

DEAF CULTURE AND LANGUAGE... A PLACE TO BEGIN~

Maryann Barth, ICF Conference, Mexico City, August 2003

Introduction

Thank you for giving me this amazing opportunity to speak with all of you today. I'm indeed honored and humbled to be part of this international conference. Truly wonderful, talented, highly skilled groups of people—all of you!

The topic, “Deaf Culture and Language, A Place to Begin,”

To Begin ~ Some terms that we will be using this morning—culture, Deaf, deaf, hard-of-hearing, hearing-impaired, cochlear implant, sign language, sign systems, oralism, liberation theology, and deaf liberation theology.

Deaf people, universally, comprise a complex, rich, and multi-faceted society. Just as each hearing person has unique, intrinsic qualities so do deaf people, whether the person is deaf, hard-of-hearing, hearing-impaired, or deaf-blind – all ‘deaf’ people bring some elements of homogeneity and heterogeneity to the arena of humanity.

Deafness/deafness

The term ‘deaf’ seems like a word that is easily understood and explained, but in reality, ‘deaf’ people are some of the most misunderstood people in society. Deafness can be viewed from two perspectives, pathological and cultural. The pathological perspective views deafness as an audiological deficit that needs to be repaired, something is wrong, something is broken, and therefore ‘impaired.’ The most intense and graphic example of deafness as a pathological condition was the eugenics and holocaust experiences of deaf people in 1930s – 1945. During this time frame, the passage of the Sterilization Law and the T4 Program were directly responsible for thousands of deaf people being forced to be sterilized or eradicated. The reason, they were deaf. And deafness in that place and time was seen as purely pathological and something that had to be erased.

Deaf/deaf/hard-of-hearing/hearing-impaired

Four simple words, simply understood? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. To help define these words, we will rely on the authors, Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture (1988)*:

“We use the lowercase deaf when referring to the audiological condition of not hearing, and the uppercase Deaf when referring to a particular group of deaf people who share a language –(ASL in America) – and a culture. The members of this group have inherited their sign language, use it as a primary means of communication among themselves, and hold a set of beliefs about themselves and their connection to the larger society. We distinguish them from, for example, those who find themselves losing their

hearing because of illness, trauma or age; although these people share the condition of not hearing, they do not have access to the knowledge, beliefs, and practices that make up the culture of Deaf people.”

The term *hard-of-hearing* refers to people who have some hearing, are able to use it for communication, and who feel comfortable (in varying degrees). From an audiological/pathological perspective, this group of people tends to have a mild to moderate hearing loss. To explain *hard-of-hearing*, the magazine “*Deaf Life*”, article “For Hearing People Only, (October, 1997, pg. 8):

“Hard-of-hearing” people can denote a person with a mild-to-moderate hearing loss. Or it can denote a deaf person who doesn’t have/want any cultural affiliation with the Deaf community. Or both. The HOH dilemma: in some ways hearing, in some ways deaf, in other, neither.”

Hearing-impaired is a word that has evolved to include hearing loss from mild to profound. The very word ‘impaired’ denotes something that is ‘broken’ and needs to be repaired. Often the label of ‘hearing-impaired’ is used in connection with education, organizations, political structure, etc. One word is used to ‘collectively’ describe a group of people whose hearing loss varies from mild to profound.

For all of these terms, Deaf/deaf/hard-of-hearing/hearing-impaired, it is crucial that we remember that it is the *person* who decides which ‘label’ to use. We do not define the person, the person defines her/himself.

Deaf Culture

What is *culture*? We use the word ‘culture’ freely and often, but what is the core meaning? How does culture apply to us individually and as a society? How does culture apply to us globally and within the context of ‘church’? What IS deaf culture?

Culture, simply stated, is a way of “being.” Our ‘being’ is what we, as individuals possess internally, our values, traditions, mores/rules, language, and identity - our essence, the heart of who we are.

