1 Missed Connections

We were discussing communication within the family when Julie motioned for the mike. Julie, an office worker in her fifties, seldom came to meetings, but she appeared at this one with her housemate Don. After a glance at him, she plunged ahead.

"I think one of my biggest frustrations is missing the one or two crucial connecting words that let me know what really happened," she said. "I know, for instance, that someone in the house is putting the cats outside for exercise, but what I miss is the one or two words that let me know: Has he taken the cats out for exercise, or is he asking *me* to? And when I ask, 'What did you say?' the words get repeated.

"It's very difficult for people to realize that all you want again are those one or two words. And I hear, 'I'm talking about the cats going out to be exercised,' and I scream back, 'I know that's what you're talking about, but *have* they gone out, are *you* taking them out, or do you want *me* to?'"

Julie laughed, and the others joined in. "And I found out that this is what happens," she said with a nod, "I miss the little connecting *as*, *and*s, and *but*s, or whatever."

"I think that's a tremendously important point," Walt, a retired financial officer, said. "If anybody figures out how to ask for the connecting word without having to listen to the whole damn thing all over again and missing it again, I'd be happy to know about it!"

A few weeks later, Ann and Tom gave a presentation to the group. "Why do you hear but not understand? Do you?

Is that common?" Ann asked. Heads bobbed up and down around the room.

"This is the first thing that Ann and I had to learn," Tom said. "That you can *hear* but not *understand* the word."

I had to learn that difference, too. When hard-of-hearing people say they've missed a word, they have almost always heard sound. The problem is that the sound lacks meaning—they've missed what makes those sounds "words."

"Your voice is made up of both low- and high-frequency sounds," Tom explained to the chapter members. "You don't speak like a middle C on the piano, in one tone. Most of the vowels are in the low frequencies. Most everyone who's hard of hearing hears vowels—*ahhh, eee.* But as you get up in the frequencies are the consonants, the *t*s, *sh*s, *p*s, *t*s, *P*s, *T*s, *P*s, *T*s." As Tom repeated, he raised his voice for emphasis. "*Those* are the things that are hard to hear. And if you can't hear the consonant, you can't understand the word. That's really why you hear but don't understand the word.

"Ann's hearing loss—even with two hearing aids, what does she miss? She misses the *t*s, the *f*s, the *th*s. She *never* hears them. That is why you hear noise. People are actually speaking outside your ability to hear."

Ann joked about those missing consonants. "'Like a Bridge over Troubled Waters'—I hear 'Like a Pitcher of Water.' And how about, 'I'll Never Be Your Beast of Burden'—'I'll Never Be Your Pizza Burning'!"

Susan stood up to agree. "Whenever they announce the temperature on the TV, I can't tell if it's fifty-six or sixty-six. I have to go look at the thermometer."

In 1995, SHHH national president Julie Olson spoke at the North Carolina conference "Breaking Sound Barriers." Olson got her first hearing aid as an adult. In her talk, she

wondered whether her hearing loss began before she started school. "My mother had written down some of my bright sayings in my baby book," Julie said in her afternoon session. "One of them was from when I came home from kindergarten. I had this lovely drawing of a horse, and my teacher added my caption for the picture: 'This is gravity. Gravity is a big horse.' Well," Julie laughed, "the teacher had told us that gravity was a big *force*!

"My mom thought that was the cutest thing, but I wonder, I really wonder, if it was because I didn't hear. That *f* sound, of course, is a very, very soft sound. It's one of the sounds we miss very early when we have a hearing loss."

Later in her presentation, Julie returned to this theme of missed consonants. "When you see a word with only vowels in it, it's very hard to figure out what it is," she said. "The *consonants* are what give sound meaning. I love to do this with spouses of hard-of-hearing people." Julie used a felt-tip pen to write out a pattern of vowels and blanks that appeared on the screen overhead. "Anyone know what this is?"

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When no one raised a hand, Julie jumped in. "It's 'Wheel of Fortune!'" she grinned. "We're pretty good at that, too, by the way. It's amazing how well we do when we're watching that program!"

The Audiogram

Most hard-of-hearing people miss the high-frequency consonants, but everyone's hearing loss is a little different.

