

The Adult Years

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Introduction

Distinguished members of the Commission on the Social Aspects of Deafness, it is indeed a great honor for me to be with you this morning. I come before you humbly, for I am neither a sociologist nor deaf—and yet I must speak about the adult years for deaf persons! In fact, I have not even been an adult long enough to feel qualified to speak on this topic!

I am, however, an educator, and I have been concerned for many years with the problems of deaf persons and their effectiveness in society. Within this past year I became an educator for a second time! I became the greatest kind of educator there is—I became a father. My son is eight years old; he is deaf, one of our abandoned waifs who came into a world which had no place for him.

But he found a place in my heart, and I in his—and today I wish to speak to you not as an educator, but as a father. A father who dreams that someday his son will be great among men; a father who sees in his son the hope for a bright tomorrow. Someday my son will become an adult; that will be the time in which everything which had been planted blossoms forth. Will his life be fruitful? Or will it have been a waste? A waste because society could not accept my son as a deaf person—a person who could do anything, but hear. Will there be—can there be—a place for my son in this world? That is the essence of what I want to talk about today.

Of necessity, I must focus my attention on the developing and underdeveloped countries where the greatest challenges to full citizenship for all deaf people are found.

Background

I do not wish to become too specific with one country; however, I feel that I should set the stage for my address by telling you something of the Philippines. Many of the things which I shall say about the Philippines are applicable to other developing and underdeveloped countries; I shall try to indicate areas of similarity.

The Philippines is an archipelago of 7,107 islands stretching for nearly 2000 kilometers off the southern coast of mainland Asia. As a developing country, the Philippines is faced by a number of serious problems. Agricultural production has been insufficient to meet the existing and growing demands of the country in spite of the fact that 85 per cent of the population depends on agriculture for their livelihood. Industrialization has not developed sufficiently to provide a firm economic base or to utilize effectively the best human and natural resources of the country. Moreover, the industry which has developed is concentrated in only a few areas. As with other developing and underdeveloped countries, the struggle for survival has, in general, left deaf people behind.

Socially, as with most other countries in Southeast Asia, the Philippines has an extended family structure which provides an umbrella of paternalistic care from which deaf people are not

immune. This paternalism is, however, a blessing in disguise since it provides the basic material needs for the vast majority of our deaf people. Given the prevailing attitude of most of our people towards the deaf (or the handicapped in general) as *sayang* meaning a pitiful waste, this paternalism provides a necessary bridge to sustain deaf people until such time as attitudes can be changed and existing government agencies and programs can be expanded for and oriented towards the needs of the deaf. In other words, what society is not now doing is undertaken by the extended family structure.

In terms of national development, this situation is most damaging because it essentially place the burden of the estimated 200,000 or more deaf individuals in the Philippines on the shoulders of the rest of us. What educational planners and technocrats in developing and underdeveloped countries often fail to appreciate is that funds spent to make deaf persons self-sufficient have double impact: First, they enable the deaf individual to contribute to national development; secondly, they remove the burden of providing for this individual from the rest of society.

Unlike many other developing and underdeveloped countries, the Philippines has a proliferation of organizations and associations for the deaf. This is due primarily to our colonial past. As an American colony we were one of the first countries in Southeast Asia to have an educational program for the deaf; this was established by the American educator Dr. Delight Rice, whom many of you may remember.

We have one national organization for the deaf, a private organization originally established by, of and for the deaf, patterned after America's National Association of the Deaf. Today, like many other countries (not just the developing ones, either), this organization is controlled by hearing persons who have no contact and are unable to communicate with the deaf. This is one reason why this organization has been unable to meet the basic needs of our deaf or even to expand its facilities beyond the Greater Manila area where the vast majority of the deaf population resides.

We have other, smaller, organizations for the deaf, all controlled by hearing persons with varying degrees of association and familiarity with the deaf. One of these, the missionary school of Rev. Ada Coryell, is the first school for the deaf outside of the greater Manila area. Another, the Model School of the Southeast Asian Institute for the Deaf, is the first total communication school for the deaf in Southeast Asia. A local optometrist has established an oral clinic for the deaf, however, because of the high fees necessitated by the cost of his equipment and his strict adherence to a pure oral philosophy, only a few deaf children are involved in his program.

The government of the Philippines, unlike many other governments, is involved in special education. Since all education, both public and private, in the Philippines is under strict government control, there is tremendous potential for rapid educational improvement for the deaf. The government operates a national school for the deaf and a handful of special education

classes scattered throughout the country. The national school for the deaf by its sheer size (nearly 1000 students) vastly overshadows all other efforts for the deaf combined. A recent study of the graduates of the national school for the deaf shows that the average high school graduate has less than a grade two literacy level. This is due in part to the fact that school officials were trained a number of years ago in various American oral schools and have been unable to adapt to the needs of our own Philippine situation.

