

Patience or Presence: A Reflection on Qualities

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I am sometimes asked by prospective interpreters about the qualities an interpreter should have in order to work with deaf-blind people. The questioner often assumes or has been taught that patience is an essential quality. Although in the standard view this may seem appropriate or accurate, I prefer not to use the term “patience” as it implies that things should be different than what they are, perhaps faster or meeting a different set of norms, that they are not how I would like them to be or am used to them being. Patience seems to imply an “effort” of some sort, like one has to do something to “have patience.” This lends a somewhat negative connotation, as if one would rather be doing something else. “Gosh, you’re signing so carefully and taking such a long time to interpret that concept; you must have a lot of patience.” So how *should* things be?

Instead of patience, another way to look at an interpreter’s way of being and doing is to have a quality of presence, to “be with”—to be with what is happening, to be with people where they are and how they are. A subtle difference, but one that shifts perspective from something negative—things (perhaps you or me) ought to be different, but since they’re (or you’re) not, I’ll have patience with the way things (you) are—to something present based—we are here, these are the dynamics of the situation, this is how things are, and I am present and fully attending, doing what needs to be done, not preferring that they be otherwise.

Another quality related to presence is that of mindfulness, of bringing one’s full mind to the person-task-situation-dynamic at hand. A part of this is sensitivity, which is seeing things from the other’s point-of-view. This would include such factors as what you wear, keeping your hands in the appropriate signing space and focusing on what is important to the person receiving the interpretation—the information, the interpersonal dynamics, the mood in the room?

Mindfulness also includes self-awareness; how am *I* in this situation; how am I feeling; how am I presenting myself; how am I relating to the others here? Mindfulness governs how you pay attention to all that is going on; the shifting salience of the people and what they are saying, both overtly and covertly; the environmental information; the visibility of the interpretation (e.g., has the lighting changed or are the person’s eyes tiring); the interpersonal dynamics and the state of one’s mental processing—am I getting it; do I

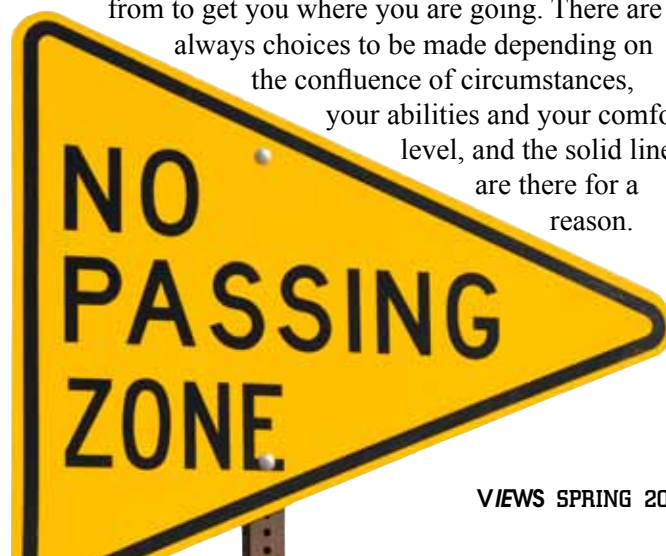
need to switch with my team; do I need to ask for support; should I jump to a textual level of processing and tie in something said five minutes ago? With mindfulness, we are not only present, but aware.

As with all interpreting, the quality that seems to be most often stated in terms of what is needed to be an effective interpreter is flexibility. So how might this play out in terms of deaf-blind interpreting? Flexibility can mark our navigation of the expanded role of the interpreter and includes abilities and adjustments such as:

- serving as a support service provider (SSP), which includes guiding,
- sometimes serving as a driver,
- shifting the mode of interpreting between visual, tactile or written, which can occur during a given interpreting event,
- adding incidental information that may be requested by the deaf-blind person, or
- possibly getting a cup of coffee if requested while the meeting is going on.

