

Deafness and Difference

by Marilyn May

How do healthy, well-adjusted Deaf people handle the "differentness" of being Deaf? The simple answer is they don't. They don't have to. Because they aren't different. Deaf people today define themselves as a cultural and linguistic minority. Sure, they speak a different language than do their neighbors, and they share a culture with each other, rich in poetry, art, social norms and every aspect of humanity that culture reflects. But having your own language and culture doesn't make you more aware that you are different from people of other cultures. Language and culture are just aspects of existence. A fresh-water trout doesn't feel the water around its body and notice how it isn't salty, or wonder what it's like to be a salt-water trout. Fresh water is that fish's environment, as our language and culture are our environment.

A Deaf person is like a member of any other linguistic minority dealing with life in America. He socializes and lives with people who speak his language, and he deals with English, and the majority culture, when he needs or wants to. No big deal.

That's the simple answer. Not all Deaf people are the same, of course. And not all are raised with healthy, well-adjusted self-concepts. Most Deaf people, in fact, are born to families who have never met another Deaf person. To these families, deafness IS different. It's a disability. Their child can't hear. Can't share the culture of music and sound. Can't communicate with them, at least in spoken English. Are hearing parents pleased when the doctor confirms that their child is deaf? Do they think, "Oh good, my child is a member of a linguistic and cultural minority, and now that culture is open to us, too"? No. They think, "My God! My child is damaged, different, disabled. How will I cope?" They go through a mourning period. They come to accept the loss of the "perfect" child they had expected, and eventually to love and welcome their Deaf child; their "different" child.

Then how does this child, diagnosed with what society and her family think of as a disability, grow up to be a normal, healthy member of the Deaf community? How can anyone whose parents have had to go through a mourning period about them grow up to feel whole and undamaged?

Again, not all Deaf people are the same. Many Deaf children go through a period some time during childhood when they come to realize that most people can hear while they can't. Often, there is a period of wishing one were hearing, or, just

as often, of wishing the rest of one's family were Deaf, so that conversation could flow freely and easily. For some, this being different from hearing friends and relatives becomes a lifelong struggle, and it always hurts a little each time that difference is pointed out. But most Deaf people eventually reach a point when being Deaf is more a source of pride and identity than a defect. For those people, how does this self-acceptance come about?

Let's return, for a moment, to the healthy, well-adjusted Deaf person, who WAS raised healthy and well-adjusted, since infancy, as a Deaf person. How? His parents are Deaf. Being Deaf is the most natural thing in the world in his family. He's born into a language he can understand. From infancy, he attends Deaf cultural events, learns Deaf stories, jokes and fables, grows up in a Deaf way of being. When he thinks of himself as different, it's because his hair is curlier than his friends' hair, or he's better at sports, or not as good at sports, perhaps. Those are his experiences of differentness; the same as any child.

Almost ten percent of Deaf children are born to Deaf parents. And sooner or later, that Deaf child of hearing parents, who was diagnosed as deaf by a doctor and whose parents came to accept her deafness after a normal mourning period, will meet and get to know a Deaf family, or a member of the Deaf community. This child will then be exposed to the concept of pride in Deaf identity, and she will come to share that sense of normalcy. She'll realize that in American Sign Language (ASL) there is nothing she can't express, and that among Deaf people there are no doors closed to her.

What about that child's family? Some hearing families accept the invitation to join the Deaf community, along with their Deaf child. It's a challenge, to be sure. It requires an open mind and a willingness to learn a new language. Not everyone in the Deaf Community is Deaf, of course. The community includes hearing children of Deaf parents, hearing relatives and friends of Deaf people, interpreters, other hearing people who know ASL; anyone, in fact, who is interested. The Deaf community is a large, diverse community that spans a wide geographic area. Though people who live in rural or outlying areas may have to travel to find other Deaf people, for those who are interested, or Deaf themselves, it isn't hard to find the Deaf community.

Some hearing families of Deaf people choose not to be part of the Deaf community. They may feel embarrassed if their ASL isn't perfect, or they may feel unwelcome by the Deaf community. Their Deaf child may move comfortably back and forth between the Deaf world and the hearing world, to be with their Deaf friends and to be with their hearing family. Or their Deaf child, as she gets older, may become much closer to her Deaf friends than to her family — her Deaf friends, in a sense, become her family. As adults, most Deaf people marry other Deaf people, or hearing members of the Deaf community. Some hearing families of Deaf adults, who weren't part of the Deaf community when their children were young, find themselves joining the Deaf community later in life, as the only way to stay involved in their adult son's or daughter's life.

It may be that a family's willingness to join the Deaf community is a factor in how well-adjusted and healthy that child's attitude about being Deaf will be. Or it may be that personality is the strongest factor — that some children just have an ability to grow up feeling good about being themselves and being Deaf. Most families do, sooner or later, come to terms with having a child who is Deaf, and most Deaf children do grow up to feel good about themselves as Deaf people. If a family wants to facilitate this process, the best way to help is by acknowledging and discussing their feelings about having a child who is Deaf, then getting in touch with healthy,

adult Deaf people as soon as possible, to start to learn about all the positive aspects of being Deaf.

True, there are times, every day, when a Deaf person's speaking voice attracts the attention of others nearby, or when a Deaf person has to point out his selection from a menu to the waiter, or write her destination on a piece of paper for a taxi driver. People do stare, for a minute, at Deaf people using ASL, and there are moments in every Deaf person's life when she is thought to be daydreaming, or stupid, for not responding to a spoken comment. But for most Deaf people these are passing inconveniences, or minor misunderstandings, common to anyone who belongs to a minority group that isn't fully understood by the majority. Being different is not the defining characteristic of most Deaf people's lives.

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