

Muffled Journey

By Erma A. Belz

THE BEGINNING

My life journey began on a beautiful Minnesota October day, when I arrived in this world as the firstborn of caring parents. Typical of the days of the 1920s, I was born at our home. The doctor had arrived earlier that day and had stayed with my parents the entire time needed for my safe arrival.

My father's and mother's parents had come to America from Germany. Both sets of ancestors were farmers and had very strong family values. This meant affection and respect for this new generation they had brought into existence, shown in a steady, strong flow of care and concern.

The influence and active participation by all generations of my family in a strong religious faith was an integral part of our daily life. My baptism had been celebrated in my home within the first few weeks of my birth. It was important that baptism be observed as early in one's life as possible. But then within the first month of my life, it was important also that I be physically present in the church building itself as an active part of the gathered congregation.

An anecdote about my first visit to our church, located less than a quarter mile from our home tells of how Dad and Mom wrapped me up well, and then Dad carried me to the church (wrapping me even more thoroughly as he left the house). He ran all the way, as quickly as he could. The ladies of the congregation met him at the door of the church and unwrapped some of the blankets. They told him he was lucky to not have smothered me.

Dad was tall, and Mom was a short petite lady who had struggled to keep up with him in his dash with their new daughter. She finally arrived and, along with the other ladies of the congregation, took me into the "kinder stube," the children's room, where fussy or crying babies would be taken so as not to disturb the worship services.

Once I was unwrapped and properly shown around, my mother took me with her to where she sat on the women's side of the congregation just as the worship services began. Yes, I was thoroughly loved and cared for, having become early in my life, an integral part of that single ethnic, single religion community where families still lived in the area settled by their immigrant parents and grandparents when they arrived here in America.

Home life for me in those years revolved around our farm home, its animals and plants, our relatives and neighbors, and the customs of a closely knit, hard working rural neighborhood.

My hearing must have been fairly keen at that time as I did hear the bell of our church ringing the angelus on Saturday evenings. The bell sounded also upon the death of a congregation member, tolling the message of that passing. Always the ringing bell called all to worship on Sundays and other days of special celebration. However, when I reached 4 or 5 years of age, that was all changing. My comprehension of that change was that only sometimes I could faintly hear the distant church bell, and sometimes I could not hear it at all. I thought that was due to the wind blowing in a different direction

and carrying the sound away from me. Also, at times I sensed a frustration from others who seemed not to approve of my response to something that had been said or done. I did not understand this as I was trying to behave and react appropriately.

This must have been a time of frustration for my parents as they grappled with why their child often seemed slow to grasp things or reacted in a manner opposite to what they had expected. Our extended family—aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents—all included me in activities and conversations. German was the language spoken on the more formal occasions, particularly when talking with grandparents and other persons of responsibility or importance. English was the everyday and business language.

I learned to read at a very early age. Now I understand why that happened; it was a communication that remained stable for me. Interestingly, a sign of the life of those times involved gangsters and bootlegging as an important part of newspaper items. My parents told me of, and I vaguely remember, an instance (probably age 3 or so) when I lay on the kitchen floor with a newspaper spread out before me. I loudly proclaimed, “Six men killed with an axe!” I am sure I was pretending that I read that as I recall the satisfaction I felt when both Mom and Dad burst out laughing. But I did understand even at that age the value of visual communication, the printed word.

EARLY EDUCATION

My first days at school, a one-room country school, took place just before my sixth birthday. By this time, I had a baby sister; she would be my only sibling. I loved her very much, and she was my parents’ pride and joy. Although I was a brunette, she was a beautiful little girl with curly blond hair and a smiling, happy personality.

Our school had one teacher for all eight grades, with a total of about thirty pupils. Her background for teaching school had been the completion of one year’s training at a Normal School, provided by our state for anyone who wanted to become a school teacher. Our teacher was diligent in her work and a strict disciplinarian. I am sure I made her life complicated as I sometimes did not understand what she was saying. Some of my reaction or lack thereof to directions given orally to me or to our first-grade class must have appeared to her as misbehavior on my part. Misbehavior and disobedience were not to be tolerated. It seemed she particularly focused on me and my responses to her directions. Sometimes I mispronounced a word, an unforgivable error, as it was important at that time, too, to erase any mispronunciations because of the transit for most of us from German to English. Although I did receive good marks in school, I know there were several conferences between my parents and the teacher.

