

## THE BUSINESS OF BEING DEAF

Ten years ago, if someone stated that a deaf person would be giving a talk on manual communication at the Detroit Day School for the Deaf, I would have found this statement very unbelievable. In this day and age, however, with so many attitudinal changes taking place on the part of those people connected with the education and welfare of all deaf people, it is very gratifying to see a program of this nature being initiated at this school. I sincerely appreciate the invitation extended me to address you here today. I can not, and do not, perceive of this invitation as an opportunity to revive the old manual-oral controversy. Rather, I can only express my appreciation to people like Dr. Kopp and Mr. Griswold for their realistic approaches to those factors that are relevant to the ultimate socialization of the deaf individual, child or adult. That is the goal for <sup>which</sup> every school, every training program for the deaf should strive.

The title of this paper, "The Business of Being Deaf" is too broad a subject to be covered in one brief talk, but it was chosen 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 condition.

No one individual invented our systems of manual communication. It would be correct to say that the manual modes of communication--like Topsy, and like all other language forms - "jes' grew." We do not know how far back into history they go. 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 mute people actually do, to make signs with our hands, and head



and person generally?"<sup>1</sup>

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 it is well within the bounds of reason to ask you to believe that the manual modes - of which there are several - were a natural development of the normal needs of the deaf people; such human needs as belongingness, security and self-esteem.

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 let us regard it as the simple, workaday "business" of making one's way in the world without the benefit of hearing. The function of manual communication will be better understood if you are made aware of the social skills as a whole that are called into play, and the complexity of the "business" of being deaf.

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, as some put it, better rapport can be established with deaf people. I would think you are seeking an empathic relationship with client or pupil which will stimulate him to discover things for himself. Stating it a bit differently, you could use manual communication as an instrument for facilitating the socialization process of the deaf individual.

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



Deaf people themselves do not always agree on how the manual modes should be used in public. A few claim that they should be kept out of sight, used only sub rosa, as it were. Most feel that they should be used without fear or favor, that there is nothing of which to be ashamed. My own view goes down the middle between these extremes. I feel strongly that there is nothing of which to be ashamed. At the same time, 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 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 testify to this complexity. All were highly articulate people who had never experienced particular difficulty with speech or language. If socialization was so difficult for those talented people, how much more difficult must it be for those who have had to and still continue to <sup>struggle to</sup> 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. He had learned to speak before losing his hearing. After this, he had actively continued to work on his pronunciation, pitch and intonation. He asked everyone closely associated with him to correct him whenever he made a mistake. As a matter of fact, so skilled was he that he could even conduct simple business transactions without anyone suspecting that he was deaf.

He met his Waterloo one day when he was dining 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 again and she still ducked lower. After three or four more 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 except for the clatter of knives, forks and chinaware - and my friend's voice shattering the comparative silence. I will leave the rest to your imagination.

But, can you advise me what to do to avoid conflict with background noises in public places? Should I simply cultivate a thick hide and 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 pad and pencil, as another friend of mine probably should have done when he ordered bacon and eggs? He prided himself on being a good lipreader, too, and when the waitress repeated what she thought he had ordered, he nodded his assent. Of course, a little argument ensued when she brought him two baked eggs.

But no matter what you advise, I hope you will understand that these are just two amusing samples of the embarrassment and frustration the deaf person must be prepared to meet in the daily round of living. Calkins, Warfield and Murphy - with normal speech and exceptionally articulate speech by any standard - all had their black days when they endured the sting of experiences far more poignant than my two friends.