"This is an audiogram," Dr. Melanie Harris, a speech pathologist and professor of speech and hearing sciences, told chapter members during a talk on recent developments in

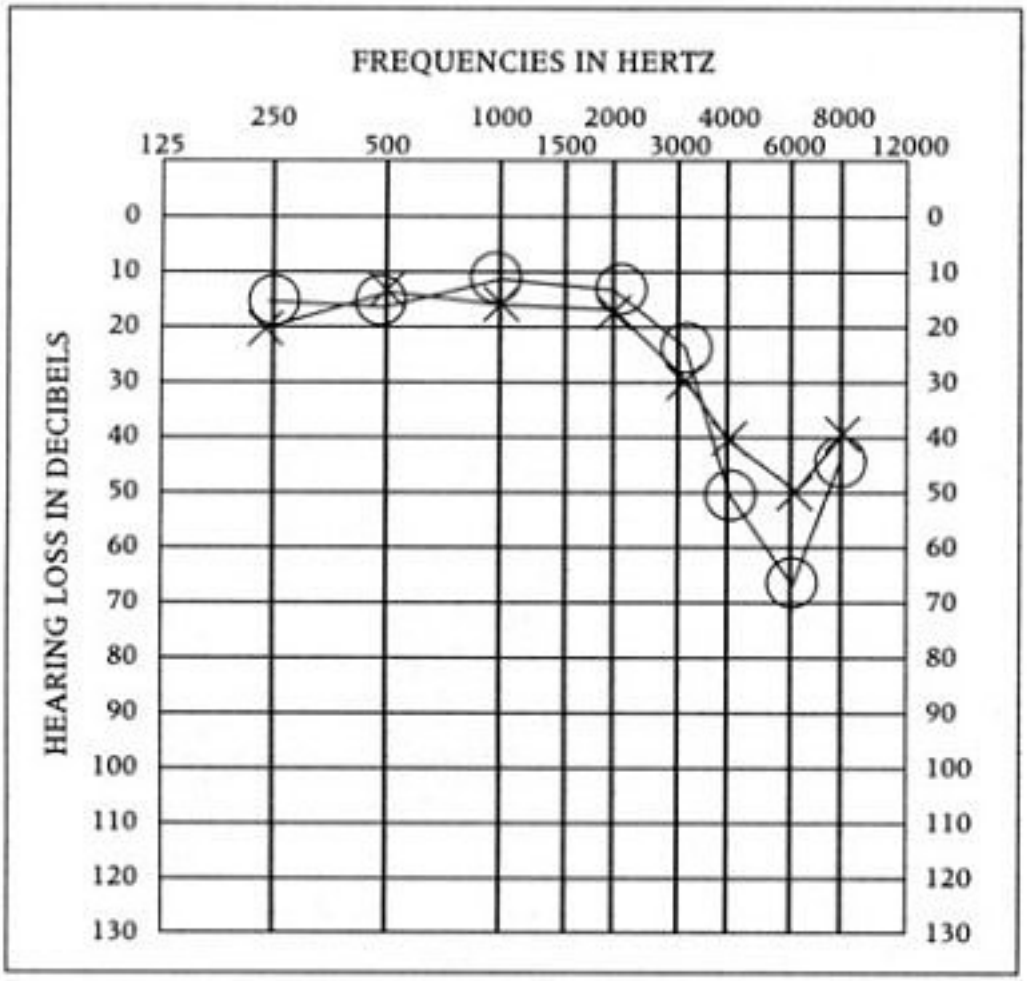

Figure 1. Audiogram showing a Moderate High Frequency Hearing Loss in Both Ears.

hearing aids. "It's a graph of a person's hearing loss." As Dr. Harris spoke, she drew the outlines of an audiogram on a green chalkboard. A reproduction of an actual audiogram is shown in figure 1. Audiograms are used to diagram hearing loss and to fit people with hearing aids.

"Now, this is the loudness scale, along this parameter," Dr. Harris pointed to the vertical axis of the graph. "Zero to 10 [decibels], to me, is normal hearing. To audiologists, zero decibels is where people with normal hearing can just