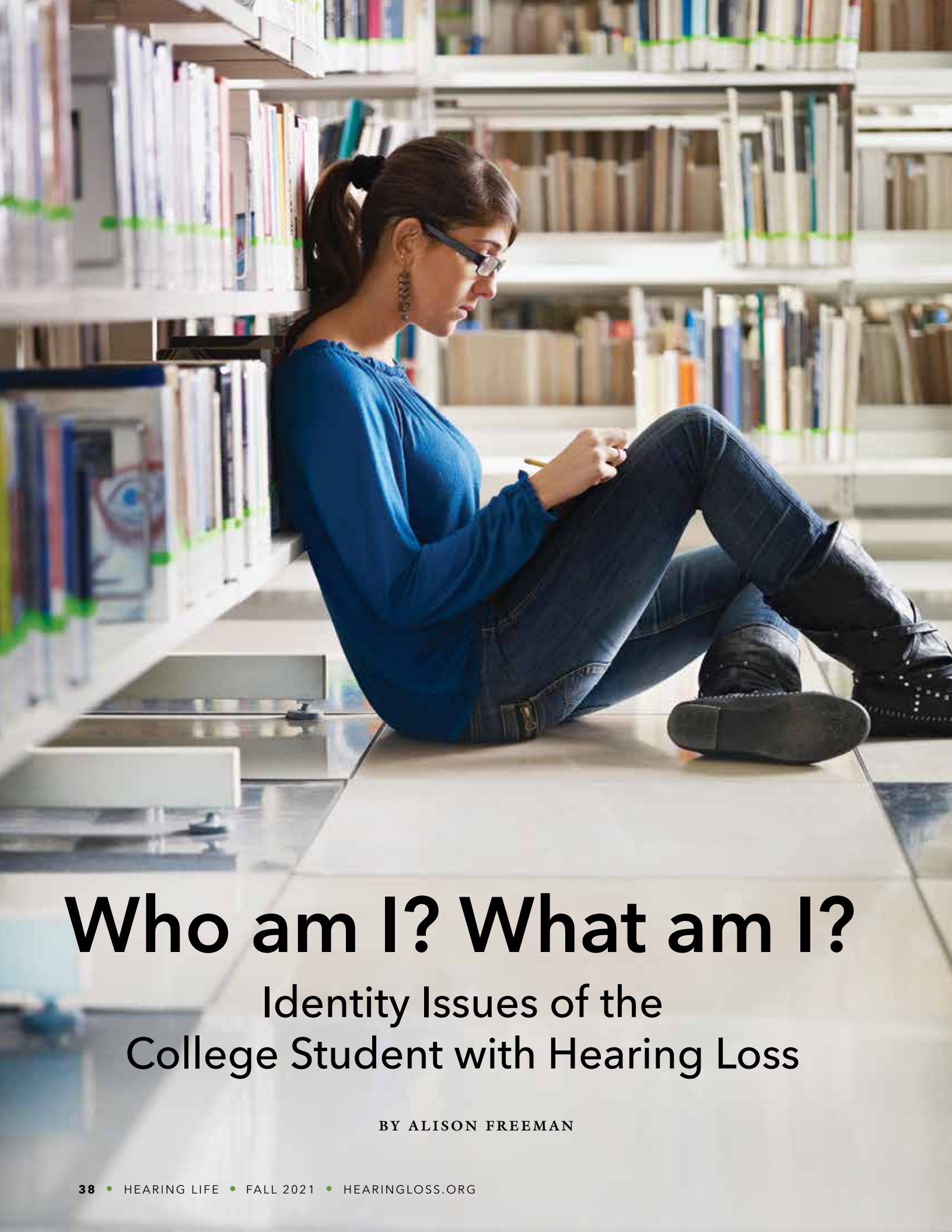

Who am I? What am I?

Identity Issues of the College Student with Hearing Loss

BY ALISON FREEMAN

Adjustment to college is a big and expectable challenge for any entering college student. Who am I? What am I? These are the existential questions that reflect the angst of adolescence and young adulthood. Exploring one's identity is an important part of a student's emotional development and academic growth. For students with hearing loss, exploring identity can be even more complex. It is one where the student asks whether, "Am I hard of hearing, deaf, Deaf or bicultural?"

Even though I am no longer a "young adult," I wanted to share my personal experience in college as well as my professional experience as a clinical psychologist at the counseling center at California State University at Northridge, which is one of the four top universities for deaf and hard of hearing students in the country.

