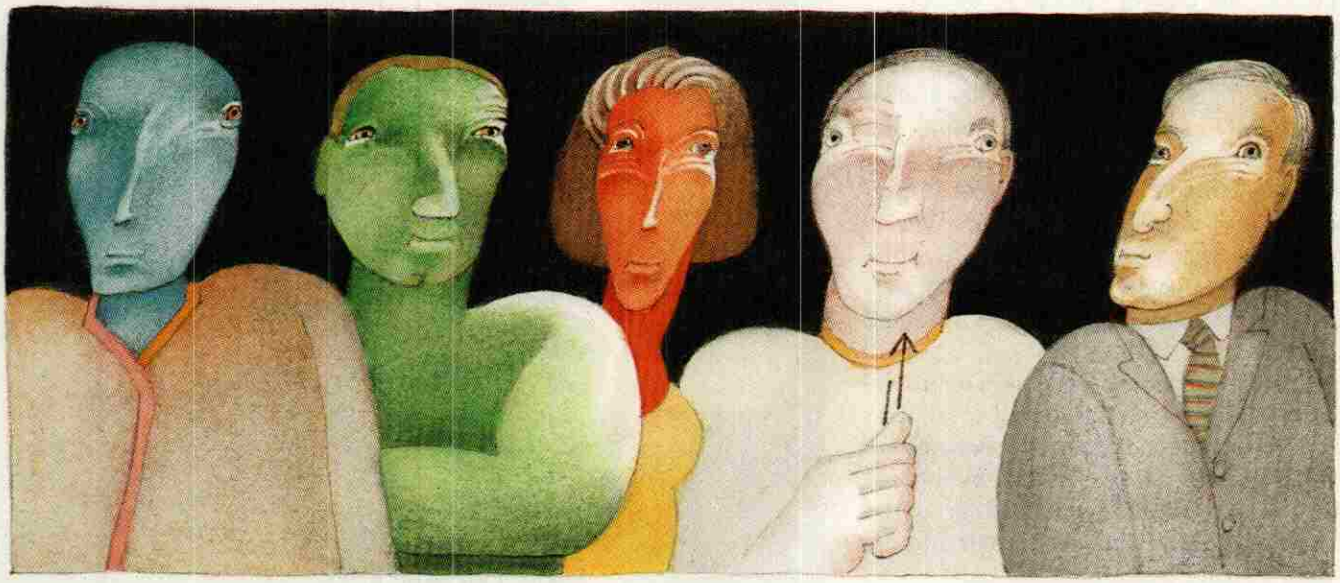
Well-meaning efforts to integrate deaf people into conventional schools and to help them learn to speak English are provoking fierce resistance from activists who favor sign language and an acknowledgment that the world of deafness is distinctive, rewarding, and worth preservation

DEAFNESS AS CULTURE

BY EDWARD DOLNICK



IN 1773, ON A TOUR OF SCOTLAND AND THE HEBRIDES Islands, Samuel Johnson visited a school for deaf children. Impressed by the students but daunted by their predicament, he proclaimed deafness "one of the most desperate of human calamities." More than a century later Helen Keller reflected on her own life and declared that deafness was a far greater hardship than blindness. "Blindness cuts people off from things," she observed. "Deafness cuts people off from people."

For millennia deafness was considered so catastrophic that very few ventured to ease its burdens. Isolation in a kind of permanent solitary confinement was deemed inevitable; a deaf person, even in the midst of urban hubbub, was considered as unreachable as a fairy-tale princess locked in a tower. The first attempts to educate deaf children came only in the sixteenth century. As late as 1749 the French Academy of Sciences appointed a commission to determine whether deaf people were "capable of reasoning." Today no one would presume to ignore the deaf or exclude them from full participation in society. But acknowledging their rights is one thing, coming to grips with their plight another. Deafness is still seen as a dreadful fate.

Lately, though, the deaf community has begun to speak for itself. To the surprise and bewilderment of outsiders, its message is utterly contrary to the wisdom of centuries: Deaf people, far from groaning under a heavy yoke, are not handicapped at all. Deafness is not a disability. Instead, many deaf people now proclaim, they are a subculture like any other. They are simply a linguistic minority (speaking American Sign Language) and are no more in need of a cure for their condition than are Haitians or Hispanics.

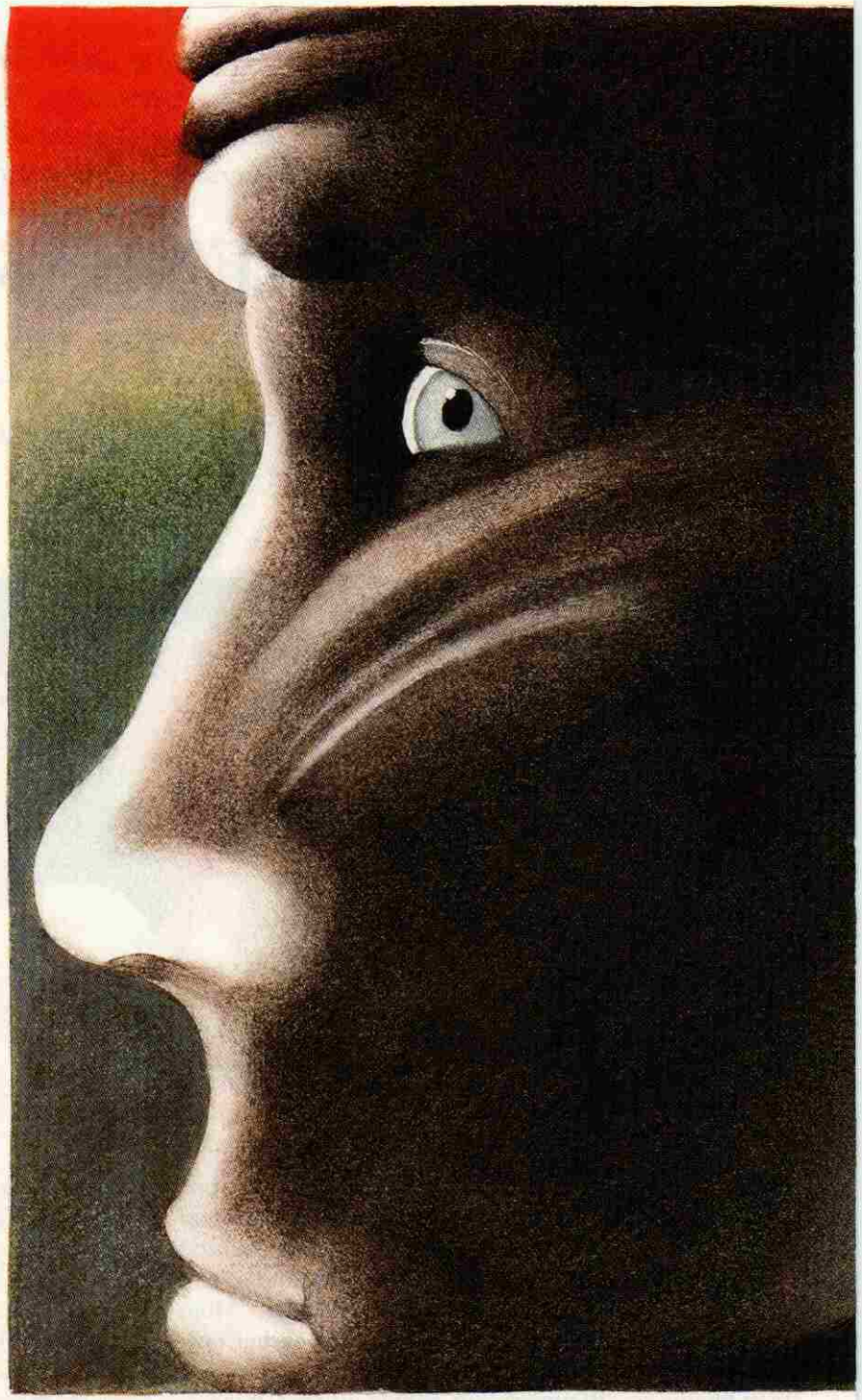
That view is vehemently held. "The term 'disabled' describes those who are blind or physically handicapped," the deaf linguists Carol Padden and Tom Humphries

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ETIENNE DELESSERT

write, "not Deaf people." (The upper-case D is significant: it serves as a succinct proclamation that the deaf share a culture rather than merely a medical condition.) So strong is the feeling of cultural solidarity that many deaf parents cheer on discovering that their baby is deaf. Pondering such a scene, a hearing person can experience a kind of vertigo. The surprise is not simply the unfamiliarity of the views; it is that, as in a surrealist painting, jarring notions are presented as if they were commonplaces.

