

Deafinitely Enlightening

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This week-end I had the privilege of making a guest author appearance at Deafworld 2003, from a hearing perspective.

Being what I call a puppet, which means if I feel I'm supposed to do something, even if I don't necessarily understand why, I do it, and await the outcome.

So when I was invited to Deafworld 2003, I didn't question why, I just did it.

I set myself up and anticipated my purpose. Praying I would detect it before the show and not after. Looking across the floor at the many jumping pits for kids I wonder if I was supposed to bring my own children who would have loved it. They know how to mix business with family. Or should I have stayed at home for the Studio Tour I already signed up for that my husband was now covering?

I don't know what I was expecting, but everyone was deaf. The exhibitors, attendees, coordinators, hands moved frantically getting their message across. The only noise was the deafening hum of the air conditioners 40 feet above. It was starting to be a celebration that I didn't know how to participate in.

Since the written word was universal, at least in this environment, I started to ponder as a writer, what my role was. Poetry is my medium, would it involve a poem anthology from deaf writers. After all, how much do we really know from their perspective?

So I sat, quietly, not uttering a word, wondering what I was going to do when someone came to my booth using only sign language. I was a foreigner, using my smile, pointing to signs, and talking, just in case they could read my lips. Here I felt at the disadvantage, so like they do everyday, of every year, I sharpened my wits, adapted and evolved.

When it's quiet, you think a lot. It's a good thing. I think back to last week when I modeled for an art class, 3 hours of being still and quiet. There is a message for me, and perhaps for everyone really. Do we need to listen more? Listen differently? Slow down? Enjoy the ride?

My first visitor just came, she could read lips. So I spoke clearly, slowly and strained to interpret what she managed to emit. I'm 5 minutes into the show, and already I'm desperate to talk to someone. I hunger for the messages I get from every person I meet, so I attempt to hear the message I may be getting from a higher plane – maybe this is the point.

I can only assume today is about listening, because I smile as I hear kids playing on the giant cactus inflatable desert. I wonder again do I hear my kids enough? I try, but that may not satisfy. When they laugh, do I join in or tell them to finish their peas? When they scrape their knee, do I tell them to be more careful next time, or get a band-aid and antiseptic. I made a mental note to evaluate my own behaviour and if necessary, improve it.

I am using my eyes more today. Looking for answers, watching their hands, increasing the recognition and appreciation of my sight. It's like a spiritual awakening of the senses in an environment where some are missing one, so they elevate the frequency of others. I decided to try and do this without one being deficient. I was going to implement every opportunity while I was sitting here. Besides, isn't this the DOCNOT way?

Our DOCNOT philosophy, Dynamic Optimism Cultivating New Opportunistic Thought. I remained open and optimistic that something great was going to come out of this. I searched for every opportunity, and I thought, about each moment, and became conscious as they unfolded. It was about becoming more aware, more grateful, and less self absorbed.

Sign language is quite awesome. Flamboyant, expressive, I watch as they look like a society of silent Italians. Kids flashing their hands, expanding their journey by choices they made before entry, as they attempt to discover their unique purpose. I watch as mothers drop off their kids at jumping pits while they visit the booths. I wonder how they hear their kids cry, or yell mom from across the room? I noticed they watch everything, and think how focused we usually are. Like the forest and the tree analogy, we stare at the tree and dissect it, but they seem to examine it instantly using all of their senses, then scan the forest to make sure nobody needs them. But it's not a nervous scan, it's a holistic motion in which they seem to absorb the entire environment, and not just a small piece of it. It's a gift they seem to develop.

I think about how great the design and layout of the show is. Seems simple on the surface, but after 20 years of attending technology trade shows, it is a breath of fresh air. They have an area, right in the center for kids, so parents can visit the booths knowing their children are occupied and having fun. Brilliant in my opinion, and a welcome element from someone who has tried to look at computers with 3 kids in tow. How evolved and insightful. Lucky them I think to myself.

