

THE SCREAM OF SILENCE

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Completing this assignment in full knowledge that it will be shared with you, my classmates, scares me very much. It is not that my words/deeds are good or bad. However, it is scary knowing that by sharing the following words with you you begin to know who I really am, information I am not sure I am ready to share with so many people at once. But I will look, and I will assess, and with your help, I know that I will see what yesterday truly was, and what today actually is, and what prospects lie ahead for my tomorrows.

When I entered the hospital in December of 1993 I had little concern about whether or not all would go well, or really any reason to fear. The earache was a standard thing and had become quite commonplace in the past few months. I will, however, never forget the look on the doctor's face when he examined my ear and offered to medicate the pain. "It will only take a small dosage, and it will more than likely make you very tired really quickly." What had I to fear? I had been through this process so very many times before. I awoke the next morning in my apartment to absolute silence. It was the scariest thing I had heard in my entire life. It was but a few days until my life atrophied completely and I slipped into a total, silent seclusion that would last the better part of a month.

The shock of losing my hearing did not hit me right away. My faith had led me to believe that what had happened was simply temporary and that it was just a matter of time before I could hear (what little I could hear before) again. After all, deafness wasn't me. I had too many hopes and dreams to accomplish, things I wanted to do, places to go. And besides, I was not ready to accept my fate of deafness. Such a thought, for me, meant life was over.

As I lay in bed, I couldn't resist the feelings of regret that hung over me. I quickly became angry with myself as I looked back on a life that--though still very young--appeared to be half-filled with youthful indifference. It seemed to me that I had done very little with what was now a lot of valuable time and the wasted days of earlier, knowledgeable years had suddenly come to an account. The future appeared to be over, and all I had for two decades of living were nagging feelings of regret.

I get very concerned when I read and "hear" about the widespread apathy that is said to exist among the young and how so many are idling their time away. Their goals and expectations amount to little more than a search for instant gratification. Ambition is hurriedly disappearing among them. It is what the author Thomas French, in his book *South of Heaven: A Year in the Life of an American High School* refers to as a "withering of curiosity."

Looking back on the once idle course of my own past, I know how easy it is to slip into a do-nothing way of life. I grew up in the heart of Los Angeles, where a person's existence begged for direction. I come from an impoverished family worsened by multiple marriages and absent parents. My poor health together with what I saw as a lack of opportunity left little doubt that living required much hard work to make it any better.

When I lost my hearing at the age of twenty-one, it seemed I had somehow managed to spend the majority of my time doing little or nothing over what was required by school courses. The years from my mid-teens to early twenties, not only for me but for those who moved along with me, were full of an almost instinctive desire for self-gratification and an oblivion to anything tomorrow. Even college bore few expectations and proved to be a continuation of the time.

When I did become focused--merely months ago--I found starting a life for myself to be no small feat. I had hoped to make my way as a writer, or maybe that dream of becoming a lawyer was not so far off. It wasn't long before I realized that getting started was filled with difficulties. Having a degree may not necessarily open a door of opportunity, but not having one will definitely close it.

Now my horizons, frontiers, represent new and unfamiliar struggles--days and things once taken for granted have long since been given due value and meaning. The previously unknown world of the disabled has served to remind me of the immediacy of life and how fragile it really is. It has also brought many changes and adjustments. I find it difficult to get used to the absence of the sweet sound of music, and the comforting and engaging voices of friends and family, the sounds of autumn's rustling leaves and this, my first Christmas, without the familiarity and seasonal jest of Christmas carols.

Everyday tasks I have re-learned. I attended weekly speech therapy classes and have brushed up on the handy sign language I learned early on. I was amazed to find out how uninformed most people are about deafness, especially concerning the capabilities of deaf people, what we can and cannot do. At first, family and friends (mainly friends) tried to do every little thing for me. For others, it means a lot of false assumptions, such as thinking they cannot speak directly to me, but must do so to whomever I happen to be with. And for too many people it means assuming that I am no longer a worthwhile investment. I can attest to this from the comments about "deaf people being dumb," and by from the fact that seventy percent of disabled Americans are unemployed.

As for myself, I have come to believe that life still has a great deal to offer and all the things that really matter remain within me. My dreams haven't faded, as I have proven in continuing my education toward law school. I also am preparing to marry a man who adds harmony to my silence. And above all, I intend to rightly relate to others and live in a fulfilling way as I strive to become an integral, contributing part of the community.

It is understandable that when you are a child you think that time is on your side and that the world waits for you. But only when it is somehow abruptly interrupted do we realize it "just ain't so." Maybe if young people could see, firsthand, the struggles and challenges of the disabled, it would stir in them an awareness of the urgency of life--to pursue dreams and frontiers and to realize what has been given to them. I write these words not in a moralistic effort to pick on today's youth, nor to be overly critical of them. Instead I wish to offer a few words to the wise and to remind myself that as far behind as I may feel that I am, I will never again be as far behind as I could have been.