The embrace of what looks indisputably like hardship is what, in particular, strikes the hearing world as perverse, and deaf leaders have learned to brace themselves for the inevitable question. "No!" Roslyn Rosen says, by shaking her head vehemently, she *wouldn't* prefer to be able to hear. Rosen, the president of the National Association of the Deaf, is deaf, the daughter of deaf parents, and the mother of deaf children. "I'm happy with who I am," she says through an interpreter, "and I don't want to be 'fixed.' Would an Italian-American rather be a WASP? In our society everyone agrees that whites have an easier time than blacks. But do you think a black person would undergo operations to become white?"

The view that deafness is akin to ethnicity is far from unanimously held. "The world of deafness often seems Balkanized, with a warlord ruling every mountaintop," writes Henry Kisor, the book editor for the *Chicago Sun-Times* and deaf himself. But the "deaf culture" camp—Kisor calls it the "New Orthodoxy"—is in the ascendancy, and its proponents invoke watchwords that still carry echoes of earlier civil-rights struggles. "Pride," "heritage," "identity," and similar words are thick in the air.



Rhetoric aside, however, the current controversy is disorientingly unfamiliar, because the deaf are a group unlike any ethnic minority: 90 percent of all deaf children are born to hearing parents. Many people never meet a deaf person unless one is born to them. Then parent and child belong to different cultures, as they would in an adoption across racial lines. And deaf children acquire a sense of cultural identity from their peers rather than their parents, as homosexuals do. But the crucial issue is that hearing parent and deaf child don't share a means of communication. Deaf children cannot grasp their parents' spoken language, and hearing parents are unlikely to know sign language. Communication is not a gift automatically bestowed in infancy but an acquisition gained only by laborious effort.

This gulf has many consequences. Hearing people tend to make the mistake of considering deafness to be an affliction that we are familiar with, as if being deaf were more or less like being hard of hearing. Even those of us with sharp hearing are, after all, occasionally unable to make out a mumbled remark at the dinner table, or a whispered question from a toddler, or a snatch of dialogue in a movie theater.

To get a hint of blindness, you can try making your way down an unfamiliar hall in the dark, late at night. But clamping on a pair of earmuffs conveys nothing essential about deafness, because the earmuffs can't block out a lifetime's experience of having heard language. That experience makes hearing people ineradicably different. Because antibiotics have tamed many of the childhood diseases that once caused permanent loss of hearing, more than 90 percent of all deaf children in the United States today were born deaf or lost their hearing before they had learned English. The challenge that faces them—recognizing that other peoples' mysterious lip movements *are* language, and then learning to speak that language—is immeasurably greater than that facing an adult who must cope with a gradual hearing loss.

Learning to speak is so hard for people deaf from infancy because they are trying, without any direct feedback, to mimic sounds they have never heard. (Children who learn to speak and then go deaf fare better, because they retain some memory of sound.) One mother of a deaf child describes the challenge as comparable to learning to speak Japanese from within a soundproof glass booth. And even if a deaf person does learn to speak, understanding someone else's speech remains maddeningly difficult. Countless words look alike on the lips, though they sound quite different. "Mama" is indistinguishable from "papa," "cat" from "hat," "no new taxes" from "go to Texas." Context and guesswork are crucial, and conversation becomes a kind of fast and ongoing crossword puzzle.

"Speechreading is EXHAUSTING. I hate having to depend on it," writes Cheryl Heppner, a deaf woman who is the executive director of the Northern Virginia Resource Center for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Persons. Despite her complaint, Heppner is a speech-reading virtuoso. She made it through public school and Pennsylvania State University without the help of interpreters, and she says she has never met a person with better speech-reading skills. But "even with peak conditions," she explains, "good lighting, high energy level, and a person who articulates well, I'm still guessing at half of what I see on the lips." When we met in her office, our conversation ground to a halt every sentence or two, as if we were travelers without a common language who had been thrown together in a train compartment. I had great difficulty making out Heppner's soft, high-pitched speech, and far more often than not my questions and comments met only with her mouthed "Sorry." In frustration we resorted to typing on her computer.

For the average deaf person, lip-reading is even less rewarding. In tests using simple sentences, deaf people recognize perhaps three or four words in every ten. Ironically, the greatest aid to lip-reading is knowing how words sound. One British study found, for example, that the average deaf person with a decade of practice was no better

at lip-reading than a hearing person picked off the street.

Unsurprisingly, the deaf score poorly on tests of English skills. The average deaf sixteen-year-old reads at the level of a hearing eight-year-old. When deaf students eventually leave school, three in four are unable to read a newspaper. Only two deaf children in a hundred (compared with forty in a hundred among the general population) go on to college. Many deaf students write English as if it were a foreign language. One former professor at Gallaudet, the elite Washington, D.C., university for the deaf, sometimes shows acquaintances a letter written by a student. The quality of the writing, he says, is typical. "As soon as you had lend me $15," the letter begins, "I felt I must write you to let you know how relievable I am in your aid."

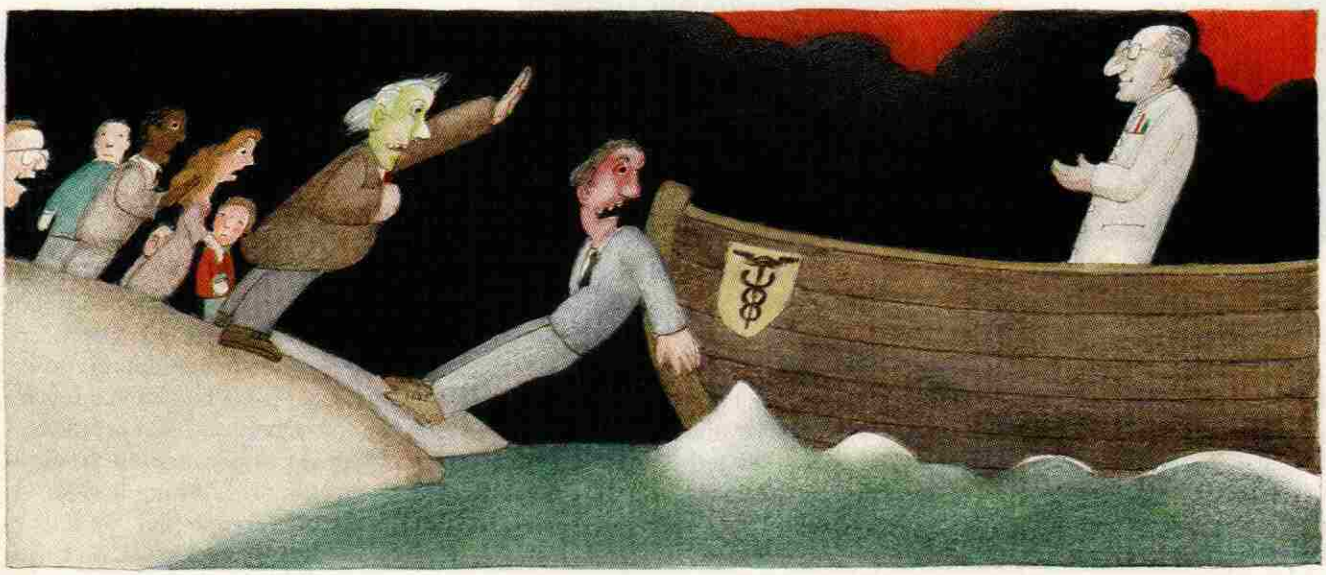
Small wonder that many of the deaf eagerly turn to American Sign Language, invariably described as "the natural language of the deaf." Deaf children of deaf parents learn ASL as easily as hearing children learn a spoken language. At the same age that hearing babies begin talking, deaf babies of parents who sign begin "babbling" nonsense signs with their fingers. Soon, and without having to be formally taught, they have command of a rich and varied language, as expressive as English but as different from it as Urdu or Hungarian.

