



249: A Former Sign Language Interpreter's Guide to Listening

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 249.

This is a podcast about making decisions, but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful but also distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place for discerning your next right thing.

What could we learn about listening from other listening professions? I'm not talking about counselors or therapists, but those whose job it is to hear on behalf of someone else. As a former sign language interpreter turned writer, turned spiritual director, I'm reflecting on how some of my learned skills in one area of study are now informing my life as a listener in a different way. Perhaps some of these same principles can help you in your own discernment process. Listen in.

Well, they say only a small percentage of college graduates end up working in their chosen fields of study. Don't you love my very specific and scientific they? Well, the actual number depends on where you look and who you ask, but even casual conversation with just friends and acquaintances reveals that it's rare to find someone these days who went to college to study a thing and then ended up doing that thing for the rest of their working lives.

It's ironic now, being my age, sending two of my own kids to college, walking with them as they painstakingly decided where to go and what to study, because I know from my own life and the lives of most people I know, that it's more rare to find someone doing the thing they went to school to learn. And so, while it's often true that a lot of us are not working nine-to-five in a job in the field of study that's written on our diplomas, that doesn't mean we aren't using our degree. They're called transferable skills, y'all. And we're using them all the time. In fact, we're using them even without a degree. We're using them in all areas of our lives and our lived experience and we're applying them to other areas.

Well, why am I talking about this on an episode about decision making? It's because I got a degree in educational interpreting for the deaf. And guess what job I'm not doing today? Well, here's what I know, I may not be working as a sign language interpreter anymore, but being trained in the field of listening, language, and intercultural mediation are all skills I use on a daily basis, as a writer, as a spiritual director, and just as a person.

Well, first, some fun facts and background that could be helpful or just plain interesting to know about sign language in general. Whenever people learn that that was my degree, often what ensues is an interesting conversation about sign language and about the language. It's a fascinating language. It is not universal. And some people don't know this, not even all English speaking countries have the same signed

language. Here in North America, we use American Sign Language. You may have heard of ASL. I'm pretty sure in the UK they use British Sign Language, BSL. In Australia, they have Auslan. British Sign Language and Australian Sign Language or Auslan, both have a two-handed alphabet. In fact, I think a lot of sign languages have a two-handed alphabet. ASL, we have a one-hand alphabet.

According to the United Nations website and the World Federation of the Deaf, there are more than 70 million deaf people worldwide. And collectively, they use more than 300 different sign languages.

Sign languages are fully fledged natural languages, distinct from their spoken languages. Now, there is an international sign language, but it's not really a language that people use in every day conversation in any deaf communities. It's more used by deaf people in international meetings and more informally when traveling and even socializing and traveling, or other situations, other contexts outside of their normal context. International sign language is not as complex as natural sign languages, and it has a really limited lexicon.

So if you've been around a while, you already know I graduated college with a degree in educational interpreting for the deaf. I went on to become nationally certified a few years after graduation. I was trained to serve as the interpreter for deaf and hard of hearing students in educational settings, which I did first at the high school level and then later at the undergraduate and graduate level at a local university. When I worked at the university, I served as the interpreter coordinator, which meant that I hired and scheduled all of the interpreters on campus, to provide interpreting services for every deaf student who needed accommodation. But when I worked in the public school system at the high school, I was assigned to work primarily with just one student at one school for the duration of the year.

Now, interpreters are proficient in both receptive and expressive skills. So it's the interpreter's job to translate or interpret from spoken English to, in my case, American Sign Language. And then, from American Sign Language back to spoken English. Interpreters are responsible to accurately communicate teacher lectures, for example, for the deaf student in the classroom. And then in turn, to accurately voice a student's owned signed expression.

