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Louie J. Fant, Jr.
Blessings from My Parents' Deafness

Lou Fant, Jr. is an only child and was raised in Greenville, South Carolina and Dallas, Texas. He says, "My career is filled with hyphens: Actor-writer-interpreter-teacher and make-me-an-offer." His hobbies are reading fiction, going to movies, hiking, and hanging out. His philosophy of life can be summed up in this way: "I believe that the universe – and all within it – is perfect, and there is abundance for all if we are in tune with the universe. Love is unconditional support for all that is, as it is." Lou's latest accomplishment is a book for the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf to celebrate its 25th anniversary. He says, "CODA, for me, is a safe place to expose myself, my real self. At first I resisted this concept, but then realized everyone must have a sanctuary, an asylum for self-ventilation of bad memories and feelings, but also a place to put back together, in a positive, constructive way, the self I really am."

*Lou passed away in 2001. This statement is from Wikipedia:
(December 13, 1931 – June 11, 2001) Lou was a pioneering teacher,
author and expert on American Sign Language (ASL).

Blessings come to us in many guises. Some we recognize that give us instant pleasure; some we do not recognize – they make us feel discontented. Blessings that please are accepted with gratitude, but those which cause

displeasure or even pain – we would just as soon they pass us by. Yet, those blessings, which we perceive as burdens, hardships, and impediments, are usually the ones which most enrich our lives, stimulate our growth, lead us into the paths of maturity, and enlarge our wisdom.

Our perception – how we see and interpret events – determines whether we feel blessed or cursed. Our perception either turns what at first seems to be an affliction into a boon, or allows it to become a millstone around our necks. If we perceive an event in a totally negative light, we abdicate control and allow it to darken our lives, blunt our ambitions, obscure our goals, and stunt our growth. On the other hand, if we perceive that same event in a positive light, we maintain control and gain insight, understanding, and strength. Our perception determines whether we allow ourselves to be manipulated like pawns in someone else’s grand scheme, or whether we take responsibility and play out our own game plan. If we blame others for our failures, we can take no credit for our successes. Our perceptions place responsibility upon others or upon ourselves, and therein lies the key to fulfillment, satisfaction, and contentment.

The placement of responsibility is the result of perception. When we see clearly and accurately without prejudice, we place responsibility where it properly belongs. Responsibility properly placed determines success or failure, growth or death, fulfillment or emptiness. If we would find fulfillment and joy, we must perceive all that happens to us as opportunities to take responsibility for positive action.

Someone once said that, “Life is what happens to us while we’re making other plans.” (John Lennon) There is much truth in that, for we are besieged from all sides by forces that thwart our plans. We have a choice: to allow those forces to destroy our plans, or to alter our plans to incorporate those forces. The first choice is a passive one that shifts responsibility from “me” to “them”. The second choice maintains responsibility on my shoulders and permits me to continue to control my destiny and chart new courses for my life.

Take, for example, the subject of career choice. How many of us are pursuing the career we first chose? How many of us are doing what we thought we would be doing when we graduated from high school or college? Most, if not all of us, made other plans which were altered as we grew in knowledge, experience, and ability; we perceived as challenges those events

which impinged upon our goals and set off chain reactions which sent us off on unexpected paths, to unanticipated destinations. We learned to roll with the punches, to see new opportunities which allowed us to develop latent skills and desires. We perceived setbacks as stepping-stones rather than obstacles, as occasions to learn and grow rather than as excuses to stagnate. Those who enjoy rewarding careers are those who perceived unwanted events as opportunities to take responsibility and control of their lives; those who endure dreary, uninspiring careers are those who perceived the same events as barriers and shunned responsibility for their fate.

I do not know if my parents considered their deafness a blessing for them; I do know that it was a blessing for me. Had they not been deaf, I would not be here today. It is the blessing of their deafness, and how it shaped my life, that I want to share with you. Because my parents were deaf, they made two important decisions which opened pathways that have led me to this place.

The first of those decisions occurred in 1944, during World War II. We lived in Greenville, South Carolina – where I was born – until I was 12 years old. My parents wanted to work in some aspect of industry dedicated to making weapons for the military. They felt this was the best way to make a patriotic contribution to the war effort. There were no such industries in Greenville, so it meant we would have to move. Mother had long wanted to move where opportunities were better for deaf people, so this seemed the perfect time. But, move where?

They had a deaf friend, Margaret Rosen, who operated her own business in Charlotte, North Carolina, and was knowledgeable about cities with good opportunities for deaf people, so they asked her advice. She contacted a Gallaudet classmate in Dallas, Texas to ask about the job market there. He responded that he was working for North American Aviation – the company that built the P-51 Mustang and the B-24 Liberator – and that they were hiring deaf people by the carload.