At the heart of the idea that deafness is cultural, in fact, is the deaf community's proprietary pride in ASL. Even among the hearing the discovery of ASL's riches has sometimes had a profound impact. The most prominent ally of the deaf-culture movement, for example, is the Northeastern University linguist Harlan Lane, whose interest in the deaf came about through his study of ASL. When he first saw people signing to one another, Lane recalls, he was stunned to realize that "language could be expressed just as well by the hands and face as by the tongue and throat, even though the very definition of language we had learned as students was that it was something spoken and heard." For a linguist, Lane says, "this was astonishing, thrilling. I felt like Balboa seeing the Pacific."

MANY DEAF PARENTS CHEER ON DISCOVERING THAT THEIR BABY IS DEAF. THE EMBRACE OF WHAT LOOKS INDISPUTABLY LIKE HARDSHIP STRIKES THE HEARING WORLD AS PERVERSE.

Until the 1960s critics had dismissed signing as a poor substitute for language, a mere semaphoring of stripped-down messages ("I see the ball"). Then linguists demonstrated that ASL is in fact a full-fledged language, with grammar and puns and poems, and dignified it with a name. Anything that can be said can be said in ASL. In the view of the neurologist and essayist Oliver Sacks, it is "a language equally suitable for making love or speeches, for flirtation or mathematics."

ASL is the everyday language of perhaps half a million Americans. A shared language makes for a shared identity. With the deaf as with other groups, this identity is a prickly combination of pride in one's own ways and wariness of outsiders. "If I happened to strike up a relationship with a hearing person," says MJ Bienvenu, a deaf activist speaking through an interpreter, "I'd have considerable trepidation about my [deaf] parents' reaction. They'd ask, 'What's the matter? Aren't your own people good enough for you?' and they'd warn, 'They'll take advantage of you. You don't know what they're going to do behind your back.'"



Blind men and women often marry sighted people, but 90 percent of deaf people who marry take deaf spouses. When social scientists ask people who are blind or in wheelchairs if they wish they could see or walk, they say yes instantly. Only the deaf answer the equivalent question no. The essence of deafness, they explain, is not the lack of hearing but the community and culture based on ASL. Deaf culture represents not a denial but an affirmation.

Spokespeople for deaf pride present their case as self-evident and commonsensical. Why should anyone expect deaf people to deny their roots when every other cultural group proudly celebrates its traditions and history? Why stigmatize the speakers of a particular language as disabled? "When Gorbachev visited the U.S., he used an interpreter to talk to the President," says Bienvenu, who is one of the directors of an organization called The Bicultural Center. "Was Gorbachev disabled?"

Uneasy Allies

DESPITE THE CLAIMS MADE IN ITS NAME, though, the idea that deafness is akin to ethnicity is hardly straightforward. On the contrary, it is an idea with profound and surprising implications, though these are rarely explored. When the deaf were in the news in 1988, for instance, protesting the choice of a hearing person as president of Gallaudet, the press assumed that the story was about disabled people asserting their rights, and treated it the same as if students at a university for the blind had demanded a blind president.

The first surprise in the cultural view of deafness is that it rejects the assumption that medical treatment means progress and is welcome. Since deafness is not a deprivation, the argument runs, talk of cures and breakthroughs and technological wizardry is both inappropriate and offensive—as if doctors and newspapers joyously announced advances in genetic engineering that might someday make it possible to turn black skin white.

Last fall, for example, *60 Minutes* produced a story on a bright, lively little girl named Caitlin Parton. "We don't remember ever meeting [anyone] who captivated us quite as much as this seven-year-old charmer," it began. Caitlin is deaf, and *60 Minutes* showed how a new device called a cochlear implant had transformed her life. Before surgeons implanted a wire in Caitlin's inner ear and a tiny receiver under her skin, she couldn't hear voices or barking dogs or honking cars. With the implant she can hear ordinary conversation, she can speak almost perfectly, and she is thriving in school. *60 Minutes* presented the story as a welcome break from its usual round of scandal and exposé. Who could resist a delightful child and a happy ending?

Activists in the deaf community were outraged. Implants, they thundered in letters to *60 Minutes*, are "child abuse" and "pathological" and "genocide." The mildest criticism was that Caitlin's success was a fluke that would tempt parents into entertaining similar but doomed hopes for their own children. "There should have been parades all across America," Caitlin's father lamented months later. "This is a miracle of biblical proportions, making the deaf hear. But we keep hearing what a terrible thing this is, how it's like Zyklon B, how it has to be stopped."

The anger should have been easy to anticipate. The magazine *Deaf Life*, for example, runs a question-and-answer column called "For Hearing People Only." In response to a reader's question well before *60 Minutes* came along, the editors wrote, "An implant is the ultimate invasion of the ear, the ultimate denial of deafness, the ultimate refusal to let deaf children be Deaf. . . . Parents who choose to have their children implanted, are in effect saying, 'I don't respect the Deaf community, and I certainly don't want my child to be part of it. I want him/her to be part of the hearing world, not the Deaf world."

The roots of such hostility run far deeper than the specific fear that cochlear implants in children are unproved and risky. More generally, the objection is that from the moment parents suspect their child is deaf, they turn for expert advice to doctors and audiologists and speech therapists rather than to the true experts, deaf people. Harlan Lane points to one survey that found that 86 percent of deaf adults said they would not want a cochlear implant even if it were free. "There are many prostheses from eyeglasses and artificial limbs to cochlear implants," Lane writes. "Can you name another that we insist on for children in flagrant disregard of the advice of adults with the same 'condition'?"

The division between the deaf community and the medical one seems to separate two natural allies. Even more surprising is a second split, between deaf people and advocates for the disabled. In this case, though, the two sides remain uneasy partners, bound as if in a bad marriage. The deaf community knows that whatever its qualms, it cannot afford to cut itself off from the larger, savvier, wealthier disability lobby.

Historically, advocates for every disabled group have directed their fiercest fire at policies that exclude their group. No matter the good intentions, no matter the logistical hurdles, they have insisted, separate is not equal. Thus buildings, buses, classes, must be accessible to all; special accommodations for the disabled are not a satisfactory substitute. All this has become part of conventional wisdom. Today, under the general heading of "mainstreaming," it is enshrined in law and unchallenged as a premise of enlightened thought.

