Danielle Kopacki

Professor Kellie Hay

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Deaf: An Unheard Community

> *I have always thought it would be a blessing if each person could be blind and deaf for a few days during his early adult life. Darkness would make him appreciate sight; silence would teach him the joys of sound*
> *– Helen Keller*

We are often deaf and blind to the plights of others. We are sometimes cognizant of their suffering, but we are insecure and swift to rationalize that each person's plight is a result of his or her own actions. We then detach ourselves from any personal responsibility, and even if we do feel guilty, "America's predominant culture insists that little we do can matter," according to Paul Rogat Loeb in *Soul of a Citizen* (127). We forget that even as individuals, we still are citizens. We still are part of an institution that views massive populations as disposable, and reserves affluence to a small population of the rich and powerful.

As citizens, it is our duty to actuate social change. By connecting and collaborating, we become part of a collective that empowers us. Our democracy operates because of its citizens and through service we can make a better future. Rather than sympathy, we must employ empathy. Instead of sharing similar tastes and opinions, we need to vicariously experience thoughts, attitudes, and feelings on an intellectual level.

We can do this by engaging others whose stories "Let us glimpse the lives of those older or younger, richer or poorer, of different races, from places we'll never even see…We are more likely to challenge homelessness if we hear testimonies of individual people living on the street" (Loeb 127). By volunteering, we expose ourselves to the implications of the maltreatment of

marginalized populations. And through exposure we can begin to take interest, and then take action. Thomas K. Holcomb explains in an article for *American Annals of the Deaf*:

> It has been argued that only members of such groups can acquire knowledge on the truth associated with their cultural beliefs and experiences. In this sense, the epistemology of the minority consists of theories of knowledge created by members, about members' modes of knowing, for the purpose of liberating members. Similarly, it has been the perspective of some deaf leaders that the quality of deaf education can be improved only when justified beliefs and knowledge vis à vis Deaf epistemology are better understood and embraced.

I am still learning the implications of deafness. Auntie Barbara, my father's aunt, first ignited my curiosity. As a child, I had learned a few signs and the alphabet, but when I signed "I love you" to Auntie Barbara, who is profoundly deaf, her excitement and joy was infectious. I didn't realize until I reached adulthood that her excitement over that one sign was rooted not so much in its meaning, but in my efforts. By approaching her in her native language, rather than expecting her to use mine, I altered our connection.

This is similar to convergence in accommodation theory, which occurs "when people make their speech and communication patterns more like that of their interlocutors" as Angie Williams mentions in an article she wrote for International Journal of Applied Linguistics (2). Whereas the usual communication pattern Auntie Barbara and I followed was that I would speak clearly and she would lip-read, I converged and met her at a level of communication more comfortable to her, which, as is common with convergence, she responded to positively (Williams 2).

While attending college, I explored sign language more. I selected Deaf Community Advocacy Network (Deaf C.A.N.) and the sign language program at Powell Middle School for my volunteering experience.

Deaf C.A.N. is a non-profit organization originally funded by the Community Services Association through the Oakland Livingston Human Services Agency. Deaf C.A.N.'s vision is to "be the community leader in providing Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals equal opportunities to succeed in society" by linking them "with the community through communication, advocacy, leadership and socialization:" Deaf C.A.N.'s mission (deafcan.org). The organization also provides casework for barriers to service, interpreting services, support programs such as for youth, parents, AIDS patients, sign language classes, and sensitivity training for law enforcement officers.

In Deaf C.A.N.'s formative years, many of these services were scarcely available to deaf people living in the surrounding areas. By conglomerating, Deaf C.A.N. became a "one-stop shop" for deaf people. Before everyone had their own computers at home where they could just look up information, Deaf C.A.N. was an excellent resource for the over half a million people in Michigan that are deaf or hard of hearing.

