

Overhearing: The Consequences of the Inability to Hear Our Surroundings

BY MARJORIE (“MARDIE”) CRANNELL YOUNGLOF

Having had profound hearing loss all my life (etiology: maternal rubella), I’ve talked with many people about the impact of hearing loss on our lives, read blogs by others who have varying degrees of hearing loss, and discussed my hearing with numerous audiologists. Recently, I realized that one aspect of hearing loss has been overlooked in conversation and in the media: “overhearing” — which is fully part of daily life for people who have normal hearing.

The episode that triggered this realization occurred while I was preparing our evening meal in the kitchen. The TV, located out of my sight about 10 feet away from me, was bleating out a discussion of the news. Since I was accustomed to the habits I’d formed from having lifelong deafness (aided by a hearing aid, then bilateral cochlear implants), I ignored the cacophony of voices emanating from the TV. Suddenly the words “the right to vote” registered on me — I had actually overheard them without paying any attention to the conversation between the TV anchor and the person she was interviewing.

Thus surfaced a new train of thought in my mind: the significance of overhearing. Overhearing means understanding the sounds being heard without actually listening; the words or sounds fall into the ears effortlessly. This is a feat people with typical hearing can accomplish but has never been part of my auditory repertoire. While I’ve always “envied” people who can easily listen to and understand the various levels of sounds they are hearing, I never stopped to think about the consequences on those of us who can’t overhear the noise and voices around us.

When I was younger, I used to say I wanted to be able to eavesdrop on conversations going on around me, in restaurants, parties, class, on the job — anywhere! The ears of people with normal hearing are always “open” and subconsciously taking in the auditory din that envelops them. That ability to absorb ambient “noise” enables them to form clearer pictures of the world they are in. People with hearing loss, to varying degrees, miss the significance of being able to overhear, to listen without having to struggle to decipher ambient sounds. “What is that sound?” is a question I’ve repeatedly wondered.

Some people with typical hearing might feel that we are less “socialized” than our hearing peers, but we have one advantage — a skill — they may not have: due to lack of hearing, we are very

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observant about our surroundings and people whom we are in conversation with. We may notice very subtle forms of nonverbal communication that people with typical hearing might overlook: perhaps a slight movement of the head, a hand gesture, facial expressions, eye movements, etc. This visual information becomes part of our way of life, our way of “overhearing”; in other words, we are “overlooking!”

Examples of what we may fail, to varying degrees, to “overhear” include — but are not limited to — slang, foreign phrases, regional or foreign accents, pronunciation, the sounds or cries of animals and insects. The tone of a person’s voice (is it friendly, unfriendly, persuasive, wheedling, angry, annoyed?) or the cry of a baby conveys important information that may not be accessible to people with hearing loss. The inability to “learn” via these sounds falling into our ears can impede our efforts to socialize successfully and may lead to typical hearing people feeling uncomfortable around us.

One incident in particular has remained in my memory for decades. One evening when our son was a young baby, I fed and burped him and put him in his crib to sleep. But 20 minutes later, he was yelling vigorously. We couldn’t figure out what he was trying to tell us, and holding and cuddling him didn’t stop the din. In the midst of this crisis, our doorbell suddenly rang. The callers were the parents of a friend of ours, stopping by

to see how we and the baby were doing. The mother, who’d raised four children, immediately heard the crying and exclaimed, “Your baby is hungry!” “But I just fed him a half hour ago,” I responded. She said firmly, “He is telling you that he’s hungry.” She could hear a familiar tone to the baby’s cry that I could not hear. As soon as he began to feed, he was at peace. I could not believe the incredible timing of the couple’s unexpected visit.

While this kind of event — hearing sounds we can’t correctly decipher — makes living with hearing loss stressful at times, there are solutions. The best remedy for our difficulties with “overhearing” and understanding the meaning of sounds is reading. Books, magazines, captioning on TV and other media, texting with people, email, etc., all help reduce the size of the “gap” in what we hear with our hearing aids, cochlear implants, and other assistive technologies. Listening to audiobooks while simultaneously reading the print version is another tool in enabling us to become more familiar with various sounds. Having people write out phonetically how an unfamiliar word or phrase is pronounced is also very helpful. These techniques can help us expand our ability to “overhear” the auditory world around us. **HL**



A long-time member of HLA, Mardie was born profoundly deaf, the etiology being maternal rubella. She hears with bilateral cochlear implants. She was the first deaf child “taught” by Helen Beebe, using what became known as the

Auditory-Verbal Approach. She has a B.A. in English from Syracuse University and lives in Virginia with her husband. Her passion is genealogy, and she has written several ancestral biographies. She also writes a monthly column about genealogy in her community’s magazine. Email Mardie at myounglof@gmail.com.



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