Except among the deaf. Their objection is that even well-meaning attempts to integrate deaf people into hearing society may actually imprison them in a zone of silence. Jostled by a crowd but unable to communicate, they are effectively alone. The problem is especially acute

in schools, where mainstreaming has led to the decline of residential schools for the disabled and the deaf and the integration of many such students into ordinary public schools. Since deafness is rare, affecting one child in a thousand, deaf students are thinly scattered. As a result, half of all deaf children in public school have either no deaf classmates at all or very few.

"Mainstreaming deaf children in regular public-school programs," the prominent deaf educator Leo Jacobs writes, will produce "a new generation of educational failures" and "frustrated and unfulfilled adults." Another deaf spokesman, Mervin Garretson, is even harsher. The danger of mainstreaming, he contends, is that deaf children could be "educationally, vocationally, and emotionally mutilated."

The Case for ASL

IN HIS BRILLIANT AND POLEMICAL book *The Mask of Benevolence*, Harlan Lane, the chief theoretician of the deaf-culture movement, makes his case seem as clear-cut as a proposition in formal logic. Deaf children are biologically equipped to do everything but hear, he argues; spoken language turns on the ability to hear; therefore spoken language is a poor choice for deaf children. For good measure, Lane throws in a corollary: Since an alternative language, ASL, is both available and easy for the deaf to learn, ASL is a better choice for a first language. QED.

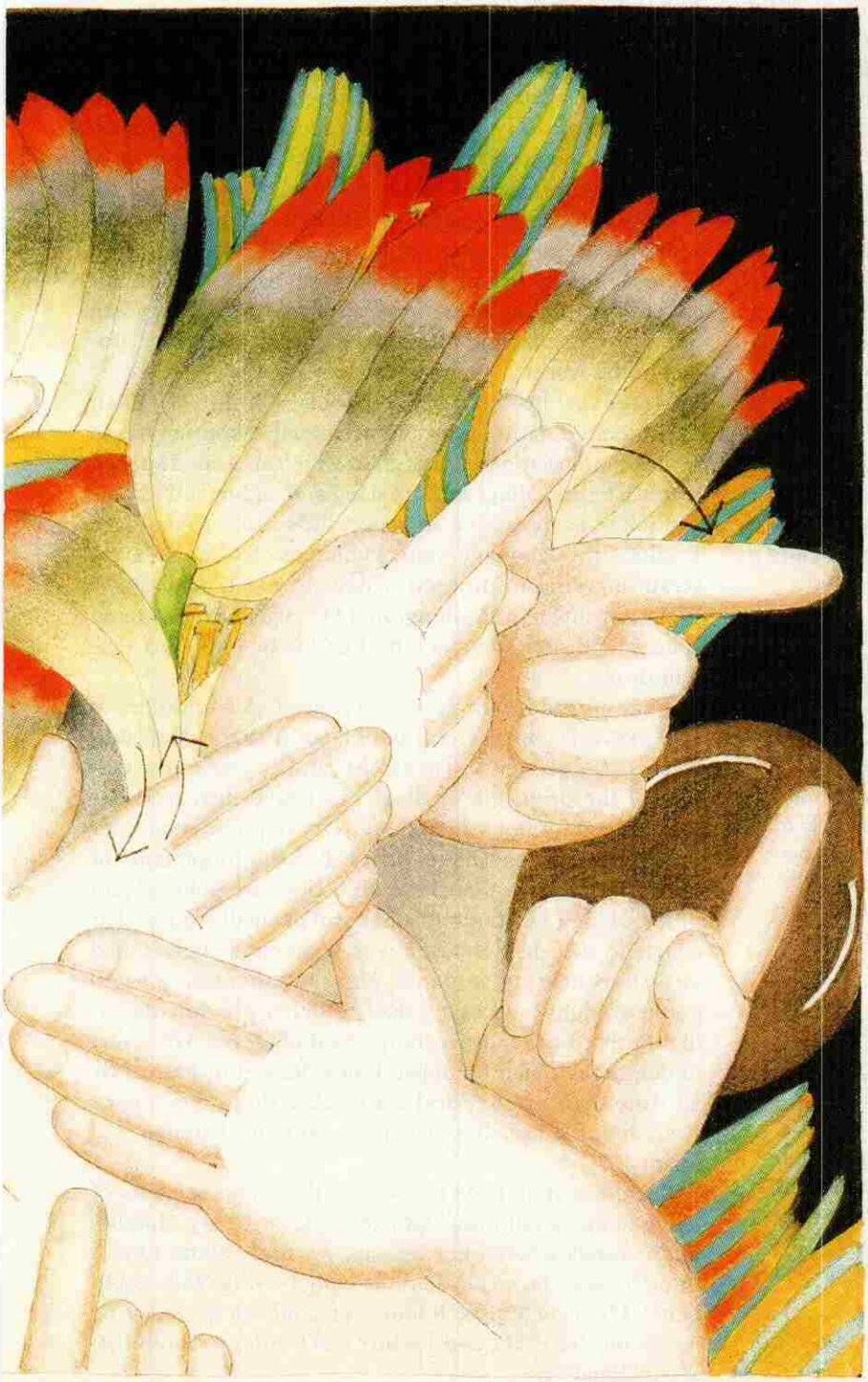
For the parents of a deaf child, though, matters are far from simple. (Lane is childless.) Parents have crucial decisions to make, and they don't have the luxury of time. Children who learn a language late are at a lifelong disadvantage. Deafness is, in one scholar's summary, "a curable, or rather a preventable, form of mental retardation."

Osmond and Deborah Crosby's daughter was born in July of 1988. "Dorothy Jane Crosby," the birth announcement began, "Stanford class of 2009, track, academic all-American, B.S. in pre-astronautics, Cum Laude. 2008 Olympics (decathlon), Miss Florida, Senate hopeful."

"You can chuckle about that announcement," Oz Crosby says now, "but we all have expectations for our kids. That card was a message from my unconscious—these are the kinds of things I'd like to see, that would make me proud, in my child. And the first thing that happened after DJ's deafness was diagnosed was that I felt that child had died. That's something you hear a lot from parents, and it's that blunt and that real."

Crosby, fifty, is tall and athletic, with blond hair and a small, neat moustache. A timber executive who now lives in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., he is a serious and intelligent man who had scarcely given deafness a thought before it invaded his household. Then he plunged into the deafness literature and began keeping a journal of his own.

He found that every path was pocked with hazards. The course that sounds simplest, keeping the child at home with her parents and teaching her English, can prove fantastically difficult. Even basic communication is a constant challenge. In a memoir called *Deaf Like Me*, a man named Thomas Spradley tells of raising a deaf daughter, Lynn. One Saturday morning shortly after Lynn had begun school, Spradley and his wife, Louise, found her outdoors, waiting for the school bus. Lynn stood at the end of the driveway, scanning the street every few seconds. After half an hour she gave up and came indoors. For weeks Lynn repeated the same futile wait every Saturday and Sunday, until her parents finally managed to convey the concept of "weekday" and "weekend." Words like "car" and "shoes" were easy; abstractions and relationships were not. The Spradleys knew Lynn loved her grandparents, for instance, but they had no idea if she knew who those devoted elderly people were. When Lynn once had to undergo a spinal tap, her parents could not explain what the painful test was for.



As much trouble as Thomas and Louise Spradley had in talking with their daughter, she was just as frustrated in trying to communicate with them. "How do you tell Mommy that you don't like your cereal with that much milk on it?" Spradley writes. "How do you ask Daddy to swing you upside down when all he seems to understand is that you want to be held? How do you tell them that you want to go to other people's houses like [her older brother]? How do you make them understand you want the same kind of Kool-Aid that you had two weeks ago at your cousin's house and just now remembered? How do you say, 'I forgot what I wanted'?"

