

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

■ June 2004

I heard you...(I hope)

The Rev. Ashmun Brown

The evidence is pretty strong that as we age, we begin to lose our hearing. It seems to be a widespread problem, and a problem that prompts a lot of advice, at least some of it from the purveyors of hearing aids. I have been losing my hearing for a number of years, and it all began years ago when exposure to very loud noises was not an uncommon phenomenon in the army. The noises I was exposed to were in training, not combat, but the result was the same. Deafness is something I have learned to live with over the years.

Our brain does its best to help us hear. As sounds come in, our brain goes to work attempting to make words and phrases out of what it perceives to be a human voice. Sometimes, it doesn't work out very well. I have caught myself responding to random noise, thinking that there was somebody in the room, when it was actually a sound caused by a fan, a squeaky door, a muffled footstep, or my cat Deuteronomy.

On one occasion, I was called to jury duty, and pointed out to the judge that, my hearing aids notwithstanding, I really did not understand a lot of what was said. He kept me on the jury anyway. What I couldn't get him to understand is simply this: what we think we hear may bear no relationship whatsoever to what was said. Again, the brain does its best with what it has.

It is this that I believe lots of hearing people fail to understand. Sound, imperfectly recognized, goes through a thought process that insists that the sound make sense. Whether it is in error or not is unimportant. It would not be at all unusual for someone to come up to me and say, "This leaky duck has got to start with the barbecue."

Fortunately, a higher thought process will say that the lady making this statement is not saying what I think she is saying. And what she is really saying doesn't have to rhyme or bear any relationship at all with what the decoder in my brain is telling me.

This can lead to hilarious interchanges as some one will attempt to tell me what is being said. I just hope that all my buttons are buttoned, zippers zipped and that no tear is apparent in the seams of my trousers.

We are social animals, and the way we socialize is through speech. The price paid for deafness includes a diminished capability for socializing. Things like cocktail parties, dances, banquets, diocesan conventions, and the like are murder. The sounds that come in from all directions create an overload as far as the brain's decoder is concerned, and five minutes at a party can seem like five hours in hard, non-productive labor.

I have worn hearing aids for something like forty years. While I am not a scientist, and while I know little about the physics of sound, there are lots of misconceptions about what hearing aids can do for the hearing impaired. Take glasses, for instance. If you have an eye defect, and you put on corrective lenses, the result is immediate and at times quite dramatic. That which was fuzzy and out of focus now appears in full glory as a sharp and colorful scene.

Hearing aids do not do that.

They basically amplify sounds, and are not particularly fussy about what ones get the boost, though I understand that improvements are being made. As a result, background noises come floating in with other sounds, making discrimination that much harder, in some cases. Aids take time to get used to. I can remember asking my optometrist how long it would take me to get used to bi-focals. "When you need to get used to them, you will," he said. He was right.

So it is with hearing aids. Try them for a couple of weeks at least. I know that many hearing aid dealers do not have try-out periods. I think this is to force the wearer to give them at least an honest chance for some success.

Encroaching deafness does not treat each sound equally. Thus you will lose the ability to distinguish high-pitched sounds before you notice an inability to distinguish the lower notes, as well. Even though you might not be enamored of tenors and sopranos, you will be surprised at how important it is to hear the clicks, clucks and clacks that are in the upper range and are absolutely necessary for understanding.

As one's hearing declines, greater attention is paid to other forms of communication we tend to take for granted when our hearing is adequate. It is not just lip reading that becomes important, but all parts of the body. A frown, a smile, a laugh, a nod of the head can all convey parts of information. Lip reading becomes crucial in some cases, as long as the lips, and the whole face, can be seen.

In times past, I worked with people who had full beards. Lip reading under those circumstances was virtually impossible. In addition to being bearded, one man muttered. Needless to say, we did not communicate well at all.

Modern things that help us are captioned movies and TV programs. For a long time I could not enjoy movies because the theater sound was simply inadequate as far as my type of hearing loss was concerned. Now I wait until the movie is released on tape or DVD and is captioned. Then I can enjoy it. I cannot watch TV programs that are not captioned. The captions help give us a context for the dialogue. Incidentally, television sets made within the past several years have the capability of showing captions. At times, the captions are hilarious when they are done in real time. One day, President Bush returned from his extensive farm in the north of England, something I thought unlikely. But then, with Texas, you never know.

Here in Florida, a special phone was given to me to use by the State of Florida. We also have a relay network in place for those who must use a keyboard to communicate. This equipment is available free of charge, and is a blessing of the first order. I avoid the telephone as much as I possibly can. There are simply too few clues as to what is being said. Caller ID helps, and if it is someone whose voice I can understand, I will answer.

As deafness comes, I urge patience all the way around. It is tough for the person, tough for the family, tough for the people he or she loves. But it is an affliction a lot of us share, and in numbers there is strength . . . I think I heard that right.



The Rev. Ashmun Brown is Priest-in-Charge of St. Agatha's Episcopal Church in DeFuniak Springs, Florida. Both he and his wife Rita are busy in community affairs. Their dog Buddy and cat Deuteronomy just hang around.



445 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10016