If I were a pessimist, I would say that the situation in which deaf people find themselves in the Philippines and other developing and underdeveloped countries is bleak. If I were an optimist, I would say that our situation is challenging. As a parent, I share with many other parents a deep sense of frustration and isolation. Indeed, the most difficult aspect of having a deaf child in our country (and for that matter in the United States or any other country) is that we, the parents, must make long-range, life-affecting decisions for our children, and we must make these decisions with inadequate, faulty, and, more often than not, conflicting information provided by the so-called authorities in the field of deafness. As parents, we are not satisfied with the output of our various programs and organizations for the deaf, i.e., we do not want our deaf children to become like the deaf adults we see around us, yet we see no concerted effort to alter these various programs and organizations to produce an output something like what we see in the United States and other developed countries.

To summarize what I have said in the way of background material, let me say that, for whatever the reasons may be, deaf adults in our country, as in most other countries, are not what they could and should be. As a parent, I simply want more for my deaf child.

Goals For the Adult Years

When I say that I want more for my deaf child, I must be more specific. What exactly do we want for deaf adults? I have defined four areas of life and will attempt to elaborate upon what I would like to see for my deaf child in each area. The four areas are cultural, social, economic, and religious.

Cultural Area

I shall probably spend most of my time on the cultural area as I feel that it is the most important. Indeed, the other areas tend to fall into place once the cultural area is in order. I have been greatly influenced in my thinking by cultural anthropologist Edward T. Hall and his classic work *The Silent Language*. Culture, Hall says, is communication. And as we all know, deafness is a debilitating handicap, not simply because of its physiological effects, but because it strikes at man's communication link.

With impaired communication, a deaf individual does not learn the essence of his culture—the subtle cues, the behavioral laws that bind a people together into a cultural or ethnic group. These are denied the deaf individual. In every country of the world, where two deaf people meet, they automatically form a cultural minority complete with all the behavioral and linguistic characteristics we normally associate with a cultural minority. The pioneering work of Stokoe and others at Gallaudet College has shown analytically what those of us active with deaf people have known, at least subconsciously, for years that the American Sign Language (Ameslan) and other national sign languages

are complete, distinct languages on a par with any spoken language.

So, deaf adults form a minority culture—a subcultural group within their host culture, complete with their own language and folk ways. There is no doubt that deaf persons will always enjoy each other's company, but what we often see is a situation where the host culture, i.e., the hearing world, is completely excluded from the world of the deaf adult. Joanne Greenberg draws a most eloquent and poignant picture of life for the deaf adult trapped in this subculture in her book *In This Sign*; it is not a pretty picture.

And what causes this? The essence of culture has been destroyed; the deaf individual cannot communicate because he has been denied the vehicle for communication—language. Do not misunderstand me; all deaf persons have a language (even if it is the language of visual images or things which they encounter daily) but what is required is the language; the language of the host culture. For without language competency, essential communication cannot take place which makes an individual a member of a cultural group.

Before I continue talking about language and culture, I would like to say a few words about the nature of language. I often elicit a few raised eyebrows when people learn that, in addition to my work with deaf people, I am also a mathematician (I'm often kidded about working with deaf people and, in mathematics, the dumb); people think that no two fields of study could be further apart. Actually, I find a great deal of overlap. The essence of deafness is communication; in mathematics and computer science we deal with information (communication is the transmission of information. Indeed, computers are simply information machines; they store and process information. Recent studies by Johns Hopkins University psychologist Alphonse Chapanis, essentially concerned with communication between man and computers, will have profound impact in our own field. Chapanis shows, among other things, that communication, in the English language, is most effective in the **voice mode**. In fact, a direct comparison between the communication-rich mode, (i.e., the usual face-to-face communication between hearing people and the voice-only mode shows that the communication-rich mode is only slightly better than the voice-only mode! Of interest, too, is the fact that when voice is not present (in such modes as hand-written communication and teletypewriter communication), communication effectiveness in English is severely impaired. I would hope that some day studies similar to those of Chapanis would show that communicating with sign language and lipreading can be as effective as the communication-rich mode. But we do not know—and the fact is the English, spawned by speaking persons, will remain principally a spoken language (as opposed to, let us say, Latin, which is now only a written language). So, perhaps deaf persons are at a disadvantage from the very start in acquiring and using the language of their host culture.

Which brings me back to my original concern—language and culture. If the deaf adult is to integrate into the host culture, he must be proficient in the spoken language of the host culture (though perhaps only in its written form) and this proficiency must begin from infancy if true acculturation is to take place. Recent trends in education, however, have introduced the concept of bilingualism in education of the deaf,—i.e., a first language of, let us say, Ameslan and a second language of English. I will say no more about this since it is outside the scope of my present talk; however, keep in mind that educators of the deaf must make a very critical decision in this regard, one which will

have very profound ramifications for the next generation of deaf adults.