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



The social scientists have not yet gotten around to a study of these problems in depth. We know for sure that a certain stigma is attached by some to the manual modes of communication used by the deaf. Even the expressive gesture is considered boorish by certain 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." <sup>2</sup>

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 myself was 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."<sup>3</sup> 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 the August-September, 1966 issue of the magazine Natural History, 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. She observed, "The best model we have for such an ideational language is that part of the language of the deaf which conveys concepts independently of the words of a particular language."<sup>4</sup>



This cannot be taken as an exact endorsement of manual communication for the deaf. Dr. Mead was thinking of other things. I mention it here 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 an important issue. One scholarly educator from the Netherlands who has 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 American Annals of the Deaf, in November, 1961.<sup>5</sup>

Hopefully, this background in the manual modes of communication will be of help as we now discuss its practical application. I do not want to steal the thunder from those who will instruct you in the techniques of manual communication, but it may be well to point out that manual communication has several different components. Fingerspelling makes it possible to spell out each word as if you were writing on a blackboard. By contrast, manual signs are the raw material for the "ideational language" Margaret Mead mentions. You might say that manual signs 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, forceful, beautiful or ugly. If you are in the right place at the right time, you may see an audience of deaf people break up in laughter at the humorous twist given to ideational manual symbols. Often, masters of the art among the deaf



exhibit a wide range of creativity and dramatic skill in telling a story.

Signs which indicate some feature, function or structure of the thing they symbolize are said to be "natural." (Examples - bird, deer, baby, eat, drink, book, house, boat, glasses, chain) Signs which are arbitrarily fixed by agreement or convention among the people who use them are said to be "arbitrary" or "conventional" signs. (Examples - play, work, necessary, explain) Often a "natural" sign becomes a conventional formal linguistic symbol 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 it will add interest in your study if you know the derivation or origins that give the symbols meaning. There is almost no limit to how far you as an interested scholar can go in this subject. You might end up as a creative pantomimist, a professional, like Bernard Bragg and other members of the cast of the National Theatre of the Deaf which has been touring the country the past two years, giving performances that have drawn rave notices from drama critics.

But I caution you, that is not easy. Some people claim to have learned the manual alphabet in half an hour. That may be true, but they have not acquired real facility and skill in its use. Some of you who have studied French probably had no difficulty learning the French alphabet. Speaking French is something else again. Facility comes only with practice. Real clarity and rhythm comes still later but both are well worth cultivating. They are equivalent to legible writing or articulate speaking. Rhythm can be used to add emphasis, just as vocal inflection adds emphasis to speech.

As an instructor of manual communication at DePaul University I have in class teachers in training, psychiatrists, psychologists and other professionals interested in working with the deaf. Among them



I find a huge variation in the capacity to learn and use manual communication fluently. Motivation is, of course, a key factor, and if one has genuine desire to acquire the skill and a commitment to communicating with deaf people, then teaching is made far easier and rapid learning occurs. On the other hand, some students enroll in the class to meet a course requirement, or figure it is something they can pick up easily. Is learning any language easy? Are you here because your bosses require you to be, or are you here because of a real desire to help the deaf person? I hope it is the latter and that you are approaching the training sessions with sincere and strong motivation.

A stumbling block with many hearing people, even those who begin working with the deaf is that they assume that when a deaf person finishes school, he has understandable speech, is a good lipreader and has a perfect command of language. They are somewhat shocked to find that this is not the case. Adding to their orientation problem is the fact that they are often told that those who do not speak or lipread well are "exceptions" when they are actually more the rule.

Another misconception many people have is that manual communication is associated with poor intelligence. Actually, there are deaf Ph. D's who do not speak or lipread well, but who are skilled manual communicators. There are also brilliant deaf persons with high IQ's who, because of their deafness and particular aptitudes, do not have a good command of language.

I would like to single out a few inaccurate concepts that lay people have about manual communication and comment on them. One which I consider more of an "old wives' tale" than fact is the assertion that deterioration in speech will result. My mother told me that when I became deaf, the doctor strongly advised her never to let me pick up any signs, but that was one of the first things I did. That was 39 years ago, and I am told by my family that my speech is better than



ever, considering my total loss of hearing. Results of studies made in the early use of manual communication, by Stuckless and Birch (1966), Montgomery (1966) and Meadow (1967) revealed that "exposure to, use of, and preference for manual communication did not negatively affect speech or speech reading skills of deaf children."

