

**Grace Mariette Agolia**  
**“Deaf Child Area: Reconciling the Worlds of Silence and Sound”**  
**TEDxUND February 27, 2015**

How many of you have ever seen one of these “Deaf Child Area” street signs while driving through a neighborhood? Perhaps a few of you. I’ve seen these signs for much of my life. I was born profoundly deaf in both ears, and I use a cochlear implant for my right ear. Whenever I turn on this hearing device, I am able to switch from a world of complete silence to a world of sound. And while I was growing up, there were two “Deaf Child Area” signs on either end of my block, placed there to alert drivers to take care when passing through the area.

I still remember the day when I saw one of these signs on the ground after a big snowstorm a few years ago. I found myself staring at it in surprise – this sign, which had been firmly planted in the ground near my house for so many years, had been knocked over by the wind and was now lying face-down in the snow. For some reason, my first thought was to try to lift up the sign to see the words, “Deaf Child Area,” but I hesitated. The silence in that moment was *deafening*.

It was deafening because in my mind, my two separate worlds of silence and sound had collided, and the impact reverberated in such a way that I had to reevaluate how I perceived my deafness. The “loudness” of my silence impelled me to confront my limitations, and I had to escape the “noise” before I was overwhelmed by it. By these, I mean the *isolation* that can be present in silence and in sound. But before I explain these limitations and my perception of them, let us explore what is meant by the realities of *silence* and *sound*.

What is silence like? Silence is often perceived today as awkward or uncomfortable, or just as a welcome relief from noise. But for a deaf person like me, silence is an experience all its own. It is both *terrible* and *beautiful*. The best analogy I can use to describe physical silence is this:

*Imagine waking up very early  
one winter morning,  
standing outside, and gazing upon  
the mounds of fresh, white, pristine snow...*

*There’s no movement,  
no wind,  
no birds chirping  
and no squirrels running around.*

*No sound of scraping shovels,  
whirring snow blowers,  
or snow plows  
grinding down the street.*

*And if you hold your breath for a moment...*

*Then, there's absolute stillness.*

*And you're all alone.*

*You hear...*

*Nothing.*

*Nothing at all.*

This utter profundity and depth of silence is what totally ensconces one dimension of my human life, the sensation of hearing, like a thick, heavy blanket, at times separating me from the world but also allowing me to encounter it more fully when the cover of isolation is lifted.

So, physical silence in itself can be isolating, but this isolation also happens when I have my implant on but just hear noise, without understanding. And this is for me, the hardest part of having a hearing loss – trying to communicate with other people effectively. When I see mouths moving and hear noise, but do not comprehend, when I frequently miss information or misinterpret what people say, I feel lost, embarrassed, and alone. I'll often use the "Deaf Nod" to escape the embarrassment of having to say "what?" several times in a row. But even so, I become frustrated whenever I fail to advocate for my needs, partly because the ignorance of others contributes to misunderstanding and because in my own diffidence, I fail to speak.

As we all know, communication is key. And a crucial part of communication for most people is being able to hear, because hearing influences our understanding, emotions, relationships, and experiences of the world. Sound, as opposed to noise, includes recognizing the beauty of the human voice, words, music, and nature. Something as simple as sweet birdsong to the loud, majestic crack of thunder. The soft sigh of a child asleep, the rain as it patters on the roof, the wind as it rustles through the trees, footsteps in the hall, a dog barking, a piano's tune. The sounds of our everyday lives, weaved together into an intricate web, a way of life, a deeply human experience that goes beyond the merely sensory. While sound may not

always be pleasant, such as hearing a person's cries of anguish and desperation, the sound still has meaning because it stirs something in us and thus reflects upon the human experience. Whereas noise is devoid of meaning because it obscures some aspect of human nature, and a sense of communication and understanding is lost, resulting in isolation.

So sound has come to be known as meaningful and silence perceived as void and barren. But I've also come to experience beauty and meaning in silence. I am more attuned to my surroundings, and I am able to perceive the exquisite particularity of a human face. I have a sense of inner calm and peace when I connect with myself in solitary moments, and I am able to develop a closer relationship with God. So silence is not necessarily an absence but a presence, and for people in the hearing world, it is the background that gives sound meaning. Because I partake of both worlds, my experience of silence informs the world of sound, and my experience of sound informs the world of silence. That is, when isolation is not present. Otherwise, they are just two separate worlds.

This leads me back to the "Deaf Child Area" sign in the snow. While I was standing there, I wondered if my two worlds of silence and sound could ever be reconciled. I began to realize that I had so internalized society's expectations of disabled people that I was perceiving the two signs as symbols of those limits. On some days, the sign was a beacon where I could make excuses for myself because of my disability, and on other days, it was a blatant reminder that I am *limited*, thus affecting how I viewed myself as a person and what I expected to achieve in life. But now, I know that I cannot wallow in self-pity, because that would be reinforcing stereotypes of handicapped individuals, supporting the notion that these people simply *can't*. They are limited. Will I forever allow these signs to surround my horizons, offering me a false sense of security? Or will I find a way to transcend society's expectations by *embracing* my deafness in my experiences of both silence and sound as a cochlear implant user?

As I looked at the sign in the snow, I noticed that it closely resembled a "Dead End" sign in shape and in meaning. Both signs can connote a sense of ominous finality. Society often thinks that handicapped people are "dead ends" because they do not contribute anything productive or worthwhile. I have realized, however, that I am not a dead end, but the beginning of a new road. People like me with disabilities have something to contribute to a deeper understanding of the human experience. We know what it is like to be isolated, to be able to

communicate truly, to see beauty in the seemingly broken. I invite you to come and see, come and hear from our perspective. What is considered a burden can also be a gift.

I turned away from the sign in the snow and walked home. A few days later, the sign was *gone*. I know that I am not fully part of the Deaf world, nor am I fully part of the hearing world. On the dividing line is the “Deaf Child Area” sign. I have learned, however, to integrate my experiences of silence and sound, and that has led me to break the barrier.

Even though I have overcome many of my own challenges, and society has made some progress in accommodating the needs of disabled people, there is still much work to be done. We, too, need to perform this integration of silence and sound in society at large because deafness is not something that should be stigmatized, and disability does not subtract from the dignity of a human person. We must not confine any person to a specific area or to expectations based upon ability because there, the detrimental kind of silence enters in, a silence of limitation in which loneliness eats away at a person’s self-confidence. Each of us, whether deaf or hearing, has experienced isolation when others hurt us and reject us for who we are. I think that is the greatest loneliness – the inability to communicate, to interact with each other truly, especially on that most fundamental level of giving and receiving love. Being lost in noise, unable to understand and have compassion for others in their struggles, failing to recognize the inherent value of the human person, and to include others on the margins, that is a terrible isolation that needs to be broken and transfigured into a silence and sound of love that can be cherished for the beauty it brings.

*What if you and I become the change?* It is time to break through this isolation because it affects us *all*; we all want to be valued. In order to take on this challenge, we must come together as a community, as a human family, with a shared definition and appreciation of human dignity. We must work with a renewed vigor to take down walls that separate people according to seemingly irreconcilable differences. We need to go beyond merely feeling “bad” for someone and channel these feelings into actions of deep empathy and compassion, even if it’s simply reaching out and talking to others, having patience, or asking them about their struggles and what you can do to help. What an incredible revelation that could take place! *We can be the change*. I challenge you as I try to challenge myself every day: What will you do today to break this isolation?