“It is important to use the auditory trainer every day,” Mrs. Jenson said as we left. “It’s an excellent way to prepare Lynn for using her own hearing aid.”

I called the people at the Chicago Hearing Society as soon as we arrived home. I told them a letter would come from the audiologist at Children’s Memorial Hospital. We wanted to borrow an auditory trainer as soon as possible. To our great disappointment, all the trainers were in use; they couldn’t loan us one until sometime in December.

Every day that passed seemed like another lost opportunity. We chafed at the delay but continued to talk to Lynn, filling our home with conversations she could see.

Treat her like a normal child.

We followed that advice without difficulty. Lynn didn’t appear handicapped; her deafness was invisible. She communicated without words and we understood her most of the time. She watched us when we spoke. We talked to her as if she could hear as well as Bruce. As the leaves turned from gold to red in the crisp autumn air, our optimism increased.

In every way Lynn appeared so normal we sometimes had to remind ourselves she lived in a world of silence. She had started to walk. She played happily with Bruce. She enjoyed other children. She cried and laughed the way Bruce had done at her age.

Perhaps we found it easy to see Lynn as normal because she kept showing us that she wasn’t handicapped. She had grown increasingly animated; her face and hands came alive with expressiveness even as her voice faded. Lynn loved books. She would pull one from the shelf, whichever was currently at the top of her rating list, find Louise, motion to the couch or a chair in the living room, climb into her lap and wait for her to open the book. Over and over again, she loved to go through the familiar pages. She pointed to the faces of children she knew. She laughed at the antics of dogs and cats. She imitated wagons and airplanes with hand motions. She pointed and looked up eagerly, searching Louise’s mouth and face for the familiar words.

Many times I came home from school in the late afternoon to find Lynn and Bruce playing on the front porch. Other children often joined them. They had transformed it into a fort, a dungeon, a pirate ship, a bowling alley. They draped old blankets over chairs and boxes to make tentlike hideaways, then carried their
afternoon snacks into these make-believe worlds. Lynn often saw me first. An excited smile lit up her face; she waved and then in an instant she raced to the stairs. With a sudden about-face, she dropped to her knees, bumped down the stairs in rapid succession, made another about-face, then dashed across the lawn toward me.

“Hi, Lynn!” I scooped her into my arms. Her silence didn’t seem to matter.

She pointed insistently toward the elm tree and I knew what she wanted. The week after we moved in, I had fastened a single thick rope to one of the branches and tied a bulky knot at the bottom. Bruce could make a running leap, land on the knot and propel himself in a wide arc; Lynn could not manage the swing by herself. I lifted her onto the rope, her tiny legs wrapped securely around the knot, and she clung tightly as I pushed her high into the air. Her eyes grew wide with excitement and a touch of fear; her delighted smile begged to go higher. As I pushed her back and forth she would look up into the dizzying heights of the elm, its black branches standing out starkly against the red and yellow leaves of early fall. She closed her eyes tightly, as if in that brief moment of darkness she could enjoy more completely the sensations of rising and falling. I finally lifted her off the rope amid protests and gestures that begged for more.

“Not now. Later. I want to go in and see Mommy now.” Lynn craved sensations, as if they somehow made up for the sounds she never knew. Together with Bruce she piled up leaves in the front yard, enormous mounds pulled from the sidewalk and lawn. Lynn loved to jump in the pile, falling headlong into the soft bed of brown and gold and red, rolling over and over to feel the dry textures against her skin. She picked up double handfuls, held them to her face, felt their brittle surfaces and smelled the deep, clean odors of fall.

Halloween came at the peak of Indian summer that year. The sudden appearance of jack-o’-lanterns, witches and masks seemed to offer Lynn a kind of visual ecstasy. Looking back, we realize her world revolved around the faces of people. Without sound, with only limited gestures, her most important link to us came from watching our eyes, our mouths, our wrinkled foreheads, our expressions that talked and never stopped. With Halloween, everything started talking. Faces appeared in profusion, as if someone had turned up the volume.

One afternoon she climbed up on a chair and watched Louise sketch out smiles and frowns on several pumpkins. Then we carved these expressions into deep-set eyes, mouths with wicked-looking teeth, frowns, smiles. Lynn squealed with anticipation, watching in amazement as we created faces that spoke to her. She pushed her fingers into the eyes, reached through to feel the stringy, damp interior of these mysterious creatures. Later that night, in the darkness of the living room, when we lit the candles Lynn was transfixed by the shafts of light that came from the jack-o’-lantern faces.

I took Bruce out to trick-or-treat. Lynn spent the evening eagerly waiting inside the door for each group of masked children to appear. Proudly she helped pass out the candy. She never heard their shouts of “Trick or treat!” but she might just as well have. She read the message of their masks. She understood the meaning of outstretched hands, bags of candy, outlandish costumes, happy painted faces. Perhaps it was as close to music as she had ever known.

