One of the authors, Tom Humphries, was introduced quite suddenly to the Deaf community in 1964 while he was working as a teenager at his uncle’s furniture store. A vocational rehabilitation counselor had learned that a deaf worker was employed at the store, so he came to visit and explained that his job was to provide training, including financial support for a college education for deaf and handicapped high school students. He could help pay for Tom to go to a college in Washington, D.C., where the students were deaf like himself.

Tom had never heard of Gallaudet, but with few other options after high school, he decided to enroll. At the age of seventeen, he left his small hometown and traveled to Washington, D.C., to begin his college education. When he arrived, however, he was not prepared for the encounter. Though he was deaf, he found himself in an environment where he could understand very few people. He knew no sign language. He had grown up among hearing people and had almost no contact with Deaf people (though he had a distant cousin who was deaf, because she went to the school for the deaf and he did not, they did not know each other). What he noticed first was that the other students seemed to have a familiarity and an ease with each other that he did not have and at the time, could not imagine ever having. As he took his first walk around campus, he was struck and dismayed by how alienated he felt. He had no idea there was such a place as this.

In the days and weeks following, Tom reached some important conclusions. First, he realized that if he was to meet his basic social needs, he would have to change. He had grown up as a “hearing person who didn’t hear,” meaning that his experience in life had been as the only deaf person among a family and community of people who hear. Now he was in a different context where he was not “the only one.” The accommodation he had received in his hometown because he was the only deaf person no longer served him in this new environment. While patience was shown him initially, his inability to sign or join in the activities of the group was quickly becoming a liability.

Second, he realized that he would have to learn the language and that it was not simply a matter of learning signs. By the end of his first week, he began to understand the enormity of the task. This was a complicated and different language from his native English. He could not simply match signs to English words he already knew. He had assumed before he came that he would learn the language quickly, but he was beginning to see that it was more sophisticated and nuanced than he realized. Each day was a struggle to use the language. His ability to speak and lipread English was not of much value here. Communication was rapid and complex, and he could not keep up.

The most daunting realization of all was that he was living among a group of people who shared a history he did not know and who in turn knew little about how he had grown up and lived as a deaf person. He had befriended a few whose experiences were similar to his, but he could not avoid daily contact and interaction with those who had been signing all their lives. Many of them had known each other before coming to college, often through sports because their schools for the deaf played against each other. Many seemed to know each others’ families. He did not know that there
was a social network of Deaf families and Deaf communities. He would later find out that some of his classmates' parents were Deaf and some had several Deaf relatives.

Their ways of doing things were strange to him. They seemed to move assertively in space in ways that he did not. Their movements seemed larger and more obvious, at times when he thought they should be smaller and less conspicuous. It was like he had moved to a foreign country where he, alone among them, had no clue how to behave. He could not figure out how to manage a signed conversation, where to look and what to say first. Despite his efforts, it seemed as if he was often looking at the wrong signer, or entirely missed what a signer was saying because he turned too late to look.

Worse, he had to admit he was feeling uncomfortable in this environment. He was surprised at his reaction at being in the company of other deaf people. In his hearing family and community, he had always been taught that he was special, that no other deaf person was like him, and that it was undesirable to be like other deaf people. He believed that he was an exception. His value of himself was tied to his belief that he had managed to transcend negative images of deaf people in society. His view of sign language was especially strong. He thought it was inadequate and of little use in an English-speaking world. Yet he soon realized that his view of himself contradicted those of the deaf people around him.

He could see, to his astonishment, that they delighted, even celebrated, those things that made him uncomfortable. They were clearly at ease with their sign language. They valued individuals among themselves who were skilled, artistic, and creative with the language. They asserted pride in themselves as Deaf individuals and as a community. Not a day went by that Tom didn't sense their message to him that he had been brought to a world much more real and possible than the one from which he came. And, over time, without being aware of exactly the moment when or how it happened, he began to feel the same way. As he learned the language and the ways of life of the community, he came to believe that he was being rescued from a life where he had communicated with others on a very small scale.