Making matters more frustrating still, no one seems able to tell parents how successful their child will be in speaking and understanding English. "I'd ask, 'What's the future for us?'" Crosby says, "and they'd say, 'Every deaf child is different.'" Though given to measured, even pedantic, phrasing, Crosby grows angry as he recalls the scene. "It seemed like such a cop-out. I wanted to grab them by the throat and shout, 'Here's the bloody audiogram. How's she going to talk?'"

The truth, Crosby has reluctantly come to concede, is that only a few generalizations are possible. Children who are born deaf or who lose their hearing before learning to speak have a far harder time than those deafened later. Children with a profound hearing loss have a harder time than children with a mild loss. Children who cannot detect high-pitched sounds have problems different from those of children who cannot detect low pitches. Finally, and unaccountably, some deaf children just happen to have an easier time with spoken English than others.

Hence few overall statistics are available. Those few are not encouraging. In one study, for example, teachers of the deaf, evaluating their own pupils, judged the

speech of two thirds of them to be hard to understand or unintelligible. Timothy Jaech, the superintendent of the Wisconsin School for the Deaf, writes, "The vast majority of deaf children will never develop intelligible speech for the general public." Jaech, who is deaf, speaks and reads lips. "To gamble 12 to 15 years of a deaf child's life is almost immoral," he says. "[My sister] and I were among the lucky ones. What of the other 99 percent?"

Still, it is indisputable that many profoundly deaf adults participate fully and successfully in the hearing world, as lawyers and engineers and in dozens of other roles. Do these examples show what parents might expect for their own child? Or are they inspiring but irrelevant tales that have as little bearing on the typical deaf child as Michael Jordan's success has on the future of a ten-year-old dreaming of NBA glory?

The case for ASL has problems of its own. ASL is certainly easier for the deaf child to learn, but what of the rest of the family? How can parents say anything meaningful to their child in a foreign language they have only begun to study? Moreover, many hearing parents point out, even if deaf culture is rich and vital, it is indisputably not the majority culture. Since spoken language is the ticket to the larger world, isn't giving a child ASL as a first language a bit risky?

The choices are agonizing. "I understand now how people choosing a cancer therapy for their child must feel," Crosby says. "You can't afford to be wrong." To illustrate the dilemma, Crosby wrote what he calls a parable:

> Suppose that your one-year-old, who has been slow to walk, has just been diagnosed with a rare disorder of the nervous system. The prognosis is for great difficulty in muscular control of the arms and legs due to tremors and impaired nerve pathways. With the help of special braces, physical therapy, and lots of training, she will be able to walk slowly, climb stairs haltingly, and use her hands awkwardly. In general, she will be able to do most of the things other kids do, although not as easily, smoothly, or quickly. Some children respond to this therapy better than others, but all can get around on their legs after a fashion. Even though they will never run or play sports, they will have complete mobility at a deliberate, shuffling pace.
>
> There *is* an alternative, however. If her legs are amputated right away, the tremors will cease, and the remaining nerve pathways will strengthen. She will be able to use a wheelchair with ease. She can even be a wheelchair athlete, "running" marathons, playing basketball, etc., if she desires. Anywhere a wheelchair can go is readily available to her. There is easy access to a world that is geographically smaller. On the other hand, she can't climb simple stairs, hike trails slowly, or even use public transportation without special assistance.

"Now, Mr. and Mrs. Solomon," Crosby concluded, "which life do *you* choose for your child?"

Cued Speech

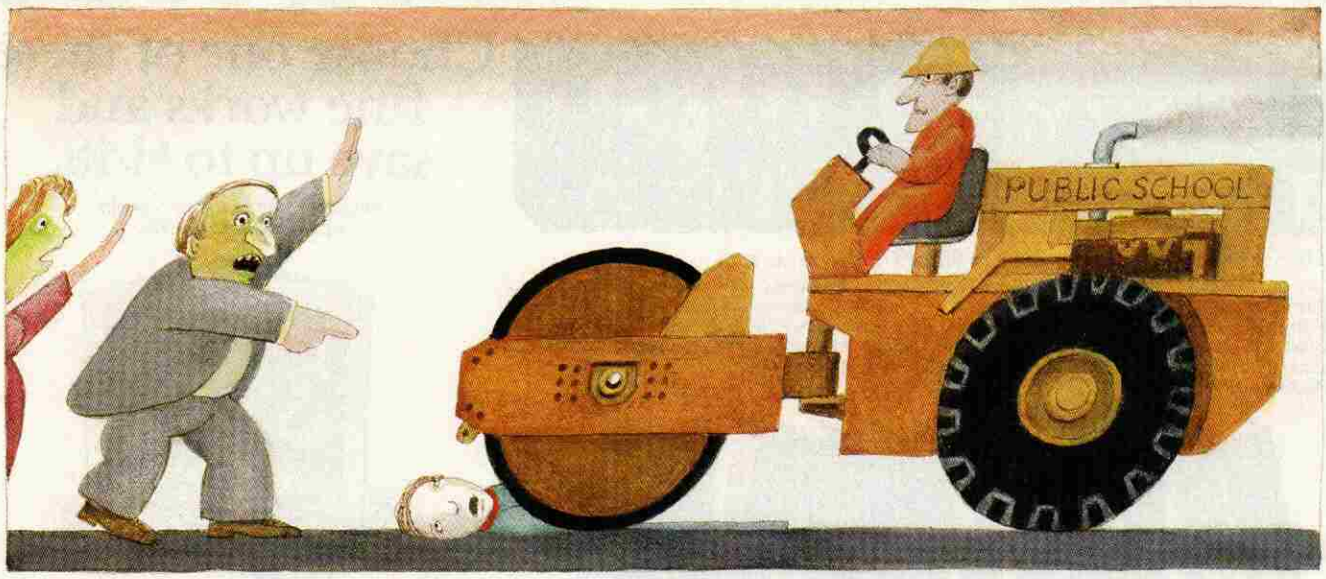
CROSBY AND HIS WIFE HAVE CHOSEN A COMPROmise, a controversial technique called cued speech, in which spoken English is accompanied by hand signals that enable a deaf person to distinguish between words that look alike on the lips. The aim is to remove the guesswork from lip-reading by using eight hand shapes in different positions near the face to indicate that the word being spoken is, say, "bat" rather than "pan."

The technique, which is spread by a tiny but zealous group of parents with deaf children, has several advantages. It's easy to learn, for one thing, taking only twenty or so hours of study. A parent who sets out to learn American Sign Language, in contrast, must devote months or years to the project, as he would have to do in order to learn any foreign language. And since cued speech is, essentially, English, parents can bypass the stilted, often useless phrases of the beginning language student. Instead of stumbling over "*la plume de ma tante*," they can talk to their deaf child from the beginning about any subject in the world.

Moreover, because cued speech is simply English transliterated, rather than a new language, nothing has to be lost in translation. A deaf child who learns cued speech learns English, along with its slang and jargon and idioms and jokes, as his native language. "It's a way to embrace English, the language your whole country runs on, instead of trying to pretend it doesn't exist," says Judy Weiss, a woman in Washington, D.C., who has used cued speech with her son since he lost his hearing as a ten-month-old.

This method, which was invented at Gallaudet in 1965–1966, is nonetheless out of favor with the deaf community. It's seen as a slap at ASL and as just a new version of the despised "oralism," in which deaf students were forced for hour upon hour to try to pronounce English words they had never heard. But the proponents of cued speech insist that these objections are political and unfounded. They point to a handful of small studies that conclude that deaf children who learn cued speech read as well as hearing students, and they mention a small group of highly successful deaf students who rely on cuing. Perhaps the most accomplished of all is a Wellesley undergraduate named Stasie Jones. Raised in France by an American mother and a British father, she speaks French and English and is now studying Russian and Spanish.