It is difficult to recall what we told others about Lynn’s deafness that fall. Mostly we told them nothing. With friends we downplayed the seriousness of her impediment. “She can hear some,” we said. “Her hearing will probably improve with a hearing aid.” We didn’t want them to feel sorry, to pity us, to view Lynn like a handicapped child. We had read that if we treated her like a deaf child, she might take on the characteristics of those isolated individuals we thought of as deaf-and-dumb.

We didn’t tell the students who lived upstairs, and even though many of them saw Lynn day after day, they didn’t suspect she couldn’t hear. One crisp Saturday afternoon in November I heard shouts of laughter from upstairs.

“Mr. Spradley! Come and see Lynn!”
At the top of the stairs was a small room they used as a television lounge. There were pillows on the floor, a few chairs, and four or five students sprawled here and there watching a football game. Mike, a tall senior who majored in biology, stood at the TV set with Lynn.

"Watch this, Mr. Spradley," he said as I stepped into the room, a curious expression on my face.

He leaned down and turned on the now-dark television set. In a few seconds a bright picture of a college band marching across the football field appeared. Lynn had missed nothing. As soon as the set came on she reached over, and with an air of authority, she clicked the switch off.

"All gone!" she said, mouthing the words silently. At the same time she looked at the students sprawled around the room.

The comical expression on her face seemed to say, "I'm sorry, but I'm not going to let you see the rest of the game!" I laughed with the students. To all the world it looked like an intentional pantomime, as if she was keeping silent for some special effect. Their laughter told Lynn she had their attention. It told me that no one suspected the real reason behind her voiceless words.

With one couple, our friends and neighbors Bob and Mary Hughes, we did not hesitate to talk about Lynn. One day shortly after we first moved into the Ferris House, we had noticed something strange about Bob.

"Look at our neighbor! Don't you think it would be dangerous for him to drive?" I called to Louise from the living room. We watched as a slender man with dark hair who looked about thirty-five struggled to make his way down the walk to the street. His body lurched first one way, then the other; his hands moved through the air in uncontrolled gestures; his head bobbed back and forth. It took several minutes for him to open the door of a station wagon and settle himself in the driver's seat. How would he manage to control the car when he had such difficulty controlling his own body?

Later Bruce had begun to play with Jane and Alex Hughes. Once Bruce climbed a tree in their backyard and Jane had to call me to help him down.

"Their mommy and daddy can't talk very well," Bruce said matter-of-factly. "And they walk funny, too."

"It's probably cerebral palsy," Louise said. We both felt uneasy, hesitant to take the first step in making our acquaintance with these neighbors who appeared so different. Bob worked at Wheaton College; I saw him going into Blanchard Hall and entering one of the business offices downstairs. I wondered what kind of work he could do.

I remember during my first year at Wheaton when I happened to catch up with Bob on my way up the long walk to Blanchard Hall. It was a cool day in late fall; most of the leaves had already fallen; the wind blew them in swirls across the lawn, scattering them in odd patterns. I could see Bob up ahead, struggling to put one foot down after the other. I strode quickly up the walk; he worked his way along as if on some invisible obstacle course. A vague sense of uneasiness came over me as I approached. Would he be embarrassed if I joined him in taking five minutes to cover the short distance that remained?

"Good morning," I said. I stepped out on the grass, looked quickly in his direction and nodded. I slowed my pace for an instant; Bob spoke but I couldn't understand him. In half a minute my long strides had taken me to the entrance of Blanchard Hall; as I opened the large door I was conscious that Bob Hughes was still struggling slowly up the walk only a few feet from where I had passed him.

We felt sympathy for Bob and Mary Hughes—and uncomfortable in the presence of their handicap. Then we discovered Lynn's deafness. Overnight we saw Bob and Mary in a wholly different way. Their struggle to talk, their effort to surmount enormous obstacles, their courage, they themselves suddenly became more significant. Louise talked to Mary about her first suspicions that Lynn might be deaf. "Well, if she is deaf, she can adjust to it," Mary assured Louise. "And you can get special
help.” Louise listened while Mary recalled her own school experiences. Slowly we learned about cerebral palsy, the stigma of being different, the special schools Bob and Mary had attended, and their painstaking effort to learn to talk.

“There are a lot more CPs than people realize,” Bob told us. “And most can get along fine.” As our friendship grew, so did our understanding of their world. One day after a windy storm, Bob called to ask if I could come over and light the pilot light on their furnace which had gone out.

“Could you drop over for a few minutes tonight, Tom?” he asked as I started out the door. “We’re having a party for a group of our CP friends. Three of them can’t walk and I’m not much good at helping them. Could you give them some assistance?”

That evening as I wheeled each one into Bob and Mary’s living room, I felt as if I was looking in upon another society. I had never seen so many strange movements and heard so many strange sounds all at once. But I also sensed the closeness that came from sharing the same handicap. In a society that stigmatized, overlooked, avoided or stood with gawking eyes, Bob and Mary were not alone. Later that night I returned to wheel the same three individuals back to their cars.

