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## DEAF AWARENESS<sup>1</sup>

James C. Woodward, Jr.

Until recently, deafness has been looked upon primarily as a medical problem a sickness—something to be studied and cured. Deafness has been seen as a handicap, as if the only way to help a deaf person is to make him hearing. But because a deaf person is deaf, he can't be exactly like a hearing person. So, many people have reasoned that deaf people cannot be as good as hearing people.

People who believe in deaf awareness disagree with the ideas I have just expressed. These people, like, myself, who believe in deaf awareness, believe that deaf people do not *have to* become like hearing people to be successful in life. They believe that deaf people should have a choice of how they want to be educated and how they want to live their lives. For deaf people really can belong to either or both of two groups. Deaf people can belong to the deaf world or to the hearing world or to both these worlds.

We hear enough about the hearing world on T.V. and in newspapers: Vietnam, Cambodia, the Watergate—We do not in my opinion hear enough about the deaf world.

By the deaf world, I do not mean some imaginary world. I mean a real world, a living world, a world full of people who interact with each other. The deaf world has its own national organizations, its own small social clubs, its own churches. It has its own schools, and, most important, the deaf world has its own language that ties it together—sign language.

<sup>1</sup>From an address to graduates of The Montana School for the Deaf, 1 June 1973.

People who believe in deaf awareness are most concerned with deaf education and deaf language. Many schools for the deaf do not want to hire deaf people as teachers. Some deaf students I have taught did not meet a deaf adult until they were thirteen years old or even older. How can hearing people alone teach deaf people to understand themselves? How many hearing people really understand what it is like to be deaf?

I recently read a story in one of the Washington newspapers about some hearing parents of a deaf child who put their child into an oral program. They had discussed total communication and oralism with counselors and experts and had decided on oralism. The main reason they gave was that they didn't want to force their child to take the "easy way" of total communication. That is their choice, but I wonder how many deaf people these parents talked to before making their decision. Was the doctor deaf? Were the counselors deaf? Were the experts deaf? Have these parents ever met a deaf person socially? If they have, I wonder what they think of the real sign for oralism?

The philosophy of total communication may or may not agree with the philosophy of deaf awareness. It depends on the definition of total communication. To me, total communication does not just mean signing and speaking at the same time. Total communication means allowing deaf people a choice: speech when appropriate, speech and signing when appropriate, signing like English when appropriate, and signing *Ameslan* when appropriate. (I want to point out briefly here that *Ameslan* or real "deaf signing" is not poor English but a separate language with its own grammar.) An ideal total communication program would allow and encourage deaf students to learn several different ways of signing, as well as of speaking and writing. In other words, it would make the students as linguistically flexible as possible.

Actually language is at the center of deaf awareness. Communication is the basis for learning. If people do not respect *all* languages of the deaf community, how can they respect deaf people and the deaf world? How can communication occur without respect? How can learning occur without communication? Strict oralism has not generally succeeded with

most deaf students; total communication will not either, unless it encourages respect for all *deaf* languages.

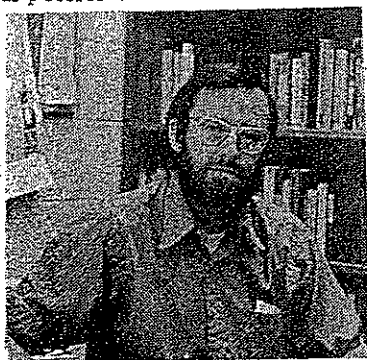
When I first became involved in deaf education four years ago, I was discouraged. With all of the negative attitudes I observed towards sign language, I felt that a change in ideas would be slow in coming. However in the past two years I have seen a dramatic change. Let me cite some examples: First in research: the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in California, and the Research, Development, and Demonstration Center at the University of Minnesota now have projects to study sign language acquisition in children; and the Linguistics Research Laboratory at Gallaudet College has grants from the National Science Foundation and the National Institute of Mental Health to study the structure of *Ameslan* and the relation of signs and English in the languages deaf people use. Second, in schools: many schools for the deaf have switched to total communication; several hearing colleges now accept sign language as a second language for degrees; Gallaudet now offers a course in *Ameslan*, coordinated by the Department of Audiology and Speech; and this year the State University at Northridge, California, will begin offering a program leading to a college degree in sign language.