Deaf C.A.N. is also the largest interpreter network in Michigan. After the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) passed in 1990, if a deaf person asks an institution; school, doctor's office, dentist, etc. to provide an interpreter, that institution must provide one, as well as cover the cost. Though this is a very abridged version of the provisions of the act, this concept is essential to Deaf C.A.N.'s interpreter services. Because the network of interpreters is so large, Deaf C.A.N. provides services to many local hospitals, clinics, doctor's offices and schools. Occasionally, I've had a smaller dentist's office or doctor's office call because they don't want to

pay, and then I have to reiterate the provisions of the ADA, or pass the call along to one of the workers for further description.

As a volunteer, my task is to serve as a receptionist at Deaf C.A.N.'s office in Sylvan Lake. I answer and direct phone calls, some of which are mediated through Video Relay Service. VRS allows a person to sign to an interpreter through videoconference equipment. I receive Interpreter Request Forms and check them for completion. I greet anyone who comes into the office and I am expected to chat with them while they wait for their appointments, or to use the fax machine, copy machine, and the telephone typewriter (TTY).

My job is not the most important job in the world, nor is it the hardest. But I felt as though it was a gentle way to break into a new community. Full immersion into the deaf community probably would have sent me into a panic. A couple of unemployed deaf men visit the office regularly just to chat or eat lunch; I befriended two of them, and challenging though it may be, we try to communicate. Freddie and Abram were always very kind to me, and if it weren't for their visits, I'd have not taken as much interest in the deaf community as I now have.

Social accommodation theory focuses also on conversational needs, which leads to discourse management strategies (Williams 3). I realize now that on some levels, I had failed discourse. One discourse management strategy that Williams mentions is "Adjusting the ideational/referential content of talk" which refers to topic selection and topic sharing. I remember the first time I met Freddie. He asked me about school; who my sign language teacher was, what I was studying, and I was game to answer his questions, but when we had exhausted my education as our topic, I failed, out of shyness and fear, to open a new topic, and chose to sit behind the counter and avoid making eye contact with him.

Another discourse management strategy that came into play was with a deaf man I did not succeed in befriending. In fact, I made him very angry, and I found out he later on inquired what days I would be volunteering, I'm assuming so that he could avoid me, since I never saw him after the day I met him. We struggled over role relations, another focus of accommodation theory (Williams 3). As part of my volunteering, when people arrive for their appointments, I am to ask their names and who they have come to see. This particular gentleman gave me very little personal information, and instead just repeated that he was here to see Brenda and completely ignored my function.

The more frustrated I became as I tried to do my job, the faster he signed so that I couldn't even understand him any longer. He changed the way he addressed me, because of "perceived discrepancies in power" (Williams 3). He wanted to control the situation and I resisted. I scuttled back to Brenda and explained the situation, and the gentleman became increasingly animated as he and Brenda spoke about me. I started to cry and then ran out of the room. Then he hollered; another part of deaf culture I was previously unaware of. Use of voice was a sign of extreme anger, and it was very rude in this scenario. I had no idea what was being said about me except that I caught him using the sign for stupid at least once or twice, but after some more furious signing, Brenda kicked him out of the office.

I was terrified to return shortly after that incident. I sheepishly recovered when I figured out that the miscommunication between he and I was my fault. Miscommunication, according to Williams is "unintentional glitches and misunderstandings in talk and meaning transfer" (4). The signs for name and sit are very similar, and while they are beginner signs, I somehow confused them. While I thought I was asking "What is your name?" I was basically saying "What are you

sitting (there for)?" He wasn't answering my intended question: instead he was answering my actual question, which was rather rude.

Had this happened before I took Mulitcultural Communication, I'm not sure I would have really understood the root of his anger. Studying different cultures, I learned that dominant culture does not often leave much space for those who are different. As a deaf minority in a hearing majority, that man has, like most deaf people do, probably spent his entire life accommodating others. And I tore down a temple when I screwed up. Deaf C.A.N. was supposed to be a haven to deaf people, where everyone knows sign and no one has to struggle with deafness. I hurt him.

