

## FAR FROM THE TREE

### Episode Two (Deaf)

Opening Announcement :

And now book of the week - Far From the Tree by Andrew Solomon documents the repeated triumphs of human love and compassion to show that the shared experience of difference is what unites us. The reader is Kerry Shale.

One cannot imagine thought without language any more than one can imagine language without thought.

The critical period for language-acquisition is between 18 and 36 months, with a gradually diminishing capacity that tails off at about age twelve. During this period, the mind can internalise the principles of grammar and signification.

Deaf children acquire Sign exactly as hearing children acquire a first spoken language; most can learn aural language in its written form as a second language. For many, however, speech is a mystical gymnastics of the tongue and throat, while lip-reading is a guessing game. Some deaf children acquire these skills gradually, but making speech and lip-reading the prerequisite to communication

may consign deaf children to permanent confusion. If they bypass the key age for language acquisition without fully acquiring any language, they cannot develop full cognitive skills and will suffer permanently from a preventable form of mental retardation.

Many deaf children who ultimately managed to develop oral skills complain that their schooling was dominated by the effort to teach a single ability . 'In my history class, we spent two weeks learning to say guillotine, and that was what we learned about the French Revolution,' Jackie Roth, a Deaf activist, said to me of the oralist education she had. 'Then you say guillotine to someone with your deaf voice, and they have no idea what you're talking about. Usually, they can't tell what you're trying to pronounce when you say Coke at McDonald's. We felt retarded. Everything depended on one completely boring skill, and we were all bad at it.'

Helen Keller is said to have observed, 'Blindness cuts us off from things, but deafness cuts us off from people.' Those who sign love their language even if they have access to the languages of the hearing world. The writer Lennard Davis, a 'child of deaf adults' who teaches disability studies, wrote,

'To this day if I sign "milk", I feel more milky than if I say the word. Signing is like speech set to dance. There is a constant pas de deux between the fingers and the face. Those who do not know sign language can only see the movements as distant and unnuanced. But those who understand signing can see the finest shade of meaning in a gesture. Like the pleasure some hearing people take in the graded distinctions between words like "dry", "arid", "parched", "desiccated", or "dehydrated", so the deaf can enjoy equivalent distinctions in the gestures of sign language.'

Deafness is a culture and a life, a language and an aesthetic, a physicality and an intimacy different from all others. This culture inhabits a narrower mind—body split than the one that constrains the rest of us, because language is enmeshed with the major muscle groups, not just the limited architecture of the tongue and larynx.

There are impassioned opponents of this model of Deaf culture.' Tom Bertling's memoir, *A Child Sacrificed to the Deaf Culture*, tells the story of how he was shipped off to a boarding school where he was instructed in Sign well below his intellectual level. He felt that ASL (American Sign Language), which he derides

as 'baby talk', was being rammed down his throat; he has chosen to use  
(*conventional spoken and written*) English instead as an adult.

In 1979 Megan Williams gave birth to a son – Jacob. *Megan and her then husband, Michael Shamberg both worked in the film business.* Both are take-charge people. When Jacob was 8months old Megan began to suspect that he was deaf. She brought him to the doctor, who said, `OK. I'm going to blow up some balloons, stand behind him, and pop them with a hypodermic needle. You watch Jacob's eyes and see if they blink.' Megan said, 'Every time he popped the balloon, my eyes blinked, and I said, "There's got to be a more sophisticated test."'

At LA Children's Hospital, Jacob was officially diagnosed.

Megan said ‘ I thought, I am not going to be unhappy about this. I wish it weren't this way, but it is, and I am going to figure it out.' Megan and Michael began hunting down deaf adults. 'We would have them over for brunch and say, "How were you raised, what did you like, what didn't you like?"'

Michael said, 'We realised that we had to immerse ourselves in that culture because that was where our child was going to live.' The most urgent question was what to do about giving Jacob language.

Megan was struck by how many of the deaf people she invited to brunch had no real relationships with their parents because there had never been fluent communication at home. So Megan and Michael hired a woman to teach the whole family to sign, and she moved in with them so that they could all learn as quickly as possible. 'you're always knocking glasses over at dinner,' Megan said. 'Then it clicks in. It's linguistic, and also three-dimensional and physical.'

Megan set aside her work to focus on Jacob's education. She contacted Carl Kirchner, a (Child of Deaf Adults) who signed fluently and had just moved to the West Coast. Megan took Jake up to Kirchner's house. 'I walk in and hands are flying,' Megan said. 'Jacob is just wide-eyed.' When Jacob saw Carl's two daughters, he made the sign for 'girls' and Megan said, 'We were off and running.'

