

Sounds like us

By Sean McLennan

If you were alert during the Academy Awards, you might have noticed a film called *Sound and Fury* nominated for Best Documentary. Chances are you missed it, since documentaries seldom receive the attention they deserve. *Sound and Fury* didn't win, but it was certainly deserving of its nomination.

The film revolves around the Artinian family in New York, who have been polarized around recent issues that the deaf community faces. Their relationships are a little entangled and there's a bit of background to cover, but it's all crucial to understanding them, their struggles, and why you, the GLBT audience should care. So bear with me. Peter Artinian is deaf (since birth) and is one of four siblings, including a deaf sister. Peter married a deaf woman, Nita, and they have three children, all of whom are deaf. Peter's parents are hearing.

Peter's brother, Chris, is hearing and married a hearing wife, Mari. However, both Mari's parents are deaf and so she also grew up close to the deaf community. They have five children (two sets of twins!) all of whom are hearing except one, one of the youngest set of twins. So, to recap, there are two nuclear families, one hearing with a set of deaf grandparents, and one deaf with hearing grandparents, all of whom are competent, if not native speakers of American Sign Language (ASL).

Enter the final player and source of all the drama: the cochlear implant. The cochlea is the innermost, nautilus-like part of the ear and it is lined with tiny hairs that respond to different frequencies of sound. It is typically these hairs that are damaged in congenitally deaf individuals, not the actual nerves that pass the stimulation on to the rest of the brain. Recently, it has become possible to insert a tiny electrode into the cochlea to stimulate the nerves, which artificially restores hearing in a deaf person. Although it doesn't capture anything close to normal hearing, it is sufficient for implanted infants to develop normal-sounding speech and to learn and understand spoken language. Chalk one up for modern science! (Actually, chalk one up for being able to restore hearing to deaf individuals! That's a pretty impressive accomplishment.)

However, you may be a little surprised to discover that the deaf community in general find the cochlear implant "deplorable." Why? Because they see it as a threat to their culture, language and way of life; in short, they see it as a road to something akin to "genocide."

This is the issue that shredded the

harmony of the Artinian family when, at more or less the same time, Chris and Mari decided to pursue the cochlear implant for their newborn boy, and Peter and Nita's eldest daughter, Heather (then four-and-a-half) came to them and expressed a desire for one herself. Most hearing people have a swift and resolute reaction: "If there's any chance of restoring hearing and allowing your child to grow up with normal sounding speech, then *do it!* Don't you want the best for your child? Don't you want to give them every possible opportunity?"

Ignore, for the moment, that the surgery will forever tie the child to an electronic processor (currently, about the size of a pocket book) and turn them into a chronic hospital patient. Ignore the inherent gamble that the chances of restoring completely normal spoken



A COCHLEAR IMPLANT

language decrease exponentially with age such that Heather, at just four, would need to be entered into hours of therapy per week with no guarantees of the quality of her speech. Let's ignore those concerns and just consider the cultural issues at stake—the issues that have much of the deaf world in an uproar.

Sound and Fury presents a side of the deaf community that we seldom see. It depicts a group of people that struggle day-to-day to convince the overwhelming majority that surrounds them that they are not defective human beings. They struggle not because they can't hear, but because they have to interact in a world that assumes that they *can*. They struggle to make the hearing world realize that they can lead happy, normal, productive, independent lives; that they shouldn't be considered handicapped, just different.

Sound familiar? How about if I repeat that in a slightly different context: "It depicts a group of people that struggle day-to-day to convince the overwhelming majority that surrounds them that they are not defective human beings. They struggle not because they aren't straight, but because they have to interact in a world that assumes that they are. They struggle to make the straight world realize that they can lead happy, normal,

productive, independent lives; that they shouldn't be considered abnormal, just different."

From the opening scenes of *Sound and Fury*, there is an obvious parallel between the deaf and GLBT communities. So much so, in some sections you could simply replace the words "deaf" and "hearing" with "gay" and "straight." I think that, at first, many people have difficulty seeing this analogy on two grounds: first, they can't get over seeing deafness as a handicap, and second, they can't see how deafness can define a culture.

The first standard argument that one typically hears is about highly improbable impending danger situations: deaf people are clearly at a disadvantage because they can't hear that dump-truck / mugger / pack of wild dogs bearing down on them. But seriously, the number of life and death scenarios in which hearing plays the critical role are pretty infrequent—how often do you hear of deaf people being in accidents such as this? The only real challenges that deaf people face are imposed upon them by a hearing world and, for the most part, they don't have

much trouble adapting to those challenges. Do you feel impaired because you can't see infrared? Aliens that had this ability would certainly wonder how we managed to evolve without the ability to locate predators and prey in the dark. With no basis for comparison, we don't see how our own lives are impaired by our sensory limitations, and we do not feel deprived or hampered in our everyday lives. The deaf community feels the same.

