

Hal-9000, Bach, and the Personal Physics of Going Deaf

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There is no sound in space. Beyond our noisy atmosphere stretches an infinite quiet. There are waves in space, but they are not sound waves. They are simply waves of silence moving through. All that vibrates keeps to itself, does not shout, scrape, or otherwise draw sonic attention. Black holes erupt in their introverted manner. The sun splashes itself again and again with its magnificent tidal flames. And not a sound comes from any of this. Solar systems are born, stars collide. Deafness prevails.

Earth, in comparison to its surroundings, is a noisy planet. We talk almost all the time. DVD players and iPods keep sound flowing directly into our heads. We use electronic devices to broadcast TV and radio around the globe and beyond. We send signals out in search of someone else to talk to. We rely on the molecular vibrations we call sound to feel “at home” in what we perceive to be a lonely and too quiet universe.

In Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the computer, Hal-9000, cuts off Frank Poole’s air and sends him drifting into space. We see this scene through the computer’s unchanging red eye; we hear the sounds of machinery and Poole’s breathing. The breaths are loud in the way that my own breathing was loud when I once snorkeled with a faulty mask in Bermuda. As I entered the preliminary stages of drowning it was the only sound in my world. At first Poole’s breath is even—it is our breath, normal and safe. As Poole enters the preliminary stages of his own death, the amplified breath becomes irregular. Hal is killing him. Watching the scene, I find my own breath matching Poole’s. I stop breathing when he does. We only hear breathing when we are watching from Hal’s perspective; watching Poole die floating in space, we hear nothing. We see only the convulsion of a suffocating man. Perhaps it is this that makes this scene so terrifying. The air we breathe, like the sound we hear, does not exist in space. It is the absence of air that causes the absence of sound. And I wonder if we don’t equate silence with suffocation. We feel, at some level, that if we stop talking the world will stop moving, as though the vibrational nature of speech is what keeps everything in motion. What would happen if we were to *fall quiet*? Are we uncomfortable with silence because it makes us feel “deaf,” a near homophone of “death?”

As quietness takes up ever more space in my world as a result of my progressive deafness, I have had to come face to face with my own relationship with sound. As I've grown accustomed to hearing aids, I've had to learn about frequencies and decibels and waves as I've had to learn sign language. Sound has ceased being an abstract, and the laws that rule sound have become laws that also rule me. Deafness has made the universal laws of physics personal.

I watched Kubrick's *2001* in 1980 (first row, balcony, in an old theater in Ybor City, Florida) and yet I can remember it as though it's playing right now on a little insert screen on my laptop. The feeling I had when I first saw Poole go drifting off has been a fundamental feature of my emotional landscape. The image has a signpost sticking out of it, one which reads "Worst Fear Imaginable." It's that peculiar brand of cinematic knowledge, suspended disbelief, that remains forever in my imagination. My belief is still suspended in a state of perfect silence, death. Poole just keeps on drifting, suffocating in his spacesuit, drifting forever, away, away, away.

In therapy one afternoon, this image came up as a metaphor for losing my hearing. It embodies the terror I feel, at times, of going deaf—the isolation, the disconnection, the knowledge that no one will go after Poole. And the question of who will come after me.

Going deaf can be a peaceful experience. There are definitely times when I am secretly grateful for it. Stereo turned on high in the car next to me at the stoplight? I turn off my hearing aids. Clatter of dishes in the restaurant where I'm dining alone? I turn off my hearing aids. Airplanes? Off. Standing in line at the bank? Off. I don't have to listen to anything that I don't want to. In such ways, my evolving deafness is a gift. With deafness, multiple dimensions of being in the world appear that I otherwise could not find. In the deafness there are stolen moments of quietude denied those with perfect hearing. My sign language teacher refers to it not as "going deaf" but "acquiring silence." In the real year 2001, at age 32, I learned that I was going deaf. In the audiologist's dark little booth a battery of beeps and words revealed that I had lost 30% of my hearing without even knowing it. I had been living among the spoken world like I belonged in it, but at some point I had become ill-equipped to remain there.