But the system is no godsend. "The trap I see a lot of cuing families fall into," Crosby says, "is to say, 'Johnny understands everything we say, we understand everything he says, he's getting *A*s at school—what's the problem?' The problem is, Johnny can't talk to someone he meets on the street and Johnny can't order a hamburger at McDonald's."



Total Communication

CUED SPEECH IS USED ONLY IN A RELATIVE HANDful of schools. By far the most common method of teaching the deaf today is called "total communication." The idea is that teachers use any and all means of communication with their students—speech, writing, ASL, finger-spelling. Total communication was instituted in the 1970s as a reaction to a century of oralism, in which signing was forbidden and the aim was to teach the deaf child to speak and lip-read.

Oralism still has zealous adherents, but today it is used mainly with hard-of-hearing students and only rarely with deaf ones. Its dominance began with the Congress of Milan, an international meeting of educators in 1880, which affirmed "the incontestable superiority of speech over sign" and voted to banish sign language from deaf education. The ban, notorious to this day among the deaf, was effective. In 1867 every American school for the deaf taught in ASL; by 1907 not a single one did.

When total communication came along, the two rival camps in deaf education accepted it warily. Those who favored English reasoned that at least teachers would be speaking to their students; those who preferred ASL were pleased that teachers would be signing. Today hardly anyone is pleased, and one of the few points of agreement in the present debate is that deaf education is distressingly bad. The Commission on Education of the Deaf, for example, which reported to the President and Congress in 1988, began its account, "The present status of education for persons who are deaf in the United States is unsatisfactory. Unacceptably so. This is [our] primary and inescapable conclusion."

The explanation for these dreary findings, depending on who is carrying out the analysis, is either that deafness is so debilitating that poor results are inevitable or that something is wrong with current teaching methods. Total communication, its critics contend, is unworkable. No teacher can speak in English and simultaneously sign the same message in ASL, which has a completely different grammar and word order. "In practice," Harlan Lane writes, "'total communication' merely means that the teacher may accompany his spoken English with some signs from American Sign Language, if he knows a few. While the teacher is speaking, he occasionally 'shouts' a sign—that is, signs a prominent noun or verb if he knows it, in the wrong order and without using the complex grammar of ASL."

A SHARED LANGUAGE MAKES FOR A SHARED IDENTITY. WITH THE DEAF AS WITH OTHERS, IDENTITY IS A PRICKLY COMBINATION OF PRIDE IN ONE'S OWN WAYS AND WARINESS OF OUTSIDERS.

Lane and his allies support an approach called bilingual-bicultural. In this new and still rare program (so new that few measures of its success or failure are available) students are taught in ASL and eventually build on that knowledge to learn English as a second language. Since learning to speak is so difficult and time-consuming, the emphasis in English courses is on reading and writing rather than on speaking.

Neither this new approach nor any other single method may prove right for everyone. Take Cheryl Heppner, the director of the Northern Virginia Resource Center. She was deafened by meningitis as a second-grader, long after she had become ex-

pert in English. Today Heppner is a great admirer of ASL, which she learned as an adult, but she says nonetheless that classes taught in ASL would not have been best for her. "Why should they have stripped English away from me?" she asks. "I already had to learn to cope with deafness."

The objections of many hearing parents to the bilingual scheme are far more strenuous. ASL is not simply a different language, they note, but a language without a written form. Partly as a consequence, deaf culture has a marked anti-book bias. (Lane himself confesses that he is "really frustrated" that so few deaf people have read his eloquent but lengthy accounts of deaf culture.) "If you give your child, as a first language, a language that has no written form," Oz Crosby says, "and if that language on average does not lead to good reading skills, then you're giving that child a life in which she reads at a third- to fifth-grade level. She will be in danger of being exploited, because low-end jobs are all that will be available to her."

Two deep and related fears lie at the heart of the resentment of the bilingual approach. First, many hearing parents suspect that bilingualism is a Trojan horse. Once ASL has been smuggled in, they fear, talk of English as a second language will dry up. Second, and more important, they resent the implication that deaf adults know better than a deaf child's own parents what is best for her. This is more than parental paranoia. Lane has written, for instance, that "most hearing parents make a botch of having a Deaf child."

Deaf leaders do their best to defuse such fears. "We don't say that hearing parents aren't qualified to make decisions about their deaf children," says Roslyn Rosen, of the National Association of the Deaf. "We say that they need to have contact with deaf people if they're going to make educated decisions. The way the system works now is that the first people the parents see are doctors and audiologists, who see deafness as a pathology. What we need are partnerships between hearing parents and the deaf community, so that parents can meet deaf people who are doing well."

Even deaf adults who don't identify with deaf culture often feel that they have important but untapped expertise on growing up deaf. "There is a strong feeling of community, and deaf people feel ownership of deaf children," Cheryl Heppner says. "I admit it. I feel it too. I really struggle in not wanting to interfere with a parent's right to parent and at the same time dealing with my own feelings and knowing that they have to accept that the child can never be one hundred percent theirs."

Such concessions rouse dark fears in hearing parents. Time and again their talk turns to laments about "giving up" or "losing" or "turning over" their child to the deaf

THE DEATH OF REASON

When the Peep-O-Day Boys were laying fires down in
the hayricks and seed-barns of a darkening Ireland,
the art of portrait-painting reached its height
across the water.
The fire caught.
The flames cracked and the light showed up the scaffold
and the wind carried staves of a ballad.
The flesh-smell of hatred.
And she climbed the stairs.
Nameless composite. Anonymous beauty-bait for the
painter.
Rustling gun-colored silks. To set a seal on Augustan
London.
And sat down.
The easel waits for her
and the age is ready to resemble her and
the small breeze cannot touch that powdered hair.
That elegance.
But I smell fire.
From Antrim to the Boyne the sky is reddening as
the painter tints alizarine crimson with a mite of yellow
mixed once with white and finds out
how difficult it is to make the skin
blush outside the skin.
The flames have crossed the sea.
They are at the lintel. At the door.
At the canvas,
At her mouth.
And the curve and pout
of supple dancing and the couplet rhyming
and the pomander scenting death-rooms and
the cabinet-maker setting his veneers
in honest wood—they are kindling for the flames.
And the dictates of reason and the blended sensibility
of tact and proportion—yes
the eighteenth century ends here
as her hem scorches and the satin
decoration catches fire. She is burning down.
As a house might. As a candle will.
She is ash and tallow. It is over.