When I was 9 or 10 years of age, a new event took place at school. A school nurse came to visit our school; this had never happened previously. She sat in a desk behind me, and I thought she said something to me. I turned around to see her since I did not understand what she had said and felt that I would understand better when I was facing her. She was very kind and repeated what she had said. I think it had been something about a dress I was wearing. After she had left the school, our teacher (the same one who had been with our school now for five years) handed me a note the nurse had written. I was told to take the note home and ask Mom and Dad to take me to a doctor because I had some problem with hearing.

This note became the object of great fun with the other students who teased me as we walked home, saying, in a sing-song style, “Erma’s got to go to the doctor; she has something wrong with her.” I, of

course, cried as I felt I was a failure and a somewhat weird person. My parents then took me to the doctor who had helped bring me into the world. He said in a most kindly way that I had a nerve deafness and that there would be no help for me except to pay attention as much as I could. This had been for me a very comfortable visit to a doctor, as this doctor sat facing me when he spoke and very clearly outlined his diagnosis. Later visits to doctors and during other medical situations were sometimes openly terrifying, as often the speaker would be wearing a mask, or not speak to me clearly, so I could not understand what was being said—that is, if I could guess at all what the next procedure might be.

By this time, I believe, my parents had begun to comprehend that something about me was different than that of other children as I was frequently referred to by them as “die andre,” that other one, by extended family members.

Now, off we went to visit another doctor. This time the doctor was a specialist for ear, nose, and throat concerns. He again said that paying attention was very important and would suffice for my “getting along.” He suggested I might be tongue-tied and performed the appropriate treatment, which involved cutting the membrane under my tongue. Mom had taken me to the doctor and was very sympathetic for the misery it had caused me, so we went to the nearby ice cream store where she subsequently bought an ice cream cone for me. That was a really big expense in those days of the Depression.

These were the days, too, of the drought that added a further burden to the depression problems. Harvest time in 1934 was difficult because the grain was too short for the binder to cut and tie into bundles. Dad had bought special attachments to place on the binder’s sickle guards. These would raise the individual plants as much as possible so that the sickle blades could cut them and get them to fall onto the canvas that would move them so they could be best bundled. Since the weather was too hot for us to use horses, we hooked the 10-20 tractor to the binder, and Dad would ride on the binder to operate the various levers and equipment, a job needing strong muscles. I was to drive the tractor. As the tractor made a lot of noise, I could not hear his directions about when to stop or start. Dad then took a long bamboo fish pole and would use that to tap me on the shoulder as a communication tool, and we managed the complicated procedure very well.

ENDEAVORS FOR RESTORATION

My parents were very concerned for my welfare, and even with money not being readily available, they continued to take me to various doctors in the hope of some hearing restoration. A dentist had told them that perhaps my back molars and coming wisdom teeth were pinching a nerve that affected my hearing ability. As a result of that advice, several molars of each jaw were removed, and as soon as the wisdom teeth had grown, they also were removed. Another doctor suggested that the Eustachian Canal was blocked. He recommended several treatments a week that would force a medication into the canal via a tube placed in the nostril to reach the canal. This was done for a total of 75 times at a total cost of \$150 for Mom and Dad, an astronomical amount in those mid-1930 days.

Next Mom and Dad took me to the Ear, Nose, and Throat department of the University of Minnesota, where the earlier diagnosis of nerve deafness was repeated along with the admonition, “Pay attention, and you will be all right.”

During the final years of grade school and completion of Confirmation Studies for the church, I had begun to understand the implications of hearing loss, something that was a hearing impairment, but not

total deafness. An incident when I was in Grade 7 illustrates this:

I was playing on the school ground during recess and was in an area by the school flagpole. The school bully said something to me, and I asked him what he had said as I had not understood. He subsequently punched me hard on the right side of my face, causing a jaw injury, which left a mark that can be felt to this day. He said as he hit me, "Well, maybe you will understand this." I did not tell anyone of this incident, as I somehow felt responsible for its happening.

In spite of these recounted incidents, life was not all that difficult and unhappy for me. I had parents who helped me in every way they could. In school I was able to earn acceptable academic ratings, even though citizenship was frequently rated as "improvement needed." Yet there were many incidents when people helped me as best they knew how. My Christian faith supported me strongly, and I began to understand that there was a fulfilling goal to life that could be reached if only one would seek and recognize it for its lifelong value.

