

## THE BUSINESS OF BEING DEAF

Let me admit first thing that the title of this paper - The Business of Being Deaf - is just too big to be covered in one brief discourse. I do not intend even to try to do that. I chose that heading because I want my remarks on the manual modes of communication to be weighed against the background of the total setting of deafness as a social phenomenon.

No one invented our systems of manual communication. It would be more correct to say that the manual modes of communication - like Topsy - "jes' grew." We do not know how far back into history they go. But we do know that some two thousand years before the Abbe de l'Epee and Samuel Heinicke, Socrates, sage of the ancient Greeks thoughtfully observed, "If we had no voice or tongue and wished to make things clear to one another, should we not try, as dumb people actually do, to make signs with our hands, and head and person generally?" (K.W.Hodgson, The Deaf and Their Problems, p.72)

Alexander Graham Bell objected to any assumption that the sign language of the deaf was a "natural" mode of communication. I will not take issue with the revered Dr. Bell. It depends somewhat on how you define the term "natural." But I think I am well within the bounds of reason if I ask you to believe that the manual modes - there are several - naturally developed out of the normal human needs of the deaf people; ~~such human needs as~~ belongingness, security ~~and self-esteem.~~

How well these basic human needs have been served by manual modes of communication is largely a matter of opinion. I will not go into that here. All I aim for now is to <sup>present</sup> ~~some~~ some idea of the ancient and honorable heritage of the manual modes that distinguish the deaf community today.

~~You will probably see~~ manual communication as the most readily apparent, the most visible feature of a pattern of behavior which, taken altogether, I have chosen to call the "business" of being deaf. Some have been so bold as to call it the "art" of being deaf, but I am satisfied to <sup>have you regard it as the simple,</sup> workaday "business" of making one's way in the world without benefit of hearing. ~~The function of manual communication will be~~ better understood if you know something of the complexity, the social skills that are called into play by the "business" of being deaf as a whole. ~~Figure 1~~



I understand that you have undertaken to learn something about the manual modes of communication - not so much because you admire them for their own sake - but because you ~~#####~~ seek an empathic relationship with client or pupil which will stimulate him to discover things for himself. Or stating it a bit differently, you would use manual communication as an instrument for the ultimate socialization of the deaf individual, child or adult.

I think you have chosen an effective instrument. As a deaf man myself, my approach to manual communication is not quite the same as yours, however. I am more concerned about the function of the manual modes in the total business of being deaf.

Deaf people, themselves, do not agree on how the manual modes should be used in public. Some hold that <sup>they</sup> ~~that/##~~ should be kept out of sight, used only sub rosa, as it were. Others hold that they should be used without fear or favor, that there is nothing to be ashamed of.

My own view goes down the middle between these extremes. I agree that there is nothing to be ashamed of. At the same time, I feel that it is bad manners to make oneself unduly conspicuous in public places. Learning the proper use of the manual modes in public is one of the <sup>exotic</sup> /social skills that contribute to the complexity of this "business" of being deaf. That the management of deafness in diverse social situations is a complex piece of business is one point on which all thoughtful deaf people are agreed.

The biographies of deafened or hard-of-hearing people such as E? E. Calkins, Grace Barstow Murphy and Frances Warfield all testify to this complexity. All were highly articulate people who had never experienced particular difficulty with speech or language. And if socialization is so difficult for these talented people, how much more difficult must it be for those who must struggle to learn the rudiments of speech and grammar?

As an example - more or less humorous - of the difficulties in the management of hearing impairment by an articulate deaf person, consider the plight of a deaf friend of mine who prided himself on his normal speech when he tried to order dinner in a crowded restaurant. Of course he had learned to speak before hearing departed from his ears. Even then, however, he had to keep working on his pronunciation, pitch and intonation. Everyone closely associated with him was asked to correct him whenever he made a mistake. As a matter of fact, he could often



conduct a simple piece of business without anyone suspecting that he was deaf.

He met his Waterloo one day when he was dining out with a party of deaf friends and offered to spare them all the hazards of ordering a meal by transmitting all orders to the waitress himself. But the waitress failed to understand him the very first time. She ducked her head lower to hear him better. He raised his voice a notch, but she only ducked lower; he raised his voice, the waitress ducked lower. After three or four tries, my friend took a deep breath and really let himself go at the top of his voice.

At this instant, the juke box which had been going full blast behind some palms suddenly stopped. All was quiet save for the clatter of knives, forks and chinaware and my friend's voice shattering the comparative ##### silence.

I'll leave the rest to your imagination. But what I want to know is what you would advise me to do to avoid conflict with background noises in public places. Should I simply cultivate a thick hide? Grin and bear it? Or do you hold that discretion is the better part of valor and counsel me to fall back on the inglorious old ##### pencil and pad?