“CPs have good driving records, better than the average person,” Bob said as we stood by the curb in the darkness and he and Mary waved good-bye to their friends. “But because we have cerebral palsy, it’s been difficult to get insurance.”

When we returned from the John Tracy Clinic that fall and moved to Emerald Street, we still visited Bob and Mary. Louise went right over to tell Mary what we had learned about Lynn’s deafness. We felt lucky to have them as friends. Had we chosen someone to teach us how to encourage Lynn’s independence in the face of deafness, we couldn’t have found more patient, courageous teachers.

Neither of us will ever forget one winter morning during the last year we lived next door to Bob and Mary. A freezing drizzle had crept into Chicago in the night; it had left a thick sheet of ice on the roofs, streets, lawns, sidewalks and cars. Even the power lines and branches glistened in the morning sun as I walked carefully to school; each twig was encased in ice. I smiled as I saw several students who had replaced their shoes with ice skates and now glided over the campus walks on their way to class.

Louise and Bruce watched out the front window as Bob Hughes made his way across Seminary Avenue. The sparkling world of ice that slowed most people down had created for Bob a treacherous, if not impossible, task. One step at a time, struggling to find footing, working to maintain his balance, Bob inched his way along. Suddenly Louise and Bruce were horrified. Halfway up the walk to Blanchard Hall, Bob slipped and fell. He struggled to get up, but each time he managed to place one foot under his body, the slippery ice made it impossible for him to rise. He lay sprawled on the walk, helplessly trapped. Louise ran for her coat, then noticed that two students had come to his assistance, lifted him to his feet and were helping Bob the rest of the way to his office.

We woke one morning in early December to find that a four-inch blanket of snow had transformed our world. It clung to the branches of the pine tree in our front yard, bending them under its weight, and outlined each branch and twig of the leafless elms that lined our street. Lynn, blinking her sleepy eyes, looked out our front window, awe-struck.

“Snow. That’s snow. Snow,” Louise said, looking at Lynn’s questioning face.

Still in her pajamas, she ran to her room and returned in a few seconds holding her coat and boots.

Bruce was already outside. “Snow!” he called to her, throwing a snowball.

Lynn seemed to find a particular joy in the symphony of sparkling, dancing whiteness that covered everything, the rays of early-morning sun that cascaded off the roof. She threw great gobs of the powdery stuff into the air. She ran across the smooth sweep of our yard, pointing back at her deep footprints. After Bruce and I had gone to our schools, Louise and Lynn built a
carrot-nosed snowman with a friendly expression that spoke to Lynn until it melted a few days after Christmas.

Bruce had begun to talk of Santa Claus, and Lynn had pointed to the decorations along Main Street in Wheaton. We tried to explain to her with pictures about Christmas. We showed her photographs from the year before, the tree all decorated in lights, presents stacked under it. "Christmas tree." "Lynn." "Bruce." Louise pointed to each picture. She pointed out pictures of Santa Claus and reindeer in magazines. Although eager and excited, Lynn looked at us in question marks.

"In a few days Christmas will come," we said to her in the same way we spoke to Bruce. But the mystery and silence didn't stop her from enjoying the preparations.

I had noticed a large branch that seemed out of place on a pine tree in the lot behind our house. The more I thought about a Christmas tree, the more out of proportion that branch became. One afternoon Louise and I went out to inspect it more closely. That evening a Christmas tree stood in one corner of our living room, looking for all the world like a huge bear about to lunge. Louise brought out the decorations and we all went to work hanging the lights, silvery balls of red, yellow and blue, candy canes, tinsel and homemade decorations. Even Lynn joined in, hanging tiny strands of tinsel on the lower branches.

We turned off the living-room lamps and admired the soft glow of lights reflected in the other decorations. Lynn was captivated, entranced; she ran to the tree and touched a red light; she rushed back, poked Bruce and pointed; she tugged on Louise's dress and pointed. And then, in all the days that followed, her expressions told of the intense joy she felt at seeing her silent world painted with the music of those lights and decorations. She would wake early, come into our bedroom and tug at the covers, the expression on her face begging to let her see the lights on before daylight filled the house and dimmed their glow. Every evening she showed us she wanted to stay up until the tree lights sent their brightness into the early-evening darkness.

I cannot describe how Lynn's face told us what she wanted. It was as if she had taken our expressions, practiced them, improved on them and then spoke silent sentences that told us what she wanted and how she felt. Without any instruction from us she had learned to communicate. In contrast to Bruce, Lynn grinned, smiled, raised her eyebrows, nodded, threw her head from side to side, shrugged her shoulders and gestured to a much greater degree. "She's so eager and responsive," people would say. "She seems so bright and expressive."

At the same time, Lynn drew from us the kind of expressiveness she could understand. When we merely spoke, our faces lacked the communicative quality that came with laughter or anger. Lynn came to depend on seeing our faces filled with these stronger emotions. It was as if watching our mouths alone was not loud enough; smiles, angry looks, a head thrown back in hearty laughter, these reached across the gap that her deafness had created. She loved to make us laugh and in the process became a tiny comedienne.