As Tom's circle of friends expanded beyond the handful of people who came from backgrounds similar to his, he learned more about what it meant to be Deaf. It wasn't easy. He wasn't just learning about Deaf people; though he didn't know it then, he was in the process of becoming Deaf himself. Much like a person who moves to a different country and over the years feels less like a foreigner, he became more unable to distinguish himself from other students. A simple but telling moment occurred when he first called himself "Deaf" in sign. Until that moment, he had called himself "hard of hearing." He believed that it more correctly identified him as being someone who could speak, and who was different from people whom he had spent his life trying not to be. It was strange he should call himself hard of hearing because he had no ability to hear. He had lost all his hearing at the age of six from exposure to antibiotics. Now, he found himself including himself as one of those he used to think of as them. From learning about Deaf people, he had moved on to learn to be Deaf.

What changed was not immediately clear to him. He knew that he had developed a level of comfort as a signer and that he no longer felt so uncomfortable in his own skin. He felt included in a way that he hadn't felt back home among his hearing family and community. In fact, he began to feel quite angry at his own older attitudes and misguided ideas about Deaf people and ASL. He began to question where he had gotten those ideas and why. Of course, he knew that they had come from a lack of public awareness. He knew that people who hear had some strong misconceptions that made it difficult for them to see Deaf people as they saw
sign language, with the conclusion that true languages involved speech, or very far without speech. Abstract and scholarly thought was possible through spoken communication, not through gestures or signs. He knew that the minds of people who hear, redemption for deaf people was possible.

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that others did too, for a new way of talking and thinking about Deaf people. Older themes that embraced older ideas about Deaf people seemed inadequate, even patronizing. In the face of a new discourse that recognized history, language, and the notion of “culture.”

If Deaf people were to be thought of as constituting a cultural group, how would one describe such a group? Cultures have traditions, customs, rituals, art, literature, modes of dress, and even cuisines; how would such a concept be translated to describing Deaf people? There would need to be evidence for Deaf culture. Some of the first attempts to write about Deaf culture described boundaries and membership because boundaries were beginning to blur and become porous. These first attempts at writing asked: Who is Deaf? What is American Sign Language? Who uses it? In 1950, these questions would be answered as: Deaf people are those who attend schools for the deaf and go to Deaf clubs. American Sign Language must be what English is not. But in 1970, the questions weren’t as easy to answer. Not all Deaf people graduated from schools for the deaf, and Deaf clubs were declining. The problem of membership was really a question of authenticity, or who can be called Deaf or what was real American Sign Language—a question that pitted Deaf and hearing people alike against each other.

When Tom arrived in this community, one of the first things he noticed was that his path into it was one of several. Like him, most Deaf people were born to hearing families. Within this group, there were several ways of finding the community: Some families had hearing parents who signed and encouraged their deaf children’s association with other Deaf people, easing their acquisition of the language and knowledge of the community. Some were born into hearing families who intended to raise them without sign language, or “orally,” as it was called. Their entry to the community came later in life, often when parents relinquished their control of their children. At some point, either by accident as in Tom’s case, or by design or plan, Tom and other deaf people like himself met each other and began to share goals.

The other author, Carol Padden, was born into a Deaf family. Carol’s parents are Deaf, as well as three of her four grandparents. Her older brother is also Deaf. Carol’s parents were both faculty members at Gallaudet College, and raised both Carol and her brother bilingually in ASL and English. As a child growing up in the 1960s, the Deaf children and adults she knew attended schools for the deaf. Deaf clubs were places to frequent, and the social events of her family, from Deaf theater to picnics and visits at friends’ houses, were often with other Deaf people. Not until her family’s first telephone arrived in 1968 was it possible for her family to make a text telephone call to other friends in the community. Before the telephone, Carol’s family would write letters to friends, or simply drop in to visit. Calls to hearing people needed the help of a friend such as a neighbor or coworker.

