

In the land of the hearing

How the deaf have mastered the art of silent communication.

Ronald Ligtenberg | July 2008 issue



In *The Country of The Blind*, the classic book by H.G. Wells, a seeing man isn't accepted by a society of blind people. He makes every effort to prove he can do things the others can't, but the blind don't understand him and consider his behaviour and statements stupid and distasteful. In Wells' story, a blind scientist ultimately offers the solution to the seeing man's "problem": He must undergo an operation to free him from all the damaging and confusing input he gets through his eyes.

Similarly, the hearing population in our society has trouble accepting the deaf. Recently, a chip implant was developed to enable deaf people to perceive sounds and thus understand words. So far, however, deaf people show little interest in the cochlear implant; instead, they're proud of their culture, pleased with their silence-based communication.

After all, the deaf have a certain advantage over the hearing. Simple examples: They aren't bothered by their partners' snoring and can sleep peacefully in a train full of people chattering on their mobile phones. But the deaf have developed a more significant characteristic—albeit out of necessity—from which the hearing population can learn a lot.

In Western society, the emphasis is on the spoken or written word. We're extremely aware of the words we use and pay piles of attention to using the right ones. However, only a small portion of our communication takes place in words. American anthropologist Ray Birdwhistell posited that a majority of communication happens unconsciously. He says the words we speak only account for 35 percent of what we convey. The remaining 65 percent is spoken through by body language, facial expressions, gestures, movements, eye movements and the use of our senses. Moreover, according to 20th-century British psychologist Michael Argyle, non-verbal signals have a much stronger effect than verbal content.

Yet we pay little attention to this silent non-verbal communication. Why? I suspect we're looking for ways to conceal our underlying motives. Simply saying what we think or want is too confrontational, too direct. The use of words makes it easier to convince someone—or deceive them.

This may be why we've lost faith in our intuition. The German co-founder of Gestalt therapy, Fritz Perls, taught himself to focus on the non-verbal sphere because it's the only arena in which self-deception is nearly impossible. Take our eyes, for example, which we call the "windows on our soul." Our eyes reflect everything happening inside us. A glance is worth more than a thousand words. And we all know how awkward it can be to have a conversation with someone who constantly looks away. But isn't it equally uncomfortable to look your boss in the eye?

The deaf interpret non-verbal communication more consciously than do the hearing. That explains why silent communication with deaf people is more honest and intimate. The intensity is determined by the degree to which thoughts and emotions are conveyed with every fibre of our bodies. The deaf do this a little better than the hearing. As one woman put it: "Since I became deaf, I listen much better."

In silent communication you're quickly aware whether or not you click with the other person. There's no point in not saying honestly what you think or feel, because the other person will pick up on it.

Do we really think the cochlear implant is the way to help the deaf? Or is it possible we don't want to confront the vulnerability of our body language and want the deaf to use the implant to enable them to conform to what's more comfortable for us?

Let's become more aware of our body language, and allow open and candid communication with our eyes. Just try looking at someone for a change. This would certainly make things more peaceful.

Ronald Ligtenberg works with deaf young people to organize musical events for the deaf and hearing worldwide. Find out more: www.skywayfoundation.com.