

Preface

I WAS BORN PROFOUNDLY DEAF on August 5, 1958, at 12:15 a.m. in the Hospital for the Women of Maryland in Baltimore. My mother used to tell me that I was an actor when I was a toddler. That was before I acquired a language. My parents did not know I was deaf until I turned three, which was in 1961—the dark ages of deaf education. Today, doctors can detect deafness in babies within the first week of life. What did my parents do during those first three years? Did they clap their hands behind my head while I sat placidly, drooling on alphabet blocks that made no sense? Did they whisper in my ear dreams of what they wanted me to become? Did they call my name over and over while I kept on running? What did they think? Well, they thought I was a little slow but quite imaginative and expressive. No wonder, I had to gesticulate all of my thoughts and feelings.

When I was a young boy, my parents took me to an artist who drew a profile of my face, cut out a silhouette, and mounted it in an oval frame. My recollection of sitting for that portrait is vague, but I do remember an old man with a small pair of scissors and black paper cutting out an outline of my face. Being deaf, I probably sat passively, oblivious to what was going on around me. Years later when I looked at this silhouette on the wall of my parents' bedroom, I realized it symbolized the early recognition of my identity, though not as a deaf person. I could see the black shadow of my facial profile, solitary against an all-white background; the silhouette artist caught several details—the round shape of my forehead, my eyelashes, as well as my long, sloped nose, tiny lips, and a curl at the back of my head. My ears, however, were not visible, a foreshadowing of what was to come in my life.

People sometimes ask me when I first realized I was deaf. It was an autumn afternoon in first grade. I felt a tickle behind my ear and brushed it away. I must have yelped because my teacher

rushed over and pointed to a honeybee on the floor. I didn't understand. She gestured for me to take out my "things." I pulled out my hearing aids, which emitted feedback. Everyone stared while she coated my whole ear with baking soda. As I looked at the dying bee, I didn't know it would be the beginning of long public-school years of jeers about my deafness.¹

I grew up in an environment where everyone had normal hearing and where English was my first language. Consequently, I learned to communicate with people by speaking and lipreading. Knowing that I was interested in college, my audiologist advised me to consider the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at the Rochester Institute of Technology (NTID/RIT). A look through the institute's impressive catalog convinced my parents and me to drive to upstate New York to visit the campus. Our guide was deaf, and throughout the tour he signed, gestured, and used his voice and facial expressions, making explanations surprisingly easy for me to understand. Later, I learned that he was using Total Communication, a language approach employed by the faculty and staff. I was amazed to find that NTID had an enrollment of over 1,000 students, all with a hearing problem. The support services NTID provided—tutors, notetakers, and interpreters—were luxurious compared to what I was getting in public schools, which was nothing. And to discover that I would be taught by professors who understood deafness—hallelujah! For the first time in my life, with the exception of kindergarten, I actually became excited about going to school.

I never knew there were so many deaf people in America until I stood in line to register for a four-week summer orientation for incoming deaf freshmen. All around me stood 250 deaf students from the four corners of the country. It was such a high that deep inside, corny as it may seem, I wanted to hug each one and say, "Hi—I'm deaf too and I've been waiting all my life to meet you."

1. This paragraph is adapted from "Life Is Short: Autobiography as Haiku," *Washington Post*, Style Section, October 28, 2001.

During those five rich years that I lived on campus, my identity as a deaf individual began to surface. I discovered a part of myself that had been missing for seventeen years: my roots in Deaf culture. The natural and necessary outcome was that American Sign Language (ASL) became my second language so that I could fully understand my professors, classmates, and peers, hearing and deaf. Never again did I have to spend long hours straining my eyes to try and capture bits of information, like I did in the front rows of my early school years. At NTID/RIT, I was able to relax and enjoy my education. Either my instructors used sign language or I had an interpreter in front of me, allowing me to comprehend everything. A trained notetaker was nearby so I could fully concentrate on lectures and participate, unabashedly, in discussions. A tutor who knew sign language was available if information in class became too complicated. Unlike my primary and secondary school years, I finally experienced the personal reward of receiving high marks.

