

# Between

Category: Disability

written by Nancy J. Rennert | October 23, 2025

This week marked almost the halfway point of my life: the first half with hearing, the second with deafness and, then, cochlear implants. I've lived in between two worlds and cultures, hearing and deaf, never fully belonging to either.

During my first year in medical practice, I lost almost all my hearing in both ears. For most adults, hearing loss is gradual, but for me it was sudden. Despite treatment for autoimmune inner ear disease with some ups and downs, my hearing continued to deteriorate.

I was devastated! After so many years of school and medical training, could I continue to be a physician?

I struggled to stay in the hearing world by learning to lipread and focusing on facial expressions. Hearing aids didn't help enough. Conversations with patients and colleagues became auditory anagrams. I filled in the missing sounds to make words and constantly verified my understanding. It was exhausting! I learned some sign language, but this didn't seem to fit me.

Then I discovered the Association of Medical Professionals with Hearing Loss (AMPHL), an empathetic, caring community that became my lifeline. Most members were born with hearing loss or deafness. Their persistence and resilience were so motivating! I felt a special comfort and familiarity with our lived experiences in medicine. I learned strategies to address the many barriers for healthcare providers with disabilities.

After surgery for a cochlear implant and the long neural remodeling process of relearning to hear, I needed to change my career path as a physician. This was the time before EMRs and texting, so everyone communicated by telephone. With only rudimentary captioning back then, it was too difficult. I found a part-time academic teaching position.

Still, my life was in between, not fully hearing and not fully deaf. While hearing with a cochlear implant was hard work, I feared removing the external speech processor each night before sleep, as it plunged me back into deafness. Deafness was so different from silence. Quieter, like nothingness.

Over time, I gained strength from my hearing loss community and my family. The unsettled feeling of not belonging faded, and I began to appreciate both my hearing and my deafness. The beauty of "in between" emerged.

I rediscovered my purpose by advocating for both healthcare providers and patients with hearing loss. I brought captioning to televisits and introduced clear masks to our offices and hospitals. In the process, I remained actively engaged in medicine, transformed by empathy and wisdom.

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