

Moment of Decision

My one hearing aid was faltering:
loud-soft, off-on.

The tight spot in my neck was getting tighter
as I strained to catch with my eyes
what I couldn't get through the aid.

After the hearing test Barbara said,
"Your hearing's worse."

I laughed.
"I've been profoundly deaf since six,
what's after profound?"

"Cosmic deafness."

I thought she was kidding, but her face was serious.
I'd become as deaf as deaf can be—
that is, when you're talking about it scientifically.
Inside I could still hear thoughts, feelings,
voices, singing, music,
words rising up off pages,
the earth breathing into my toes.

But outside
to the world—

this world—
I was off in space.

“There’s no hearing aid that’s going to help you,
only the cochlear implant.”

“I’m scared.”
There—finally—I’d said it out loud.

She nodded.

If I got the implant
there would be no going back to the hearing aid,
dizzy spells might worsen,
tinnitus, facial paralysis, loss of taste, headaches—
all were possibilities.
My right ear,
my more alert,
more awake ear,
would have to be the one,
the left ear was too far gone.

The biggest question yet:
would my brain be able to move
from a trickle to a torrent of noise?
Would sounds be torment or treasure?

Barbara guessed my thoughts.
“The implant’s come a long way.”

I’d explored the possibility twenty years earlier.

My gut said no.

Later I knew that was the right decision—
only seven of the fifteen operations by that surgeon
had been successful.

Barbara waited.

“Give me a surefire reason to get it.”

She didn’t skip a beat.

“Now your eyes do 95 percent of the work,
the hearing aid 5 percent—sometimes less.
With the implant it would be more like fifty-fifty,
your eyes and your right ear.”

My dear eyes!

My most faithful friends!

Once I experienced blindness for three days
because of an accident,
and learned I’m no Helen Keller.

It was time to protect and thank those eyes.

With that realization a cascade of other reasons rushed out:

It was time to step into the world of technology
many of the deaf children I worked with inhabited.

It was time to try meeting my hearing family on their turf.

It was time to hear what I hadn’t heard since I was six:
wind, rain, rivers, crickets. . . .



THE MOMENT when I knew, “I’m going to get it!” stands out vividly in my memory.

It was a sweltering August day. Barbara, mentioned in the poem above, was my audiologist. After I left her office, I sat in the air-conditioned car in the parking lot for a couple of minutes, marveling at the fact that I’d just said “Yes!” to something I’d been saying “No!” to for at least twenty years. I recall craving a Coke or a chocolate bar—as though, physically, I’d completed a marathon and needed a pickup—but not stopping to get either on the way home because I was in a hurry to share the news with Ed.

The decision *felt* right, that’s all I knew. It felt right in my mind and in my heart and now it felt right in my gut too.

For years I’d given others, including my coworkers at Clarke Schools for Hearing and Speech where I worked, coherent reasons for *not* getting the implant. All the reasons I have already stated here: I was doing okay (they always nodded in agreement when I said this), and if the implant didn’t work, I wouldn’t be able to go back to a hearing aid because the sixteen thousand hair cells in my cochlea would be destroyed when the twenty-two electrodes were embedded in it, and to hear with a hearing aid you need those hair cells. Concrete facts of this sort can be tremendously reassuring, like bodyguards in a circle around you.

But . . .

The word “but” simply wouldn’t leave me alone.

But what about your eyes? The experience with near blindness, which I mention in the last poem, was terrifying. It was an extremely windy day and a sharp object flew into my left eye,

ripping the cornea. I had to have surgery. The pain was acute. I needed to stay in a darkened room, could not open my left eye, and my right eye teared up constantly. For almost three days I was unable to see clearly or to read faces, lips, emails, handwritten notes, books, the newspaper, anything. Communication, even with my husband, was reduced, for the most part, to my asking questions, then listening carefully for yes-or-no answers. Though I knew my eye would eventually heal and I'd be able to see again, I also knew my mother had suffered from severe macular degeneration and my father had had to have surgery twice for glaucoma. Oh boy, was I was going to be a chip off the old block? Would I be inheriting the same eye conditions? Yikes!

