OVERLOOKED

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This narrative portrays aspects of the deaf community through a lens that is both personal and social work oriented. The author frequently finds herself straddling uncomfortable roles between the deaf and hearing worlds because of communication difficulties between deaf clients and hearing service providers. She is often faced with the awkwardness of hearing intimate information about clients before they do. At times she is unsure how to interpret insensitive or derogatory comments spoken by hearing people, and other times she is unsure about whether or not to act on behalf of a deaf person in the face of overt discrimination. This narrative describes several incidents that involved the author personally or as a social worker, and a deaf person. Historical and social knowledge is drawn upon as a way to reflect on and understand these experiences.

** Names have been changed to protect privacy.*

Patty* and I sat in the small, dingy, gray office at the D.C. General Hospital awaiting the doctor's arrival. Patty, a 40-something African American woman, hadn't been feeling well for a while. The staff from the group home where she lived asked me to schedule a doctor's appointment. When I called to make the appointment, I asked for a sign language interpreter. The curt woman on the phone asked if I could be her interpreter. I explained that I am a social worker, not a certified interpreter. I explained that according to the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act, they were under legal obligation to provide the interpreter. She reluctantly told me that she would see what she could do.

On this afternoon, Patty and I waited in the sterile, gray office, suspecting that an interpreter would not be coming. This was nothing new. I have been in this situation too many times to count. They knew as well as I did that the likelihood that Patty will file a civil action lawsuit was slim to none. She fit the profile of those who were least likely to complain about not having an interpreter. Patty lived in a supervised community group home. She is African American and deaf. She graduated high school, but schizophrenia soon took over her life. Patty didn't understand English very well; she signed and wrote in American Sign Language. Doctors rarely understood her written ASL because her grammar wasn't connected in ways that make sense in English. They thought she was illiterate. Patty did not seem the type to them who would raise issues of discrimination. In the busy D.C. hospital, it was business as usual for everyone, except for Patty. She knew something was wrong with her body.

While I waited, I reflected on the various appointments Patty and I had been to recently. Sometimes the doctors and nurses insisted that she could read lips, mistaking her nodding head for comprehension and agreement. Patty nodded to be friendly, to give the appearance that she understood, but she really didn't. Patty and her health care providers rarely wrote their conversations on paper. Patty had difficulty understanding the doctor's written English. They struggled with the slow back and forth writing that interfered with their busy schedules. The doctor wanted to use his voice with her. I explained to him that if he spoke to his deaf patients without an interpreter, the patients wouldn't know what was happening. The doctors from private practices were often reluctant to provide sign language interpreters. They didn't want to pay for the service, and felt frustrated at the slow, tedious style of written communication. My role as the social worker was not to be at the disposal of the doctor; my responsibility was to advocate for my client. Deaf people with additional issues like mental illness or developmental delays often did not understand their rights as patients. My primary role was to help make sure they have access to services. I also helped practitioners understand the consequences of not obtaining interpreters. So, I sat back and observed Patty's interaction with the doctor. I would only assist with communication when my client asked me for help.

On this day, Patty's life would soon change. Patty asked me to interpret the conversation. The doctor opened the door and mumbled something unintelligibly while looking down at her chart. Patty looked at me; I shrugged. I told the doctor that I didn't understand what he said. He ignored my statement and hurried to Patty who was sitting on the tissue-covered table in a white cotton gown. With his stethoscope he listened to her heart and lungs. He looked at me.

"Tell her that her tests don't look good. She has cancerous tumors in her lungs. She needs to be scheduled for radiation therapy."

I was shocked, speechless, and signless. Patty kept a close watch on my facial expressions and asked, "What? What's he saying?"

I translated what the doctor said word-for-word. Patty, who was prone to agitation and anxiety even on a calm day, signed very rapidly.

"Me die? What you mean tumor? What you talking? What radiation? What mean? Me die? Me die?"

She looked back and forth from the doctor to me. Her signs were accompanied by shrill vocalizations that became louder as the urgency of her unanswered questions progressed. I told the doctor that she didn't understand; she had some questions. The doctor, pressed for time, told me to make an appointment with the oncologist at Washington Hospital Center then abruptly left the room. The entire exchange happened in 10 minutes.