Arm in arm, hand in hand, people hug as they greet. How civilized. Again, tactile, touch, utilizing another forgotten element that can remain malnourished within our souls. I put a note to myself to hug more. It can only make the world a better place. They seem happy despite the disregard we can sometimes have towards anyone who is different. Here they are all the same, except for me. But I don't feel like an outsider, I feel unique and one-of-a-kind.

I wondered if this was about my dad? He couldn't hear for years, unable to face the issues that surrounded that possibility, we simply assumed he wasn't interested in what we were saying. Finally he got a hearing aid which continuously needs batteries, and attention. We still exclude him, he can't keep up, we're always 3 thoughts ahead of him, we get annoyed when we have to repeat things. Intolerant, impatient, even on a small scale. I vow to eliminate this from my personality. I was very sympathetic for anyone else, but negligent when it was my own father. That was worth discovering.

I look across the room and wonder why the busiest booth is the ASL web design. Is it the mere embrace of technology, or is reading a web an issue? Why would it be? The presentation is packed, the hand language at a frenzied pitch. Obviously a deaf person would have picked up on this deficit because to me it felt like the dot.com trend all over again. A perceived need, when there were really so many others to deal with. It certainly made me chuckle inside as I watched them all sign synchronously, and wondered how the presenter chose who to answer first.

I got my first person who couldn't speak at all. I was glad I made a sign that listed out in point form what we did. I pointed at it, pointed at myself, pointed at the book I was there promoting, and waited for a reaction. They all seemed very impressed with the book. A venture they didn't seem to want to pursue themselves though. I found this interesting, as I thought if I couldn't hear, I sure would have lots to say.

I would often get asked if the book was about deaf people, and I would tell them how jobs, emotions and poetry was about all people. They bought from me – mostly the poetry lovers though, for it is indeed a universal language.

The awaited speaker was coming up. There were never any loud announcements directing people to the stage. A girl walked the floor with a sign in her hand to tell everyone what was going on. Christy, the deaf girl from Survivor Amazon approached the stage. The entire audience remained silent except for the waving of hands in the air. They were clapping. It was hysterical. Up she goes, I was anticipating her message, but I quickly realized I didn't have a clue what she was saying. The entire presentation was in sign language. Certainly saves on microphones and PA equipment. No technology issues to worry about here. She was expressive, hands a mile a minute, face, eyes, animated, with her whole body delivering the message. Even without the uproarious laughter, you could tell they thought she was funny. I realized how it must feel to listen to us speaking, unable to interpret our lips from a distance, or when we were looking down, or moving between people. When they asked a question, they would get up, move to the front of the room, face her and the audience, sign their question, and then the hands would start flying. This was a very important show for them. The whole time she was presenting though, they

were right beside the stage building a skateboard ramp. The hammers, and banging, and slamming of wood – nobody seemed to mind though, except for me.

Afterwards I had a chance to speak with Christy. I had watched her on Amazon religiously, and admired her courage. She accepted her purpose and the issues that went with it, and boldly stepped forward towards the challenge. I gave her a copy of my book. She asked me to sign it. I was the one waiting for an autograph. I hope that as my purpose unfolds I will address it with the dignity and grace that she has, and everyone I met today has done. I felt blessed to be there.

Overall it was an incredible experience. It was the first show I had ever attended where I didn't come away with a sore throat from yelling. Where I wasn't over stimulated by a barrage of multi-media, electronic PowerPoint resonating with attitude, music or megaphones. We communicated with any means possible, and came away understanding.

It was a pleasant change of pace, one that I hope will continue as I speak more softly, because I can still be heard. Just imagine if we all decided to do this how more peaceful and calm it would all be. I took a deep breath, packed up my booth, and walked out, listening to the sound of my boots on the concrete, feeling joyous I could hear that, and more awakened than before I arrived. Whatever the multitudes of messages that I received today were, I certainly feel more alive, and connected, and intrinsically aware that my day was well spent.

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