

What is it like to 'hear' a hand?

You have to be deaf to understand

What is it like to be a small child
In a school, in a room void of sound:
With a teacher who talks and talks and talks:
And then when she does come around to you
She expects you to know what she's said?
You have to be deaf to understand.

Or the teacher who thinks that to make you smart
You must first learn to talk with your voice:
All mumbo-jumbo with hands on your face
For hours and hours without patience or end:
Until out comes a faint resembling sound?
You have to be deaf to understand.

What is it like to be curious,
To thirst for knowledge you can call your own.
With an inner desire that's set on fire -
And you ask a brother, sister or friend
Who looks in answer and says, "Never mind!"
You have to be deaf to understand.

What is it like in a corner to stand -
Though there's nothing you've done really wrong,
Other than try to make use of your hands
To a silent peer to communicate
A thought that comes to your mind all at once?
You have to be deaf to understand.

What is it like to be shouted at
When one thinks that will help you to hear,
Or misunderstanding the words of a friend
Who is trying to make a joke clear,
And you don't get the point because he's failed?
You have to be deaf to understand.

What is it like to be laughed in the face
When you try to repeat what is said
Just to make sure that you've understood.
And you find that the words were misread -
And you want to cry out "Please help me, friend"
You have to be deaf to understand.

What is it like to have to depend
Upon one who can hear to phone a friend;
Or place a call to a business firm
And be forced to share what's personal, and
Then find that your message wasn't made clear?
You have to be deaf to understand.

What is it like to be deaf and alone
In the company of those who can hear -
And you only guess as you go along.
For no one's there with a helping hand
As you try to keep up with words and song.
You have to be deaf to understand.

What is it like on the road of life
To meet with a stranger who opens his mouth -
And speaks out a line at a rapid pace;
And you can't understand the look on his face
Because it is new and you're lost in the race?
You have to be deaf to understand.

What is it like to comprehend
Some nimble fingers that paint the scene,
And make you smile and feel serene.
With the "spoken word of the moving hand
That makes you part of the World at large?
You have to be deaf to understand.

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"What is it like to 'hear' a hand?
You Have to be Deaf to Understand"

Written by Willard J. Madsen, associate professor at Gallaudet College and a graduate of the Kansas School for the Deaf USA.

Written in 1971, the poem first appeared in the Dee Cee Eyes and has since been reprinted in publications all over the country.

It has received worldwide attention and has been translated into seven different languages.