Patty and I left the doctor's office in a cloud of disbelief and fear. She asked me repeatedly if she was going to die. I told her that we should first talk to a "cancer doctor" and see what the treatment will be. The Washington Hospital Center, I knew from previous experience, would provide sign language interpreters. Indeed, at Patty's first appointment, the interpreter was already there when we arrived. Even when Patty decided to stop radiation and chemotherapy some time later, the interpreter translated her wishes to the oncologist.

I hate the awkwardness of hearing intimate information before my clients. I've learned of cancers, HIV-positive results, family deaths, loss of jobs, and loss of children before the owners of these unfortunate circumstances knew it. I've overheard the not-so-soft whispers of people around me making fun of the way someone signs or interpreting a non-response as just being an asshole. Even the most educated, most articulate, most successful deaf people are faced with others' assumptions. They are left out of conversations, negotiations, and private jokes. Many times, unbeknownst to the deaf person, he/she is overlooked and ignored. Only when the deaf person uses his/her voice or pounds his/her hand on the table will he/she be regarded by his hearing counterpart. People will think a deaf person is rude or even violent, not realizing that table-pounding is often used to capture the attention among those in the deaf world.

I frequently find myself straddling awkward roles between the deaf and hearing worlds. Do I interpret the ugly remark that the person standing next to me just said? Do I ignore the person's rude behavior and continue as if I, too, am deaf? Do I turn to the person making the remark and confront the idiotic behavior? The truth of the matter is that I may do any one of those things depending upon the situation and circumstance. Sometimes, I find it easier just to pretend that I am deaf too and walk away with my secret tucked safely inside. Other times, I turn to the person next to me and tell him/her what an idiot I think the person is. Still, sometimes I choose to interpret the comment even if it means interrupting something important and special.

One warm May afternoon, I stood in the courthouse parking lot with my soon-to-be husband, Paul. We had the jitters, like many couples. We talked about how excited and happy we were. We hoped the interpreter arrived to translate the ceremony. We wondered how long we would have to wait to see the judge. We were engrossed in the excitement of the moment when a slender woman approached us. She asked, "Are you getting married?"

I interpreted her question to Paul and replied, "Yes." She paused for a moment looking at Paul and at me.

"Is he deaf and dumb?" she asked pointing her finger at Paul.

Again, I interpreted what the woman was saying to Paul. I told her and signed at the same time, "He's deaf, not dumb. You know, he has a Ph.D. and teaches at a university."

She paused even longer this time, seemingly unable to comprehend the implications of what I said. Paul said nothing and he and I stared back at the woman. She looked again at us, the minutes unwinding slowly.

Finally, she said, "Well, you know, I am just amazed at how those deaf and dumb people can even drive cars. You'd think they'd get into accidents and all. Bless you child. You're doing such a good thing." The woman flashed a brilliant smile and gave my shoulder an affectionate squeeze before hurrying off. We stood in the parking lot shaking our heads. I was incensed.

I signed to Paul, "Wow, she's really stupid. I can't believe that woman. Who does she think she is anyway? Does she even realize how stupid she sounded? What's the matter with people these days? They act like they've never seen another deaf person before. Geez, I just can't believe her."

"Yeah. It happens all the time," he replied.

Paul's resignation coupled with my outrage made me feel indelibly sad. No matter what I said, the image of him as some sort of freak laid firmly in her mind.

The woman's pairing of the words "deaf and dumb," is telling and old fashioned. It is hard to trace back the term's origins. As early as the 1800's, the term "deaf and dumb" was used commonly among deaf as well as hearing people. In reports and addresses, even those with highest esteem and education used the term. Gradually, the term "deaf-mutes" began to replace or run alongside deaf and dumb. From the frequency with which it appears in early documents of deaf archives, it appears that this seemingly demeaning term was used and accepted as commonplace.