While I am restricted to my specific function in the organization, I have been working to become slightly more involved. I have been invited to several events, including a Christmas party and the unofficial "Deaf Coffee" that takes place the first Friday of every month at a Starbucks in Troy. Upon mentioning that I'm also working toward a degree in Journalism I have been consulted to possibly do some writing for the Hearing Loss Association of Michigan website and to blog for ASLdeafined.com. My further involvement with Deaf C.A.N. is restricted however, because of my lack of experience with sign language. So far I've taken three classes, but I'm starkly aware that I'm nowhere near fluency, but, as Loeb says "We can't predict our impact, which is why we should persist" (329).

So far my best experiences at Deaf C.A.N. have inspired me to continue growing my involvement with the culture as well as my knowledge of the language. A new volunteer joined our ranks recently. Dylan aspires to be a social worker, so he is working closely with Rosalee. He is the first deaf person I've met that was my age. We talked about our colleges and our majors, but his signing was so crisp and so clear that I had no trouble understanding him and was

able to actually hold a complete conversation without begging him to slow down or repeat anything. I had butterflies. Not like having a crush, but I was so excited to be on an even keel, instead of feeling like a child that everyone has to be nice to.

I mentioned to Denise about the ease with which I understood him and she explained that deaf adults become "lazy" with their language or modify the way they sign depending whom they are talking to. The latter part of her explanation is part of accommodation theory, which is the way "People modify their communication according to situational, personal or even interactional variables" (Williams 2). Dylan modified his sign without belittling me, and without me asking, and did it in such a way that did not embarrass me. I wish I could thank him, but I'm not sure now that I have the means to really do so.

Deaf C.A.N.'s office has six full-time workers, including a social worker and two case workers. The group dynamic is very relaxed and there is no apparent chain of command. Marcie Colton is in charge, but I've never seen her exercise her authority. I was told that she was involved with the original formation of the organization in the 1981. The other workers respect her and are more mindful of their chatter when she is around.

Susan Lundy, a case worker, is deaf, so when she is present, signing is required. It is imperative in deaf culture that if a deaf person is present and everyone else knows sign, it must be used. Speaking in Susan's presence rudely excludes her, even if she is not a part of the conversation. In *Soul of a Citizen*, Loeb says that "We realize ourselves fully only through interaction with others, a good society fosters community in all its forms," (259). Deaf culture is full of idiosyncrasies that the hearing are unaware of.

At Powell Middle School, it is my job to help two classes of hearing eighth graders learn about some of the idiosyncrasies of deaf culture, as well as the language. While Paul Fugate, the

sign language teacher for Romeo Schools, as well as my sign language professor at Oakland University, teaches, I observe and help when I can. During interactive parts of the class, I answer questions the students have and help them with their signing. Paul focuses on using music to help the kids learn new signs, as well as create excitement to learn language through pop culture. They have learned, as a group, "Thriller" by Michael Jackson, "Imagine" by John Lennon, and "Born Free" by Kid Rock. Each class is also divided into small groups where kids have, with some help, translated and learned to sign songs they selected. The artists the kids have chosen to sign range from Simon & Garfunkel to Taylor Swift but enthusiasm unites them even as their music tastes differ.

The kids' enthusiasm has spread throughout the school, and Romeo is seeking a second teacher for the program, since Paul teaches at Romeo High School as well as Powell. More kids want to enroll in sign language classes than the school can currently support. This case is not an anomaly. Paul, who encourages me almost daily to become a sign language teacher, has told me that he was offered jobs by two other school districts before accepting his position at Romeo Schools. Oxford Schools, as well as West Bloomfield, are both seeking teachers to start or continue sign language programs.

These vacancies are odd. Paul told me of a former student of his that is teaching sign language for a public school even though she has only taken as many sign language classes as I have. So it is not steep qualifications that are restricting fulfillment of these positions and many, many others, but lack of awareness and marginalization of deaf culture. Paul tells me that if I continue pursuing sign language, I am guaranteed a job after college because of the intense need for interpreters and teachers.