—Eavan Boland

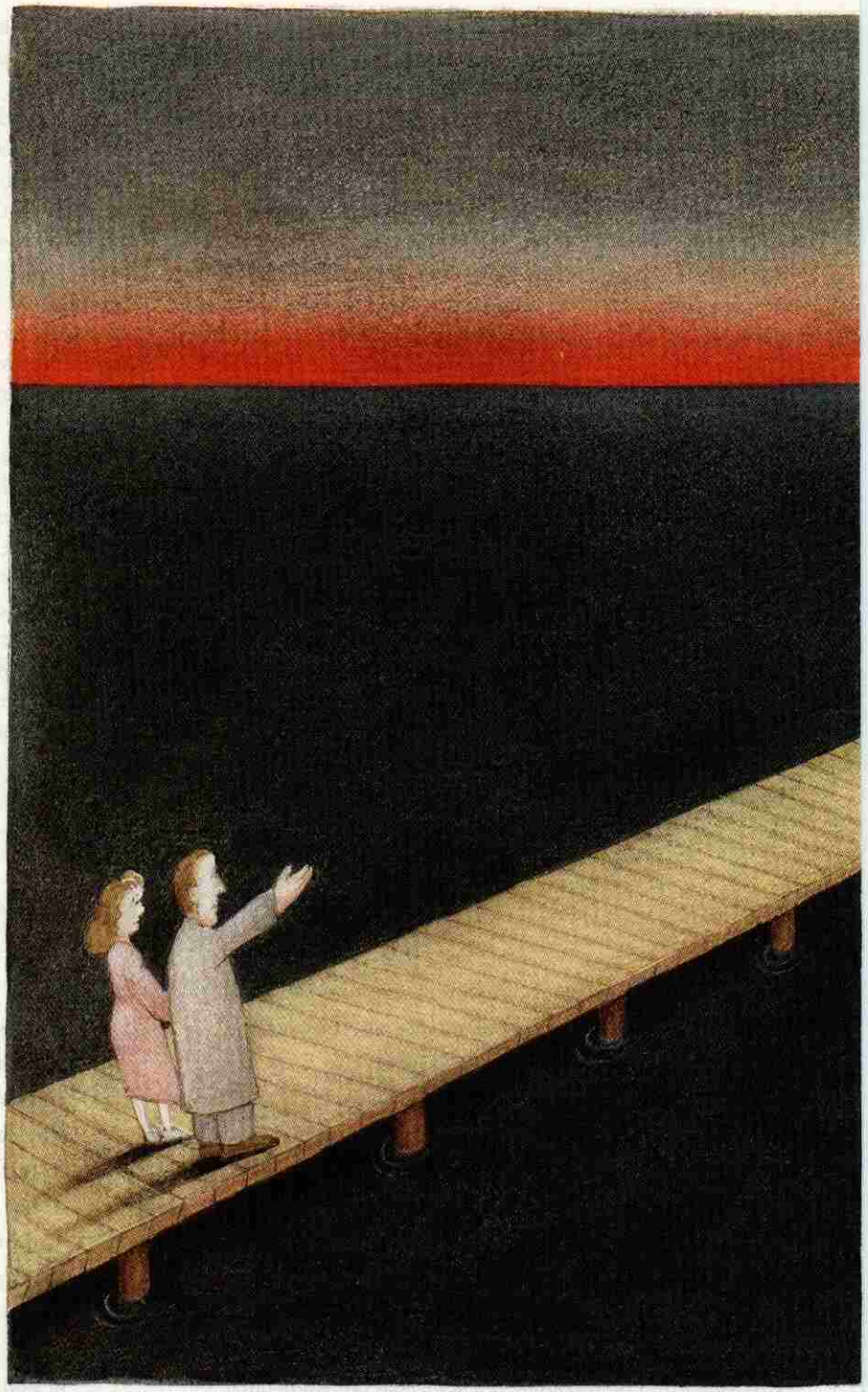
community. Even Oz Crosby, who strives to be open-minded, observes that "sometimes Deaf Culture looks like the Moonies to me: 'Your child will be happy, just don't expect to see her anymore, she's too busy being happy.'"

These fears crystallize around the issue of residential schools for the deaf, which have far different associations for deaf and hearing families. Hearing parents think of residential schools and conjure up the bleakest scenes in Dickens or the angriest images in a Frederick Wiseman documentary, with their child stuck away in a human warehouse. But among the deaf, residential schools have tremendous support. Here deaf children will not "drown in the mainstream," as Lane puts it, but will instead flourish among their peers. The schools provide a lifesaving chance to escape from isolation into community.

Patrick Graybill, a prominent figure in the deaf community and a former member of the National Theatre of the Deaf, attended a residential school in Kansas starting at age five. His enthusiastic memories of those years are typical. "I was really happy at school," he says, through an interpreter. "I saw my first plays there, and I knew that's what I wanted to do when I grew up. There were deaf adults I looked up to, and a good support system."

The classes were by no means uniformly excellent. "The emphasis was on English, and we were hit if we were caught talking with our hands. The speech teacher couldn't sign, and I used to hate having to touch her throat and neck, to learn the sounds to make, and smelling her breath." But pedagogy wasn't the point. "ASL was allowed in the dormitories," Graybill says, "and that's where we learned Deaf culture. Now I see kids in public schools, and some accept themselves as Deaf people, but others have a problem with it. We knew who we were, but I'm afraid they'll be lost between two worlds, because they can't speak well enough to be understood by hearing people and they're ashamed to use ASL."

Residential schools play such an important role in deaf culture that when two deaf adults meet, they tell each other not only their names but also the names of the schools they attended. "These schools were the place where their culture was transmitted to them," Lane says. "If they had hearing parents, they weren't going to find out how to be deaf in their homes or in the local schools. This was where it happened, and frequently it's where they found their spouses, too. The schools are what Israel is to the Jews, the land of a minority without a land."



THE WORLD OF THE DEAF IS HETEROGENEOUS, AND the fault lines that run through it are twisted and tricky. Now politics has worsened the strains. Frances Parsons, for example, is a much honored Gallaudet professor who, though deaf herself, has denounced "the extremists fanatically hawking ASL and Deafism."

Such views have brought her hate mail and denunciatory posters and, once, a punch in the neck. Parsons sees her attackers as cultists and propagandists; they call her and her allies traitors and Uncle Toms.

Much of the dispute has to do with who is authentically deaf. Parsons is suspect because she speaks and has hearing parents. To be the deaf child of deaf parents has cachet, because this is as deaf as one can be. (The four student leaders of the 1988 Gallaudet protest were all "deaf of deaf.") To use ASL is "better" than to use a manual language that mimics English grammar and arranges ASL signs in English word order. "Those born deaf deride those who become deaf at six years or twelve years or later," the Gallaudet psychologist Larry Stewart observed last year in a bitter essay titled "Debunking the Bilingual-Bicultural Snow Job in the American Deaf Community." "ASL-users who do not use lip movements scorn those who sign with mouthed English, or, the other way around. Residential school graduates turn up their nose at mainstream graduates, or the reverse. And so it goes; a once cohesive community now splintered apart by ideology."

Still, there is some common ground and even room for optimism. Captioning on television is universally welcomed; so are TTYs, keyboard devices that allow the deaf to use the telephone, provided the person called also has a TTY. In most states phone companies provide a free "relay" service, in which an operator with a TTY serves as a link between a deaf person with a TTY and a hearing person without one.

"Things are getting better," Roslyn Rosen says. "When I check into a hotel, because of the Americans With Disabilities Act, I expect the TV in the room will have captions, there'll be a TTY, the phone and the fire alarm will have flashing lights, and all that. And soon there will be TV-phones, which will be a wonderful boon for people who use sign language."

What's the difference between these technologies, which Rosen welcomes, and such a device as the cochlear implant, which she denounces? "An implant," she says, "alters *me*. The critical point is, it changes me instead of changing the environment. Therefore the problem is seen as belonging to the deaf person, and *that's* a problem."