My Dad was reluctant to move that far from his roots, but Mom was persistent, and the romance of the West added fuel to her fervor. (She told me years later that if things had not worked out in Dallas, she was determined to go on to California rather than retreat back to South Carolina. I often wonder how that would have affected my life.) She won Dad over, and on February 4, 1944 we arrived in Dallas. My only disappointment was that there were no cowboys riding horses on dirt streets lined with saloons.

Because Western movies were my only exposure to the West, I fully expected to witness a shoot-out on Main Street. After enrolling in school, I experienced the first significant impact of my parents' decision to move to Dallas: Textbooks were free. In South Carolina, we had to buy or rent them. This impressed us mightily. The school I attended was superior to the one I had left, and I believe I received a better overall education in Dallas than I would have, had we stayed in Greenville.

My parents were church-going people, so our first Sunday in Dallas, they sought out the only church that had a deaf group: the First Baptist Church in downtown Dallas. Since we were Baptists, that worked out doubly well. Temporary apartment buildings had been erected on the outskirts of Dallas to house the great influx of defense plant workers, and we moved into one of them. It was a long bus ride from our home to the church, but my parents had no options. Had they been hearing, we would have gone, instead, to a neighborhood church.

Our membership in that church was the second decision my parents made that heavily influenced my life. Like my parents, I was dedicated to my religion and strove to live according to its precepts. When I was 16, I felt called to be a minister to deaf people. I began to teach Sunday School classes and interpret sermons for the deaf group. There was a full-time minister for the deaf congregation, the Reverend C. F. Landon – also a hearing Coda – who took me under his wing and gave me much good guidance.

The First Baptist Church was one of the largest and wealthiest Baptist churches in the country. There was a scholarship fund established by wealthy members to aid students through college, especially those headed for the ministry. I was a beneficiary of that fund. Had it not been for that assistance, and the personal interest of three other members, I would not have been able to attend college, at least not the college of my choice, and not on a full-time basis. So, because my parents were deaf, we were members of a church, which not only provided me with my first vocation, but also the wherewithal to attend Baylor University. Had they been hearing, I doubt either event would have occurred.

I want to make it clear that my parents at no time pressured me to enter a vocation to work with deaf people. Indeed, they never even asked me to interpret for them. They got along mostly with pad and pencil, or by asking

someone like the Reverend Landon to interpret. I am grateful that I was never put in the position of constantly interpreting for them. I believe it is a great mistake for deaf parents to rely heavily on their hearing children to serve as their interpreters. Children are too immature and emotionally involved to cope with the stress of interpreting. My parents somehow had the good sense not to press me to interpret for them or to pursue a career in the field of deafness.

These two decisions were the beginnings, and their ramifications are still echoing in my life. During my sophomore year at Baylor, I wrote to several churches around the state to ask if I could come and preach to their deaf groups. The response resulted in an itinerant ministry of five or six churches where I conducted services for deaf congregations. Each weekend, I became an itinerant preacher, driving as much as four hundred miles round trip. That experience did more to develop my skill in American Sign Language (ASL) than any other single event.

In those days, deaf groups had no other preacher to hold services, so when I came to town, it was a special affair – a social as well as a religious one. Sometimes I taught Sunday School and preached a sermon in the morning, then enjoyed a potluck and preached another sermon in the afternoon. The sermons were long, too, usually running for an hour. Since I was a preacher – even a student preacher – was a rare event, they wanted full value in the form of a long sermon.

For an 18 or 19-year-old to hold the attention of an audience for an hour – sometimes twice a day – was an experience that matured me quickly. I worked hard not only to prepare my sermons, but also equally hard to improve my delivery in ASL. The people were generous in their criticisms of my signing, for which I am eternally grateful. I also picked up a lot of valuable pointers watching deaf Sunday School teachers. I consider that on-the-job training the best I ever had, and it could not have been bought at any price.

During my junior year at Baylor, I decided that I had misinterpreted the call to be a minister and that what I really was supposed to do was teach deaf children. After graduation, I attended the teacher-training program at the Lexington School for the Deaf in New York City, and then began my teaching career at the New York School for the Deaf in White Plains

(Fanwood). From there I went to teach at Gallaudet College and faced a new challenge: simultaneous communication.

Prior to teaching at Gallaudet, I had had virtually no experience signing and speaking at the same time. I had always signed in ASL, and even when I used an English-like register of ASL, I did not vocalize; it seemed superfluous. None of the deaf folk in Texas asked me to speak as I signed, and though the ASL I used at Fanwood with the children was often in an English-like register, I only mouthed the words. Hearing my own voice as I signed made me extremely nervous.

Eventually I mastered the form, but never liked it, even to this day. When I speak and sign simultaneously, especially before a large audience, either the ASL suffers because it must follow the English syntax, or the English suffers because it must follow the ASL syntax. I am always left with the feeling that I haven't done a complete job; I feel I could do much better by doing one or the other. I am happy to say that there is, today, a trend toward using just one language at a time.