In 1816, Laurent Clerc, a deaf Frenchman, came to the United States in an effort to establish the first school for the deaf. Clerc attended the Institution for the Deaf and Dumb in Paris first as student, then later as a teacher. On a trip to France, Reverend Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet became entranced with the manual conversational language of the deaf and sought to bring Clerc back to the United States to set up a similar school. In an address to the Governor of Connecticut, Laurent Clerc, along with his friends, Reverend Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Mason Cogswell, addressed the Connecticut delegates:

> *"Gentlemen – You know the motive which has led me to the United States of America... It is to speak to you more conveniently of the deaf and dumb, of those unfortunate beings who, deprived of their sense of hearing and consequently of that speech would be condemned all of their life, to the most sad vegetation if nobody came to their succor, but who intrusted [sic] to our regenerative hands, will pass from the class of brutes to the class of men. It is to affect your hearts with regard to their unhappy state, to excite the sensibility and solicit the charity of your generous souls in their favor; respectfully to entreat you to occupy yourselves in promoting their future happiness* (p. 6)."

As Clerc pointed out, the idea of establishing a school was seen as an act of charity for "those poor, unfortunate wretches who might otherwise lead a vegetative life." Even though Laurent Clerc and Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet were both traveled and learned men, they played upon the ignorance and stereotypes held by officials in order to receive support for the deaf school. Was this an intentional ploy? Or were they simply using the language in the fashion of the day?

Whatever their plan, in 1817, the American School for the Deaf and Dumb located in Hartford, Connecticut was established, making it the first school for the deaf in the United States. Though the very idea of establishing a school for deaf children was seen as an act of charity, a new seed would be planted. Those poor, unfortunate wretches who might otherwise lead a vegetative life would later prove to not only be educable, but very clever indeed.

In 1858, talk of a new state, a community of deaf-mutes, began to circulate. Printed in the American Annals of the Deaf, letters between J. Booth and Edmund Flournoy (1852) prompted a heated discussion about the creation of a separate state where deaf people could have control of their world. Flournoy's idea was to purchase a large parcel of land and sell it to deaf people who would come from all over the world. He promised to establish a democratic voting system, including giving women the right to vote. Determined in his resolve, Flourney wrote:

> "*If mutes cannot do this they are justly held as inferior and useless in the world. For they ought not to present to be any body among hearing men, who do what deaf 'dogs' shrink from achieving alone. Even should the contemplated colony fail, as Mr. Booth predicts, one great utility to ourselves will have been derived from practical experience. We shall have proved to other nations and our own that deaf and dumb people are capable of many things; and to our successors in misfortune, office and employment may be opened. They may be treated as men and women of some use to society and to the country, and respected accordingly* (p.15) ."

The deaf-mute colony was never established, but the idea persisted for a number of years. Clearly, the men involved in this endeavor did not support the notion that they were inferior, unteachable, and incompetent. Their goals were lofty and idealistic, reflecting a deep-rooted pride and strength that can be seen running through the deaf community today. If the larger society would not recognize their worth, then they would create a society of their own. Mired in the complexities of power and ownership, several issues caused dissension among the visionaries. What would happen, one argument went, if the hearing children of deaf parents inherited the property? Within one generation, the community would be primarily hearing.

In a letter published in the *American Annals of the Deaf*, the writer, referred to as a deaf-mute, addressed a matter of great concern among the deaf community. H.M. Chamberlayne (1859) asked that the matter of deaf peddling and vagrancy be addressed. Deaf peddlers, sometimes seen today selling signed alphabet cards, even then were considered an embarrassing aspect of the deaf community to its members. Chamberlayne wrote in 1859:

> "*Dear Sir- I wish to inform the teachers of the deaf and dumb, through your useful periodical, that several northern mutes have visited Richmond and some other cities as vagrants. Indeed, my object in doing so is to call their attention to the fact that it is absolutely necessary for them to impress their pupils with the value of character* (237)."

A couple of years ago, I passed a deaf man selling alphabet cards outside a nearby Dunkin Donuts. After ordering my coffee, I stopped outside to talk to the man. He explained that he was retired from his government job and receiving a small pension. I asked him why he was selling those cards - didn't he feel embarrassed? He replied that he spent his check as soon as he got it. Selling those cards helped bring in extra cash.

Historically, deaf people were lumped into a category with people who were mentally retarded. (Bragg, 2001) As late as the 1890's, they were prohibited from marrying one another for fear that a breed of uneducated heathens would be created. They were offered menial jobs with less than menial wages. However, within their community, they recognized their untapped potentials for honor and equality. Many knew of themselves what others didn't know: they were productive, bright, articulate, and creative people. They were not mentally retarded or deficient. They had much to offer to society.

