotten myself into? Who was I about to associate myself with? Why weren't there more Deaf people involved? Was I taking an opportunity from a Deaf person who was better or equally qualified? Why did I have such an unsettling feeling? Was I given this opportunity because I was hearing? Why did I accept the position?

I kept thinking about it and about two weeks before the conference, I realized I didn't want to go if I didn't have a Deaf teacher to co-present with. I had already committed to going so I felt I shouldn't back out but I started to contact people to see if they would be willing to work with me. Would I be able to find a Deaf teacher who wanted to go to a conference with a majority of hearing participants and present with a hearing co-presenter they didn't know? There was one woman I had in mind but when I emailed her, she declined. The conference was so soon and she had a full schedule. So, I contacted Bianca and asked for recommendations of who to contact next. The following day I got an email from

her saying she had someone who was interested. Bianca had done the leg-work and shared my situation with a Deaf teacher from the University, named Karen. Not only was Karen willing and interested, but she was more qualified than me. Again, I wondered, why was I asked to do this when there are clearly Deaf people who are qualified and interested in doing the work?

I asked Karen to write up her bio and then I sent it to Amanda, along with an email informing her that I would have a co-presenter with me. I didn't write everything I'd been thinking and feeling, but I did say that it was important to me to present with a Deaf partner. At that point I had decided I would withdraw my conference registration and refuse to present if I was told Karen could not present with me. Knowing there was potential for confrontation, I took a deep breath, sent the email, and hoped for the best. Amanda responded with a simple, "Thank you for this." I wasn't sure what to make of that statement, but I was glad that Karen and I were all set to present together.

Karen and I are currently working on our presentation and I am now looking forward to the conference. I am looking forward to our long drive in the car, to spending the day presenting together, to learning from each other, and to providing everyone the opportunity to work with a Deaf-hearing team, as opposed to a sole hearing presenter. It seems so simple but it feels like an entirely different situation to me now.

I want to ally with Deaf people and one way I see to do this is to be aware of professional opportunities I am given and to be careful and thoughtful about the roles I accept and the situations I participate in.

Some tips for unpacking:

Make a list of all the privileges you may have.

Take a moment, every day, to work on understanding and undoing your privileges.

Understand that one act on one day does not mean you have completed the work of becoming a hearing ally. Don't seek gratitude for your work in unpacking and/or becoming an ally.

Identify small and large ways you can begin to actively change systems that grant you privileges in order to ensure that the playing field is more equal.

Recognize that remaining “neutral” or “objective” can be a form of hearing privilege.

Share information with non-privileged groups who may not be given access.

If you take a position where you have the opportunity to work with Deaf people, or talk about Deaf people, make sure that you share information about Deaf people, give credit to them. Donate a portion of your profits to organizations led principally by Deaf people.

Accept that making mistakes is part of the unpacking process and becoming an ally. Don't give up.

Reference: Tools for Liberation Packet, 2007 ([www.safehousealliance.org](http://www.safehousealliance.org))

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