So that was the next step in becoming a more proficient communicator, if mastering simultaneous delivery can be considered a leg up in sophistication. The big leap for me, however, came when I left Gallaudet to join the National Theater of the Deaf. While with NTD, I first began to appreciate the artistry that was possible with ASL. Although I had seen artistic, dramatic, and theatrical ASL, I never apprehended the significance until I saw Eric Malzkuhn perform "Jabberwocky".

It was as if blinders were removed from my eyes, revealing a whole new world I never knew existed. My work with Eric, Bernard Bragg, Andy Vasnick, Mary Beth Miller, Freda Norman, and others too numerous to mention, raised my skill in ASL to a higher plane. ASL became not only a language capable of conveying all knowledge, but also a language capable of expressing exquisite beauty.

From preaching to teaching to acting, my skill in ASL grew, and my ability to interpret developed correspondingly. I have lived an exciting life, always moving back and forth between the Deaf and hearing communities. I look back and can truly say I regret nothing, because I learned from the example set for me by my deaf parents.

They took life as it unfolded from day to day. They faced adversity, poverty, discrimination, and frustrated hopes with serenity and persistence, believing and trusting that their lives would improve, and that the future for all deaf people would get better. I learned from them always to look for the positive and never to dwell on the negative.

I do not know whether their faith in the future would have been as strong had they been hearing, but I will always believe that growing up deaf somehow empowered them with this quality. There are too many variables that affect the personality to point to one or two and declare that they were the prime forces, which shaped theirs. Without doubt, however, I can say that deafness was one of those dynamics that produced in my parents the strength, insight, and understanding one must have to survive the obstacles others place in their way.

Among the many divergent formulas for successful living, one attribute stands out, common to all of them: the ability to forgive. If we cannot forgive others for their transgressions against us, we cannot forgive ourselves for our own shortcomings. Every religion and philosophy of life holds this teaching central. If we would love others – and they all teach that we should – we must first forgive them and then ourselves. There cannot be love without forgiveness. My parents were forgiving people.

When they were discriminated against, and exploited because they were deaf, they forgave the hearing world for its callous and uncaring ways. When the hearing world denied them opportunities to develop and express their talents simply because they were deaf, my parents did not become bitter, cynical or sour, but, rather, forgave the hearing world and persisted in search of other opportunities. My parents were loving people, and that was so only because they could forgive hearing people for the injustices, inequities, and unfair treatment they received from them. I learned from my parents the enormous truth in this old saying: “To err is human, to forgive is divine.”

If we, children of deaf parents, harbor any grievances toward our parents, let us first remind ourselves of the tremendous uncertainties they felt in their lives, the gnawing anxieties and the all-too-real abuse they experienced. Let us understand that these feelings, not our misbehavior, are the cause for our grievances, real or imagined. Unable to cope with their frustrations and disappointments, unable to vent their anger upon the all-powerful hearing

world, perhaps they turned it upon themselves, each other, and us. Understanding this is vital. But one step more is required: to forgive them and to forgive the hearing world as well, for perpetrating upon our parents the evils that spring from the avarice that thirsts for and creates the ruthless ambition to which all of us are vulnerable.

I am grateful to my parents for the two decisions they made – which were made because they were deaf – that set me on the path of my life’s work. Like two pebbles dropped in a pond, causing circles that spread to great widths, crisscrossing, reverberating, and stirring up waters, they were the genesis of what I have become. I was richly blessed by their deafness. Most of all, however, I am grateful for the lesson they taught me by their lives: to forgive and to love. I shall always treasure the sweet dispositions they took to their graves. The hearing world did its worst, but it could not warp them. If I can always face the future with hope and trust firmly rooted in forgiveness, I will be joyful and attribute that joy to the blessing of having had deaf parents who could forgive and love.

We are, each of us, unique. There is only one of me in all the universe; I am, therefore, the perfect me. And you are the perfect you. Perfection is neither good nor bad; it is existence, because all that exists is unique, and uniqueness is perfection.

Perfection is not the absence of flaws or errors, but existence itself. Remove all value judgments, and what remains is perfection. Perfection – burdened with such value judgments as “good”, “desirable”, “holy”, “admirable”, and “saintly” – is merely an idealization that exists only in our minds and has no substance in reality. As such, it is completely useless to us as a goal, or as a guide for our behavior.

Perceive all things as perfect, and then see more clearly – more accurately – who we are, what we do, and where we are going. Perceive all things as perfect, and we cease to draw comparisons that elicit bias towards, or away from, others.

Cease to compare ourselves and focus only on ourselves to develop our own unique intellects, souls, skills, and desires for their own ends. Our goal must be to rejoice in our perfect selves, to rejoice in the diversity that testifies to our uniqueness and to our perfection.