Despite not having a telephone until later, life in Carol’s family was unremarkable in that she had not acquired a sense of being very different from her parents or their friends. Her conversations with almost everyone she met were in ASL and even when the topic of discussion turned to deaf and hearing people, there was a sense of her family sharing experiences with other families in the community. Being without hearing was part of the landscape in which Carol grew up, neither onerous nor unusually special.

Carol’s family and community experiences provided her with ways of thinking about herself and her relationships with others. As a child, she knew about hearing people. They lived on her block, and her neighbor would make phone calls for her mother. They were coworkers in factories and print shops, also principals
bus ride was a journey between worlds, each day deepening her sense of how different her family and community were to the rest of the world. Though she felt anxiety traveling to this new culture, she also found herself curious and attracted. At home, hearing people felt distant, but at school, she was in closer contact with them. These were people who lived in her neighborhood but whose lives were distant from her family. There was something exotic about them—their way of dress, their talk, their music, their social relationships. She wanted to learn what it all meant. It was one thing to see hearing people and their ways on TV, but quite another to spend her days among them, up close and personal. There was a seductiveness in their difference: how they used English and the ways that they thought, acted, and spoke.

Later, as she looked back on her earlier experiences, she was shocked to learn how small the world of her family and friends was compared to this world of hearing people. As she walked on the campuses of deaf schools and at Gallaudet College, where her parents taught, the buildings felt as if at the right scale, but at a hearing school, the halls seemed longer, the rooms oversized. At her former school she could talk with any child she chose, but at the new school, she needed to be more selective because she could not understand all of the children. There were many Deaf people in her world and her time spent with them was busy, full, and complex, but here was another world, larger, busier, and more complex than she had imagined.

Comfortable and confident among Deaf people, she became self-conscious and watchful in her new relationships. She was uncertain of how to handle the reaction of hearing people to the fact that she did not hear. Her hearing status became one of the most obvious and noticeable things about her in this new environment. She found herself dealing with a new perception of her, occasions of misunderstanding who she was and what her abilities were. Her social skills now needed to be adapted for use with hearing people.

The ways that hearing people seemed to think about Deaf people
were strange to Carol. When she was growing up, she had often heard Deaf people’s stories about hearing people, and now she was learning hearing people’s stories about Deaf people. She knew that hearing people thought of Deaf people as handicapped and that they believed if they should ever become deaf themselves, their life as they knew it would end. But she was not prepared to see how their ideas became realized in their interaction with her. Hearing people found the fact of deafness, and by extension, deaf people, more strange and disastrous than she did. They said so in their words to her, and in their reactions to her family and friends.

While with hearing people, she was expected to adapt to their behaviors and to their ways of talking. She realized that their view of her as handicapped could not be overcome; it was too deeply rooted in their culture. When she spoke English, they noticed her “hard of hearing” accent and sometimes commented on it. If she brought friends home from school, she had to remember that her parents were foreign to her friends. If she wanted to bring her parents to school, her parents would be foreign there as well. A lot of her time and energy was consumed remembering herself as ordinary while being regarded as strange.

By the time Carol entered college, there was a growing interest in sign languages. With his colleagues, William Stokoe had published a dictionary of American Sign Language demonstrating that linguistic principles could be applied to the study of sign languages. For Carol, linguistics offered a way to understand her experience of moving between two languages that were equivalent in expressive power, yet different in what they expressed. Telling a story in American Sign Language could include detail that would typically not be included in a similar story in English, yet both languages held equivalent possibilities. Instead of embracing these new ideas, she found her family and community in a state of alarm and confusion. Her parents were unsure whether their sign language should take on a new name. Her friends complained about the proliferation of new technical names for different types of signing, and said that the new ideas threatened to upset a comfortable way of existence.