Let me conclude my discussion of culture by saying that I, like most of our parents, feel that the greatest gift I can give my deaf child is his culture. We are Filipinos;—we want our children to share their rich cultural heritage. And there is only one way we can do this: We must give our children language. I do not care if my son cannot say the letter *a* or lipread the word *papa*. But he must have language on the same level if not higher than his hearing peers. If I say nothing else today—if you remember nothing else that I have said today—there is but one thing I would have you remember: Language is the key to unlocking all the problems of the deaf adult.

Social Area

The social area follows from the cultural area. We see a situation today in many developed countries where deaf people have established their own clubs and businesses; they travel in groups with an interpreter; they buy their automobiles and their insurance from agencies which provide special services for the deaf. Carrying this to the extreme, we have seen the birth of the "deaf power" movements. I do not wish to discuss the pros or cons of this except to say that in underdeveloped countries where deaf people are unable to organize socially, there seems to be a higher incidence of mental and emotional problems among them. For my son, I would hope that he would participate in clubs and social events for deaf people, but I would also hope that he could also participate in hearing society. When the club or bowling team or whatever, becomes the center of one's life, then something is very wrong—and this is precisely the situation which we see among many of our deaf adults today.

For many years I wondered why, in the face of such monumental evidence, there remain some diehard parents and educators who refused to accept total communication; there are particularly many in our own region. What magic attraction did pure oralism have? Why did Alexander Bell fear "a deaf variety of the human race"? I now understand why—it is essentially a matter of social acceptance.

Parents do not fear sign language per se, but rather the frightening feeling of being isolated from their progeny. What parents somehow manage to figure out, by instinct, I think, is that language is the essence of culture and social acceptance and that if their child is to become a part of family life (as well as of hearing society), he must communicate fluently. Parents are often misguided and equate oral skills with language—ergo, a staunch oralist is born.

The fears of parents are certainly justified because today we do see a situation in which many deaf adults prefer (for whatever reasons) the life of their own social clique. Those of us who are involved in both the deaf world and the hearing world know that there is so much more that life has to offer the deaf adult than the Saturday night bowling league or the monthly club meetings. We want to see our deaf children partake of everything society has to offer.

Economic Area

In terms of economics the deaf adult in our country and other developing and underdeveloped countries is denied his place in

contributing to self and national development, as we have talked about earlier. There are many in the field of rehabilitation who feel that the government and private industry should take a more active role in making deaf people suitable for employment by means of various rehabilitation programs. In the Philippines we have a most outstanding national rehabilitation center under the Department of Social Welfare. It is significant to note that this center has reduced sharply the number of deaf participants. This has been due to an inability of our deaf people to assimilate into the mainstream of the economic community—again a result of the language/cultural problems.

Our national organization has established a coffee shop operated completely by deaf persons (more than 100 deaf persons are employed), but, of course, under the supervision of the hearing officers and staff of the organization. This coffee shop provides a means of livelihood for deaf persons who would otherwise be a burden on society—but it is, of course, not a solution to the problem of economic fulfillment for our deaf people. Even more significantly, in a country with rather antiquated notions about the handicapped in general and the deaf in particular, this coffee shop has given many people the naive impression that deaf persons are capable only of waiting on tables and washing dishes.

Therefore, as an educator, not a rehabilitation worker, I would prefer to see our deaf children provided the skills needed to integrate them into the mainstream of our work force, hence obviating the need for coffee shops or special rehabilitation programs. This is an ideal situation and arriving at it will take time. Until then a transient condition of rehabilitation and educational programs will have to obtain.

Religious Area

In the religious area we have a number of missionaries who are concerned with the spiritual life of our deaf people. This seems to be the same in many other countries. I will only say that, as a father, I would want my child to feel God's love, to grow as a spiritual, Christian individual. I recall one deaf man telling me that he would not fall into sin because there is an angel who would record the event in a book. Another deaf man, when asking for an explanation of what is venereal disease was told that it is a "curse from God for those who sin."

It is, indeed, sad that so many better educated deaf persons turn away from religion because of the manner in which it is presented by missionaries who work with deaf congregations.

Conclusion

I hope that I have provided some food for thought for our discussion this morning. Perhaps it is because of my experience in a developing country that I have tended to take a somewhat pessimistic view of things. I don't know. But, as a father, I must confess that when I look around at our deaf adults today, I feel a sense of hopelessness. I feel as though our present generation has been lost. I can only hope that for my son, for all of our deaf children, the future will be bright.