But what about your grandchildren—you'd like to be able to hear them, wouldn't you?

But what about your students with implants—you've even seen some of them talking on cell phones?

And so on.

These *buts* were not huge, they were not a matter of life or death, but they were persistent, especially the one involving my eyes. Apart from needing, as a deaf person, to be able to see in order to hear, I love looking at the world. There is always so much to see! Sometimes I feel I am, literally, eating and tasting the world through my eyes! My mother was an artist and was often doing watercolors on the kitchen table when I came home from school, and I'm sure this contributed to my appreciation both for art and for the natural world. Many of our conversations—hers and mine—were not spoken verbally, they arose out of this shared love of beauty. She would often ask me to pick a few flowers from a neighbor's garden for her to paint, would point at them when we were in the car. So I developed

an eye early on for contrasting shapes and colors and, in the process, became an expert flower thief!

It's amazing how quickly I traveled beyond the other concerns surrounding the cochlear implant—the possibility of facial paralysis, or loss of taste, or increased dizziness, which I have always been prone to—through the power of having made a decision. I was no longer scared. I actually felt exhilarated. Sure, I'd get the jitters, and I'd have to meet with the doctor and get his take on it, sign my head over to his expertise, have an MRI, see about insurance coverage, figure out when it could be done, and so on. More important, there would be family and friends to go over the details with. But, for me, the course had been set, and I gave myself to it. I not only trusted the surgeon, the technology, the audiologist I'd be working with, the love of my husband, the support of my family and friends, the recuperative powers of the body, and the creative and educative forces within the brain, I also trusted that I would be protected and guided. If I was *not* meant to get the cochlear implant, I believed outer events or forces would interfere.

Amen!



I can't remember who taught me to pray back then, or if anyone suggested I pray, but pray I did when six years old. And hard! In the dark, on my knees by the side of the bed every evening after my parents had tucked me in, I told God I wanted my hearing back. I explained he had one week to turn the switch on again. At the end of the week, still unable to hear, I gave him another week. Then another. I figured he must be pretty busy.

Eventually, tired of repeating myself, I began asking, instead, for wings. If I couldn't get my hearing back, I wanted to fly.



Family portrait. I think I was four years old.

No wings sprouted on my shoulders, but I flew often in my dreams. When I was seven or eight, I dreamt almost nightly of becoming a bird, sometimes an owl, other times a parakeet. I'd circle over the classroom and would alight on the shoulder of the handsomest boy. I could poop on the heads of the mean girls too! Or, when going down the stairs behind my mother, my legs would suddenly stream out, straight behind, flat against my tummy, the legs of a goose in flight. If my mother turned around, I was instantly a girl again, upright on my feet, going demurely down the stairs. I could also hear perfectly in my dreams, which is still the case today. In fact, people don't even

have to open their mouths to say what they mean, I “hear” and understand them perfectly. And they “hear” me perfectly as well.

“How charming!” you might say.

I believe every prayer sent straight from the heart *is* answered. Maybe not as expected or hoped, and often not as quickly as one wants. But, I’ve found that when I pay attention, and look and listen carefully, the answers come, or are, quite simply, there. And often they keep coming, keep appearing, for there may be more than one response to a request or a question. That six-year-old praying to God to turn her hearing back on didn’t know a thing about the inventions and other forms of hearing help that would someday appear on her horizon: hearing aids, text telephones for the deaf, closed captioning, interpreters, oral transliterators, email, texting, the cochlear implant.

This has been the story of my life: there are *many* ways to hear. What I do with it, the listening part of it, is up to me. I suspect it was God himself who nudged me toward the decision to have the cochlear implant. He blew away every carefully crafted objection, made me hungry to connect in yet more ways with his world, gave my heart the needed courage.

It was as if God said, “Remember when you asked me to switch your hearing back on? Okay, now we’re going to get literal about that. . . .”