LATER ACADEMICS

My mother had through the years very strongly felt that women's rights and opportunities were ignored. She felt that it would be extremely important for her children to have education beyond Grade 8. However, there were no school buses to transport students to high school. Our nearest high school was about 12 miles from our home, an insurmountable distance to overcome. Mom then explored other options and learned about the School of Agriculture at the University of Minnesota (St. Paul), with dormitories for students who were attending the school. She began making arrangements for my attendance at this school, obtaining the necessary references and submitting the application.

Upon the school's receiving the application for my attendance, a University of Minnesota field supervisor came to our house and interviewed me, also giving me an intelligence test to make sure that I would qualify as a student. I was at that time 14 years of age, far younger than the average age of the school's students. My score on the test was the highest possible score, so eventually I received my letter of conditional acceptance. In the fall of 1937, shortly before my fifteenth birthday, Dad and Mom brought me to the St. Paul Campus of the University of Minnesota, and I became a freshman at the University of Minnesota School of Agriculture. This must have been an unbelievable financial hardship for my parents, as they had only recently survived the depression and the drought years. Yet they managed and were assisted only with a \$50 scholarship from (of all places) Sears and Roebuck.

Again, the same message to me from the school nurse there and the intake physician: You will be all right if only you pay attention; your hearing loss is not a total deafness. At that time my last name began with "W," so when students were seated alphabetically, I would be in the back row. Sometimes I had courage enough to ask to be seated in a front row, but again, it seemed to me to be a sort of shameful thing to not be able to hear well. In addition to attendance at the classes, I read every available book on that specific subject and fully completed all assignments.

At the end of three years at this school, I graduated and was awarded the gold "A" because I had attained the highest rating in the entire school that year in scholarship, citizenship, and leadership. I enrolled again in the fourth year, an intermediate course that allowed additional hard science courses, and again I attained the gold "A."

At that time, I had still hoped to become a doctor or nurse, but was also beginning to understand that my muffled hearing would really endanger others as well as prove an almost insurmountable obstacle to me. I was not given any advice to the contrary by my class and student advisors, so I began altering my dreams.

In the spring of 1941 I enrolled in the “Nursemaids’ Training Course” at the Minnesota Children’s Home Society, St. Paul, Minnesota. I thought that perhaps I would try this path, and if it was successful, I could perhaps still reach my goal of being a doctor or nurse.

The course consisted of extensive study of child development and health concerns in addition to hands-on experience in the care and training of children and youth (a now outdated term). Upon graduation I was hired to become the assistant to the Head Nurse at the Children’s Home Society, and I worked in that position until my marriage in November of 1943.

JUST PAY ATTENTION

By 1940 I had learned of hearing aids and the help they could provide. However, again, counselors told me that my loss was not great enough to warrant such a device nor was there any special education available for me via our state schools and education systems. Once again, I heard the advice, “Just pay attention.”

When my husband Robert returned home after World War II ended, he felt that a hearing aid would really help me, and we began saving money to purchase one. Robert had been attached to a Field Hospital during the war and had learned about the value of hearing aids/assistive devices for those with impaired hearing such as mine. In 1947, finally, we contacted a hearing aid salesman to begin our purchase of an aid. Although even then, medical doctors had stated several times that such assistance was not necessary for me, and all that was needed was for me to “pay attention.”

Now for me, in 1947, help with the hearing loss did come. It was a hearing aid for my left ear, which, at that time, had a 60% loss. The right ear never had any hearing ability at all, having been classified as ancillary (nonfunctioning) from the very early years of my life.

How wonderful it was to hear our children’s voices even when they were distant from me, and I felt a renewed sense of comfort to more clearly hear my husband’s voice! Now I could more fully understand words and more fully hear music! By this time I had completed further studies in music and had begun to give private music lessons to others. Now it was not all “guess and see” with only muffled sounds, but with more auditory input.

On a visit to the Mayo Clinic in the 1960s, I had asked for an evaluation of my hearing loss and possible treatment to bring back some hearing. The doctor examining me had held his watch near to my ear, expecting, I think, to determine whether I could hear the watch’s ticking. I did not hear it, but I did turn my head to see his face and try to understand what he had said to me. “Oh,” he said when I turned my head, “she can hear well enough to get along; all she needs is to pay attention.” I tell this story only to indicate that even as recently as the ‘60s, the message had not yet been learned that though there was yet no medical help to restore hearing lost with nerve deafness; neither was there an understanding that any degree of hearing impairment does have an effect on an individual’s total life.