The two authors represent two different pathways into the community. Most Deaf people come to the community not through family, but through contact with other Deaf people at school. Carol’s experience of childhood in a Deaf family is comparatively rare. Yet these pathways become implicated in how labels like Deaf and hearing are used. Carol’s family is Deaf. Tom grew up in a hearing environment. Tom’s status depended on his ability to pass as someone who knows ASL well. Some days he seemed to pass well, and other days, someone would ask a direct question. “Are you Deaf or hearing?” In order to understand his background, the question came less often as he became more adept at “being” Deaf.

Questions of authenticity were important in the early years of talking about “Deaf culture,” in the sense that there needed to be “criteria” for the new vocabulary. Who were those called “us” and those called “others”? Where did Deaf culture begin and other cultures end? Was Deaf culture a subculture or an entirely separate culture? These were questions that came from having to define being Deaf by a set of criteria that Deaf people had never used before. Deaf people had long been defined according to hearing ability and the age when they became deaf, whether at birth or later. Now, the criteria became skill in ASL, ability to carry oneself as though appearing Deaf, and family background. Which of these experiences count the most? Suddenly, there was a problem of definition and how to assess different pathways of experience.

By the time the word “culture” began to be associated with Deaf people, their lives had already changed. In the latter part of the twentieth century, economic shifts leading to changes in the types of work Deaf people did influenced changes in their social practices.
and beliefs. Deaf people were not alone in experiencing this transformation: similar alterations have taken place in other ethnic and cultural groups as well. The transformation moved Deaf people into new spheres, onto public stages as well as into different types of work. They would need new language and new practices for the new places where they found themselves. The word “culture” provided a word, a new tool and device for describing and understanding Deaf people and their new lives.

The way that Deaf people see themselves and their explanation of themselves is historically grounded. Deaf people in the United States are descendants of a long lineage extending back into the eighteenth century with roots in the first schools for the deaf in Europe. When Tom lived alone among hearing people, he knew little of other deaf people, and was unaware of any history of Deaf people. He thought of himself as unique and alone. When he met Deaf people for the first time and observed an unusual familiarity among them, it would take him a long time to understand that this was a product of a history together and an even longer history extending before them. While Carol saw herself living as part of a community of Deaf people, she realized later that she had inherited beliefs and ways of thinking that had been passed down by previous generations of Deaf people. She was a present link in a stream of collective acts and thoughts extending over generations.

The task of Deaf people approaching the end of the twentieth century has been the projection of this history into public space. As we explained in Chapter 5, the National Theatre of the Deaf was an early experiment of Deaf actors presenting new knowledge about their language and culture on a public stage. In this public voice, Deaf people explained themselves in terms of a complete wellness, whole bodies and whole lives. They also used humor and allegory to challenge an older way of thinking about themselves. Being Deaf was not a consequence of not hearing. Being Deaf was an existential experience, complete in itself and not a consequence of broken bodies but the outcome of biological destiny. As many Deaf people came to say “I don’t want to be hearing,” they shocked even themselves and their hearing public, but the experiment in self-description resonated strongly among Deaf people.

The recognition of sign language, not by linguists or scholars, but by Deaf people themselves, was a pivotal moment. While Deaf people had been aware that their sign language met their needs and provided them with an aesthetic pleasure that only languages can provide, the realization that sign languages were equal to yet uniquely interesting among human languages brought to Deaf people a sense of vindication and pride. To possess a language that is not quite like other languages, yet equal to them, is a powerful realization for a group of people who have long felt their language disrespected and besieged by others’ attempts to eliminate it.

Before sign language became so public, the language bonded the group together and kept alive rich channels of cultural circulation. Its unusual qualities kept away outsiders because Deaf people believed there was little interest in the language outside the group. They had been told by others that their language wasn’t worth preserving. Yet part of their private use of sign language came from a desire to protect their private world, to have something that would insulate them from those who might do them emotional or physical harm. Coming to accept that ASL was an object of public interest and that it should be taught to others was a difficult transition.