One evening Louise turned the water on in the tub for Lynn's bath. Lynn, stripped down to her diaper, grabbed the red plastic bucket she played with in the tub, put it on her head and dashed into the living room, where I sat reading. She pulled a red-and-white candy cane from the Christmas tree, and just as Louise came looking for her, Lynn began to dance. I reached for my camera to record this special performance; Lynn stopped, assumed a sultry pose, held it until the burst of light from my flash faded, then continued her dance as we laughed and exclaimed.

Christmas Eve she sensed the excitement. The next morning she unwrapped her presents in silence, as captivated by the bright paper and ribbon as by the contents inside. She said no words. She heard nothing that Christmas. But she understood and did not lack for imagination. She opened one package and discovered a tiny tea set; immediately she took several sips from an empty cup, poured another full one for Louise and daintily offered it to her.

Another present came from Lynn that Christmas. We had expected it, wondering when it would arrive. One Saturday morning
a few days before Christmas the doorbell rang, Louise answered it and the postman handed her a package; the return address said “Chicago Hearing Society.”

“The auditory trainer is here!” she called excitedly.

We took it into the kitchen and eagerly began tearing the wrapping paper from the package. Amid the packing paper inside, I located a set of headphones, a microphone and a black control unit with a dial. I set them carefully on the kitchen table, looked in the bottom of the box and found the instructions. Lynn came into the kitchen and climbed up on the chair beside Louise.

Filled with anticipation, I began reading the instructions to Louise. The auditory trainer was battery-operated; the headphones and mike each plugged into the control unit. It worked simply; we were to speak into the microphone and Lynn would hear our amplified voices through the headphones. The volume control dial went from 1 to 10; we should begin with a medium volume and work up as necessary.

“I’m really glad this came before Christmas,” Louise said, her words filled with relief and excitement at the same time. “If she can just hear us a little bit, even if our voices are faint, it should make a big difference.”

“And it should make it a lot easier for her to learn to read our lips,” I added as I made sure the batteries were in place. I picked up the headphones and plugged the jack into the control box.

“Maybe you should listen first, Tom, to see how it sounds.”

I put the earphones on my head, adjusted them, plugged in the mike and turned the dial to 3. I spoke into the mike.

“Hello. This is Daddy. Hi, Lynn.” My voice, uncomfortably loud, vibrated inside the headphones, as if I were shouting directly into my own ears. I turned the dial all the way up and then spoke softly into the mike: “Hi, Lynn . . . !”

I stopped instantly and pulled the headphones from my ears. My voice had come with deafening loudness. I could feel pinpoints of pain against my eardrums. I rubbed my ears. “She should be able to hear that!” I said to Louise.

Lynn had watched every move, and now, standing in the chair, she reached for the headphones.

“Let’s get one of her books,” I said and jumped up at the same time. Louise adjusted the headphones for Lynn while I quickly found her favorite book. I felt my heart pounding as I came back into the kitchen. The auditory trainer had made my voice sound louder than anything I had heard at the John Tracy Clinic or at Children’s Memorial Hospital. Lynn’s tiny head looked dwarfed between the cushiony black headphones; she smiled proudly up at me. I placed the book in front of Lynn and opened it to the first page, which showed a pair of brown shoes. I turned the volume control to 3, pointed to the shoes and spoke directly into the microphone: “Shoe.”

Lynn looked at me, then back at the page. She pointed at the shoe in imitation of my movements, as if she was trying to grasp the rules of this new game. I turned the dial up to 6 and when she looked at me, I spoke again: “Shoe. Shoe.”

I could detect no response. She looked back at the page, then tried to turn the volume dial back and forth. Perplexed, I turned the dial all the way up to 10. I couldn’t understand why she hadn’t heard. Perhaps there was a great difference between 6 and 10. Would the full volume hurt her ears? I spoke more softly this time: “Shoe. Shoe. Shoe.”

Lynn didn’t look up, but tried instead to turn the page to the next picture. I could see a look of keen disappointment spreading across Louise’s face. I fought back the doubts and pointed to the picture on the next page. I spoke loudly into the mike, recalling the reverberations that volume had caused inside my ears only a few minutes before: “Wagon. Wagon.”

No response. She didn’t reach for the headphones. She seemed completely ignorant of my voice. I pointed to the wagon and spoke again. She pointed, looked at my face, then fiddled with the dial on the control box.

“Do you think she heard me?” I asked Louise, trying to sound unconcerned.
"No," she said slowly. "I didn't see any response."

For the next five minutes we tried other words, other pictures. We said things she knew how to lip-read, things we knew she had seen on our faces before. We said them while she looked away, we spoke them when her attention was on other things. We pointed and repeated.

No response.

It was as if the black box, the shiny microphone, the headphones were all like the other games we played together in silence. Finally she grew impatient and tried to take off the headphones. I set them on the table as she crawled down from her chair and ran into the living room.

Louise looked at me. I stared at the electronic equipment before us. Extreme disappointment swept over us. Was this what we had waited for with such anticipation? Why had she not responded? Surely it was loud enough. Was she only pretending not to hear? Had she ignored us?