CONCLUSION

Through the years until now, 2008, the loss has increased, and now it is termed a profound impairment. Even though succeeding years continue to bring new innovations and developments in hearing assistive devices, it needs to be remembered that even with such progress, some sounds will remain indistinct and incorrectly interpreted. Consonants are frequently difficult to identify. For example, the mistakes easily made between “do” and “don’t” illustrate clearly the difficulties of a muffled journey. Much progress has been made via development and availability of hearing and communications enhancers, captioning, a variety of electronic and technical inventions, such as electronic messaging, and a more complete understanding of the implications of hearing loss. Always there remains the problem of social situations when one is judged aloof and rude or stupid because of not responding to conversations and greetings. Always there remains the cold fear of unrecognized danger or the misunderstanding what has been said.

But there was yet one more momentous and important chapter in my life. A seemingly ordinary phone call came to me asking me whether I would be interested in a part-time position with the local school district. The position would be one of promoting the Described and Captioned Media Program (DCMP) throughout our entire state. Up until that phone call, I had never even heard of this program, which at that time provided captioned media to persons of all ages. I thought it would be interesting to accept this position, so I said yes. Now I compare that moment to putting on skis at the top of a snow-covered mountain and setting off on the journey. It was and is a truly exciting and interesting journey. As the DCMP revealed itself with all its benefits and potential, I began to understand the value of this program, and I want to bring information about it to all of this very, very large state: Alaska.

Only in the recent decades had captioning begun to be appreciated for the wonderful benefits it could provide for anyone of any age with any degree of hearing impairment. The printed word visible on the screen was nothing short of miraculous. How wonderful it was to finally understand the communications and the sounds of the projected items. It is overwhelming to think of the benefits the captioned media can provide for persons of any and all ages.

Statistics tell us that one in every ten children/youth has some extent of hearing loss. Here in Alaska, with its often harsh weather and frequent distance from health care, the rate is one in eight. It is almost impossible to comprehend the scope of the benefits that comes with the ability to understand the messages. This has been and continues to be a wonderful, wonderful journey for me.

Therefore, it is extremely important to provide all the assistance possible, both technical and instructive, to those of us who are on this journey. Teachers, parents, caregivers, and all who interact with us in the activities of life need to accept the reality of hearing impairment. Those of us with a hearing impairment want to be recognized as individuals and given every opportunity to be a complete part of life and living. However, we who are hearing impaired also must honestly be aware of our role and play an active part in every step of this journey.

From the Author

My purpose in writing *Muffled Journey* is to raise awareness of the issues that accompany hearing impairment. *Muffled Journey* is written not to belittle or ignore the barriers and challenges of total deafness, but to illustrate the needs and obstacles that accompany a less than total loss of hearing. Recognition and acknowledgement of the hearing impairment itself is of paramount importance.

The advocacy and research that have come with the 1990s and early years of the 21st century have brought us by leaps and bounds to an era of open recognition and positive response rather than judgment and removal from mainstream life.

It is important to recognize the vast array of difficulties and differences in situations and reactions involving hearing impairment. Not only is there a variance in types and degrees of loss; life situations and experiences vary greatly from one individual to another and exert influence and impact. All of these variations come in a spectrum so complex that no one measurement or condition can be given as an absolute.

An overly simplistic classification regarding the effect of hearing loss on an individual's life can be viewed from two very different perspectives. One perspective defines nonhearing individuals as not normal because they cannot hear sound, while the other perspective points out nonhearing persons primarily relate visually to the world about them. There are negative implications to an overly zealous and isolated viewpoint from either of these perspectives.

Recognition and acceptance of a condition as well as its implications, followed by taking appropriate action, are important and positive first steps for all concerned. Whether short term or lifelong, the journey of someone with a hearing impairment will include a mixture of actions and reactions involving both perspectives. Ultimately, the individual's own perspective will be the deciding factor in the journey's direction. Next, but not least in importance, will be the perspective of the person with whom the interactions of life take place.

Muffled Journey is related here in the true hope that a greater awareness and understanding of the implications and reactions because of hearing loss will bring to hearing and nonhearing alike a greater understanding of each other and thus a more productive and compassionate lifetime journey for all.

About the Author



Born October 18, 1922, Erma Belz lived in Washington County, Minnesota. Growing up on a farm, she went to a one-room school while surviving the Great Depression. After completing her studies at the then School of Agriculture, University of Minnesota, she married the man of her dreams, Robert—a soldier in the US Army (WWII)—on November 13, 1943. Their first daughter was born November 13, 1944. In 2001, she was chosen as a Woman of Distinction in Fairbanks, Alaska. She now has three granddaughters and is most grateful for a full and busy life.