Eventually, protections were put in place to address the struggles of disabled people. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act was established in 1973 by Congress to protect the civil rights of people with disabilities. The act covered all services that received Federal money, or in other words, public services. For deaf children, it meant that they could receive special services at no cost to them—like attendance at deaf residential schools, sign language interpreters in the classroom, and Individual Education Plans. These educational plans listed specific learning objectives, the method an instructor would use to help the student achieve the objectives, and ongoing reports documenting progress toward those objectives. The idea behind these plans was to ensure that all students with disabilities receive a proper education. (Bragg, 2001)

In 1990, Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act, legislation to prevent discrimination of people with disabilities from private services of society. This law required that appropriate accommodations be made, including handicapped accessible bathrooms, ramps into public buildings, and a fair shot at employment opportunities. This law enabled deaf people to request interpreters or other accommodations—like closed captioning or TTYs (text telephones)—at hospitals, private doctors' offices, theaters, job interviews, and on public transportation. The legislation was wide-sweeping and was intended to allow disabled people full integration into society. (Bragg, 2001)

Despite the government protections put in place, deaf people continue to have limited access to communication, education, and opportunities. Even today, use of the label "deaf and dumb" by some hearing people is not uncommon. Within the past year, I've heard deaf people referred to as "deaf and dumb," "deaf-mutes," and "death" people. A common reference term is "hearing-impaired," a label that has also lost favor among many in the deaf community because of its connotations of disease and dysfunction. Sadly, instances when the deaf people are subtly excluded continue.

One winter evening, I attended a fundraising event for Arundel Lodge, a community service agency that provides support for adults with mental illness. The deaf program at Arundel Lodge was small, with only about 25 clients and staff members. The room was packed with family and friends of Arundel Lodge. Among the hundred or so attendees, ten deaf clients sat in their reserved front-row seats so they could see the sign language interpreter. The interpreter sat rather than stood. As a result, the deaf man sitting next to me in the middle of the room and the two deaf staff members sitting in the back couldn't see what was being said. The deaf man next to me tried to initiate a conversation because he didn't understand what was happening at the front of the room. I was self-conscious because he was also voicing his words – albeit unintelligibly. Those sitting around us turned and stared. I put my hands to my lips. Embarrassed, he abruptly turned away.

As the event continued, I turned around to look at the two deaf staff members who sat behind me.

I signed, "Why isn't the interpreter standing? You can't see her, can you?"

Both of the women signed simultaneously, "No, we can't see." They shrugged their shoulders.

I noticed that the interpreter didn't bother to sign the musical performances. Instead she sat at the front of the room watching the musicians perform. I suspected her signing skills were limited. From where I sat, I could see that she didn't sign very well. I have had the pleasure of watching some of the best interpreters sign theatrical and musical performances. Some, if their skills are highly trained, can even sign instrumental music by using their body, hands, and faces to interpret the rhythm and emotion of the music. They can look like they are dancing an emotional, passionate performance following the flow of the music. This interpreter sat in the front, occasionally smiling at the deaf people in the audience who were clearly bored. They conversed among themselves, talking about mutual friends and counselors and the next day's plans.

When the performances were finished, the executive director of Arundel Lodge, Mike Drummond, stood to present awards to meritorious staff and members. He announced that the award for the employee of the year went to Dawn Padon, the deaf program manager at Arundel Lodge. Dawn, unable to hear Mike or see the interpreter, was engrossed in a conversation with the deaf woman sitting next to her. A hearing colleague tugged at her sweater and pointed to the front of the room. Dawn lifted her hands, gesturing "What?" Others tugged and pointed to the front of the room. Dawn, uncertain about why she was being called to the stage, approached the front with a fearful and anxious look on her face. Only when she arrived at the front of the room did the interpreter explain why she was beckoned. The hearing audience was silent; they didn't understand what was being signed from the back to the front of the room. Even the executive director looked tense. It was clear to me that there was a divide between the deaf program and the rest of the agency.

The story of the deaf community is not all pessimistic, though. In recent years, deaf people have become more visible in the public media. Television programs now have deaf actors in their shows (e.g. a deaf doctor on *ER*, a deaf lawyer on *My Name is Earl*, a deaf actress on *Dancing with the Stars*.) Deaf people and sign language aren't seen as a side show in the carnival anymore to most people. Deaf people have increasingly become activists and lobbyists, lawyers and dentists, teachers and television celebrities. Their increasingly visible presence in society means that they will not be easily overlooked.