Then there are others who say that the manual mode of communication lacks syntax. Actually, it is a language in the same sense as English, German and French. It has syntax and vocabulary as do all formal linguistic systems. Reference for this is found in studies mad by W. C. Stokoe, D. C. Casterline and C. G. Croneberg in 1960 and 1964. <sup>6 7</sup>

Instead of people trying to point out the flaws in the manual mode of communication, I would like to see them, as some schools are now doing, find ways to improve upon it, to supplement the speech training and the educational process. If a combination of the language of signs and fingerspelling is taught to young deaf children following the syntactical principles of English, then the manual communication of these children would be in correct English syntax, i.e., the manual symbols would be isomorphic to the English language symbols. At the present time, the language of signs and fingerspelling are learned surreptitiously instead of with correct guidance and supervision. Hence, like any "underground language" it is highly idiomatic and does not always parallel the English language in some of its contructions, especially when used by uneducated persons. The educated deaf person makes every effort to express manual communication in correct English syntax and it is even a practice, and could be considered an art, with those who have good speech to talk orally and sign and fingerspell at the same time for the benefit of both hearing and deaf persons present. A fair enough deal. In this way, if they are speaking in correct English syntax, it follows that the manual mode will be repeated in the same way.



I could tell you many stories about the psychological effect upon a deaf child and a deaf adult when they meet a person who cares enough to communicate manually. I have seen the face of a deaf individual light up when, after unsuccessful efforts to communicate orally, the hearing person resorts to the manual mode. Instantly, there seems to be a camaraderie of sorts. This is the empathy mentioned earlier. On the other hand, consider the frustrations encountered by deaf people when no one cares to communicate with them other than orally. Dr. McGay Vernon of the Psychosomatic and Psychiatric Institute of Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago tells me of the many deaf patients there who are total isolates and require hospitalization for mental illness because they were unable to learn to speak and lipread nor were their families taught manual communication. Michael Reese is only one place. I mention it because it is staffed with personnel who can help the deaf patients, can communicate with them. There are hundreds of other such patients in hospitals all over the country.

There is one vivid case of the emotional impact on a deaf man who was denied exposure to manual communication when it may have helped him most. He was 25 years old when he was referred to me, not so much to learn the manual mode but to show him that deaf people can be successful through use of it. Years of oral instruction had resulted in no progress whatever in his ability to speak. After a number of sessions with him, we began to understand each other quite well and he related a very frustrating period of his youth. His mother used to make him take a book and read the words out loud. Each time he mispronounced a word - and there were many, many times - his mother would slap him on the back of his head. Then, out of the blue, he said, "I am glad my mother is dead." This was a terrible thing to have someone say about his own mother, but think of the damaging effect upon this man's emotional makeup as the result of his mother's obsession to make her son



accomplish something that was very difficult for him to do. How much better would her son's emotional stability be if she had been realistic enough to see his limitations in his formative years, swallowed her pride and let him have the benefit of other modes of communication.

A positive step which would have a good psychological effect on deaf children would be for the parents of these children to use manual communication as a supplement to speech. It would indicate to the child that the parents are readily accepting his deafness and its implications and will give him that psychological boost that will greatly improve his adjustment to it. In Chicago, a growing number of parents are enrolling in manual communication classes, and almost without exception, they have related how/closer <sup>much</sup> it has brought their child to them. There is no longer as much strain in family relationship, conversation is relaxing, frustrations reduced and personality development shows a very positive improvement. This total involvement by teachers, counselors and parents should be a part of your program.

I am sure that in the city of Detroit there are a number of people, both deaf and hearing, who will be very receptive to setting up classes for these parents. Chicago is no less oral than Detroit, educationwise, yet we are hard put to meet the demand for manual communication classes. Also, the contact with successful deaf adults who have learned the business of being deaf can be a source of inspiration to them.

I hope you approach this undertaking with much optimism, and that it will certainly rub off on the deaf children and clients in your charge. Be flexible, be empathic, and above all, be persistent in your efforts to merge well those ingredients that contribute - not to normalcy - but to the business of being deaf.



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