~~No matter what you advise I hope you will take this as a brief glimpse at the many kinds of ##### embarrassment, frustration and yes stultification to which the deaf person is heir.~~

##### But no matter what you advise, I hope you will understand that this is just one amusing sample of the embarrassments and frustrations the deaf person must be prepared to meet in the daily round of living. Calkins, Warfield and Murphy - with normal speech and exceptionally articulate by any standard - all had their black days/<sup>when they</sup> endured the sting of experiences far more poignant than ##### my friend's

But it seems we have not learned the lesson they teach. Sometimes it seems as if we know less about the social life of the deaf human being than we know about the social life of the bee.

Now I do not intend to try to tell you that manual communication is the sovereign remedy for all social ills. I am simply trying to say that, in situations as uncharted and unpredictable as these, manual communication may have a vital function in the ultimate socialization of the deaf individual.

The social scientists have not yet gotten around to a study of this question



in depth. All we can do here is to plant this thought as seed for hope. All we know for sure is that a certain stigma attaches to the manual modes of communication used by the deaf. Even the expressive gesture is considered boorish by some stiff-necked people in our culture.

We know this is a culture trait, however, because it is not true of all cultures. One deaf American reported some years ago that he had lived ### in Italy for three years without knowledge of the language or the slightest inconvenience because, as he put it, "Italy is, par excellence, the land of gestures." (Albert Ballin, The Deaf-Mute Howls.)

So it appears that, given a different culture - one no less civilized than our own - the manual modes would be more generally acceptable than they are in Britain and the United States. I was myself pleasantly surprised to find that linguists and other scientists lend support to this more respectful treatment of manual communication in general.

At one point, Ogden and Richards, outstanding linguists, found occasion to remark on the "immense superiority in efficiency of gesture languages within their fields." (The Meaning of Meaning) It would require a scholarly treatise to explain just what they meant by this, but that is not necessary here. It is enough for us to understand that these authorities treated "gesture languages" with more respect than the average citizen does.

Several other witnesses of the same caliber could be cited but I will mention only one more here. In a recent magazine article (Natural History, Aug.-Sept., 1968) Margaret Mead, the well known anthropologist, wrote on the subject of a system of symbols which would serve as a means of communication, a universal language, for the whole world. "The best model we have for such an ideational language," she observed, "...is that part of the language of the deaf which conveys concepts independently of the words of a particular language."

This cannot be taken as an endorsement of manual communication for the deaf exactly. Dr. Mead was thinking of other things. I mention it because I think it will help you to see the manual modes in perspective, rather than as an isolated phenomenon with scant potential.

But I also had another purpose in mentioning Dr. Mead. She is correct in referring to "parts" of the ##### manual system as an "ideational language."



But there is some question if it is truly independent of the English language in the minds of the American deaf.

The written or printed language can be reproduced in manual symbols and manual symbols can be reproduced in writing. Just how closely the two are tied together in the minds of the deaf is a question. One scholarly educator from the Netherlands who had studied manual forms of communication on both sides of the Atlantic has observed, "American signing ... has come to be just another means of expressing grammatically correct English." This is from an analysis by Bernard Th. TerVoort in Americal Annals of the Deaf, in November, 1961

I do not want to steal any thunder from those who will instruct you in the techniques of manual communication but it may be well for me to point out that manual communication breaks down several different ways. Finger spelling makes it possible to spell out each word as if you were writing on a blackboard. Manual symbols are the raw material of the "ideational language" Margaret Mead mentioned. You might say that manual symbols are the bricks in the sign language structure and that pantomime is the mortar that holds them together. On the hands of a master, this ideational language can be very dramatic and very, very amusing. If you are in the right place at the right time, you may see an audience of deaf people break up in belly laughs at the humorous twist given to ideational manual symbols. Often masters of the art among the deaf exhibit a wide range of creativity in telling a story.

Signs which imitate some feature of the thing they symbolize are said to be "natural" or "iconic." Signs which are arbitrarily fixed by agreement or "convention" among the people who use them are said to be "arbitrary" or "conventional" signs. Often a "natural" sign becomes "conventional" over time with repetition and gradual contraction until the original connection between symbol and referent is lost to view.

I mention these things chiefly because I think it will add interest to your study if you know what to look for. There is almost no limit to how far you can go in this subject. You might end up as a creative pantomimist, a professional.

But I caution you that it is not easy. Some people claim to have learned the manual alphabet in half an hour. That may be true, but I am sure they have not acquired real facility and skill in its use. Facility comes only with practice. Real clarity and rhythm comes still later but both are well worth



cultivating. ~~#####~~ They are equivalent to legible writing. Rhythm can be used to add emphasis, just as vocal inflection adds emphasis to speech.

Learning has been very uneven among the people I have taught at De Paul.  
                    , usually with another deaf person,  
Only those who have found time to practice/have gained real facility. Those who  
have been professionally engaged with the deaf and have had opportunity to prac-  
tice have told me that their clients are always pleased to help and that it really  
helps when the client is able to assume the role of "teacher" at times.