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Something Less? Something More!

Deafness. Suddenly I was face to face with it. I had opened my door to find someone standing outside, who I recognized as my new neighbor, Ken. He said nothing, smiled, pointed to his ear, and shook his head. So he was deaf! At the moment I realized this, I felt fear. How would we communicate? I'd never talked with anyone deaf before. Sure, I'd seen "them" waving their hands over at the school for the deaf, but I'd never thought much more about them--yet here was "one of them" at my door!

Ken smiled again, and with a questioning expression on his face, made a simple scissoring gesture with his hand. I grasped his intent--he wanted to borrow some scissors. After cutting through the communication barrier in this first exchange, Ken and I found other occasions to talk. Initially, we drew letters in the air or wrote things on paper to get our thoughts across. Finding this slow and cumbersome, however, I soon began asking him how to "sign" various words. He was an enthusiastic and creative teacher, and our rapport developed as I gained a new ability to "speak" and understand his silent language. It wasn't long before I found myself with a full-fledged fascination for this new language: American Sign Language. ASL is not a form of manual English, I discovered, but is a separate language with its own grammar and rules of expression. The speaker's face, hands, and upper body convey information to the listener's eyes. Every bit of information, emotion, or nuance of meaning that can be conveyed by spoken language to the ear, can be brought, instead, to the eye, by means of the rich language of sign.

Ken introduced me to his deaf friends, and I accompanied them to plays and other events

which were interpreted into sign. I also attended many of the special sports and cultural events which were put on by and for the deaf. Surrounded by flying hands and animated, soundless conversations, I often felt like a stranger in a land where everyone could communicate fluently except me. I kept my eyes open, though, and after months of immersion, I found myself swimming out of my sea of ignorance. Communication began to flow, along with a new appreciation for this community--a people with their own culture: Deaf Culture.

I was surprised to find that the deaf community really does have its own clubs, conventions, customs and colloquialisms. As I became steeped in this culture, I realized that many deaf people do not view their hearing loss as a tragic handicap or deficit, but many see it merely as a difference. This difference is dealt with through an expansion of communication avenues and outlets, and through bonding between people who share an identity as Deaf persons. The challenges deafness presents are squarely faced, and creative contributions and depth of character grow out of these challenges.

Through my experiences with deaf people, I was changed. I broke out of my limited view of the world. I realized that people who do not speak my language, nor communicate by speech as I do, have excellent qualities that I would be wise to appreciate. Deaf people do not lack anything that is necessary for full humanity or for living full lives. Their language and culture can actually enhance the lives of others. Rather than representing something less, deaf culture offers something more.

Chris Wixtrom