Soon I became friends with many people, some who signed and some who did not, but their preferences made no difference to me. It was such a novelty to make so many friends; up until the summer of 1976 I had very few and never so many who were understanding and unbiased about deafness. It was so overwhelming that when my second year came around, I had to slap myself to remember the primary reason for being in college. I had completed one year of study in the NTID Applied Photography program, and I decided to cross-register in the RIT School of Photographic Arts and Sciences to begin four years of study in biomedical photography.²

One of the printing techniques I learned in the darkroom is called "vignetting." Often, I practiced this technique by exposing a film image of a friend's face onto photographic paper. While the exposure was being made, I cupped my hands to create an oval

2. This section is adapted from a personal commentary by the author that appeared in *Deaf Students in Postsecondary Education*, ed. Susan B. Foster and Gerard G. Walter (New York: Routledge, 1992), 163-167.

opening for light to pass through. This created a portrait with no definite borders, rather a tapering off gradually at the edges into the background, thus creating a vignette. Technically, a vignette in photography is an abnormality in the optics of a camera lens, which causes a loss of clarity and brightness in the corners of photographs. Photographers often use vignetting as a desirable, atmospheric effect in their images. It helps prevent the eyes from wandering over extraneous details and directs their focus on the most important detail in the photograph.

It wasn't until twenty-five years later, when my hearing son was born, that I revisited this technique. I took a photograph of my wife, who is Deaf, rocking him over her shoulder in the hospital. It turned out to be an average-looking picture that had a lot of unnecessary details in the background. When I processed the photograph, I employed the vignetting method to fade out the distracting details of the hospital environment in order to focus more on the special bond between my wife and son; she looked ahead into the future while he slept peacefully by her ear.

During my junior year at RIT, I was offered a position as a resident advisor for a special-interest floor for photography majors called Photo House, located in a predominantly deaf residence hall. I was very interested in being a part of a small floor community where the residents were deaf and hearing, and they used photography as the basis to develop communication and relationships. After a year with Photo House, I accepted a new challenge—to be an area administrative assistant for a predominantly hearing residence hall and resident advisor staff. My job involved assisting the area director of the hall in the supervision of nineteen resident advisors as well as carrying out the administrative duties for the housing office. Again, my interest lay in encouraging deaf-hearing interaction using a higher, more visible position.

NTID had an incredible theater program for a school that did not offer a theater major. In their spare time, students, faculty, staff, and members of the Rochester community presented well-crafted plays in sign language and voice. As my ability to under-

stand the nuances of sign language became better, my appreciation for the theater grew. I was finally being entertained by something other than a baseball game.

This experience was a revelation to me. I hated going to the theater when I was growing up. One of my earliest memories was seeing an outdoor production of *The Lost Colony* in North Carolina. I couldn't hear the dialogue. To make matters worse, my parents and I were seated so many rows back in the amphitheatre that the actors were practically the size of ants on stage. Try lipreading an ant. I vaguely recalled a lot of little figures in colorful historical costumes standing around in front of a stockade with some cannons going off. The booming cannons and smoke held my attention. We left in the middle of the show, not because I couldn't understand a damn thing on stage but because some lady sitting behind us vomited on my mother's back. At NTID I finally understood my first play—a sign language production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* with an all deaf cast. I was struck by the poignancy of life in an insane asylum, especially with the subtext of how deaf people were once thought of as being dumb or crazy. The passionate expressions of deaf actors using ASL moved me. As I attended more and more sign language plays, my appreciation for Deaf culture and the theater grew. I fell in love with the theater and have been in love ever since.

As a senior, I developed an urge to be involved in the theater, so I joined a resident troupe called Sunshine and Company. I did this partly out of a desire to be a communicator; I wanted to convey artistic images and ideas to people just as I had seen actors do on stage. I also needed to instill confidence in myself with my new language and newfound identity.