As ASL moved into a public space, it quickly became clear that hearing people wanted to study it and describe how it works. What had been private and closely held by Deaf people was now being talked about and written in positive ways, but also in ways that Deaf people themselves hardly recognized. They were unused to seeing their language discussed in the jargon of scientists. They had their own “folk” theories about ASL. They often talked about it as having an “art” to it or a “preferred mode of expression,” and it was difficult for many to relate to the new discourse about it, the discourse of “phonology,” “morphology,” and other linguistic terminology.
Just as surprising was the increasing demand of hearing people to learn the language. Before 1960, few hearing people were ASL signers. If they learned the language, they did so from an association with Deaf people such as working at a school for the deaf, or from a Deaf relative. A very small number studied the language and learned it in a class. But by the 1970s, there had been a sharp increase in demand for ASL instruction, a development for which the community was not prepared. The way sign language had been taught in the past was as a translation of English words. Teachers would give students a list of English vocabulary or phrases and then for each, give a matched translation in signs. What was taught was how to translate English into signs.

Slowly, as more knowledge was gained about the structure of ASL, the teaching of ASL became more like foreign-language teaching. The demand for ASL classes created two problems. The first was pedagogical: How do you teach a sign language? Many who had skill in the language did not know how to explain it. They had grown up learning English grammar, but had never been taught ASL grammar. The problem became: Which form of the language was “real”? Which form of the language was borrowed from English? Which form of the language was coincidentally similar to English, but not English? There would be heated debates about ASL—in ASL.

The second problem for Deaf people was to overcome their anxieties, both personal and collective, about the fate of their language as it became increasingly more public. In the early 1970s, Deaf people were unsure of the motives of hearing linguists—were they truly interested in describing their language, or had they other goals? Furthermore, what were Deaf people to make of the growing interest in learning ASL as a foreign language? How did hearing people plan to use their knowledge of the language? Would they learn the language in order to communicate with Deaf people, or to dominate them? Only after a decade of rapid growth without dire consequences did the community relax and begin to see the advantage of the proliferation of ASL in foreign-language teaching.

Besides the problems of agreeing who was Deaf and the problem of their language becoming public, embracing “culture” as a means of public identity meant agreeing on what to call themselves. The 1960s and 1970s saw a movement to replace the English term “deaf” with “hearing impaired.” Deaf people had always used a sign, transcribed as DEAF, which referred to themselves. The sign had been translated into English as “deaf,” but it is an inaccurate translation. The English word refers to loss of hearing, but the ASL sign refers to a difficult to translate quality, the essence of what DEAF people are. The sign would be more accurately translated as “we” or “us” (DEAF people), and carries the meaning of hearing loss only secondarily. Deaf people are deaf, but not solely this characteristic.

Despite the lack of precise translation, Deaf people wanted to retain the English word “deaf” as the appropriate translation for the sign instead of “hearing impaired.” The problem with “hearing impaired” is first that it has no historical basis in the language, that is, Deaf people refer to themselves as not hearing, and not that they have an impairment in hearing. Second, it refers to those who do not hear, but are not ASL signers, as Tom once was. “Hearing impaired” includes people who do not want to be considered signers and are not Deaf. By contrast, DEAF refers to people who are completely without hearing, and to people who can hear some and call themselves “hard of hearing.”

Deaf people knew that their community included those with varying degrees of hearing. This was confusing to Tom when he met Deaf people for the first time. He had assumed before he arrived at Gallaudet that Deaf people were totally and profoundly without hearing. He later realized that some of the people he considered most Deaf actually could hear quite well, even well enough to use the telephone. He was surprised, more than once, to see Deaf people he knew using their hearing in various ways. For ex-
ample, one of the first things that he noticed upon moving into the dormitory was that on a regular basis his dorm mates would gather around the TV in the lounge and watch a program interpreted by a Deaf student who could hear enough to understand the TV. Tom would meet Deaf people from Deaf families who called themselves Deaf, but could hear better than he could. Ironically, he was still calling himself “hard of hearing.”

Deaf people encompass a diverse group of people, unified by the experience of living among Deaf people and ASL. Hearing level plays a different role in the community. Carol grew up knowing she was Deaf. But on numerous occasions, she had to explain that she was “hard of hearing” to those curious about her hearing level.

