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Disability Essay

By Evelyn Glennie

For the vast majority of species on this planet, in order to survive, everything they experience has to be categorised into one of four groups. Whatever they encounter has to be either a food source, a threat, a means of reproduction or irrelevant. Most species survive their environment with this simple view of the world but it seems to me that almost without exception evolution has basically been a physical arms race. Predators become stronger than their prey and evolve extremes of physical weaponry and sensory perception. Meanwhile the prey evolve an escalating variety of defence mechanisms ranging from the highly specialized and complex to the simple solution of reproducing in such large numbers as to allow for depredation. However there is a handful of species, including Homo Sapiens, that despite having developed a reasonable range of physical adaptations have essentially opted out of the physical arms race by instead looking for survival solutions from the angle of their understanding and view of the world. As a computer analogy, one could say that this handful of species have opted out of the evolutionary hardware race and have instead concentrated on software development. In the case of human beings a large part of our software solution is an ever expanding and changing framework of nested categories and sub categories evolved from the four basic categories used by most other species. An arguably undesirable and unavoidable consequence of this solution is a sense of self and the need therefore of placing of oneself along with everything else into our framework of understanding. Indeed the survival of most individual Homo Sapiens now depends not so much on the existence of this framework but on our understanding of the categories and their labels which make it up. For example in certain parts of the United Kingdom the understanding of the categories of Catholic and Protestant can impact significantly on one's survival prospects. Fortunately, this framework of understanding is in a state of constant evolution with new categories and sub-categories being constantly added and the definitions and labels of existing ones changing. Although it appears extremely rare, if ever, that categories are ever totally discarded.

If you accept this view of human evolution, trying to eradicate the category of "Handicapped" for instance, is completely futile. It's essentially trying to eradicate what is arguably the defining characteristic of the Homo Sapiens species. What can be achieved is the evolution of a category and the possibility of eventually even rendering it irrelevant. For example the category of "Centurion" still exists but I don't know of anyone to whom it could apply. A category so often associated with me is that of being "Deaf", which itself is a sub-category of the "Disabled" category. A great deal of evolution has already taken place with the "Deaf" category. Each category has a simple definition which is accepted and adopted by means of general consensus. The category of "Deaf" used to be called "Deaf and Dumb" and was representative of the general consensus definition that people who were deaf could not understand the spoken word or the information being communicated and were therefore unable to hear, stupid and unable speak. During the last century a growing number of deaf people proved that they were able to communicate and that deafness was not an indicator of intelligence. The definition of the "Deaf" category evolved by general consensus to mean no more than that someone who is "Deaf"



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cannot hear anything. Along with the change of definition came a change in the label to just "Deaf". By the end of the last century the definition was again evolving as the general consensus started to realise that the term "Deaf" was not an absolute. Very few if any of the deaf live in a world of complete silence. To signify this evolution of definition the category label of "Deaf" is gradually starting to be replaced with the label of "Hearing Impaired". Indeed, I stand here today, invited to speak to you because I do not meet the definition of the category into which most people would place me. The definition of the category of "Deaf", ie., not being able to hear sound, and the category of Music, which is sound, are mutually exclusive. My career, like that of Beethoven's and a number of others, is an impossibility. There are only three possible explanations: I am not a musician, I'm not deaf, or the general understanding of the categories of "Deaf" or "Music" must be incorrect. In addition to the "Deaf" category, I also bring the category of "Disabled" into question. By definition being disabled means that I am not able to do something. However, except for a few minor inconveniences, I am not disabled from achieving anything in my career or private life. How then do the terms "disabled" or "Deaf" really apply to me? In short, they don't, not even the "Hearing Impaired" label works because in some respects my hearing is superior to the average non-impaired person. I simply hear in a different way to most people. Other people apply the categories, but to me and some others like me these particular categories are irrelevant.

"Normally hearing" people do not define their existence by their hearing. In fact, by and large they very rarely even think about it. A common thread amongst the very high achievers that I have met who have a hearing impairment is that they treat their hearing in a very similar manner to the non-impaired. They have at some stage had to do a lot of work to train their voices or learn to lip-read but after a while it becomes second nature and they simply forget about it. Their hearing impairment becomes no more a defining part of who they are than their hair colour.

For me it was not a question of breaking through my "handicap" and then competing with "normal" people. I have never considered myself as anything other than a "normal" person in the first place. I view my hearing impairment the same way as say a footballer who damages their knee but makes a virtually full recovery. There are many months of physiotherapy and even years later there is the occasional "twinge" and maybe you have to take a few extra precautions whilst training. The injury doesn't define who you are, it doesn't take you out of the realms of being a "normal" person and it doesn't stop you becoming a world class footballer. In fact it's completely irrelevant to what you can achieve in your work or your life.

Like everyone else in society, regardless of my legal status, I am physically handicapped. For instance, regardless of my desire I can never be a professional heavy-weight boxer, a supermodel or a famous tenor ... At least not without a some serious hormone therapy and a drastic increase in my calorie intake! Like all other people, regardless of any so called "handicap", there are certain jobs I can't do due to my physical attributes. However, I can't excel at hundreds of other jobs because I either don't want to or I believe I am not sufficiently talented. How we categorise ourselves and where we fit in to our own framework of understanding leads the vast majority to the belief that they are unable to achieve the



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highest levels of attainment in their chosen field of endeavour. This a far greater handicap and disability than virtually any physical problem I can think of, with the exception of death!! From politics to theoretical physics and numerous other examples beside there are people whose careers prove that the biggest handicap is the framework of understanding in which people place themselves, and that even the severest of physical difficulties are at most secondary.

