



Hearing Loss and the Rubin Vase

BY MICHAEL A. HARVEY

Sue entered my office displaying an odd mixture of jubilation and despair. Before I could ask her my usual “How are you?” question, she recited a quotation she had just found online: ‘Hearing loss is so cruel. It cuts you out of everything and makes you feel worthless, unneeded and unimportant.’ This is exactly how I feel!”

Finally, someone had put into words her heretofore private torment, feelings that when she had dared to admit them to herself promptly catapulted her into an abyss of shame. “As far back as I can remember, I kept thinking there must be something seriously wrong with me for feeling this way but now I know that I’m not alone!”

I have heard versions of this quotation many times — often voiced to counter society’s diminishing the multilevel ramifications of hearing loss as “no big deal.” “It certainly *is* a big deal,” Sue proclaimed. Indeed, the psychological literature is full of studies about how hearing loss profoundly affects one’s self-esteem, identity, and interpersonal relationships. These effects are always more poignant, more stark, when witnessing them firsthand from a live person.

Sue adopted that quotation as her identity mantra, one that finally validated exactly how she had felt “forever.” She no longer felt like a pariah. It was vital for Sue to have time and space to openly acknowledge what she perceived as the cruelty of her hearing loss and how it has molded her view of herself and her world. She was, in her words, “on a roll.” Later, she brought in two more quotations, both by Helen Keller:

“Blindness cuts us off from things, but deafness cuts us off from people.”

“The problems of deafness are deeper and more complex, if not more important, than those of blindness. Deafness is a much worse misfortune.”

I had never seen her so exuberant — proud of herself, like she had finally transformed years of shame into a solidified identity. It was quite gratifying to witness. But alongside my feeling encouraged by her victory, I had a gnawing discomfort. First of all, hearing loss isn't a person so it can't be cruel. But of course, that's a literary metaphor, a personification, not meant to be taken literally. But secondly, hearing loss in and of itself doesn't have the power to sentence one to a life of feeling worthless, unneeded and unimportant. I recall Eleanor Roosevelt's quotation: “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.”

However, it would have been premature to share with Sue my internal “Yes, but” conundrum. Instead, after helping her explore her newfound mantra over a few sessions, I showed her one of my favorite optical illusions: the Rubin Vase (pictured below). You can see it in either two ways — as a vase or as two faces that are facing each other.



The Rubin Vase

“That’s very interesting, Mike, but what does the Rubin Vase have to do with what I’m talking about? Have you been working too hard?” She displayed mild amusement.

“Some people see a vase and others see two faces,” I continued with a smile. “Neither view is wrong but each one is incomplete. I wonder if that’s also true with most things, including your perspective of hearing loss. I recall a woman who said, ‘I’m grateful for my hearing loss for the opportunities it has given me. It has taught

me compassion and I’ve met some wonderful people,’ but then she quickly added, “If there were a medical cure, I’d accept it in a heartbeat. I’ve ‘accepted’ my loss and I still grieve.”

The Rubin Vase has been used to illustrate a social psychology concept called Integrative complexity. It deals with one’s capacity and willingness to accept that there is more than one way to look at an issue and to acknowledge that these differing perspectives are all legitimate. For example, a bully who contributes to charity; acknowledging that viewing abortion as murder or as a civil rights issue are both legitimate; or acknowledging the cruelty of hearing loss while being grateful for it.

Now it was my turn to give Sue a quotation:

“There are times in our lives when we have to realize our past is precisely what it is, and we cannot change it. But we can change the story we tell ourselves about it, and by doing that, we can change the future.” (Author Eleanor Brown).

I mused at how our therapy sessions had morphed into an exchange of quotations. “If I understand you right,” I continued, “once upon a time, you had told yourself a story that there was something seriously wrong with you for feeling worthless, unneeded and unimportant. But you recently changed your story by acknowledging that those feelings are commonly brought on by hearing loss. How might your new story change your future?”

“Rather than hide in shame and isolate myself, I’m seeking out others who are hard of hearing and who’ll understand and share my story!” She proudly displayed a flyer for an HLAA Walk4Hearing event.

“I get it. Let’s kick this up a notch, shall we? What other stories can you tell yourself about hearing loss?” I asked.

“Uh uh, now wait a minute,” she shook her head. “I know what you’re doing. You’re trying to make me think only positive thoughts but it’s not going to work!”

I, too, shook my head and told Sue about a profoundly deaf young man who was attending a “bicultural-bilingual school for the Deaf, one that espoused that deafness is positive and a source of cultural pride. Sounds good so far. But he lamented that “Whereas in oral deaf programs that prohibited sign language, students had to sign secretly in the bathrooms, now I need to secretly grieve my deafness away from my teachers. Feeling bad about being deaf wasn’t allowed!”

“Obviously, his teachers weren’t familiar with the Rubin Vase,” I said. “It’s not either/or, positive or

negative. Like the vase and faces, grief and gratitude can co-exist.”

“Are you saying I should be partially grateful for being hearing impaired?” she winced.

“It’s a question. As you said, Nobody, including me, has a right to tell you how you should feel.”

We sat silently for several moments, as Sue pondered my question. My task was not to interrupt her thought process. “I can’t be totally grateful,” she finally said.

“We’re not talking about totally *anything*. I doubt it even exists! We’re talking about feeling regret, gratitude, hardship, blessing, curse, gift, grief, benefit, The Rubin Vase on steroids!”

More silence. Finally, she said: “Let me get back to you on that.”

We met for six months as she put words to how hearing loss had molded her identity and how she could mitigate its negative effects. As she left my office for the last time, I had another gnawing feeling. I wondered whether I had rushed her to create additional stories; whether I was too eager to elicit positive narratives and therefore didn’t adequately support her in exploring the cruelty of her hearing loss, an affirmation that she found so validating! Was I inadvertently telling Sue how she should feel? Maybe, in fact, the Rubin Vase had nothing to do with what she was talking about? I knew that she needed time and space to openly acknowledge what she perceived as the cruelty of her hearing loss, but how much time and space is enough?? Grieving doesn’t operate on a schedule.

My answers would come soon enough.

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A while after Sue and I ended treatment, she sent me an email. It began with a description of an arts and crafts project, a table she had made. “Why would she be sending me this?” I thought. It wasn’t until she described her process of choosing the tiles that it became clear. She said that initially, she planned for the tabletop tiles to be a solid color: chartreuse, her favorite. “But then, thinking of our work, I decided to use some tiles

of my least favorite colors and some tiles of my most favorites.”

Then she elucidated a verbal version of her tile metaphor:

“At times, my hearing loss is indeed so cruel that it cuts me out of everything and makes me feel worthless, unneeded and unimportant. But I’m beginning to see that, at other times, it’s nothing but a drab, pitiful presence that doesn’t warrant my precious attention. And at other times, I’m even realizing that it has given me wisdom to know what’s really important in life. And it has also strengthened my spirituality. Most of the time, I can’t understand the minister’s sermons, so I’ve learned to take my church with me wherever I go. Still, I wish there I had normal hearing.

“I needed some time to sort all of this out. And FYI, I was at the Museum of Fine Arts a while ago and bought a print of the Rubin Vase. It’s prominently displayed over my office desk.” **HL**

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The HLA A 2022 Convention was June 23–25 in Tampa. Our convention archive, including the recording of our Research Symposium on cochlear implants, will be online at hearingloss.org this summer. We look forward to seeing you at the HLA A 2023 Convention in New Orleans, June 29–July 1, 2023. Registration opens this fall.