To an outsider, this sounds a bit forced. Do eyeglasses, say, belong to one moral category and eye surgery to another? A more useful distinction may be between approaches that allow deaf people to participate in the world and those that leave them stranded on the sidelines. "Part of the odyssey I've made," Cheryl Heppner says, "is in realizing that deafness is a disability, but it's a disability that is unique." It is unique in that a deaf person, unaided and independent, can travel wherever he wants, whenever he wants. The question is whether he will be able to communicate with anyone when he gets there. □

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LETTERS

Deafness as Culture

The easiest way to resolve the question of whether deafness is a disability ("Deafness as Culture," by Edward Dolnick, September *Atlantic*) is by checking with the physical universe. Reality deals harshly with politically inspired smoke and mirrors. Leaving aside for a moment questions of interaction between deaf people and the rest of society, it is a simple fact that the profoundly deaf lack the ability to detect modulated pressure waves (that is, sound waves) unless their volume is so great that they are perceptible by the sense of touch, as gross vibration. Given that this sense (hearing) is an ability that most individuals of the species homo sapiens both have and use, the lack of it (or a condition of greatly reduced sensitivity) is, by definition, a disability and a handicap. For example, the profoundly deaf person will not hear the desperate honking of an out-of-control car coming from behind, and will be oblivious of shouts of warning from onlookers who are not in his or her field of view. The deaf person will not hear the warning sound of a disturbed rattlesnake, the warning growl of a wild animal whose territory is being invaded, or any of the innumerable other warnings that nature provides and that we have evolved to take advantage of.

In this context the politically motivated arguments against cochlear implants are both foolish and cruel. Such implants restore at least part of a physical ability that the implantee would not otherwise have, while subtracting nothing from the individual's physical capabilities. Parents who provide a cochlear implant to a child are not saying "I don't respect the deaf community"; rather, those who wantonly reject such implants—who for their child choose to "let deaf children be deaf"—are elevating deaf culture above that of hearing. They are saying that deaf culture is so much richer or better than that of hearing people that being forced into it is worth the handicap—the disability—of not being able to hear.

Joel S. Davis
Albuquerque, N. Mex.

Edward Dolnick's article was a welcome introduction to deaf people's perspectives on the meaning of deafness and to the deaf community's repudiation of well-intentioned but misguided efforts by hearing people to "cure" them. For the past six years I've been exploring what it means to be deaf after a youth spent "passing for hearing," and I'm delighted that deaf pride and deaf culture are being discovered by the hearing world.

However, an increasingly common perspective on disability in the deaf community, one that was well represented in Dolnick's article, deserves comment. Deaf people often uncritically make and accept the assertion that they are not disabled. This assertion is meant to challenge the definition of deafness as a medical condition—like blindness or paralysis—requiring invasive and "heroic" treatment.

Although medical treatment may be desirable for people who lose their hearing after having learned and used spoken language, I agree with the view that deafness is not primarily a medical condition. Being deaf may entail a sense of cultural pride, and involvement in a vibrant and cohesive community. However, we are not fundamentally different from people who are blind, use wheelchairs, or have other conditions that mark them as different.

Deaf people should have the power to define the meaning of our experience. In saying that the deaf are not disabled we implicitly accept the hearing world's view of disability, assign others to it, and exempt ourselves from it. This robs people with other physical or sensory differences of the very right to self-definition that we seek for ourselves as deaf people.

Barbara A. Robertson
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis, Minn.

The article "Deafness as Culture" is most informative and even revelatory to an ignorant hearing person like me. But how can you discuss deafness with only minimal reference to its effect on learning to read and not even a single mention of music? It's like trying to discuss human behavior without mentioning sex.

Bernard Friedman
Long Island City, N.Y.

Edward Dolnick's article emphasized American Sign Language, as if it were the only language being used by profoundly deaf people throughout the country. Dolnick made no mention of other "true" sign languages, all of which enjoy far greater prominence than ASL, which is used by not more than 25 percent, and by as little as 16 percent, of the deaf.

Every sign language in use in the United States, with the sole exception of ASL, follows the logic and form of our common tongue, English. ASL is unique. By design this language follows a deliberately contrived logic completely unrelated to English. By design ASL stands alone, separate and isolated from every other language on earth—signed, printed, or spoken. It represents and reinforces two key aspects of the "Deaf Culture" espoused by Dr. Roslyn Rosen: isolation and separation of deaf people from society.

Morton Warnow
Communication Technology for the Deaf
Hollywood, Fla.

I think Edward Dolnick misses the point about cochlear implants. They do not turn you into a hearing person. A person with a cochlear implant is a deaf person with a device that provides hissing sounds the recipient may or may not learn to recognize as speech. So you can see why deaf people are not lining up to have this expensive, high-maintenance hardware embedded in our heads.

Joan Cassidy
Sterling, Va.

As a parent of a child with a cochlear implant, I am neither a child abuser nor disrespectful of the deaf community. I am, however, more concerned with my daughter's education and development as an individual than with the political agenda of the deaf isolationists. Thus I chose to give my daughter the same opportunities that Harlan Lane has enjoyed—the opportunities to hear and to speak. In choosing both an auditory-oral approach and the cochlear implant, I made well-informed and reasoned decisions without the benefit of hindsight and with my daughter's best interests always in my mind and in my heart. Interestingly, far from dismissing her as a "fluke," the National Association of the Deaf (for whom Mr. Lane serves as a spokesman) has characterized my daughter as a successfully implanted child.

Richard L. Apicella
Oyster Bay, N.Y.

"Deafness as Culture" neglects to address a point of some, perhaps major, importance—a point apparently also neglected by deafism cultists such as Harlan Lane and Roslyn Rosen. The world of sound is not limited to human speech, though it is limited to that in the article. The cochlear implant, which will undergo the usual technological development and get more and more efficient, allows people suffering from the disability of deafness to hear the symphonies of Beethoven, the twittering of birds, the susurration of leaves, and thunder. That adult deafism cultists should choose to be alienated from these sounds and other human and natural music is their own business; that they should condemn children to such alienation is shameful.

Charles Blinderman
Worcester, Mass.

Edward Dolnick's excellent article on deafness in America contains one factual error: ASL does have a written form. The writing system is named Sign Writing; it is currently used in deaf schools in Denmark and Norway to teach their respective signed languages—DSL and NSL—to both hearing and deaf people.

Richard Gleaves
San Diego, Calif.

Edward Dolnick's sense of historical timing is as acute as his sense of balance. The cochlear prosthesis, on which I have worked for years with many other scientists, engineers, and clinicians, will lead inevitably to the extinction of the alternative culture of the Deaf, probably within a decade. There will still be deaf people, some by choice and some because the technology cannot address (yet) some forms of deafness, but they will be so thinly scattered that the Deaf culture will be unsustainable.

Gerald E. Loeb, M.D.
Queen's University
Kingston, Canada

Edward Dolnick replies:

The world of the deaf is indisputably different from the world of the hearing. The question is whether this difference amounts to a disability. Contrary to Joel Davis's assertion, the answer is not a matter of "simple fact." There are any number of factual ways in which groups of people differ—short people can't dunk a basketball, men don't live as long as women—and they certainly don't all count as disabilities.

As Bernard Friedman points out, music seems a particularly telling example. How could it not be a loss to live without Beethoven? But many deaf people respond matter-of-factly. "I'm doing fine," says Matthew S. Moore, the publisher of *Deaf Life* magazine. "I haven't ever heard it, so I don't miss it." Should human beings pine over our impoverished visual world because bees can detect ultraviolet light and we cannot?

Morton Warnow questions my emphasis on American Sign Language. According to Thomas Allen, the director of the Center for Assessment and Demographic Studies at Gallaudet University, "If you look at those born profoundly deaf or deafened very young, probably eighty to ninety percent use ASL."

Charles Blinderman writes that adults should not "condemn" deaf children to alienated lives. Indeed, they should not. But the poignancy of this debate is that well-meaning people disagree utterly on how to ensure that deaf children do lead rich lives.

Saving the Environment

Matt Ridley and Bobbi S. Low argue cogently and persuasively ("Can Selfishness Save the Environment?," September *Atlantic*) that incentives, properly structured and properly applied, are the key to environmental preservation. They argue that the environmental movement, believing that appeals to virtue and conscience will suffice, has missed this point.

I have spent twenty-three years as a working environmentalist, and regularly