

Uncle Bill and Aunt Mary - Lives Affected by Late-Deafness

By Carol Granaldi

When I was 10 years old back in the 1940's I had an uncle and aunt whose lives were affected by his late deafness. Uncle Bill was a WWI veteran, and in those days, suffered from what was called "shell shock" which damaged his hearing while firing artillery rounds. Back then, soldiers didn't protect their ears during warfare, and many returned from the military service with damaged hearing.

My Uncle Bill wore a large, black hearing aid with a black harness which used two D size batteries which must have been uncomfortable to wear, and didn't help him much, either. It would lie on his end table next to his chair most of the time, and he wore it only occasionally when visitors came to see him and Aunt Mary. He was largely uncommunicative, didn't engage much in conversation, and would putter around the house and yard in silence.

Aunt Mary, by contrast, had normal hearing, was a social butterfly in her young years, and spent many hours on the telephone gossiping with friends. Sometimes she'd ask Uncle Bill to come to the phone and talk to her friends and family members, but he always declined, shouting "Hello, hello, hello," then walk away. He was so introverted because of his deafness, and she was as extroverted as a gadfly, and this difference affected their relationship considerably.

At 10 years old, I related well to him, because I wasn't hearing too well either, although I was not as deaf as he was. I always felt sympathetic toward Uncle Bill because my Aunt Mary was so cross with him when he didn't hear or understand when she spoke to him. She had a shrill, high-pitched voice, spoke very rapidly, and didn't project her voice well, either. Neither did she address him by name first to get his attention.

I always had trouble understanding her, but by then I had begun to speechread, so I fared a little better than he did when talking with her. He wouldn't use eye contact when we spoke to him, so he didn't know how to speechread. Often, when people become late-deafened, they don't acquire speechreading skills when they are adults or seniors, because their once normally-hearing habit of listening without looking at people is hard to break. In my case, as a child I adapted to speechreading to compensate for my hearing loss, so I fared a little better than he in understanding her speech.

Aunt Mary would often call him from another room, saying his name in 2 syllables: "BI IL BI IL, BI IL", and since her voice and pitch didn't carry very far, he often didn't hear her. Often, exasperated when he didn't respond, she would storm up to him while his back was turned and go: 'WOOOO WOOOO WOOOO!' This would startle him and me, too. I hated for her to do that because it seemed sadistic. Once she saw me watching her do this, and said self-righteously: "I HAVE to do that! He doesn't LISTEN to me! That's the only way I can GET his attention!" I wished that she would approach him, touch his shoulder so he could turn around and be able to hear and listen to her better. But Aunt Mary didn't have much sympathy for his deafness, and was irritated because of the inconvenience to her. Sometime during the 1950's Uncle Bill underwent an ear surgery called a "fenestration." It was hoped that by opening a "window" in his ear he'd be able to hear better. Unfortunately, his hearing was not improved. Uncle Bill bitterly said that the doctors took his money, but shouldn't have been paid because the surgery was not successful.

In 1957, now both in their sixties, they sold their New Jersey home, and moved to Florida, so I didn't have as much opportunity to spend time with them during summer vacations and holidays. I did travel a few times to visit them, and I sadly noticed that his withdrawn behavior had gotten worse. He rarely engaged in conversation with Aunt Mary, and almost never started a conversation with others. It was so hard to reach him through the wall of silence that hemmed him in. He didn't wear his hearing aid while outside doing the yard work, and kept its batteries in a jar in the refrigerator, supposedly to extend their use.

By this time, Aunt Mary was starved for companionship, and when there were visitors she was so relieved to have someone to talk to, that she became rather garrulous. Uncle Bill's deafness was not only his handicap, but it became hers as well. If only she understood what his life without sound was like! If only she had some sympathy for his inability to interact with others with spoken words. She instead remarked that she and he did not have any social life together, and didn't even socialize with each other at home.

I think that all the stresses, sorrow, and isolation of deafness took its toll on Uncle Bill's health, because by age 70, he became ill with heart disease. His last days were spent dying in a hospital, suffering with pulmonary edema, and so frightened at not being able to hear the doctors or nurses talking to him. Aunt Mary later said that he was afraid to close his eyes and not see anyone, because he couldn't hear anyone, and this probably killed him. He was buried in the family plot alongside his sister and parents. Uncle Bill's marker was etched with his name, birth date and "VETERAN WWI, US ARMY."

Aunt Mary reached age 93, outliving him by more than 20 years. In her old age, she, too, became deaf, and had to confront the same disconnectedness which bedeviled Uncle Bill for all of their married lives together. Although she was given a hearing aid, she complained that it did her no good. She no longer could converse with others in the nursing home, nor over the telephone, and she, too, became isolated just like Uncle Bill. She was sullen and withdrawn and didn't join in the social activities provided in the nursing home.

She died alone and was brought back to New Jersey to be buried alongside him. It was my task to carry out the burial arrangements and order the gravestone for her. I had it made up exactly like Uncle Bill's with her name and birth date, too. I needed to balance the third line with an inscription which matched Uncle Bill's WWI VETERAN, so I had it inscribed: TOGETHER FOREVER. Poor Uncle Bill!