Of course, one also needs to have healthy boundaries and to know what they are and be comfortable stating them. It is like the broken lines dividing the lanes on a highway. There is some flexibility as you move along in your lane, a little more this way or that way depending on traffic, sometimes shifting into the next lane as conditions warrant as long as you’re going in the same direction, occasionally going into the lane that goes the opposite way briefly as long as you’re aware of your surroundings and do so with purpose and discretion, then returning to your own lane—or not, if it’s outside your comfort zone. The lanes are there to allow for the smooth flow of traffic, but there are generally several lanes to choose from to get you where you are going. There are

always choices to be made depending on the confluence of circumstances, your abilities and your comfort level, and the solid lines are there for a reason.



Discretion or judgment is another quality that pertains to interpreting in general but may require greater discernment in deaf-blind interpreting. There is so much to be aware of, so much potential information to be included, how does one decide what to include and what not to? Part of this, as stated, comes down to the development of judgment and being able to think on the spot. Interpreting is about judgment calls. And part of this can be determined by getting to know the deaf-blind person with whom you are working. What are they interested in? What sorts of information do they generally want to know? Who do they know who may be in the room or at the event? Of course, the degree to which one knows any individual will vary, and deaf-blind people may prefer one interpreter over another for a given setting depending on their level of familiarity with that person (sometimes you want an interpreter who knows you well, sometimes you don't).

Granted, we do not always know the person with whom we will be working, and judgment then (as it does when we know the person) includes sifting through such factors as time, what is standing out as most notable or relevant at the moment and how much one can coherently include while presenting a whole package of information. Expanding on these factors, time is one of the core elements that help make both the situation and the interpretation successful.

Situationally, arriving in sufficient time allows for communication and logistics to be established. In terms of the interpretation itself, pacing and the ability of the interpreter to adjust his or her pace to the receiver, is part of what makes the difference between an interpretation being understood or not understood. There is also a finite amount of time in which to deliver information. Judgment, then, allows an interpreter to be able to assimilate and select what information to present and in what sequence in that period of time. There is always a mix of auditory (with a hearing interpreter), visual and social information. In order for the receiver to follow an interpretation and to know what is important at any given time, the interpreter must have taken in, assimilated and selected from all of this information and delivered it in a logically coherent order.

In addition to pacing, the quality or skill that determines the visibility or, if you will, tactility, and therefore intelligibility of an interpretation, is sign articulation. All other factors may be in place, but if the individual handshapes cannot be made out or the signs do not flow, the interpretation will not be understood. The qualities/skills of articulation, pacing and sequencing

must go hand-in-hand with skill in ASL. Not only does skill in ASL allow for more logical sequencing of information, it requires fewer signs. The fewer the number of signs in an interpretation, the more time can be devoted to pacing and articulating the signs that are made. With ASL skill as a foundation, an interpretation can be grounded not only linguistically, but visually as well. That is, in order for a person to understand something that was said, they may need the information presented not only with the topic first, but with visual information as a grounding, as part of the topic.

There is also a set of qualities that comes under the general heading of demeanor and governs what we are like and what may draw us to working with people who are deaf-blind or what may draw deaf-blind people to us. These are qualities such as friendliness, being fun-loving, having comfort with close physical proximity and touch, being even-tempered, being open to and interested in others' views and ways of being, being open-minded and open to feedback, being trust-worthy and dependable/keeping one's word and above all, having respect; respect for a person's right to access information—information in the form of content that is said, visual information, social information and incidental information; respect for a person's pace of moving through the world and acquiring information; respect for a person's time and respect for the process of interpretation itself.

With such a range of technical skills and holistic qualities coming into play, perhaps the foundation upon which all of this is built is a quality of heart. It is that which makes what we do enjoyable. After all, people leave jobs, activities and such because their "heart is not in it." So having one's heart "in it" is a quality that makes for, well, quality. It is that which is *present* and from which our skills, interactions, demeanor and decisions flow. Patience becomes moot. ■

Thank you to Pearl Veesart for her contributions to this article.

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