Subconsciously, the rogue mind within me devised masterful means of concealing the truth. In addition to having manipulated my listening skills to keep my condition from myself, I had withdrawn from social situations and maintained a life of almost perfect solitude, even while living with a boyfriend who would eventually, and justly, lose patience and shut me out just as I had shut him out. I had moved into another world, one whose physics are quite different.

Sound forms a sort of multilayered shell around the hearing. Unlike vision, which is three-dimensional, sound is poly-dimensional. Sound waves, unlike those of light, do not move in a straight line but expand in all directions, like an ocean, and each point on any wave is the source of another spherical expansion, like an ocean in a storm of crosswinds. If light behaved like sound, we would be blinded. The effect of sound's behavior is our perpetual surround-sound world which movie theatres and home entertainment systems try so hard to emulate. Sound wraps us up and carries us through the world, letting us know where things are and where we are, promoting both the feeling and indeed the reality of being safe in the world.

Sound orients an ever-changing earthly environment. The waves begun by a chirping bird atop the spruce tree behave like a breadcrumb trail, letting us know how to find the bird, so we may be certain it is a cedar waxwing as we'd guessed. When we move away from the bird, its call weakens, letting us know we're looking in the wrong direction. Sound cues guide us through our days, not only for basic survival but for aesthetic purposes as well. As the silence enters, I lose both. It has taken me years to understand why newly acquired deafness is so disorienting, why my natural loss of the cedar waxwing's call has left me unsure in the world, even if I can hear it with my hearing aids in.

Hearing aids operate in the realm of virtual reality, translating the real sonic environment into a replica that can be experienced by their wearers. But they fail to reproduce the wash of sound that hearing people experience without knowing it. The best they can offer is a funnel through which the analog juice of world sounds can be digitally poured, drained of zest.

Sound is frighteningly precise and discrete. The precision affords the multidimensional experience of being in this world of birdsong, traffic jams, trains, airplanes, Segovia, cell phones, blue light specials, shouting parents, ambulances, and the beeps of a bus in reverse, without getting overwhelmed and confused. In the real world, sound obeys a completely different set of laws from those of matter. Whereas no two objects can occupy the same space, an infinite number of sound waves can do so without having any effect on each other. This why it is possible for a mother bat to identify the cries of her baby in a cave of crying baby bats, or how hearing people can hold conversations in crowded restaurants and not have the voice from the man at table 27 seem to flow out of the mouth of the woman at table 5, or how a Bach fugue can present eight independent melodies without creating a cacophony. Sound holds the hearing world in its shell as though we are its hatchlings yet unhatched, still warm within the membrane of the world's vibrating song. The world within has become familiar and whole, approaching us not only on an auditory level, but on psychological, physical, and emotional ones as well.

When I lived alone in a little cabin on Sequim Bay, Washington for a year at what I believe was the start of my undetected deafness, I listened to the Yo-Yo Ma recording of the Bach Cello Suites every day, sometimes all day long, particularly when it snowed. It was the soundtrack to my year in a place now solidly interwoven with my notion of God, my year of solitude. When I was snowed in for six days, this piece of music echoed the heron's cautious movements on the frosted shore. It rendered in the air of my cabin the sonic portrait of seals swimming in a blizzard and the quiet of the bay at night after the snow had stopped and the moon glowed as though from underground. I cannot hear this music anymore the way I could hear it then.

One of the misconceptions of deafness is that losing external sound equates with losing internal sound. But the melodies and voices of the internal world remain entirely intact. My deafness, in fact, is far from silent. There is music flowing through my mind almost all the time. There is no such thing as inner deafness, unless we are speaking metaphorically, biblically. I could hum the Cello Suite No. 1 as I remember it right now. It's deep inside me. The trick comes when I am trying to hear the music that dwells outside of me. That's the stuff I don't hear well.