In my opinion placing deaf children and students in "deaf communities" and educating them is a huge improvement on just locking them away in institutions as was done in the past and as is still done in some countries. However, the great danger of "impaired communities" is that the students are not just educated in how to overcome their impairment, it is unavoidable that they develop a framework of understanding of the world around them and categorise themselves with their peers as being a member of an impaired community. For instance teaching a deaf child to communicate only through sign language not only gives them the ability to communicate but it also re-enforces the difference between themselves and the vast majority of "normal" people who don't sign. Essentially it's replacing an unusual physical handicap with an extremely common mental handicap. My gift, if that is how it can be described, is not in my physical ability to play percussion instruments but in my framework, which has evolved without much conscious input from me and which doesn't allow me many excuses. I have truly never believed that the problems I experienced with my ears could in any significant way affect my abilities as a musician. Neither did I believe that just because no one else had ever succeeded in maintaining a career as a solo classical percussionist that I would not be able to. I have not succeeded in spite of my deafness or because of it. Deafness is simply an irrelevant part of the equation. For instance some of the things I do when playing would be a lot easier if I had longer arms and bigger hands. So I could consider this as a physical handicap. Compared to the general consensus concept of arms and hands though, mine aren't particularly out of the ordinary so rather than dwell on my physical inadequacies I simply find a work around. Certainly my hearing is out of the ordinary as others might see it, but not for me it isn't. I'm used to my hearing in the same way that I'm used to the size of my hands.

You might feel that what I'm saying is all very well but I must have put in a lot of work to create a perception of the sound that I am producing. This is very true, I have . but there again so has every other musician. What many people don't realise is the sound that even a "normally hearing" musician hears while connected to their instrument often varies dramatically with the sound an audience hears several yards away. What's more this sound isn't a constant as it is also affected by the acoustic properties of the room in which the instrument is played. All professional musicians have spent time training our hearing and continue to study and learn with each acoustic we encounter.

The reason you as individuals are so important is that you are in a position to directly influence the development of the framework of understanding in children and of the placing of themselves within it. By the end of your careers you will have been responsible for the education of many hundreds or even thousands of children and students. The questions that I am frequently asked by interviewers from or on behalf of the "Deaf Community" make constant reference to "deaf/hearing impaired" or "traditionally



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hearing roles/jobs". For me there is no such thing, there are just people jobs and there are just jobs. It's up to you whether or not your future students are "special needs students", "hearing impaired students", "handicapped students" or they are just students. With the same limitations or lack of them of any other students but perhaps like the footballer mentioned earlier they need a little extra attention because of their "broken legs"! Many of your students will arrive already thinking of themselves as handicapped, deaf, blind or otherwise impaired, it is human nature to look for an easy route and having a "handicap" is an excuse they don't even have to think up for themselves. But surely the job of any educator is to broaden the minds and outlook of their students and inspire them to reach beyond their current limits, not to re-enforce their excuses.

As a professional soloist I have a certain insight into the world of music which is beyond the scope of most non-professional musicians. If handed a musical score most people would recognise it as such but would be under the false impression that a score is a visual representation of music. To me a score is merely the visual framework which contains the potential for music. In fact it could be argued that musicality is all those deliberate elements in a performance that are not specifically indicated in the score. I use my knowledge of how and where to strike my instruments to manipulate the emotional response of my audience. Not to just explain the feelings or ideas I have interpreted from the composer's score but to actually give the audience an experience of them. This to me is the essence of musicality and the definition of music as an art form.

A few years ago while performing in Nashville, Tennessee I attended the annual conference of the National Association of Music Therapists. While much of what I saw was very encouraging I left with mixed feelings. It was obvious there was a great enthusiasm for exchanging information on therapy but there was very little understanding of the music aspect of Music Therapy. It seemed to me that by general unspoken consensus any sound produced by a musical instrument was by definition music. The sound produced by a violin or a drum is no more musical than the sound produced by hitting a car with a hammer. The violin has arguably a greater potential for creating music than a car but only in the hands of a musician who is using the violin to communicate. The art form of music is a language of communication, sound is only relevant in that it is the medium through which music travels. Although I am not very experienced with Music Therapy, virtually everything I have seen leads me to believe that what is actually happening is Sound Therapy and that Music Therapy is a misnomer. In one instance I played for a boy who was deaf, blind, brain damaged and had to be constantly restrained as he was unable to control the erratic behaviour of his muscles. The boy was held on the wooden floor underneath my marimba so that he might feel the vibrations. Within a few minutes of my starting to play a piece of music depicting a gentle sadness the carers were able to release their grip and the boy's muscles relaxed. I then played a fun and cheeky piece of music and the boy waved his arms in a controlled manner and smiled. The boy had been in care all his life and between tears his carer told me that to their knowledge, in his nine year old life, this was the first time the boy had been seen to smile, had shown any muscle control or indeed had responded in any way. As a language of communication I believe that music has huge potential in the area of therapy.



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From the little I have seen, I believe the career you have chosen to be one of the most emotionally demanding of any work I can think of. The results though often subtle and inconsequential to others can be profound for the individual and immensely personally gratifying for the teacher. Although I cannot give you even vague methods of implementation, I hope that you have found some spark of an idea or something of use from my observations.