"Well," I finally said to Louise. "Lynn has lived for so long without hearing us that she probably couldn't make sense out of the sounds she heard. She probably just needs time to learn how to listen, to use her residual hearing. Maybe that's why they call it an auditory trainer —it isn't for talking, the way her hearing aid will be, it's for training her to use her hearing. We'll just have to use it, to practice with her until she begins to recognize the sound of our voices."

Christmas vacation ended. Students returned to a campus caught in subzero temperatures and a wind-chill factor of more than 50 below. Each day at school I met my calculus class and two sections of algebra. At home Louise struggled to teach a far more demanding subject to Lynn: language without sound.

Talk. Talk. Talk. The informal instruction continued from the moment Lynn awoke until she fell asleep at night.

"It's morning."
"Bruce is eating breakfast."
"Cheerios."
"Bowl."
"Milk."
"Daddy. Mommy. Bruce. Lynn."
"I'm doing the dishes. Washing the dishes."
"Chair. Lynn is standing on the chair."
"Broom. The broom is for sweeping."
"Telephone. Talk to Grandma on the telephone."
"Pajamas. Lynn's pajamas."
"Pants. Shirt. Shoes."
"Making cookies."
"Flour. This is the flour."
"Sugar. Egg. The egg can break."
"Cookie for Lynn."
"Shopping. Drive in the car."
"Door. Steering wheel. Mirror. Keys."
"We're going to the store to shop."

Like a magnet, Louise's moving lips seemed to draw Lynn's attention. We didn't know how much Lynn understood, but she
often responded as if she knew exactly what we said. Louise had a deep reservoir of patience and a capacity to teach Lynn informally which I lacked. She could capitalize on the most routine experiences, transforming them into quiet lessons in lip reading.

One Thursday morning Louise drove to the Jewel Food Market, talking as usual to Lynn perched in the car seat next to her. Inside the store she lifted Lynn into the basket seat and started down the first aisle, shelves crowded with bread, cereal and coffee.

“Let’s get some Cheerios,” she said to Lynn, offering her the box to hold before it went into the basket. “Cheerios. Cheerios.” Lynn’s eyes lit up in recognition.

They turned down the next aisle and passed a woman with a boy about Lynn’s age. Lynn pointed eagerly, smiling and waving.

“Hi! Hi! Hi! Hi! Hi!” the little boy called loudly from his seat in the shopping cart. Lynn watched and waved until he disappeared at the end of the aisle.

“Cookies. Cookies. These are cookies.” Louise spoke as she placed a package of Oreos into the basket. Lynn looked back and forth from the package to Louise’s face.

“Milk. We better get some milk for you and Bruce.”

“Eggs. Eggs. Here’s some eggs.”

And so the lesson proceeded. Down one aisle and up the next. A few other shoppers smiled at Lynn or looked at them as they passed. Louise kept talking of butter and coffee and napkins and waxpaper and oranges and potatoes. As she started filling a bag with apples an elderly man smiled at Lynn. “Hi there, little girl!” he said. Louise smiled, weighed the apples, and went on to the carrots and celery. Ten minutes later she pushed the load of groceries to the checkstand, went to the front of the basket and started unloading it onto the moving belt. Lynn sat alone at the other end of the basket, looking out at the store and passing shoppers. Louise stopped to wait so the checker could catch up; about half the basket was unloaded.

“Hi there! Are you helping Mommy today?” The friendly man from the vegetable department was back again, this time standing in line behind Lynn. Unafraid, she communicated as best she knew how with sparkling eyes, bright smile and an eager expression.

“Did you get to go for a ride in the shopping cart? I wish someone would push me around like that!” Lynn laughed out loud as the friendly stranger poked her gently. He smiled at Louise and went on talking to Lynn. “I’ve got a little granddaughter who isn’t as big as you. I’ll bet you’d like to play together.”

Feeling a little uneasy now, Louise unloaded the remaining items quickly. She glanced at the man as she searched in her purse for the checkbook.

“What’s your name, little girl?”

Lynn smiled a silent answer to his question.

“I’ll bet it’s Johnny. Is that right? Come on, tell me your name. What’s wrong? Cat got your tongue? I’ll bet you just can’t talk today!”

A woman had joined the line and was also smiling at Lynn. It was too late to say anything. An explanation now would only embarrass this kindly gentleman. Louise quickly finished writing out the check, pulled the basket forward, smiled at the stranger, who was still admiring Lynn, and lifted Lynn out of the shopping cart. As they followed the young man with their cart full of loaded bags, Lynn flashed a smile at her friend and waved “bye bye.”

After that we often tried to head off this kind of social trap. A brief comment like “She can’t hear you, she’s deaf” or “She can’t talk yet because she has a hearing problem” usually sufficed.

