

Wall of Sound; trying to make sense of what he couldn't hear.

By Josh Swiller

I got my first hearing aids when I was 4 years old. To that point, I was slow to pick up language, slow to show an interest in the world. I mostly sat under a table in my family's apartment and stared at the corner. "That boy is slow," my grandfather said. Under the table there were shadows and dead spiders, the pattern of the floor, cities of floating dust. It hadn't yet occurred to me that the silence of things was an absence. Pediatricians said I was just a delayed learner, until one tested my hearing and said, "Well, what do you know?" We went down to the League for the Hard of Hearing, and I was fitted with hearing aids and was born a second time, into a noisy new world that expected things from me. "I knew it the whole time," my grandfather said.

With hearing aids, I was expected to hear. But hearing aids amplified every single sound they encountered, including all the background sounds you'd rather they didn't. All that noise, amplified 90 decibels, was difficult to decipher; voices didn't produce words so much as the idea of words.

But we worked hard. My mother spent hours every day repeating words and phrases that tripped me up. My father read entire novels to me. I became an assiduous lip-reader, and it turned out that while only about 30 percent of spoken English is recognizable on the lips, virtually 100 percent of televised basketball-coach profanities are. By the time I was 10, I could read lips phenomenally well and could speak almost perfectly. Many people never realized that I was deaf. You only picked up a deaf accent if you were really listening for it or if you were a highway patrolman and I was deliberately laboring my words to get out of a speeding ticket. I could fool almost everyone into believing I was who I pretended to be. It didn't matter to me how much I was missing so long as others thought I could hear.

In high school, though, "hearing" was a fake smile plastered over a losing struggle with fast-talking kids and crowded rooms, and I escaped into books, reading Nietzsche, Ayn Rand and "The Happy Hooker Goes to Washington" sometimes right through my classes. The teachers, ill at ease with my disability, usually let me be. Then I went off to Yale, hopeful for a fresh start. But classes were brutal; I spent hours in one lecture course wondering how the German Kierkegaard expert onstage ate soup through his great beard. It was as if a Christmas tree were stuck to his face. Every once in a while a student would stand up in the back of the room and ask a question.

"Rub-a-rub-a errgh rugga wub," the instructor said. "Weee me we me, mee mee, wee?" the student asked. "Ahh, glubba, rugah wrgh," the instructor answered.

I felt more marginalized than ever. Try Prozac, the mental-health counselor suggested. Instead I decided to try Gallaudet University, the national university for the deaf. But there, with poor signing skills, and make up some remark off that - pretty much my strategy in spoken conversations. In the cafeteria students threw signs the way rappers threw lines, quick, harsh motions that had a bop and an edge. Some signed like orchestra conductors or shy mice or out-of-breath grizzlies, others like teenagers aping rock stars or rain falling in thick, luscious drops. It was beautiful, all of it, and I barely understood a word.

Even where working ears were irrelevant I felt out of place. To the deaf students I was hearing; to hearing people I was deaf. And then I thought, if neither category fits, eliminate the categories. Soon I was on a plane with a two-year supply of hearing-aid batteries, headed for Africa as a Peace Corps volunteer.

In a sense, in Africa I found the place I was looking for. No one expected me to understand what was said. And the people in my Zambian village didn't care about personal quests. To them, everything about me was so foreign that my deafness was a minor novelty. In a place where a lack of

clean water and basic drugs led so many children to die so many preventable deaths, deafness meant nothing. I was freed from the struggle that had defined my life - and I was absolutely helpless, ridiculous. In the open village spaces I heard the funeral wailings just fine.

And so, years later, after I received a cochlear implant, a remarkably successful procedure that improved my hearing to almost normal levels, I was rather unsurprised to find that this great improvement and its attendant developments - talking on the phone, talking to my girlfriend in the dark, hearing the waitress read the daily specials - didn't make that much of a difference in the scheme of things. Volume, in the end, has no great effect on happiness. I can hear now, but I still have to wake up earlier than I'd like to in the morning to walk the dogs, take out the recyclables and confront my credit-card bill. The thing is, that's more than enough. We should all be so lucky.

Josh Swiller is a hospice social worker. This essay is adapted from his book, "The Unheard: A Memoir of Deafness and Africa."