In Deaf Culture there are CORE components. They are, sign language (each differing with each country/area/region), identity, residential school experience, deaf parents, respect and use of sign language, sacredness of the hands, sacredness of the eyes, importance of social activities, and folklore/stories that transmit deaf culture values. The *Center* or the *Core* of Deaf Culture is: identity as a deaf person, audiological deafness, identification and affiliation with the Deaf Community, sign language (ASL, BSL, etc.), deaf parents, deaf residential school, and adherence to deaf culture values. From this ‘core’, variations exist. People who are audiotically hard of hearing, who identify and are affiliated with the deaf community, use sign language, and embrace the deaf cultural values, are still within the ‘circle of deaf culture, but not within the core group. There are varying degrees of membership within the Deaf Community, hearing children with deaf

parents, extended family members who are deaf and hearing people who work with deaf individuals. It is comparable to a pond of water in which a pebble has been tossed in the middle. The middle is the core group, and as the water ripples, each ripple represents another group of people within the deaf community. The farther the ripples extend from the core of the pond, the less membership value the person has with the deaf community. Using the pond and pebble water analogy, all of us at this conference are part of the deaf community in some way. Welcome to the POND and welcome to the DEAF WORLD!

Elements of Culture/Deaf Culture

What are some of the elements of culture and deaf culture? One of the ‘key’ elements to ANY culture is communication. Within the Deaf/deaf community, communication is diverse, American Sign Language, British Sign Language, French Sign Language, etc. But as we know, communication within the deaf community is not limited to only sign languages. We have people who use sign systems, i.e., Signing Exact English, people who speech/lip-read, people who use sign language and speech/lip-read. Just as each person is an individual, so too is the communication venue that each person uses and feels most comfortable using. Is one communication system better than another? Or should we ask, how is our 21st century environment influencing communication within the deaf community?

Approximately 35 years ago, sign language was referred to as ‘*the sign language*.’ Deaf life was referred to as ‘deaf way.’ The 21st century has brought us from ‘*the sign language*’, to American Sign Language, British Sign Language, Mexican Sign Language, French Quebec Sign Language, Thai Sign Language, Irish Sign Language, etc. ‘Deaf Way’ has evolved into Deaf Culture. For many individuals, being deaf brings the questions; residential school or mainstreamed school, hearing aids or cochlear implant surgery; decisions that many deaf individuals did not face 35 years ago. For many deaf people, decisions of the 21st century are as exciting or as disenchanting as the Congress of Milan, Italy in 1880, when sign language was banned as the mode of communication for deaf education.

In Europe, in the 1800s, France and Italy were staunch supporters of the oralist movement. French oralists petitioned the government to issue reports stating that sign language lacked grammar and prevented deaf people from understanding French. Isn’t it ironic that France had Charles de l’Epee, Sicard, and Clerc, all prestigious, educated, men in the field of deafness and sign language; and yet, France ordered all schools supported by the French government to use oral French. And the superintendent of the Paris Deaf School, who supported sign language, was fired and replaced by an otologist doctor who possessed no support for sign language. Amazing!

Italy was experiencing the same type of suppression of sign language. Catholic Clerics dominated deaf education and were supporters of oralism. Two men, Abbe’ Balestra and Father Pendola, converted the schools to oralism. France and Italy joined ‘hands’ in planning the 1880 Milan Conference/Congress/Convention. Attendees were primarily from Italy and France. With the position that speech was superior and

articulation was the method for education, the proposal to ban sign language for educational purposes was passed.

Americans in attendance were few, Edward Gallaudet and Thomas Gallaudet, being two of the five people from America, two instrumental people in America's history of deaf education, specifically, Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. Total attendance for the conference was 164 participants, 143 from Italy and France, 163 hearing participants and one deaf participant

With the Congress of Milan, the suppression of sign language seemed to logically mean the suppression of the culture, but quite the contrary. Deaf Culture did and has survived! The very nature of oppression, discrimination, and solidarity of deaf people, strengthened the culture. Deaf culture being a high-context culture enables information and minute details to be disseminated in the community. Being a high-context culture, a broad social network is of the 'norm' with family, friends, and community members, sharing common experiences, knowledge, language, and a common bond – deafness. Individualism is superseded by collectivism; community-belonging and social relationships are of paramount importance. Deaf survivors, adopted 'deaf' families, community membership, information sharing (information is precious), common struggles, rules for introductions and leave-taking are all components of *the deaf life, i.e. Deaf culture*. All of these qualities contributed to the vitality and survival of the culture.