The real question is "where can I be most included?" The student attending a college with a significant population of deaf and students with hearing loss will differ from the student who is alone or is one of only a few students in a hearing-dominated student body. For example, this identity process can look different for a student at California State University at Northridge (CSUN), which has an average of 200 students a year from the student who is attending a small community college where he or she is the only student with hearing loss. Here, being part of a collective community becomes a critical part of identity development, i.e., hard of hearing or the Deaf community.

Counseling can help make some sense in this exploration of identity. For many students, K-12 education focused primarily on the learning of the 3 Rs and how to pass tests and very little on self-care. It is unfortunate that counseling continues to have a negative stigma, especially in marginalized and underserved communities. It is my passionate hope in sharing both my personal and professional experience, that counseling should and can be looked at as a wonderful opportunity to grow and learn about one's strengths and challenges living in a complex world.

In counseling, the student with hearing loss deals with an evolving identity that is a fluid one; one that might shift back and forth on a spectrum from denial to acceptance and can be fraught with many questions of whether one is hard of hearing, deaf, Deaf or bicultural. As such, counseling becomes an important part of their growth and individuation process where they have a chance to explore how they want to be identified and function in the world. Further, this is a process that is likely to extend even past the college years.

Personal Experience

I was born premature, which probably explains my moderate hearing loss, although it wasn't diagnosed until I was almost three years old. Educationally, I was mainstreamed and grew up with years of speech therapy and lipreading skills. Over the decades, I skirted between the politically correct label of the decades—hard of hearing, hearing impaired, hearing challenged, a person with hearing loss, deaf and Deaf. In education, I was orally trained—I would concentrate very hard with my attempts to "pass as normal" and to perfect my lipreading skills. I continually struggled to correct possible misunderstandings, and all the while felt the loneliness of being left out of both hearing and deaf communities.

When I was 17 years old, I asked to go into therapy because of my loneliness, and I met with psychologist Dr. Alathena Johnson-Smith, who worked at the John Tracy Clinic. She was an outspoken advocate for total communication of learning sign language and speech. For those of you who may be too young to know about John Tracy, he was the son of academy award-winning actor Spencer Tracy and his wife, Louise Tracy. In the 1940s, Mrs. Tracy started an internationally-renowned program for speech therapy for children with hearing loss and she strongly objected to sign language.

John was profoundly deaf and never learned sign language. One day, Dr. Johnson-Smith introduced me to him and I attempted to talk to him but was totally unsuccessful in doing so. His speech was very hard to understand nor could he understand me. When I tried to sign with him, he nodded that he had no idea what I was saying to him. I thought how incredibly sad and frustrated his life must be without being allowed the option of sign language. This experience profoundly affected me and shaped the course of changing both my personal and professional goals.

In therapy, I began to explore what the deaf world was like when I met several successful deaf students who signed. I began to think about how much I wanted to continue "passing," but I still wasn't ready to join the Deaf community. It wasn't until I experienced several situations of danger that I realized that my denial would be so costly.

Shortly before entering college, I found myself in a situation while traveling abroad with my best friend. We were walking through a park when a small group of friendly looking guys started following us. One guy approached me and asked me something while another guy approached my best friend. I, being friendly, nodded affirmatively to something I didn't understand. He then grabbed my hand and attempted to drag me to some

nearby bushes whereupon my friend sprang to action yelling and then onlookers appeared. The guys took off, but I got scared enough where I had to examine how my denial put me in a dangerous situation.

This sparked the beginning of the process of accepting my hearing loss and learning a few basic signs. During college, there were several common denominators that I struggled with on how to describe my hearing loss to strangers, classmates and dates. As a person with hearing loss, was I allowed to be as frustrated as my Deaf peers because I had some hearing? Was I allowed to be in the Deaf community because I could speak and talk on the phone? Was I hard of hearing in one situation and deaf/Deaf in another?

This search for identity became even more complicated when I lost more hearing, where I went from having a 65 to a 90-decibel loss (from moderate to severe to profound). Audiologically, I was deaf and then it became even more confusing. It wasn't until I could no longer hear on the phone that I started referring to myself as being deaf/Deaf more frequently, but I still reserved the label of being hard of hearing when I spoke to hearing people because it was easier to explain the limitations of my hearing loss. It wasn't until relatively recently that I decided that it was okay for me to be comfortable with the label of my choice and to choose it whenever I wanted to and in whatever environment I found myself in.

Professional Experience

In my 11 years at CSUN as a psychologist in the counseling center, I have seen how students with hearing loss struggle with this identity issue. Many students who enter college in their freshman year come in with one identity, and then find themselves struggling with how to identify themselves in a myriad of settings at home, school and the dating scene.

