SHADOWLANDS: IMPLICATIONS OF WRITING A MEMOIR OF DEAFNESS

Donna McDonald PhD
Griffith University, Australia
IDENTITY

‘The sense of our own identity is fluid and tolerant, whereas our sense of the identity of others is always more fixed and quite often edges towards caricature. We know within ourselves that we can be twenty different persons in a single day and that the attempt to explain our personality is doomed to become a falsehood after only a few words . . .

And yet . . . works of literature, novels and biographies depend for their aesthetic success precisely on this insensitive ability to simplify, to describe, to draw lines around another person and say, “This is she” or “This is he.”’

- A.N. Wilson. Incline Our Hearts
A LIFETIME OF PEOPLE ASKING ME QUESTIONS ABOUT MY DEAFNESS

“Your deafness, it must have a big impact on your life?”
MY SEARCH TO UNDERSTAND MY DEAF SELF

- I read many memoirs by other deaf writers and novels with deaf characters (most of which are written by hearing writers).

- I faced the task of:
  - composing my own memoir of deafness,
  - in a fresh way,
  - to disrupt historically persistent perceptions of deafness and what it means to be deaf.

- In this presentation, I describe how and why I tackled this challenge, and its impact on my sense of identity.
MY FEARS

Sprang from my experiences and observations:
- many hearing people treat and talk crudely about deaf people
- *I* might also be treated and talked about in such a way, with devastating consequences:
  - lessened career prospects, compromised friendships, and conditional love.
- perhaps *I was* a lesser person in some way? . . . because here *I was*, routinely inconveniencing so many people because I couldn’t hear properly and didn’t say every word properly.
SHAKING OFF MY FEARS

- Admitting this fear to myself, let alone to anyone else, was hard.

  BUT

- I realised my silence was acting as a brake on my ability to live authentically, and

- as a brake on other people’s understanding of the variety of possibilities for deaf people’s lives.
Defining my ‘self’

In my memoir, Art of Being Deaf, I remembered, described, and interpreted my experiences by answering such questions as:

- Who am I in relation to my deafness?
- What does my being deaf mean in relation to other people?
- What additional tasks in developing my sense of self did I have to take on board (or avoid) because I am different from other people? (Corker, 1996, p.4).
“Lately, the deaf subject is also anxious. She is anxious about her identity, anxious about her place, anxious too about her anxiety. Attempting to cope with her anxiety, she tries to remember what some philosophers and great authors have told her about her subjectivity, her anxiety, and the placing and questioning of her very identity” (Brueggeman, 2009, p.1).
MY APPROACH

- I was born deaf, and so I did not experience that fracture between “hearing” and “no hearing” described so vividly by other memoirists who became deaf through illness or trauma.

- My memoir is not a “triumph over adversity” story or about conquering battles, but about inviting the reader into my world to see what it feels and sounds like, e.g., my:
  - external experiences of *deafness*
  - inner sense of myself as “*being deaf*”
  - struggles with the general questions of life that confront all of us.
A THEME: SEPARATING THE CHILD’S WILL FROM THE PARENT’S WILL

- I saw how my early life had been shaped by the exertion of my mother’s will so that I gained the necessary competencies to participate fully as a deaf woman in the hearing world.

- I also accepted that I had been a largely unreflective but usually compliant accomplice to my mother’s will.
ANOTHER THEME: IMPORTANCE OF FINDING OTHER VOICES

Absence of childhood deaf friends + absence of deaf mentor . . .

This is why reading:
- historical and contemporary novels with deaf characters
  and
- memoirs by deaf writers
were such useful guides for my reflections on my deaf life and deaf self.
Learning from other voices

Memoirists: Helen Keller; David Wright; Frances Warfield; Henry Kisor; Bernard Bragg; Bainy Cyrus; Hannah Merker; Christopher Heuer; Joseph Valente and many others.

Novelists: TC Boyle (Talk Talk), Frances Itani (Deafening), Vikram Seth (An Equal Music), Philip Zazaove (Four Days in Michigan).

Anthologies: Sayers, E. E. ed. Outcasts and Angels

and so on.
A third theme: Identity builds on connections

- We must all take our sense of connectedness from where we can best find it.
- For some deaf people, it is within their own Deaf community.
- For others such as myself—those oral-deaf people, in the shadowlands, scattered across the hearing world—such a sense of connectedness can be buried or lost.
- Accessing the heritage of deaf memoirs, biographies, and life narratives was enormously helpful to me . . . the hand of mentoring reached down to me across the span of history.
FOURTH THEME: DEAF PEOPLE ARE NOT THE FAILED ATTEMPTS TO BE HEARING.

- My deafness is more than the backdrop to my sense of self; it is the context in which I am located.
- But I do not like being regarded by others as a “deaf woman” as if I hold no other qualities.
- And I do not like it when people try to “take away” my deafness with comments such as “You seem just like a hearing person.”
- My private, non-negotiable insistence on being understood by others in a layered, textured, multi-dimensional way has restrained me from publicly staking out my identity as a “deaf woman.”
LOVE

- The depiction of romantic love in the lives of people with a disability still seems to be startling to others.
BORDERS IN CHILDHOOD

In my childhood, my deafness was contained within many borders:

My entire extended family was hearing and so served as a stronghold against any encroachment by the deaf community . . . warding off the threat that being deaf might overtake my life.

Many suburbs and a wide wending river lay between my childhood home and the school for deaf children and the homes of my deaf friends.

Even the private girls’ school I attended (after five years at the Deaf School) was protected by that same river and high stone walls.
BORDERS (LESS APPARENT) IN ADULTHOOD

- This membrane is permanent and so is the duality of my public “hearing-deaf” self and private deaf self.
- The dominance of either the public or private self depends on the circumstances in which I find myself.
**WHY TELLING OUR STORIES MATTERS**

- How do others understand us if our stories about deafness and what it means to be deaf are missing from what they read?
- How do hearing parents of deaf children navigate the course of their young children’s lives if they do not have an array of life-stories from deaf adults from which to learn?
- And just as importantly . . .
- How do we understand *ourselves* if we do not see our lives authentically portrayed in books, films and other media?
PERSONAL IMPACTS OF WRITING MY MEMOIR: RECONCILIATION & CLARITY

- A shift has occurred in me, and it shows in the significant changes that have taken place and are continuing to take place in my life.
- By writing my memoir of deafness, I reconciled my childhood deaf self with my adult “hearing-deaf” persona. The two selves have merged as one.
- I have also learned that talking with others about my deafness has anchored me more strongly to my home, my family, and to my friendships.
- My final destination has been clarity.
REFERENCES

SELECTION OF MY PUBLICATIONS ON DEAF IDENTITY