

An Emotional Ride with Hearing Loss

BY DARLEEN WILSON

I am a life-long musician. As a sound engineer and record producer, I relied on my ears to make a living. You might suspect where this is going. Some years after I had (fortunately) shifted into developing multimedia and Web content, there was a moment when I was listening to an Aretha Franklin record, and it sounded altogether different to me than I remembered.

Aretha's voice, being more powerful than the technology that recorded her, produced high-end distortion that is embedded in the recording. Suddenly I was aware that I was not hearing that. And I reconsidered the number of times I had strained to listen to conversation or perceived that people were mumbling. What was going on? I had my ears checked. Emotionally daunted at the idea of hearing loss, I was momentarily relieved to verify the cause of my perceptions: at least I wasn't crazy.

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Then the emotional rollercoaster. One moment I was hopeful that there was something I could do to be able to hear better. The next moment I was distraught by the quality of sound delivered by my hearing aids—it was as if richness of color was drained, leaving everything in harsh black and white and hard-to-interpret shades of gray. Still, I was relieved to be able to follow some conversations more easily. Then again, I could be overwhelmed by noise, and plunged into despair.

I heavily mourned my hearing loss for at least a decade and a half, anticipated gatherings with trepidation, knowing I'd have to steel myself against each ripple of laughter as I missed the joke, and dreading the sense of cluelessness I felt when I could not decode the details of

some inside story. Most painful of all perhaps, the loss of music was completely disorienting. I felt like an outsider who could never come back in, forever abandoned to stark, leaden days. Music, which had always been my solace, no longer felt available to me, and as disheartening as the disconnection with people is, the broken connection with music felt like proverbial insult to injury. And of course, it was all exhausting. It still is.

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Lately I have found it exhilarating to be able to hear at all. I have been fortunate to spend extended time in a sparsely populated tropical area, living in a screened-in cottage, close to nature. I wake up pre-dawn and all is dark and silent. Then the sun heralds the day, I put in my hearing aids and the world goes from silent to alive. I hear birds! The ocean! Sweet murmurs of my husband's voice... and my healing heart rebounds with joy.

One of these days I may even reach for my guitar. **HL**

Darleen Wilson is a former record producer and engineer. She served as director of WGBH Online in Boston, and holds a master's degree in Human Factors in Information Design. When she is not weeding or writing essays, she spends her time researching services and technologies to support better hearing. She and her husband split their time between Pahoehoe, Hawaii and Lowell, Massachusetts.

