

## MEDICAL MODEL OF DEAFNESS vs. CULTURAL MODEL OF DEAFNESS

The medical model is distinguished by the viewpoint that deafness is a functional disorder that needs to be fixed. In this viewpoint deaf people are seen as handicapped. “My deafness is a functional defect. I can’t hear anything at all—conversations, music, automobile horns, the radio, Scud blasts. I unquestionably recognize that in one specific area I am, yes, impaired/disabled/handicapped/deficient/deviant in the real world. This causes me a number of problems—some big, some small. It’s obvious to me that I have a set of completely broken, totally useless ears.”<sup>11</sup> Generally, people holding this viewpoint consider the hearing condition the optimal model and use the auditory methods to obtain the goals of using residual hearing, speechreading and speech. An individual is deemed successful if he/she gains good oral skills. The use of assistive devices such as hearing aids and cochlear implants is considered appropriate. A person who has this viewpoint is called “deaf”.

On the other hand, the cultural model of deafness defines the deaf individual as a linguistic minority with a distinct language, culture and mores. “Deafness is viewed as a difference, a difference which in no way connotes inferiority.”<sup>12</sup> The individual is viewed as a visual being whose natural language is ASL or any other naturally occurring signed language. The individual does not need to be fixed. “We always said Kathleen was “diagnosed” as deaf. In 1991, due to exposure to the Deaf Community, our perspectives and ideas changed completely! We now say that Kathleen was “identified” as deaf. She wasn’t and isn’t sick. She didn’t need to be “fixed”.” An individual is deemed successful if he/she attains fluency in ASL. A person with this viewpoint is considered “Deaf”.<sup>13</sup>

Why can’t a person simply be deaf? This observation/question from my twelve-year old deserves an answer. Most of the people I interviewed are not extremists. Individuals who are members of the Deaf Community are able to communicate and become friends with members of the Hearing Community and visa versa. One deaf author comments “I understand all too well why the world of Deaf Culture may be somewhat intimidating to hearing parents. But it shouldn’t be. It improves communication, enriches lives. Like I said, it can bridge worlds together...The mistake here is having an ‘either-or’ mentality (i.e. your child will either sign, or he will speak).”<sup>14</sup>

Irene Schmalz, an oral deaf parent shares these thoughts: “It [Deaf Culture] is a matter of personal opinion and it is wonderful for those who wish to be a member.”<sup>15</sup> The value of understanding that there is more than one way to approach deafness, lay in the ability to decipher the mindset behind all the “wonderful” advice that is frequently showered upon parents of deaf children