In 1988, the Board of Trustees at Gallaudet University appointed Elizabeth Zinzer to be the university's president. Within a week, students and faculty protested the appointment. She was a hearing woman and she couldn't sign. Deaf people on campus and worldwide felt strongly that in the 150 year history of Gallaudet University, it was time to have a deaf president. The uprising of the deaf community symbolized their anger and refusal to be seen as a handicapped, incapable group. This protest became known as Deaf President Now, and is compared to the Civil Rights movement by scholars of deaf activism. The struggle to evict Dr. Zinzer from her post was seen as an act of civil rights. When the campus shut down in protest, Dr. Zinzer resigned her post. The protest resulted in the appointment of a deaf man, Irving King Jordan, who became the University's first deaf president. Similar to the ideology behind the deaf-mute commonwealth, Irving King Jordan's appointment represented the possibility of success in the broader world. Deaf community members now had one of their own to act as a role model and liaison with the hearing world.

King Jordan's appointment was not small potatoes. King, as the community refers to him, became deaf in his 20s and uses sign language fluently. He understood what the deaf community was about and what it needed. King often called upon the words of Frederick Schreiber, the first executive director of the National Association of the Deaf, in speeches: "Deaf people can do anything that hearing people can do, except hear..." These words, seen as a rally cry, energized and motivated the deaf community to continue the fight for equal access to employments, services, and communication. King was not only a university president, but was seen as a leader of the deaf world. Gallaudet is not merely an educational institution; it is the hub of the global deaf community and is seen as the single most important influence in deaf education, and thus deaf culture, in the world. There is nowhere else comparable.

I feel like I belong to two worlds simultaneously. In the hearing world, I am a part of the majority culture. I move easily through the tangles of society without much trouble. It's easy to assume the posture of one who is confident and perhaps even arrogant, though I don't intentionally do so. In the outside world, I am white and hearing and female. I like to think that most times I am aware of my privilege. Only when I go to work am I reminded of my blind spots. At work, my status in the community turns upside down. I feel the loss of visibility and the sense of importance. Regardless of what I tell myself about being aware of my privilege, I struggle with giving it up, of moving from a position in the majority to one in the minority.

When I go to work at Gallaudet University, I am keenly aware that I am hearing. I am sometimes seen as symbolic of the oppressor; I carry within me the ancestry of all of the injustices and ill-treatment given to deaf people over the centuries. Every time I converse with a hearing person who knows how to sign, but doesn't, I know that the deaf community is watching. Deaf people interpret that behavior as at best insensitive, at worst "audist." They say that at Gallaudet, everyone should have equal access to communication. Hearing people can see what deaf people are saying, but deaf people can't hear what hearing people are saying. They have a point; it's important to show respect and cultural sensitivity in that situation. So, two hearing people should sign and speak their conversation.

The environment at Gallaudet is so unique and powerful that one can easily forget that most deaf people in the country work outside of the confines of the university. What happens to those deaf people who don't have college degrees? Who are unemployed? Poor? Who have additional disabilities? What about deaf people who are mentally ill or abandoned by their families? What happens to the average deaf Joe when the world isn't watching? They have medical procedures for which they are not adequately informed. They go forth into the world with only partial information. They are talked about and sometimes made fun of behind their backs. They are skipped over for jobs, seen as too needy, or too angry, or too dependent. They are cast aside by many, who may not even realize their prejudice and discriminatory acts.

Even as the battle for equality continues, no one denies the improvements that have been made over the centuries. With the passage of the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act, all television programs are closed-captioned. Technology for deaf people continues to develop rapidly. Deaf children now have choices about where and how to be educated. Though divisive in the deaf community, cochlear implant and hearing aid devices are improving by leaps and bounds. Class enrollments for those seeking to learn sign language are increasing. Many high schools and colleges now offer American Sign Language as a foreign language. Deaf people are now seen as a community of consumers with money to spend. Competing companies for pagers, videophones, fire alarms, and phone light systems are popping up nationally. The story of the deaf community as a strong, visible minority group has many more chapters to it.

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