In America, there is a community, Martha's Vineyard, an island off the coast of Massachusetts, which is rich in Deaf Heritage, History, and Deaf Culture. In the early 19th century, Martha's Vineyard was 'deaf.' One child in every 155 born on Martha's Vineyard was deaf compared with one child out of several thousand born in the U.S. at that time. On Martha's Vineyard, 85% of deaf children had hearing parents. Sign language, deaf culture, deaf life, was the way of 'being' on Martha's Vineyard. Deaf and hearing people signed, embraced deaf life, and deafness was not seen as 'pathological', but rather just the way 'to be.'

Deaf Culture in the 21st Century

Will Deaf Culture continue as it is today? No. Cultures change with society, and the deaf community is a viable, growing, ever changing group of people. Deaf Culture will change as deaf people change. The culture will evolve, but Deaf Culture will remain with specific qualities inherent with the 21st century deaf community. What will the 21st Deaf Culture look like? I wonder!

How do we *preserve* Deaf Culture? Sign language; not sign systems, but the actual language, storytelling, folklore, jokes, tales, legends, sign -play, ABC stories, number stories, art, sculpture, etc. must be preserved for our future deaf generations. We can see Deaf Culture changing now. With mainstreaming being prevalent, the art of ABC stories, number stories, folklore, and storytelling, are not encountered until the student assimilates into the deaf community. Often this happens AFTER the education

process has been completed. Much of our news and activities is now disseminated via computers, e-mail, pagers, and television. In the past, information, news, story sharing, were transmitted to deaf members of Deaf Clubs. In today's world, Deaf Clubs are still apparent, but in diminishing numbers. The emphasis has moved from "Club" to "Cyberspace".... getting information quickly and being on 'par' with hearing people who use cyberspace technology.

How will the cochlear implants impact Deaf Culture? The first cochlear implant surgery was performed in Paris in 1961. The same year, the first American implant surgery was performed. The surgery has met with strong positions, both pro and con. In the early 1990s several position papers were written outlining concerns regarding the surgery for children. Some of the communities who expressed their views were: The Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf, the Danish Deaf Association, the Netherlands Deaf Association, the Austrian Deaf Association, the Swedish Deaf Association, the German Deaf Association, and the British Deaf Association. Since the early 1990s, views have changed, the surgery has improved, but the debate is ever-present.

To meet the demands of cochlear implant students, Gallaudet University in Washington, D. C. has established 'classes' to assist in the transition to Gallaudet University, the only liberal arts university for the deaf in the world. At Gallaudet University, deafness is a way of 'being' the same as it was a way of 'being' at Martha's Vineyard. For students with cochlear implants, attending a deaf university is a transition from a world that is neither all deaf, nor all hearing, to a world that uses various modes of communication, American Sign Language, and where Deaf Culture is very much alive, well, and thriving!

Language/Communication/Sign Language

Now to the next part of this information sharing----language. Culture and language are intertwined, especially within the Deaf Community. As mentioned previously, one of the components of the core of Deaf Culture is sign language. But do all deaf people sign? No. Each person has their unique skills and talents for production and reception of language—THEIR language! But several things we DO know. From the perspective of American Sign Language, ASL, research has proven that ASL *is* a language with rules, grammar, syntax; a complete natural language, not like English.

In this brief presentation, one cannot present all the linguistic features of ASL, but a few are: phonology, the simultaneous formation of a sign-handshape, location, motion, and palm orientation; morphology, the study of the smallest meaningful unit in language and how units are used to build new signs and word. In ASL, examples of morphemes are; summer, ugly, dry...location of the sign changes the meaning. Other elements of ASL linguistics, but definitely NOT the ALL of the linguistic structure are: temporal aspect (forms that are adjective and verbs, verb action is done TO time, i.e. 'study continually'.), various types of classifiers, non-manual markers, eye gaze, facial expression, body shifts, and pauses. The linguistic features are numerous, and definitely ASL is a bona fide language!

Linguists know that the brain has the capacity to acquire language, naturally, and pass the language to other people. This brain function happens whether it is a *spoken* language or a *signed* language. Many assumptions about sign languages have been debated, discussed, and researched.

- Sign languages are pantomime—false.
- Sign languages are highly pictorial or *iconic* – true.
- Many people feel, therefore, that sign languages can only express concrete ideas – false. Some people also feel that sign languages are universal – false. Seeing all the interpreters working at this conference refutes that statement!
- And last, many people feel that ASL is a primitive language, a lesser than English type of communication system – false!