In the different cities around the country where I worked after graduating, I ran into deaf people, young and old, who seemed to try awfully hard to be like “normal hearing people.” They had darting eyes and nervous smiles. When I said something, often they nodded their heads but said, “Huh? What?” It pained me to see this because I sensed something they were not aware was missing from

their lives—a void that I used to have. I wanted to blurt out the news about Deaf culture, the many clubs and organizations of deaf people, the theaters of the deaf, and the deaf sports teams and competitions. I wanted to tell them about literature and films, some by deaf writers, with deaf characters; show them art by deaf artists; and, ultimately, introduce them to another language, rich and, at last, attainable.

Sometimes I held back because of overprotective parents who hovered close by, parents who were adamant that their child not come in contact with sign language or Deaf culture for fear that the child would lose, of all things, the ability to speak. Other times, I hesitated because the deaf people were so proud of their speech and success in the hearing world that they did not need to be involved with Deaf culture and sign language. It horrifies me to think where I would be today if I had not gone to a college for deaf students.

Understandably, people have questioned my drastic career change from biomedical photography to theater. I think there is a parallel between photographers and theater artists in that both are communicators of ideas and images. The biomedical photographer's job is to record medical facts on film and communicate them in a factual, visual way for doctors who need to present these facts in journals and at conventions, lectures, and grand rounds. The actor's job is to absorb a playwright's text and communicate it in an accurate, artistic way to an audience. But why the career jump, some ask. Why not? I had passed rigorous requirements to be certified as a Registered Biological Photographer (#319, and the first deaf person to earn this certification). During a span of seven years, I worked diligently for four major hospitals—Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Yale University School of Medicine, University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, and Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Beverly Hills. After that, I was ready to move on and expand artistically.³

3. The preceding section is excerpted from "From Lip-reading Ants to Flying Over Cuckoo Nests," *American Theatre* (April 2001): 34–37, 60–61.

In 1987, I became an actor with the world renowned National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD). My desire to become a playwright emerged from my experiences as I toured with NTD for three years, working with eight to ten Deaf actors and two hearing actors. We performed plays typically written by famous hearing playwrights who originally conceived of hearing characters speaking dialogue in English—a seemingly absurd situation for a troupe of predominantly Deaf actors whose mode of communication was American Sign Language (ASL).

David Hays, the esteemed Broadway lighting and set designer and our long-time artistic director, chose the plays that we performed on tour. Then, we (the actors) would get together and go through the following steps in order to prepare the “hearing” script for a stage production.

1. We received the script and our assigned character(s).
2. We translated the dialogue into some form of sign language, depending upon the character’s background and the time period.
3. We did a sign-thru/read-thru of the entire script.
4. We met with the director to discuss dramaturgy (how to set up the production) and resolve translation issues.
5. We adapted some of the playwright’s stage directions to make scenes more visual for Deaf actors and audiences.

As a Deaf actor, I felt a certain artifice in performing a role originally written for a hearing actor from the hearing point of view, no matter how much adaptation was done to make me fit the mold. After traveling around the United States and performing in over 500 shows to mostly hearing audiences, I decided it was time to obtain formal training in playwriting. I wanted to be able to write plays from a Deaf perspective for deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing characters. I relished the opportunity to create art with my own characters born out of little sparks of imagination and pieces of everyday life; this is every playwright’s dream. To have living, breathing, human beings express my words and

create three-dimensional art on stage before an audience would double the thrill. I envisioned opportunities for more theater companies to produce works by Deaf playwrights, which in turn would create more employment for deaf and hard of hearing people. I went back to school and received an MA in Creative Writing/Playwriting from Boston University, and an MFA in Theatre from Towson University.

Now, I write for the eye, always searching for live, mobile, provocative images that fill and illuminate the entire stage with the complexities, the pathos, and the humor involved when deaf and hearing cultures merge or collide. I am always thinking of how a deaf audience will view my work. I don't worry about the hearing audience, though, because the hearing actors voice the dialogue, or the deaf actors do some of their own voicing, or the scene is nonverbal and visual, or signed dialogue may appear as written text somewhere on stage. Although my scripts may not have the aural elegance and sophistication of those written by famous hearing playwrights, I hope that I have succeeded in visually capturing different aspects, or vignettes, of the "deaf character." The plays that follow are brushstrokes, colorings, cutouts, montages, and textures of how I perceive some of the many facets of the deaf character in all of us.

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