Well, in my interpreting days, I interpreted everything from geometry, algebra, history, PE, pep rallies, field trips, non-caption videos, basketball games and practices, locker room huddles, morning announcements, and even some high school friend drama. Outside of the classroom, I interpreted counseling sessions, symposiums, graduation ceremonies, doctor appointments, assemblies, community plays and more. That was more when I worked as a community interpreter, and those were for a variety of clients, and I never even maybe knew who those clients would be until I showed up.

Well, after spending many years learning the language and then also learning the skills required to master it as an interpreter, and then after working as a professional interpreter for several years in educational settings as well as in my local community, it was a sad day when I realized a decade later that my interpreter days had passed and I allowed my certification to expire.

It's been years now since I worked as an interpreter in any capacity, but lately, I've been paying attention to how all those years of study and practice didn't go to waste. Here are things I learned from my years as a sign language interpreter that I still use in my listening life today.

Number one, good listeners put down their own agenda. Sign language interpreters are required to set down our own opinions, preferences, and perspectives for the sake of providing equal access to the deaf or hard of hearing student, client, person. It wasn't my job to insert my commentary on the lecture or the information being given. It wasn't my job to agree or disagree with what was being said. It wasn't my job to keep the student interested in the lecture. And so, if the lecture was compelling or if it was

confusing, then the interpretation would reflect that. If the teacher was boring, I was boring. If a teacher was expressive, that was reflected. If the student mumbled when they signed, I mumbled with my voice. Interpreters aren't robots, but they are responsible to interpret what's being said without censorship or editorializing in any way. The goal is to render the message faithfully, to bridge the communication gap between a hearing person and a deaf or hard of hearing person, and to ensure fair and equal accessibility.

As listeners, we have a similar invitation, if we're willing to accept it. By offering our agenda-less presence to someone else, we can help them render their own message faithfully. We can provide them time and space to connect the dots without our own ideas and opinions getting in the way.

Number two, good listeners are intercultural mediators. That doesn't have to be as fancy as it sounds. We know that language is an important component of culture. That's more obvious when we're talking about, for example, those who live in Italy and they speak Italian, or those who live in Spain and they speak Spanish. We recognize that those are distinct cultures. It's less obvious when you consider those who live in the United States together, maybe even North Carolina, maybe even my hometown of Greensboro, but used a different language, like English versus American Sign language. One misconception is that ASL is just a signed version of English. But in fact, ASL is a visual language, with its own grammar, syntax, and rules of engagement.

For example, among hearing people, it's considered culturally inappropriate to point directly at someone or to wave your hand to get their attention. But in deaf culture, pointing is part of the language. And waving, or even in some cases, stomping on the ground, is an entirely appropriate way to get someone's attention. What's considered rude in one culture is necessary for communication in another.

In the broader context of listening, every person we meet shows up with their own family context, lived experience, and social location. All of these things together in a way, they make up the story of a person, the way they see and move in the world. And while I wouldn't go so far as to say that we each have our own personal culture, as that phrase itself is an oxymoron, culture implies the collective, but I would say that the skill of mediating between the hearing and the deaf cultures for all of those years taught me the complexity of human experience that always exists between us, even when we can't see it on the surface, and that we can't assume things about each other based on our experience alone.

Finally, number three, good listeners read the room. This one, I learned the hard way. I was scheduled to interpret at the university for, I think it was something like an awards luncheon, where there were both donors and people who weren't part of the university, but they were maybe somehow affiliated with the university, and so they were there. And there was a deaf student or maybe several deaf students who were being honored in this group.

Well, the room was set up with tables, and I quickly found the table where the deaf student that I was assigned to be interpreting for would be seated, but the trouble was they set me a plate as well, like I was part of the party. I was a new interpreter at the time, really wanting to follow the letter of the law, which said that I was there to work, to interpret, not to participate, and that's true. And that meant that it wasn't appropriate for me to eat lunch at the table, as if I were a part of this thing. I needed to be seated in a way as to be able to hear the conversations, that I could interpret what was said and voice for the deaf student. But similar to how you're not supposed to pet a service dog when they're working, you're not supposed to feed an interpreter either. That's a terrible analogy. I hope I don't get in trouble for that, but you kind of get the point.

