Silence Brought Me a Community and an Escape

Society maintains that I am broken because of my deafness. I consider myself fortunate to have been given this ability to turn off the sound.

By Sara Novic
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Every evening when I return home, I rush into my house and rip my hearing aids out of my head. No matter where I've been, the routine is the same. Sometimes I'm in such a hurry I can't even stand to cycle through the settings on the power button, so I pop open the battery doors instead. Then I stash them on a high bookshelf out of reach of my toddler, where they stay until the next time I venture out.

Taking out my hearing aids is a relief, not unlike freeing my feet from a long day in dress shoes, except the thing being squeezed is my brain. I choose to wear hearing aids in a variety of work-related or social situations, but they create a dull throbbing around the circumference of my head. For all the technological power and benefit the aids provide, lately I've found their greatest value is in the pleasure of removing them.

I wasn't always deaf. I was raised in a hearing world, and in a house brimming with music, which back then had a much more imposing physical presence — recorcs, cassettes and CDs were stacked on the tables and shelves of every room; stereos, boomboxes and subwoofers lined the walls of our home office. Bookish and possessing no athletic talent, I fell into choir and musical-theater extracurriculars. I was a decent singer, but more than that, my friends were there. Music classrooms had become my safe haven. It's probably why, when I failed a school hearing screening at around the age of 12, I ripped up a pink slip that said as much instead of bringing it home as instructed. Like everyone I knew, I understood deafness as a deficit, and considered myself a broken version of the person I had been. I was losing access to sound and to others.

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My hearing loss was a slow progression over the next decade. It would take even longer for me to unlearn the prevailing wisdom about the deaf world that I had internalized, and learn to listen to other deaf people — and myself — instead. I spent my high school years trying to pass, clinging to normalcy and worrying that losing my hearing would threaten the friendships I had forged in musical spaces. When I finally found the deaf community and American Sign Language (ASL), I realized that silence didn't have to mean isolation — it could mean community and conversation, just as sound had before.

 Feeling low one Sunday while I was away at college, I walked into a church service and noticed a sign-language interpreter in the front corner. She and the deaf parishioners signed along as the band played, making them momentarily conspicuous. I slid into the pew beside them, jangling with fear and excitement that I had found others like me.

Afterward, I introduced myself to one of the group, using the halting ASL I had picked up from the internet. I don't remember what either of us said, but after months of expelling every ounce of energy trying to communicate with hearing people at school, even this clunky interaction felt like a relief. I wasn't hiding anymore, and he didn't turn me away. My poor signing skills didn't matter, because he and most of the deaf people I've met since understand what it means, and what it feels like, to be in this body.

“The deaf don't believe in silence,” writes the deaf poet Ilya Kaminsky in his collection “Deaf Republic.” “Silence is the invention of the hearing.” I offer a revision: Fear of silence is the invention of the hearing. I don't believe in silence as a void. It's additive, forcing me inward to engage with my thoughts without distractions, challenging me to participate in the world differently, to use my remaining senses to their fullest, in ways I certainly wouldn't if I had remained hearing.

Deafness has made me a better writer. While hearing individuals use music and podcasts to sustain them through their commutes, downtime and everything in between, I allow my mind to wander, write sentences in the air. Sometimes it's boring to be alone like this, but it's engaging me to study the atmospheric detail in my daily life: the sheen of broken bottles and potato-chip bags, and the nose wires of discarded masks in the South Philly gutters, refracting the morning sun when I walk the dog. Things I probably wouldn't have noticed when I was hearing — at least not enough to remember them — now fill a rich reserve of images from which to choose when I sit down to write.

Society maintains that I am broken, and has sought to rehabilitate my ears through various devices. But I have watched hearing people stuff their ears during every waking moment, seeking the thing I already have: a buffer between the self and the overwhelming day. What I once thought was “normal” I now consider a burden — to never be able to stop listening, even while sleeping. Deafness certainly presents challenges in a hearing-majority world, but I feel fortunate that I've been given this ability to turn off sound. While I can't recommend deafness exactly, what I've learned — to see different sensory experiences not as failures but instances of human diversity; to stop conflating the majority
experience with superiority; to find the good in the thing that at first really scares you — should be lessons for everyone. Don’t be too quick to turn up the headphones. Embrace silence, or at least some time without constant content consumption. You might even slip into boredom long enough to hear what your mind is saying.

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