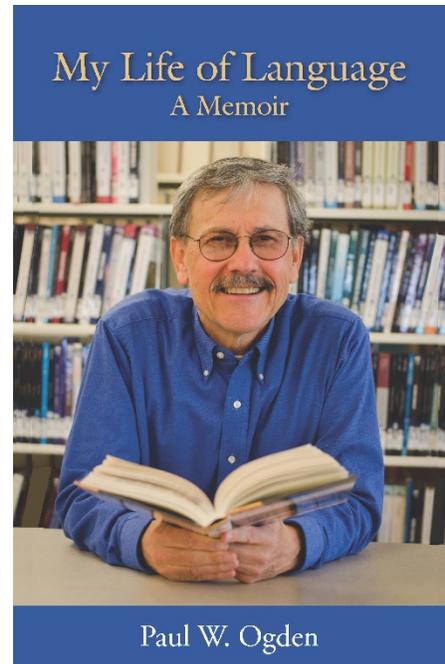


An Interview with Paul W. Ogden

Author of [*My Life of Language: A Memoir*](#) and [*The Silent Garden: A Parent's Guide to Raising a Deaf Child*](#)

What inspired you to write *My Life of Language*?

Writing is thinking. When I write about my life, each sentence gives my life shape and meaning. And finally with a memoir in hand, I have something of myself to give to someone I care about. Wherever I go, people always ask about my life experiences. The more I share, the more they are eager to pick up their own prism and see how universal their experiences are.



You discuss language and communication throughout the book. Why are these topics so important to you?

When I communicate, I discover what I think. When I communicate with someone else, I want to know what they think. And together we can start to make community. With ASL I am bilingual. Without language and communication, an individual is incomplete. Being unable to express oneself is a tragedy. I have language and can communicate; therefore, I exist.

You grew up in an oral environment and didn't learn ASL until you were an adult. What impact did learning sign language have on you?

Learning sign language opens up opportunities to meet all other members of the Deaf community and to appreciate the richness of their world and culture. The best analogy I can offer is that when an American remains monolingual and does not become part of the much larger world we live in, they are deprived of access to many different cultures where they can learn about other traditions, norms, and social behaviors. When we are aware of different cultures, we are more tolerant and embrace diversity.

You describe incidents of discrimination against you because you are Deaf. What advice do you have for others facing similar challenges?

The older I become the more I hesitate to give advice. No specific advice can be applied. Every situation I face is complex, and there is no specific plan of action I recommend other than educating people and eradicating general public ignorance toward Deaf people. A lot of thought has to be given and followed by an evaluation of the situation. Then a plan can be set up for dealing with the situation. I have been brought up to believe all people should be given a chance to learn. We have to be creative and proactive in the process of reaching out and educating people. I believe in people.

You tell the story of your father’s involvement in the civil rights movement and how Martin Luther King Jr. was a guest in your home when you were a child. How did that influence your own work as an advocate?

My father believed in fair play in all walks of life, and he acted on that belief. I saw him always for the underdog everywhere we went. I witnessed how he interacted with the disabled, patients in hospitals, the oppressed in the South, alcoholics, broken families, and people who were suffering. He had unusually strong empathy for the disadvantaged, marginalized, and oppressed.

You have dedicated your life to improving the opportunities available to deaf and hard of hearing children. What is the greatest lesson you’ve learned that you’d like to share with these children, their families, and their educators?

Three greatest lessons I’ve learned:

- a. Families who are passionate in reaching out to their deaf and hard of hearing children and communicating with them as early as possible have a much better relationship with them and can be part of their children’s lives when they become adults.
- b. A teacher who takes seriously their role as a deaf child’s advocate can help both child and parents navigate the way through education and eventually into vocation.
- c. Families and teachers who include deaf and hard of hearing role models in the lives of their children and students—at all age levels—increase their opportunities to excel at whatever they choose to do.

We need the teamwork of families, teachers, and role models to create a healthy environment for deaf and hard of hearing children.