This need may have risen from interest "placed upon the extent to which employers provide accommodations to workers with a hearing impairment" stimulated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) as mentioned in an article by Paul D. Geyer and John G. Schroedel for The Journal of Rehabilitation. While the ADA was passed in 1990, if awareness is not cultivated in youth, few of them will even know that sign language interpreting is a viable career choice. I didn't even consider it myself until my senior year of college, and I am reluctant to pursue it because I've already nearly finished a double degree and more school doesn't sit well with my current post-college plans.

Michigan has a large population of people that are self-identified as either deaf or hard of hearing. According to the 2011 Census, Michigan's population is around 9.88 million. 444,428 people are of Hispanic or Latino origin and 609,183 people are deaf or hard of hearing. Yet far more public schools teach children Spanish than American Sign Language. I am not saying that all Hispanic people speak only Spanish, or that all hard of hearing people use only sign language. However, the need for people fluent in sign language is almost crippling, and positions in many institutions remain unfilled.

In our shaky economy, it seems that more students should pursue a career in which they were basically guaranteed a job upon graduation. But, as Ram Dass & Paul Gorman mention in *How Can I Help?*, "people don't like to be should upon, they'd rather discover than be told," (160). My own experiences at Deaf C.A.N. have helped me discover this gaping need. Many times, we are unable to fulfill requests for interpreters simply because no one is available.

Deaf C.A.N. contracts more than forty interpreters, and many of them work more than full-time, or have full-time jobs alongside interpreting. Interpreters are needed, not only for

specific deaf people, such as for doctor's appointments, etc., but also in hospitals, courts, schools, government and numerous other institutions. Deaf people struggle to find jobs, and have lower standardized test scores (Holcomb 475). In part, perhaps this supposed inferiority, which once made the term "deaf and dumb" common, is simply caused by obstructed communication due to lack of interpreters, or even people who know any sign language at all.

Another focus of accommodation theory comes into play here. Deaf people, as receivers of spoken language rather than sign, may have low "Interpretive competence, which is their ability to figure out what is being said to them" (Williams 3). Only a very small percentage of deaf people are at all competent at lip-reading, so meaning is lost; if the words conveyed are even received at all. Williams says that interpretive strategies can be used for clarification (3).

But in the case of deaf people, changing pitch or tonality will do no good. Changes in vocabulary and emphasis may perhaps increase clarity, but only as the sender adapts the message for the receiver. Most of the time, a deaf person's comprehension is extremely low because reception is also low. It's really not any better than trying to put a puzzle together in the dark, only to find out come daylight, that half of the pieces are missing.

Like a puzzle, the deaf community has slowly been piecing together. Deaf culture is evolving, with its idiosyncrasies, heroes, movements, and mores. Like English, the language adapts to the times. Slang signs become popular terminology, dialects develop and die out. I have learned so much about deaf people and my exposure has been minimal, but enough to leave me wanting for more. Perhaps, as Helen Keller believed, if we each had to spend a few days in the shoes of a deaf and blind person, we would appreciate our surroundings enough to realize that our contributions solve the issues. By actively participating, we can make the necessary changes that can help deaf people have equal opportunities as the hearing. Just as the founders of Deaf

C.A.N. began their labors in 1981 and created an organization that gives a marginalized population a niche, our labors can make a difference. Our citizenship, which we take for granted, bears also a duty. Without the hard work of others, the very things we take for granted may not ever have been ours. So we, too, must fight and push and participate to keep our citizenship and we, too, must share it with others. Like Ram Dass and Paul Gorman mention in *How Can I Help?,* upon entering a sanatorium, the narrator does not treat the people there as invalids, as disabled, or as insane. Instead he or she says we need to keep in mind that "they're equally as human as I am." We need to do the same. With everyone.

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