With the hearing aids in, I hear an equalized version of Bach, but not the same one that Yo-Yo Ma creates. Hearing music with hearing aids is perhaps more accurate, allowing me to "catch" more notes, but it is strangely one-dimensional and does not improve my experience of listening.

Without my hearing aids, I lose many notes—that is true—but I complete the music with my imagination, that wealth of all the music I have loved. This imaginal hearing is completely rich and multidimensional. My mind completes music the way a person who loves and knows another person really well can complete that person's sentences. It is the same way that the imagination completes the Parthenon and sees its beauty, rather than registering a "ruin."

I "listen to music" without my hearing aids and turn the speakers up high. I enjoy this co-creative process of imagining without being aware that it is happening. With my hearing aids in, I'm listening only to notes.

If I could have my hearing back just for five minutes, I would use those five minutes to hear the Cello Suite No.1 one more time, un-deadened by the hearing aids. Not only because of the memories it would stir in me of that year in Sequim Bay but because I think that hearing this suite is perhaps the truest experience of listening available to hearing people. The entire piece seems to occur in its own melodic universe, suspended apart from all others by its own set of rules, its own economy of note and tactic, a freedom from linear time. We know that Bach's minimalism was a reaction to the wildly ornate musical fashion of his age, that he cut notes relentlessly until he was left with what he

felt was the essence of the music. In his minimalism, we hear the beauty of perfection only our imaginations can achieve.

Deafness is an ongoing exercise in minimalism. I have learned that a spectacular number of words and sounds can be left out and the world will make neither more nor less sense. I have learned that just as sound is spherical, the loss of it is equally multi-dimensional and polycentric. Deafness and devices designed to enhance hearing deny me the spherical nature of sound and leave me somewhat adrift with few cues for orientation. The fugal nature of this loss spins out over the course of time, delineating a profound change in my personal life, and it also spins an all-encompassing web around my world and the people in it. What was once a soundtrack to my winter in Sequim Bay is now the soundtrack for this enduring moment of going deaf. I am living in Suite No.1. My world may be virtual, it may be floating away—but it is beautiful.

The great danger of the late-deafened individual is the possibility that she or he will simply "spin out" and let go of the world that has been home, without grasping the next dimension—that of life as a deaf, but not dead, person. I see these people often, ones who cling to the hearing world without being able to participate because the people around them do not know they now need to reach out further. Poole spins out from the spaceship and continues spinning out into the silence of outer space. I was terrified that this would happen to me, and there are, in fact, time when it does. I spin out when I am in a group and the conversation flies between mouths that aren't facing me. I spin out when I've gauged the value of the conversation and determined I can do without it, although it would be nice to have it.

The "hard of hearing" make such decisions all day long. A friend of mine once remarked this is comparable to the time she lived in Russia and had to either consciously choose to try to learn the language or else simply drift off, not acknowledging her own presence or anyone else's in the room. I agreed, pointing out that the traveler in the foreign land usually knows there is a return home eventually, whereas the person on the journey to silence knows only that silence will continue to deepen and widen.

But I am selfish and shortsighted in my argument: the traveler needs to learn the language of the country she is visiting and the late-deafened adult needs to learn the language of deafness. While there is silence on Earth as well as in outer space, there are sign language and speech-reading here on Earth and a world of people speaking both. If my companions aren't making a conscious effort to include me, and if I am not making a conscious effort to remind them to do so, I do the Poole thing and float off. It is not so much

terrifying as it is sad, because at these moments, I am excluded from the world of talk. Even if I have weighed the importance of the talk and decided I can live without it, I am losing out.

We probably can live without most conversation. But for most humans, with the exceptions of the whistling nuns in Brooklyn and certain varieties of monks, conversation defines life here on the chatter planet. It is another music which, pending our spiritual transcendence, we need in order to feel fully alive. My deaf tendency is to sacrifice myself to the convenience of others. I let something go that I ought to seize hold of. I am certain there were moments when Bach realized he had taken away one too many notes and killed the beauty of a Cello Suite, so he put that note back in. Being deaf requires we let go of some things. But not everything. ☞