Every day that winter Louise set up the auditory trainer. Sometimes we have a snapshot which I took during that time. It captures the hours they spent together at the auditory trainer. Lynn, obviously aware of the camera, large black earphones protruding from her head, a cheerful smile on her face, is sitting at a small table in the living room. Louise, on the opposite side of the table, is holding a shoe in her hand. Beside the black control box and microphone are Lynn’s red ball, a large kitchen spoon and one of her favorite books.
“Shoe. Shoe. Shoe. Shoe.” With each word, Louise showed Lynn the shoe, watching for some indication that her voice had penetrated the barrier of silence. Then she put the microphone to Lynn’s mouth, hoping she would imitate.

“Ball. Ball. Ball. Ball.” As Louise spoke Lynn watched each word; the lines of concentration on her tiny face seemed to say she was trying hard to hear, to figure out what was expected of her.

Sometimes when Louise pushed the microphone to her Lynn would move her mouth in a silent mimic that seemed to mean “ball” or “shoe.” Day after day in January and February we practiced and waited. Did she ever hear us? We couldn’t be sure. By the end of February she made sounds like “aaaaahhhhhhh” and “uuuuuhhhhhhh” more often when she wore the earphones.

We knew it would be futile to force this kind of learning. So Louise would spend ten to fifteen minutes on it during the day; when I came home I would set up the equipment and go through the same procedure again. We rarely could hold Lynn’s interest beyond fifteen minutes. Yet we knew that any practice would eventually bring results. Someday she would begin to recognize sounds. Someday she would see their connection to the words she saw on our lips. Someday she would talk to us.

On a dark, overcast evening in the middle of January, we drove to Chicago. John, a senior who lived upstairs, came down to baby-sit. Bruce and Lynn greeted him with delight. “We should be home by eleven,” Louise said as we went out the door.

The side streets and secondary roads, covered with rutted, slippery snow, meant slow going, but once on the expressway, we made good time. The Chicago Hearing Society had announced a series of meetings for parents of deaf children. We hoped to attend them all, even though we would have to drive nearly an hour in each direction through wintry weather. In the distance, the lights in empty offices of Chicago’s skyscrapers lit up the cold night.

We found the building and entered a high-ceilinged room. About forty folding chairs had been set up; less than half remained empty. We found two seats on the end of a row. After several minutes a tall, friendly woman in a green business suit stood up at the front.

“Welcome to this first meeting for parents of deaf children,” she began. She talked about the Chicago Hearing Society and then introduced a film on the human ear and the causes of deafness.

The lights went out. We settled back to watch. Black and white numbers flickered in rapid succession on the screen; scratchy music came over the speaker.

“Look at the people around you,” the narrator began as the camera focused on a blind woman slowly making her way along a crowded street. “You can see the blind, the wheelchair of the paraplegic. You notice the palsied and the amputee. But you probably will not recognize the deaf and the hard-of-hearing. They are usually invisible. Yet nearly fourteen million Americans have impairments of hearing. Of this number, about seven million have a significant loss of hearing in both ears. Approximately one million eight hundred thousand can be called deaf; that is, their hearing is nonfunctional for the purposes of everyday life.”

The film then shifted to the ear, showing the intricate mechanisms inside that enable us to hear. The narrator gave a long explanation of the way each part of the ear works, how sounds reach the brain, and the difference between a conductive hearing loss and a sensory-neural loss. The film ended forty-five minutes later with a discussion of residual hearing and the way deaf children learn language.

The lights came on, the woman stood up at the front of the room. Several people asked questions about deafness and residual hearing.

“Will a hearing aid help my little boy who is profoundly deaf?” one man asked.

“That is something an audiologist will have to tell you,” the
Sometimes, on the basis of a test, a child will appear profoundly deaf; then, a year later, that same child will respond to more sound than anyone thought possible. It may be that, in the meantime, the parents have worked daily to stimulate the child’s residual hearing. Most audiologists will recommend a hearing aid even if they aren’t completely sure if it will help. And often the results are surprising.

I wanted to ask whether a hearing aid would amplify sound more effectively than an auditory trainer, but the subject changed, so I decided to wait. We slipped out just as the discussion was ending; it would be after eleven before we reached home.

A week later we sat in the same room. A special-education teacher was introduced and began her talk.

“I know that the first wish of every parent who has a deaf child is to hear Johnny or Susie talk. Just to hear your child’s voice say ‘I love you’ will be worth all the work and sacrifice it takes to teach speech to the hearing-impaired child.” All the whispering and shuffling had stopped; I could see a late couple tiptoeing across the back of the room to two empty seats.

The speaker then emphasized that speech was the birthright of every child. But that was only one reason we must begin teaching hearing-impaired children as early as possible. In our desire for immediate communication with our deaf child, we must never forget that all of us live in a hearing world. A deaf child encounters that hearing world from the first day he sets foot outdoors to play with normal children. From that time on, he will have to compete with hearing people for the rest of his life. Without the skill of lip reading or the ability to talk, how could a deaf child make it in a hearing world?

The deaf child who learns to communicate orally can succeed. And later an employer will be more inclined to hire a hearing-impaired person who has learned to use oral skills. People are more reluctant to employ a deaf person, someone they will have to give instructions to by gestures or by scribbling notes.