Kirchner had done parent workshops in the seventies and called them Tripod. Megan suggested setting up an advice hotline under the Tripod name.

In that pre-internet time, someone would call the Tripod number and say, 'My child is deaf, and I need a dentist, and I'm in Memphis.' Megan and Kirchner would contact deaf people and their families in Memphis and find a dentist who knew Sign. Around this time Jacob, aged five, asked Megan, 'Are you deaf?' and she said she wasn't; he asked, 'Am I deaf?' and she said he was; then he signed,

'I wish you were deaf.' Megan said, 'That was such a healthy response. Not "I wish I were hearing", but "I wish you were deaf".'

Megan went to look at deaf schools. 'It was vocational training or rehab training. It wasn't school.' There was signed education for deaf children in the Los Angeles public school system, but when Megan visited a classroom, she was unimpressed. The content was horribly dull. I went back to Michael and Carl and I said, "We need a school."

The project required enormous amounts of money, and Michael set himself the task of securing it.

Megan was constantly caught in the snares of Deaf politics. She was told that she couldn't do all this because she wasn't Deaf enough.

'Well, I wasn't deaf, period,' she said.

Jacob was considered not Deaf enough because he didn't have deaf parents. One activist said to Megan, 'What you're trying to do is very noble, but the best thing would be to give your child to a deaf family and let them raise him.'

Megan ignored these assaults. She invented reverse mainstreaming, in which non-disabled children are put in a classroom that is focused on the needs of disabled children and learn as the disabled students learn. At the Tripod school, every classroom had two teachers, one with deaf-education teaching credentials, for ten deaf and twenty hearing students. Everyone signed.

Jacob said, 'Tripod is about a revolution. I had hearing friends, deaf friends, didn't matter. But Tripod treats the deaf students like we don't actually have special needs, and, really, we do. It was helpful to me, but at some level, it's about my mother, not about me.'

To be fair, deaf schools at that time were all bad. Tripod was better than most, but there were not enough teachers, not enough money, not enough interpreters. I was really lucky, I know that, with this amazing family, but I've still got a lot of complaints.'

Megan sighed when I recounted this. 'There were a couple times when I had to do what was right for the programme over doing what was right for my son,' she said. 'That was tough.'

Jacob went to the National Technical Institute for the Deaf then dropped out after a year and worked at a resort in Hawaii. Then he went to Gallaudet, the university for the Deaf. 'I was struggling with depression,' Jacob said,

'But something important happened. Before, I'd looked down on deafness; I had a lot of self-hatred. At Gallaudet, I started meeting a lot of great deaf people who had the same interests I do. I don't really have that capital-D Deaf Pride, but I cherish the Deaf culture, and it's a place where I am empowered.'

For the first time, Jacob said, he felt normal.



I met Jacob shortly after he graduated; despite speech therapy, he is unable to speak in a way that is consistently comprehensible. 'I've been sorry for myself for a long time, for being deaf,' Jacob said. 'Last year I tried to kill myself. It was not that I wanted to die, but I felt like I had no control over my life. I just wanted to give up.'

Jacob may have inherited his edge of despair from his father, who has struggled with depression through most of his adult life. 'Then you mix in the deafness,' Michael said. 'But Jacob is tough. I hope he figures a way through normal life.'

I wondered why Jacob's sense of struggle persisted in the face of so much acceptance and love. Jacob *responded*,

'Three nights ago, I went out for drinks with the other people in a class I'm taking, and all of them are hearing, and we just wrote back and forth. But there is a point where they're all chatting, and I'm like, "What's going on?" I'm lucky that they're open to being with me, but I'm still left out. I have a lot of hearing acquaintances. But, good friends? No. Deaf culture teaches me how to see the world, but it would make surviving the world a lot easier if I could hear. If I were

going to have a Down's syndrome child, I think I would abort. But what if my mom had found out I was deaf when she was pregnant and aborted me? I don't want to be racist, but walking alone at night, I see an unknown black person approaching, and I feel uncomfortable, even though I have black friends. I hate it. So it's the same when I make people uncomfortable because I'm deaf: I understand it, and I hate it. I just hate it.'

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Kerry Shale was reading from **Far From the Tree** by Andrew Solomon. It was abridged and produced by Jill Waters, and is a Waters Company Production for BBC Radio 4.

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**The abridged text for this episode is available to read online for 7 days after broadcast courtesy of the author, Andrew Solomon.**