One factor that invariably emerges in counseling is how the student interacts with their family of origin. Most students come from a family where they are the only one in their family with hearing loss, with little or no sign language. This oralism often exists in families where parents fear that the visibility of sign language will further target their child to bullying or discrimination. As such, oralism helps to ensure a sense of safety in "passing" in social situations. However, the irony is that many parents of babies who are not deaf teach their children sign language to facilitate earlier communication.

When the entering student becomes immersed in the deaf/Deaf student community, learns sign language and develops new friendships with other students with hearing loss, feelings of anger and frustration with their family often become intensified. When this happens, they are forced to look at these feelings and become motivated to learn how to better cope and learn new communication skills.

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Adding to this complexity of identity with hearing loss is the intersectionality of other identities such as gender, sex, cultural, religious and other disabilities. "Intersectionality can be understood as a camera lens approach to the work because identities are contextual, complex, both deeply rooted and emerging, layered and intermeshed. The camera lens moves across a landscape of our experiences, zooming in, zooming out, panning, becoming still, rapidly moving forward, slowly recollecting the past." (Chong, 2016).

Each culture may have its own assumptions, stereotypes and rules. Thus, intersectionality of multiple identities can often force a person to identify the varying levels of oppression within each one. Then, the question is often which identity assumes top ranking and how to figure out how to balance the other identities.

Keisha, 20, is currently the only African American student in her classes who is deaf and she does not feel accepted by the Deaf student body because she visibly stands out alone in the majority white student body. Likewise, it is difficult for her to participate in any of the Black student support groups as the only deaf person and she would need to have a sign language interpreter help her be included.

Juanita, 32, is a Latina student who became deaf as an adolescent due to a genetic condition of neurofibromatosis, and her family still doesn't understand why she is so frustrated and depressed. Her near-perfect speech makes it even harder for them to accept her disability. When she tries to advocate for herself by refusing to go to certain family social events, she is told that she is being disrespectful to her Mexican-born parents and siblings who don't truly understand her invisible disability. In this case, she is challenged by her primary identity as a Latina, and her hearing loss receives second billing.

Jonathan, 21, is White, gay and profoundly deaf. While he might struggle with the coming out process, he acknowledges that both of his identities are invisible and that he can choose to pass or not. He is fully aware that

his invisibility ensures a certain level of security unlike the visibility of skin color in Keisha or Juanita.

Trisha, 19, is a freshman from a predominantly White, wealthy community and she feels somewhat protected in her privileged state where she must learn how to exist in a diverse college community. Her trauma comes from being a deaf survivor of childhood molestation (another invisible identity), and she never told anyone. Sadly enough, this is a common identity that must be added to the mix, as sexual assault occurs three times more often in the communities of deaf people and others with hearing loss.

This aspect of invisibility may help to explain why many students in the Deaf and hearing loss community may not identify themselves as being disabled. There tends to be a disconnect and they see themselves as a separate group from those that have other disabilities. While it might make sense for them to join the larger group of people with disabilities, they cherish the feeling of connectedness and belonging with others who share the common language of American Sign Language and culture.

However, this connection can become clouded even further if there is an additional disability that is not invisible. Chloe, 26, is a White student who has unilateral deafness and cerebral palsy (CP), which affects both her ability to move, speak and sign. She functions more like her hard of hearing peers because she hears in one ear and yet is profoundly deaf in her other ear. As such, she is thrusted into an existence where she floats between the worlds of deafness and those with a visible neurodevelopment disorder. Chloe deals with the feeling of not fully belonging in either the deaf/Deaf/hard of hearing community or the CP community. As such, she feels that she cannot be a fully participating member of either community and has to learn to adapt to this duality.

It helps to remember that identity is not a static concept, but a complex and ongoing quest for belonging to a community—perhaps one that they may have never experienced prior to college life. For the student with the single identity of hearing loss, this is a quest that is bound up with the acceptance of being deaf while finding one's voice in a hearing-dominant community, whereas the student with two or more disabilities will have a more complex journey oscillating among various communities.

In closing, I strongly encourage the student with hearing loss, or any disability for that matter, to have affirmative counseling to navigate through these multiple identities and issues. The process of accepting one's hearing loss is a lifelong journey. Students need to be informed that college counseling is a free service that their student fees pay for and can be an invaluable service, one that they may never be able to easily access upon graduation. With students who come from families whose culture views mental health counseling with stigma and shame, this becomes even more important. Counseling can best be seen as a growth process where students can learn new coping and communication skills to become the best student and person they can be. HL

I strongly encourage the student with hearing loss, or any disability for that matter, to have affirmative counseling to navigate through these multiple identities and issues. The process of accepting one's hearing loss is a lifelong journey.

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