“With an oral education,” she said, “you can share the joys of raising a family as if you had a normal hearing child. You can see your child go on to a successful life. I know hearing-impaired children who have finished high school with hearing kids, who have gone on to graduate from college and who are now successful in their careers.”

I shifted in my seat. Louise smiled at me for a moment, slipped out of her coat and put it around her shoulders. I looked around the room. In front of us sat a man in construction boots and overalls; his wife looked tired and overweight. A black couple had taken seats to our left. Two rows ahead I could see a young man and woman who hardly looked old enough to have finished high school. An older man, perhaps forty, in a business suit—who might easily have been a lawyer or an accountant—sat next to them. Next to him I could see an Oriental couple. There must have been forty or fifty parents there that night, all brought together by deafness.

The speaker pulled my thoughts back to the front of the room. “Let’s start at the beginning. Let’s say you have detected that your child of two years is deaf. Although this may be a review for some of you with older children, it never hurts to go over the important principles again.”

I could see several people writing things down. The teacher spoke easily, emphasizing her words with a tone of authority.

“Treat your son or daughter like a normal hearing child.

“Work consistently to stimulate your child’s residual hearing.

“No matter how great your child’s hearing loss, auditory training can improve his ability to hear.

“If a deaf child does not have constant auditory stimulation, he will lose the ability to use whatever hearing he has.

“The most important thing is to take every opportunity to talk to your child. Face your child as you speak. Remember, if you have a deaf daughter, for instance, and you treat her like a deaf girl, she will begin to act like a deaf girl. She can be ‘very deaf’ if you let her.”

Toward the end of her talk she stressed the necessity for specially trained teachers as a child grows older. We were encouraged to enroll our children as early as possible in schools that
provided such teachers. Some children could start as early as three years of age.

Then, just before the speaker finished, almost as if she had forgotten to stress it enough; she gave two warnings.

"I want to caution you first about discouragement. You may meet people who will try to discourage you. They will tell you that lip reading is extremely difficult, that too many sounds can't be seen on the lips. They will say that only a few gifted hearing impaired children ever learn to speak clearly.

"Don't believe them!" Her voice rang with authority as she repeated herself. "Don't believe them! I have worked with hundreds of deaf children. It's true, some do not learn to talk clearly or very well, but why not? It is because their parents did not start early, did not have the patience, did not work with determination to provide a pure oral environment for their child. If you have ever seen a group of deaf teen-agers or adults talking away for all they're worth, you will have had all the proof you need to know that your Janet or your Billy can grow up to communicate effectively in a hearing world.

"The second thing I want to warn you about is shortcuts to communication." She paused for a long moment as if to let the importance of this danger sink in. "Don't get sidetracked. Some misinformed people say you should use gestures as well as lip reading. If you gesture, it can prevent your child from ever learning to speak. If you gesture, your child will start thinking in gestures."

That idea caught my attention. Thinking and language were certainly tied together. How could anyone think at all without language? It would have to be in pictures or gestures or something. More than ever I could see how important it would be for Lynn to learn to talk and lip-read.

"I've seen deaf children in their teens who can hardly say a word, gesturing to one another, trying to communicate, completely cut off from the hearing world. And gestures can cause your child to develop a deaf personality, until he eventually will act deaf. His facial expressions will begin to seem unnatural. The noises he makes will sound unpleasant. The deaf person who relies on gestures will end up living almost entirely in the deaf ghetto."

The lecture brought a great many questions. The first hand went up near the front of the room; I tried to see who it was. The speaker pointed in the direction of the hand and nodded. An elderly black woman stood up.

"I'm a grandmother," she began hesitantly, looking around to include the whole group. "I have an eight-year-old granddaughter, Sally, who's stone deaf. Her mama couldn't come tonight. Now, Sally, she's been goin' to school for five years, ever since she was three. And her mama and papa, they talk to her all the time just like the teachers say they should. And I talk to her and all my daughter's other kids talk to her. Sally seems to understand quite a bit by readin' our lips."

The room had become intensely quiet, all eyes fixed on this gray-haired woman; I tried to catch each word.

"It just worried me and her mama," she continued, "cause Sally still don't talk. Can't say no more than four or five words that anybody can understand. No conversation at all. We just can't make any real sense out of the noises she makes.

"I have another granddaughter," she went on, speaking louder now, more emphatically. "She is only four years old, but she talks all the time. Sally can't tell us how she feels. Sally can't tell us what she wants. Sally can't tell us what she's thinkin'. Sally can't even say her own name! When do you think we can expect Sally to begin talkin'?"

The hush that had fallen over the group continued after she sat down. Someone finally coughed, breaking the tension that seemed to fill the room. We waited for the teacher to speak.