Times are changing for the deaf and their languages. But there is still a lot of change that needs to happen. I hope you graduating students will strive to be a part of that change. Be aware of your deafness. Be proud you can belong to *two* worlds, hearing and deaf. Be proud of your languages and yourselves. But most important, remember your experiences as deaf people. Try to use your experiences to help other, younger deaf people to "be aware;" and, perhaps this is more important, try to help hearing people understand the meaning of deafness. To paraphrase your class motto: you have entered school and learned. It is now time for you to go forth and serve the hearing and the deaf in both worlds.

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# FACULTY AND STAFF FORUM

The other night several of us were sitting around talking about the academic program at Gallaudet. The gist of our conversation would be familiar to most instructors at Gallaudet, and emerging our discussion came a familiar controversy: do we, as instructors of the deaf, limit the scope of our discussion in the classroom to the dominant hearing culture? Do we, that is, ignore the culture of deafness and its language for the sake of exposing our students to as much of the "outside world" as possible?



Mr. Batson

Many instructors here will answer "yes" to that last question. "After all," we might say to our students, "you may have been able to hide in your 'world' up until now, but you just wait until you graduate! Then it will be all English and all hearing people, and no more will people take care of you." And with this half-cocked, self-righteous notion we run off to show our poor students what the world is all about. What blatherskites we must seem to them! What bootless bromides we feed them! What cackling caitiffs we are!

We instructors all know of the students who didn't improve in their use of English during five years here yet who, in one year out working, suddenly

became rather fluent in English. Well, we say, they finally found the motivation. Or we know of the students with poor English who met a student of the opposite sex whose first language was English and who then grew quite well-spoken in English. Strange coincidence! If one uses a language, one learns it! What a marvelous discovery! We could say the same of learning about the dominant culture as well; if there is interest, one quickly becomes quite well-informed about what is happening in America. Our students here at Gallaudet have the ability, we all know that, yet at the same time we all recognize a much too widespread lassitude—a simple lack of interest in using English outside of the classroom or in reading the newspaper or in discovering what American culture is all about.

The question which naturally arises out of all this is, if this lassitude persists, can a program, a program, which captures the attention of a student for only a percentage of his waking hours do much for him

especially if it captures his ATTENTION, but not his INTEREST?

What, then, is behind this lassitude or indifference? For, it seems that until we understand the cause of that, we are wasting time devising ever more sophisticated programs that fail ever more grandly.

Our question is this: without pride in one's own culture and language, can one have pride in an adopted culture? If one's own language, sign language for example, is suppressed or ignored or scoffed at, how can one generate interest in learning a "foreign language" (English, for example)? The same, of course, goes for culture. Do you know anyone who is weak in his native language, but very strong in a foreign language? A ridiculous question.

Some will say that we at Gallaudet do not suppress or ignore or scoff at the culture of the deaf. After all, we DO now officially encourage the simultaneous method.



Mr. Woodard

We ask, however, where are the courses for students in American Sign Language? Can a student major in American Sign Language? And where is the Deaf Studies Program? Yes, in print, right now, we are asking that most obvious, but incredibly impossible question.

Do you mean to say that Gallaudet College does not have a formal Deaf Studies Program? Where else on earth should it exist? From a disinterested standpoint, one would have to conclude that the official policy of Gallaudet College has always been that there is no such thing as a deaf culture, a deaf language or even a deaf experience: deaf people, it would appear, are only slightly quieter hearing persons.

We suggest that as long as there is so little interest on our part in the world of the deaf, the world of the deaf will have little interest in us. The lassitude lies deep in the soul, we feel, for it is the malaise of a long-suppressed minority. One must have a strong sense of identity to be a strong and active person; a large part of that identity depends on culture and language. If we want motivated and active students here at Gallaudet, we can help by quickly establishing a deaf studies program with courses in various academic disciplines related to the deaf culture. This is not for the purpose of dividing or separating, it instead would work toward building a strong

foundation of cultural identity and linguistic competence that would allow the students here to more easily and eagerly assimilate into both the deaf and the hearing cultures. Let's stop ignoring the obvious!