

HLA-NJ News and Views

A Monthly Column from The Hearing Loss Association of NJ

By Peter Yerkes, Trustee, HLA-NJ

For Support in Living with Hearing Loss, a Good Mentor Can Help — Even One Who Lived Long Ago

When someone losing their hearing asks me for advice, I start by urging them not to try to go it alone.

Mentors have helped me enormously - such as the person who taught me speech reading and guided me as I made the progression from hearing aids to FM systems to a cochlear implant experts in technology at the Center for Hearing and Communication in New York City; a psychologist to help deal with the inevitable difficulties with family and friends; new friends I've met through the Hearing Loss Association of New Jersey.

But I've also learned from people with hearing loss who lived long before the days of hearing aids or the Americans with Disabilities Act - people such as Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes, the Spanish painter known to most people simply as Goya. He has been on my mind a lot these last few months, because my wife and I recently celebrated a major wedding anniversary. We decided to treat ourselves to a week in Madrid, partly because 40 years ago we made our first trip to Europe together. I had a bit of an agenda of my own, because Madrid's Prado Museum is home to the world's best collection of Goyas.

As my hearing loss has gotten worse, I've become more and more interested in Goya because of the remarkable strength with which he faced his deafness.

No one knows exactly why he suddenly became deaf at the age of 47. With no warning he suddenly became very ill. When he recovered a few weeks later, he had lost all his hearing. Doctors could do nothing, and neither could the crude instruments of the day such as ear trumpets. Goya, who had built a career as a court painter to Spain's ruling Bourbon monarchy and to wealthy aristocrats and successful government officials throughout Spain, could have given up. Instead, from 1792 when he lost his hearing to the year of his death in 1828, he continued to paint.

He painted so successfully that today he is seen not only as the chronicler of Spain's rich and famous, but also as one of the most important figures in the history of art – one of the key figures in the transition from traditional styles of painting to the new styles of modern art that were just taking hold. (For information about Goya I've relied on readily available works by scholars such as Robert Hughes and Julia Blackburn.) When Goya's wife died, he found a new companion. He had a rich social life. Spanish friends who accompanied him on a trip to Paris were astonished to find he seemed more at ease in a foreign country than they did.

The legacy of paintings I saw in the Prado were ones anyone can enjoy despite the passage of 200 years—wonderful colors, portraits that make you feel you know the people portrayed.

But the other thing I learned about Goya was that he was a master at depicting suffering and alienation, in works such as "The Giant," which depicts a lonely figure sitting alone beneath a sliver of a moon. Scholars say it's impossible to know how much of his preoccupation with suffering was due to his sudden hearing loss. But it certainly must have played a part.

There is suffering in Goya, but there is also joy. The other day I took an afternoon off to wander in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. I was feeling tired and caught up in various problems of everyday life. And suddenly, by chance, I saw a painting glowing with a rich red that caught my eye even though the painting was far away down a long corridor. I investigated, and it turned out to be a portrait of the young son of the Count and Countess of Altamira with his pet bird. The boy is wearing a bright red

dress suit. Next to him three fascinated cats stare at the bird, with an intensity so lifelike it made me feel like laughing.

The painter was Goya. Scholars believe he painted the work sometime after 1792—the year Goya became totally, profoundly deaf and also the year the child died. Suddenly my problems didn't seem so important. I was just very thankful that Goya's hard work and perseverance left such a legacy of pleasure.

Do you have a story about a mentor you'd like to share? I'd be very interested in hearing about people who have helped you—or perhaps people you have helped, or about any other aspect of hearing loss. Please contact me at p.yerkes@comcast.net.

The HLA-NJ annual meeting is Saturday, November 17 from 1 - 4 p.m. at the East Brunswick Library. Members of HLA-NJ, and anyone who would like to learn more about the organization and about how to help people with hearing loss, are invited. In addition to the business of the organization, the meeting will offer the annual mini-fair of exhibitors. It will include the state Division of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and presentations concerning CapTel and CaptionCall, vocational rehabilitation agencies, the NJ Theatre Alliance, cochlear implant support and assistive technology. There will also be a booth where you can "Ask the Audiologist," as well as ample time for socializing.

To learn more about HLA-NJ, please contact Arlene Romoff at info@hearingloss-nj.org. We also invite you to visit www.hearingloss-nj.org, or to attend one of our local chapter meetings in Bergen, Monmouth/Ocean or Middlesex County, and our newest Morris County chapter. Dates, places and times for chapter meetings are available from info@hearingloss-nj.org.