Concerning the question of culture, the deaf community presents a special case compared to, say, the blind or quadriplegic communities. That is because of language: language and communication are one of the strongest factors in defining identity, kinship and culture. Unlike other demographic groups, the deaf share a distinct and unique form of language. Most people naively believe that ASL is simply a signed form of English. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, typologically, ASL has more in common with Chinese than English. Sign languages the world over are as individual, complex and mutually unintelligible as

Continued on page 41

Continued from page 40

English, Tagalog, Japanese and Hausa. They are acquired in the same manner, on the same developmental time-scale as spoken languages, and linguists have demonstrated time and again that they are subject to the same universal constraints a all languages. Language on its own is a strong enough sociological argument to validate "deaf culture."

The deaf community shares another really important similarity with the GLBT community that other minorities communities don't: parents and children don't necessarily share the same traits. This raises completely unique issues for both communities. There is a visceral, probably biological, desire for your children to be like you. For a hearing family with a deaf child or a straight family with a gay child, (or vice versa) there's an inherent alienation from each other that requires extra effort, understanding and compassion to bridge. Unfortunately, as we all know, the gap is not always bridged and the stress can drive families apart.

Because I saw such a strong analogy between the deaf and gay communities in this film, it was natural to extend the analogy further to the analogous situation in the gay community. Suppose medical

science finally identified the "gay gene" and developed a therapy for it. I'd find that a terrible prospect, as would I suspect most GLBT people who have come to grips with their identity. I'd feel like it was genocide; that it was an attempt to eliminate a distinct group of people for the sole reason that they didn't conform to a majority definition of what was "normal."

What about children? I would like to have children some day. Although I couldn't ever be anything but completely devoted to, and accepting of, them however they turn out, and wouldn't ever do anything to direct their course of self-realization, I'd be dishonest if I didn't admit that I'd harbour a secret desire for them to also be gay. So that they'd be like me, and I could relate to them on that level. Is that selfish? Shouldn't I wish that my children were straight so that they wouldn't have to go through the same things that I did? That they'd have an easier life living in a straight world? Is it selfish for a deaf person to want their children to also be deaf? So that they'd have an easier time in the hearing world?

By the same token, a straight/hearing family, I'm sure, feels the same way as I do; they want their children to be the same so that they can relate to them on that level. Shouldn't I then be sympathetic to the desire of a straight/hearing family to

make their gay/deaf child become straight/hearing were the ability there? Sympathetic, yes. But, I suppose, the difference is that if I had a straight child, I wouldn't try to make them gay because I harboured a desire for it.

Peter and Nita eventually decided not to get Heather a cochlear implant and Chris and Mari did get one for their son. Both were accused of child-abuse by their extended family: Peter and Nita, by Peter's hearing parents for denying their daughter the opportunity to hear, and Chris and Mari by Mari's deaf parents for subjecting their son to dangerous surgery and denying him his natural identity.

The central question is "What is best for the child?" And it seems that prevailing wisdom is that we are obligated to make our children's lives as easy as possible, and to give them every possible advantage. From this stance, one is inevitably drawn to the conclusion that our children should conform to the norm. I suppose I take a different perspective on things: it seems to me that overcoming challenge builds character, self-esteem and self-identity. I am much less interested in making life easy for my children than in trying to support them as they struggle past the obstacles that life throws at them, through genetics, social circumstance or the luck of the draw. I'm thankful that my parents felt

the same way. As David Gold, Brendan Fraser's character in *Twilight of the Gods* (a topically appropriate film) so eloquently puts it, "Everything that you love about me is tied to that one element [being gay] that makes you queasy. Every human being is a tapestry. If you pull one thread or one undesirable colour, the whole f***ing thing falls apart and you wind up staring at the walls."

Watching *Sound and Fury*, I was surprised to find these same issues coming up in such a radically different context. I felt like I had found unexpected allies in an unlikely place. Now the only question is can we—as a majority hearing population—and they—as a majority straight population—extend compassion and understanding towards each other; enough so that we realize that we are, in fact, not alone?

Sean McLennan has a degree in Linguistics from the University of Calgary and he's currently working towards a PhD in Linguistics and Cognitive Science at Indiana University. In between research, classes, and teaching, he does web-design, writes for a Japanese English-learning magazine, and is active in a local GLBT education group.

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