ASL is NOT the same as English. ASL is a fully developed autonomous language with grammar, syntax, sentence structure, and discourse!

Survival!

With all the various modes of communication, ‘labels’ of identity, pathological versus cultural issues, and society’s ‘input’, how DO we survive? We survive with humor. We survive with networking. We survive by reaching out to our fellow man/woman. We survive by being “church.” We survive by ‘stretching’ ourselves to be open to explore liberation theology, deaf liberation theology. We survive by having open minds and open hearts. We survive by having a sense of humor!

What do culture, communication, and liberation theology have in common? Is there a deaf liberation theology? And if so, what does this mean for ‘us’ as ‘church?’

Liberation Theology

Liberation theology is historically rooted in the early colonial days of Latin America. In the 1960s, churches began to see their missions not only as ‘in church’ but a social mission. Laypersons committed themselves to work with poor and disadvantaged people, marginalized people. By 1974 the Synod of Bishops published “Evangelization of the Modern World.” In 1975, Pope Paul VI wrote *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, which included his ideas regarding the relationship between evangelization and liberation. Simply stated, Pope Paul VI gave a clear proclamation of the wants and longing of oppressed people for liberation.

Oppressed people...deaf people...oppressed deaf people. Do we as ‘church’ recognize that deaf people, deaf communities all over the world, are wanting, desiring, and hungry for liberation? Do we as ‘church’ understand that deaf liberation theology means not merely access to church, spiritual development, sacraments, Liturgy, but deaf liberation theology means equitability in spiritual development, sacraments, Liturgy, and

‘church.’ Deaf liberation theology is seeing and working with the entire person...working within the structure of deaf culture, working with a community that is still marginalized and oppressed. Deaf liberation theology is having all of us come together not as Deaf, deaf, hearing, hard of hearing, deaf-blind, but coming together as the Body of Christ.

How do we, “the Body of Christ”, Deaf/deaf/hearing/Catholic, how do we, each different, each members of the Body of Christ, identify ourselves? Are we an oppressed people, or are we people who are working to break the bonds of oppression?

We, in this place, are Catholic. We, in this place, are working and living within the parameters of Deaf Culture. How does Deaf culture compliment and contrast with Catholicism? How can we better identify and exemplify ourselves as Deaf, Catholic and/or Deaf Catholics?

When home, what can each of us do to find ‘the lost sheep’ and *invite* them back to church, being *with* and not doing *for* the Deaf community?

Reflecting on Jesus’ ministry and life, how can each of us reach out and touch Deaf people by using and respecting Deaf Culture rules/beliefs, etc.?

In being here this week, what will you learn that you can share and ‘give’ to your Deaf community? We have many cultures here this week—an extremely rich experience. What can we learn from this experience? How can we take this ‘rich’ experience and share it with our Deaf Communities at home?

Communication is essential for humanity. Communication is vital for culture. How can we have viable communication with bishops, priests, nuns, lay pastoral ministers/workers, and lay people—meaningful dialogue that is open, sensitive to all cultural needs?

When we leave here, HOW can WE stay connected in meaningful dialogue and communication? Can we?

OUR deaf liberation mission begins here, but never ends.

OUR deaf evangelization mission begins here, but never ends.

In closing, we are ALL part of a larger culture, a larger language, and a larger society. We are members of the Body of Christ. We ALL are here at the *Pond/Water at the Well*. We are all here at the *Well*, waiting and wanting to drink. There are no differences in the types of water for Deaf, deaf, hearing, hearing-impaired, or deaf-blind people. The *water at the well* is the same---living water. This water is water that gives us new life, new life with Mary. Mary who gives us hope; hope that what we experience this week is a meeting of cultures, languages, and hearts. A meeting of minds, hearts, and hands, which will translate into hearts and hands of action. Action that leads us to work *with* deaf communities all over the world. Our hearts are open, now what can our

treasured *hands* do to show what is in our hearts? Let us go forward with one culture and one language – the culture of sensitivity and empathy for all peoples. Let us go forward with one language – the language of the *heart*.

Thank you for coming. Thank you for going forward to do the “Action”.

Thank you for being part of the Deaf Community and coming to the *Well*.

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