To the world of the hearing, signers, nonsigners, people recently deafened, and people who were hard of hearing share the quality of hearing impairment, but in fact, each group has little in common with each other, other than a physical characteristic of not hearing. Becoming a signer is a process of socialization in the same way it is a process of socialization to become a deaf nonsigner. The culture is defined not solely by degree of not hearing, though the fact of not hearing is a large part of how Deaf people interact with one another. Tom, without a trace of auditory response on his audiogram, was not Deaf until he learned to be. Carol, with more hearing evident on her audiogram, was hard of hearing as well as Deaf from birth.

The idea of culture offers the possibility of separation and inclusion at the same time. Culture provides a frame for Deaf people to separate themselves from an undefined group of those with hearing impairments, but at the same time, they are included in the world of human communities that share long histories, durable languages, and common social practices. Separation allows Deaf people to define political goals that may be distinct from other groups. Inclusion allows Deaf people to work toward humanist goals that are common to other groups such as civil rights and access. In this way, the idea of culture is not merely an academic abstraction, but very much a “lived” concept. Tom remembers his early encounter with the idea that there was a culture of Deaf people, in fact many different Deaf cultures around the world. It implied a connectivity to others that was intoxicating to a young man whose life was once based on having a “special” place in a world of people who hear. The attraction of the ordinary, the sameness, the sharedness, and the sense of roots in the past that it offered was strong.

For us and others in the Deaf community, culture also offers a way to counter world views too heavily influenced by others. Deaf people have long lived under the benevolence and care of others whose plans and aspirations often isolated Deaf people from each other and labeled them in ways that left them uneducated and alone. Culture offers the possibility of making Deaf people whole. It assumes lines of transmission of ways of being from generations past, as long ago as hundreds of years. Culture provides a way for Deaf people to reimagine themselves as not so much adapting to the present, but inheriting the past. It allows them to think of themselves not as unfinished hearing people but as cultural and linguistic beings in a collective world with one another. It gives them a reason for existing with others in the modern world.

More attractive than any other promise that the idea of culture holds for Deaf people is the thread of connection to the past. The fear of banishment and elimination has dogged Deaf people throughout most of their history. George Veditz worried about the future of the sign language in 1913, and today Deaf people continue to worry. In 1913, Veditz railed against hearing people who would prohibit the use of sign language and develop methods of education that would isolate deaf children from sign language. Today, the same concerns exist; there are doctors and teachers who say that they are ambivalent about the future of sign language while they are enthusiastic about the future of technology like cochlear implants.
The medical community’s narrow focus on deaf people as patients to be alleviated of their affliction has always been a source of anxiety within the community. The idea of “culture” outlines the terms of a counterargument. It demands considerations of equal treatment, justice, and political voice for a group of people who find themselves in a highly politicized environment such as medicine and disability.

A generation of young Deaf people have grown to adulthood with a vocabulary of culture and language that is only thirty years old. Where once the words “Deaf culture” and “American Sign Language” were controversial, they have since eased into everyday talk, and are used now as unselfconsciously as “the sign language” once was. Now “Deaf culture” has taken on a new layer of meaning: it has become a code for challenging the ideologies of others who have a stake in deaf children and deaf adults. The ideology of those who believe deaf children should grow up without sign language conflicts with Deaf culture. As the medical profession continues to hold that doctors have privileged expertise on deafness, Deaf culture has come to represent an alternative view of humans under their care, calling into question their goals of medical treatments and rehabilitation.

An ironic lesson to be taken from the short history of “culture” in Deaf people’s history is how a concept long used for hearing people around the world can be so eagerly adapted for use by Deaf people. The long history of scholars writing about spoken language grammars has come to be enormously useful for describing sign languages as well. Perhaps this is the true lesson of human cultures and languages, that our common human nature is found not in how we are alike, but in how we are different, and how we have adapted to our differences in very human ways.