Words in My Hands is a simple but powerful story about human connection. The synopsis on the cover might lead one to think that the story is simply about an elderly man learning a second language. Indeed, that is the extrinsic story. But, something deeper emerges. The overarching theme, subtle yet powerful, is that what gives life its sweetness, richness, and poignancy is our ability to both figuratively and literally touch other souls, fellow travelers on our lifelong journey.

In a narrative conversational style, the author describes meeting Bert Reidel at the behest of his son and daughter-in-law with whom he's come to live after the death of his wife of nearly 60 years. Her passing becomes the “last straw” that pushes Bert and his family past his denial that he was getting along fine with his dwindling hearing. The truth was that his hearing was almost nonexistent and he no longer had his wife to help him interact with the world.

The details of Bert’s life unfold piecemeal throughout the book, apparently following the chronology of his developing relationship with the author. In places, connecting the disparate anecdotes is difficult. However, we ultimately learn about his struggle growing up with ever-worsening vision and hearing. Despite these obstacles, he manages to successfully go to dental school, marry, have a family and set up a practice.

One of the most moving scenes in the book occurs when he is rapidly losing what is left of his hearing. Bert describes lying on the living room floor with his ear close to the stereo speaker. He listens to his favorite symphonies over and over until he memorizes every note.

Bert’s wife, his “eyes and ears,” has recently passed when the Diane is engaged to teach the family sign language. Bert has lived fully over his 86 years, but he is by no means ready to quit or even slow down. His family’s goal is to be able to communicate more effectively, and Bert just wants to keep on living. For him that means writing his poetry, playing his piano from memory, swimming, and hiking, but especially meeting new people, learning about them, and sharing with them the wisdom and humor that he has in such abundance.

During the course of the book, the author interjects a good bit of information about issues relating to deaf individuals and deafness. This includes describing Signed English compared with American Sign Language, issues around cochlear implants, and her work as an interpreter. She includes anecdotes from her own experiences that beautifully illustrate both the challenge and satisfaction that come with being a professional interpreter. These were most welcome from this interpreter’s point of view. She eloquently writes of being on assignments where the interpreter is the only one who fully appreciates the huge privilege and responsibility of being present at births and deaths; the frustration of seeing a deaf patient’s misunderstanding be dismissed by a hearing person who is ignorant to the ramifications of their “brush off.” Bert’s and Diane’s stories touched me deeply. Both experience exhilarating triumph and formidable challenges. What are striking are the similarities in their natures. Despite Bert being an “elderly” man and Diane being an active, working wife and mother in her 40s, both clearly love and engage in life with fervor. In the end, they are able to give each other invaluable gifts. Sharing their story is a gift the author gives to us.

This book is in no way a scholarly book or even a treatment of pedagogy. The reader should expect and enjoy a story of sign language and the people who use it being the source for both professional and personal reward.

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doi:10.1093/deafed/enl010
Advance Access publication on August 17, 2006