"We must all remember," she said, looking around the room to include everyone, "that there are always individual differences. Some children take longer than others to start talking. That's true for a hearing child, but individual differences stand out even more for deaf children. Some deaf children will start talking when they are only four years old, but others not until they are six or eight.
“You keep talking to Sally,” she said, looking back at this grandmother, “and you’ll be surprised when one of these days she starts talking back. I’ve seen some kids who didn’t speak much, who had learned to lip-read fairly well, and then one day, almost spontaneously, they began to talk. It just takes patience.”

Then someone asked about the John Tracy correspondence course. Should they send for it? Would it help in teaching their severely deaf son?

“I’m glad you brought that up,” she said, and went on to recommend it as one of the best ways to assist deaf children. It was especially good for the first few years before the children started regular school. She had hardly finished when a barrel-chested man at the back raised his hand and got to his feet at the same time. His wool shirt looked worn; wisps of sandy hair stood up on the back of his head.

“I don’t like that John Tracy course,” he blurted out in a booming voice. I could see startled heads all over the room suddenly turn to look.

“Our boy, he’s deaf. When he was three we started that course. We wanted to help him all we could. At first it went okay, then it started to get more difficult to go through a lesson with him. Now he doesn’t want to sit still for more than two minutes at a time.

His voice grew louder. I could see his white knuckles on the back of the chair.

“The more we tried to teach him”—he paused—“the more we fought with him. For a couple years we all managed to put up with it. I think we helped him a lot. But now he’s six and a big kid for his age. He’s really upsetting the whole family routine.”

He stopped as if to catch his breath, to slow the unexpected rush of words.

“We can’t understand more than two or three words he says. And he don’t understand us. If we’re all talking around the table, he gets angry and frustrated. It’s getting so we don’t like to take him out in public. He’ll throw a tantrum in a restaurant or a store and it’s embarrassing to the rest of us.”

As he spoke I could see the woman next to him—it must have been his wife—nodding her head in agreement, worried lines of despair written on her face. People now began to shift uncomfortably in their chairs. But this father hadn’t finished.

“What I want to know,” he went on, looking directly at the teacher in the front of the room, “is why can’t the city of Chicago have a residential school for deaf kids?” He slowed for an instant and I could hear several muffled gasps. “Why can’t they have a place where all these deaf kids could be together all week?”

Both his hands pounded the air in great downward jabs as he spoke. “My boy could be with hundreds of other kids like himself. They would all be much happier. We could take him home on weekends, but all week long is too hard on the rest of us.”

He ended abruptly and sagged heavily to his seat, as if it had taken all his strength to say what he felt so intensely.

Heads turned slowly back to the front of the room. Whispered exclamations broke out nearby and I could see the lowered heads that made these comments. I gave Louise a knowing look; she seemed perplexed. I sat up straighter in the metal folding chair wondering what the teacher would say to this man. I found myself feeling sorry for her. She waited for a long moment in complete silence, her face flushed. Then she spoke in carefully measured words.

“Have you ever thought that maybe you are unwilling to face your responsibility to your deaf son?” Her question brought a sudden relief to the tension in the room, as if someone had thrown open a window on a stifling hot day. I wanted to nod vigorously in agreement, but I knew the man could see me from where he sat.

“You are the parents,” she continued. “It is your son who is deaf. No one said that life with a deaf child would be easy. It sounds as if you want to turn the problems over to someone else.
Sure, it is difficult to communicate with your son at six years of age, but pushing the difficulties off on other people will not solve them. That’s not the way your child is going to learn how to talk. It takes time and it takes patience."

She stopped, almost in midsentence, and looked around the room for other questions. No one asked anything after that, and the meeting ended. All the way home we talked about this man and his problems. I could still see the pained look on his face; the anger and despair in his voice rang in my ears. His comments had raised new doubts for Louise. Would we have the same kinds of problems with Lynn?

"I don’t think we need to worry," I said, as much to calm my own doubts as those Louise expressed. "Lynn is only twenty-one months old. Lynn can already lip-read a number of words. Lynn has already started to mouth some words. Lynn enjoys the lessons with the auditory trainer."

Later that week I had to make another trip to Chicago and all the way driving in and back, that one father’s questions kept coming back to me. It made me more determined than ever to work patiently with Lynn. I vowed I would never give up as this man seemed to have done.

In the weeks that followed we planned again and again to drive in to the Chicago Hearing Society’s meetings, only to be prevented by some new winter storm or teaching responsibilities. One afternoon when I walked home from school it began to snow. Enormous eggshells of white were slowly drifting down. By the next morning nearly two feet of snow had fallen, and before it ended, a record-breaking four feet of snow lay on the ground.

We were disappointed not to be able to attend the remaining lectures at the Chicago Hearing Society. But the gap created in our education about deaf children was soon filled when a large brown envelope arrived one day. I could see the return address read "John Tracy Clinic." Inside we found the first installment of the "Correspondence Course for Parents of Little Deaf Children."

I opened the envelope eagerly. I leafed through the pages, excited to have finally received the first lesson. At last we had something specific to work on, lessons worked out by experts. I immediately set about reading the introductory materials. Ahead of us stretched months and months of lessons that would come from the clinic as we completed each unit of work with Lynn.