So when the server came around with the food, I politely declined and had to repeat myself for several different courses that came around. Instead of helping me to blend into the background, my constant declining of the food ended up bringing more attention to me than would've come if I would've just

simply let them serve me food and just left it there untouched.

Here's what I missed, because this was a luncheon, these people were not accustomed to having a deaf person with an interpreter in the room. This may have been some of their first exposure to a deaf person or a deaf student and an interpreter and how all that works, unlike in a regular classroom, where the professor was accustomed to having the deaf student in the room. Because it was a luncheon that we just showed up at, there wasn't any time for the deaf student to prepare their fellow lunch mates with how to work with an interpreter or how this whole thing is supposed to work. I underestimated how uncomfortable these participants, many of them older, would feel having someone seated at their table who wasn't eating. And so, my lack of experience at the time had me relying solely on the rules rather than on my intuition and reading what the moment required.

This luncheon, it's so funny, it happened so long ago, but it comes to mind for me a lot, particularly in group settings, where I'm tasked with leading or facilitating a group in some type of listening practice. Because there's the practice and then there's the room. And if I hold too tightly to my planned agenda, I will almost always miss an opportunity to attend to what's happening in the room. Does it feel risky to hold my own agenda loosely? Yes, absolutely, it does, but I never regret scrapping an agenda to attend to a nuanced human moment that might otherwise have gone unnoticed and unnamed. Good listeners read the room.

Well, in closing, I would love to teach you one of my favorite signs. I'm not sure I can do it via audio, but I'm going to try. It's the sign for amen in ASL. So first we'll do the shapes and then we'll add the motion.

With your dominant hand, for me, that's my right hand, make a sign language A. If you don't know the A, that's okay, just start by raising your dominant hand as if you're taking an oath, with your palm out. Then simply fold your fingers over your palm like you're making a fist, but don't tuck in your fingers or your thumb. This is an A shape. Now, with your non-dominant hand, simply hold it out, palm up.

Now, here's the fun or the tricky part. To sign amen, you begin with your... You have your A shape, you have your non-dominant hand palm up, and you simply take your A shape hand with your thumb out to the side. You swoop it 90 degrees, and place your dominant hand onto your non-dominant hand, with your thumb facing up, almost like you're holding a thumbs up sign, resting on your hand. Does that make sense? I hope you're trying it. If not, you can Google it after you listen to the episode, and you'll see an easy movement to make it, even if it's not quite so easy to explain.

This is one of my favorite signs because it's a bit of a mix between two other signs in ASL, the sign for help and the sign for establish. With every amen, we are in a way asking for help. But with the amen, we're also believing with hope that our words will be set up, recognized, and established in the heart of God.

Maybe these stories have helped you to name some transferable skills in your own life. Maybe these small vignettes for my years as a sign language interpreter will inform some of the ways you practice listening in your own life. Mostly, I hope we will, as a community of people, continue to learn how to listen to ourselves, to God, and to one another, as a discerning life is a listening one. So here's to paying attention, to putting down our own agendas, and to reading the room as we do our next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 249 of The Next Right Thing.

Well, I hope this simple practice of learning to listen can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which

your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because while it's true, this is a podcast about making decisions, the bigger truth is our daily decisions are making our lives.

As always, you can find me on Instagram, @EmilyPFreeman and online at emilypfreeman.com, and I hope you do. You can also find a transcript of this and every episode thanks to Leah Jarvis, who does our transcripts and show notes. Transcripts are so important to me, to provide accessibility to those who might want access to the podcast, but who themselves are deaf or hard of hearing. Or if you're just a person who prefers to read, I hope you enjoy those.

And finally, a thanks and a shout out to the team at Unmutable, who edits our audio every week.

In closing, here are seven words from author Felina, "Silence helps us learn to listen."

Well, thank you for listening, and I'll see you next time.