

Dear Mom and Dad,

This is a strange time to write this letter that has been on my mind for years. I need to take a moment to share with you how I feel about my language development, speech training, our communication at home, my educational placement, social developments and academic skill developments. There are many things that I deeply appreciate and had positive impacts in my life. There are things that affected my identity and emotional health negatively.

When I was in preschool I have a memory of being outside of my classroom and seeing a group of kids moving their hands. My attention was drawn to one particular girl who was standing by herself. She looked in deep thought and was signing, as though she was signing to herself. I was captivated and felt a desire to learn the language of the hands. I did not know that this was called sign language. I sensed that the hands moved like dancers communicating thoughts with invisible volume. I did not grasp the reason why I was in a classroom learning to communicate through voice only and not learning any of the signs of hands. This memory has steeped from the past and played its short film at different times in my life. After the process of recollection is over, my heart feels as though there is a void that has no color, no energy and no identity. Surrounding that void is sadness and hurt. I saw in your faces and body language your pride and joy when I clearly pronounced a word and understood the vocabulary of your dialogue. I registered at a very young age that articulate voice communication and intensive listening was the method of increasing your happiness and feeling your love. Although I had a strong desire to learn ASL, I am thankful that I developed a skilled language foundation in English. I value and appreciate having the ability to articulate thoughts, opinions and concepts through speaking, reading and writing English. A strange irony slightly constricts the blood flow to my heart as I acknowledge that although I have tools of verbal dialogue, I did not have the freedom to express my sadness, grief, anger and hurt. Those feelings conflict with your pride,

diminish your joy and your love becomes an expression of disappointment. While I was learning to speak, read, write and hear English, another unspoken lesson registered in my brain. I took my feelings, my desire to learn sign language and the memory of the young girl signing, buried them as close to the core of the earth as possible that I might forget their existence. I planted vibrant flowers on the surface of my being and wore a smile that radiated happiness to protect you from my grief.

Our bond became practicing speech therapy. Staring face to face, I felt the warmth of your breath, the vibration of your cheeks and observed the shape of your lips as you demonstrated the silent sibilants and obscure consonants. The serious intensity of your eyes emphasized the importance of this lesson. I carefully placed my tongue behind my teeth, inhaled and exhaled creating a vibration that rumbled from my vocal chord through my teeth. "Zzzzz..." The sound I visualized in my mind hoping it translated as sound out of my mouth. I studied your facial expression for clues as to whether I was right or wrong. The moments I saw your eyes widen, your cheeks glow pink and your teeth glittered through your smile, I felt relief. I did something right, something good. I told myself to remember what I did so that I would not make anymore mistakes. I am grateful for the skills I gained from speech therapy. I am thankful for the immense amount of time, effort and determination both of you placed in working one-on-one with me. Sometimes I felt as though those speech therapy sessions, audiologist appointments, as well as the many other medical appointments became the foundation of our relationship. A part of the process of fixing or improving attributes that were broken in me. You put a lot of effort toward activities, exercises and methods to help me become as close to hearing as possible. While all these practices had many benefits in my life that I value, the void that I felt as a little girl kept growing in its vast emptiness. We hardly ever talked about deafness or the basic fact that I had a characteristic that was different than you. No matter how well I spoke and how pleasantly surprised people reacted to my speech clarity,

I felt as though there was something wrong with me because I never quite measured up to your levels of perfection.

Frequently I felt pressure to superbly perform the role of a hearing person out in public because the quality of my performance reflected upon your success as a parent. I look back at my childhood into adulthood and realize that a huge quantity of the time I was acting. There are situations that I do not quite understand the benefit of their occurrence except that it was something you believed was helping me, but with deeper evaluation was more an act that supported your need to be seen as a good parent. I have another memory that sometimes floats to the surface no matter how much I try to weigh it down. I am in my second grade classroom sitting next to a classmate, at the end of one of the rows of rectangular tables. My eyes are toward the front of the classroom where I am watching mom talk to the class about my various disabilities and teach them how to interact with me. As I am reading your lips explaining how the students need to face me when talking with me, I began to feel embarrassment and shame. I had not felt these emotions the previous school years, but continued to experience them till you stopped at seventh grade. I felt confused and conflicted because I knew I was supposed to appreciate this act of love, support and concern for me, yet I felt like a freak show among my peers. Being the only deaf student with disabilities in my grade, I felt alone and isolated. At home our family rarely discussed the reality and emotional impact of my various disabilities. However, at school you gave my peers and teachers labels of all the ways I was different. It impacted their perception of me as well as my perception of myself. I saw what I felt in their eyes and through the way they interacted with me. They were nice and polite toward me, but distant because we did not know how to relate beyond the differences. I wanted to tell you to stop and let me be my own person. Even with all of my speech training and language development, I was not able to form the phrases nor clothe

myself with the confidence to tell you. I wrapped my feelings and this memory in a black garbage bag with heavy rocks and watched them disappear to the bottom of the ocean.

In fourth grade I felt a glimmer of hope because I was going to be partially placed in a deaf and hard-of-hearing classroom. I thought maybe this would be my chance to add some color, some positive energy and experience a sense of confident identity to the void I had been carrying within. Instead it amplified my loneliness and isolation. I was the only deaf person in the deaf and hard-of-hearing classroom that did not know sign language. Tense emotional pressure compresses my lungs and my eyes mist with water as a recall a incident that occurred during this time. The four of us as a family are sitting around the dinner table. We are eating and talking about our day. I remember that I wanted some more milk. I decide to tell you this through pantomime hand motions. Although I was telling you that I wanted milk, what I really wanted was to learn and be able to communicate with you through sign language. Mom, you placed your hands on top of my hands, pressed them down on the table, looked at me with a serious disappointment and said "use your words." A tidal wave of shame, embarrassment, hurt and sadness rushed over me. I felt guilty for doing something wrong. At the same time, I did not quite grasp what I did that was bad. I knew I did not want to upset or disappoint you again. I registered in my mind not to repeat that. I continued to struggle with the conflict of wanting to please you and fit in with our family versus filling a longing of self-acceptance if that meant acknowledgement of my differences and willingness to be unique.

My desire to discover a language that I did not know how to use, yet felt connected toward, continued to flow like a quiet river beneath the bridge of my mind. This next experience is one that perplexes me with anger, hurt and grief as I try to navigate its existence. This is during the time when mom was getting her Masters to work toward getting her certification to become an MFCC. During your educational process mom you announced to the three of us that you were going to take sign language classes so that you would become a therapist for

deaf people. I remember that it was something we were celebrating and encouraging. I felt a heightened amount of conflict wearing a smile and declaring praises in your desire to help the mental health of people who are deaf. When deep in my gut I felt a fire of anger and volcanic acid of bitterness. I did not understand how it was acceptable that you were learning a language to help people of a culture that you had zero interactive experience and never allowed your daughter to participate. I was angry but I did not feel safe to express my anger. My anger was conflicted with the belief that feeling angry was wrong and I was supposed to be proud and supportive. I felt like you were taking the clothes of my identity as a deaf person and decided to alter and wear them for yourself. This hurt cracked open the empty void into a vastness that seemed infinite. When I was finally allowed to learn sign language in high school, I was thankful that you had forgotten what you had learned. I needed something to be mine and I did not want to share it at that time.

Throughout my middle school and high school academic education, I became focused on trying to be the perfect straight A student. Sitting at the front of the mainstream classrooms reading the teacher's lips, spending hours on my homework and studying diligently to pass my exams with high grades. I thank you for all of the hours both of you took to help me study and understand the complexity of the information I was learning. I had an excellent education in the sense that I passed and received good grades. I learned how to be a good student on paper. I reflect back, acknowledge and accept that my comprehension skills were weak and I was a terrible critical thinker. I spent most of my academic education trying to memorize the right answer rather than engaging in the process of breaking down, discerning, comprehending and formulating my own opinion. I was afraid of appearing stupid, saying the wrong things or forming opinions that would disappoint both of you. I wanted to belong and be accepted. If I was not accepted or loved by my own family, I did not know where I could experience that. That fear hindered my academic learning experience and healthy brain development.

I had a few friends at school, but we never hung out outside of school. I would listen to them talk about things they did together recreationally. I felt sad and rejected, but I accepted this as my normal. Once in a rare while, I was included in an out-of-school event. I felt awkwardly out of place, lonely and isolated. As a preteen or in my early teenage years, you guys brought home a TTY machine for me to use. You attached the TTY next to the telephone in your bedroom. I felt uncomfortable talking to anyone on the phone while you guys were in the background of your room. I was not given any privacy. My own sister was able to have a phone line in her room. I do not understand why she was able to have privacy for her conversations and I was not. I felt like my needs were not as respected as hers because I don't believe I was viewed as an equal. This increased the hurt, pain, anger, rejection and sadness I buried deep within my void. I despised that TTY and eventually stopped using it. It just sat there in your bedroom collecting dust. I feel frustrated and upset that I did not have comfortable access to devices that would help me connect with friends. Recently I found a form I filled out when I was twelve years old. The question was "List one wish that, if granted would add something meaningful to your life and would make you happier. Explain why." My answer was "Is to have a lot or some friends. Because I someone besides my family to share my feelings with." I was socially isolated and dependent upon you as my social network. This dynamic was not healthy.

Beneath my smile, I was struggling with low self-esteem and repressing my feelings of loneliness, anger, hurt and grief. Instead of having the ability to express my feelings and experience the healing calmness and inner strength of those feelings being heard by you, I became silent. As an adult, I continue to struggle with wanting to feel accepted, valued and loved just as I am. I genuinely know that you love me and care about me. The love was expressed with mixed messages of loving me the way that I am versus there are many things

about me that need to be fixed and because you love me you want to help me. The ways that you helped me were not always the ways I needed.

I love you both dearly.