

My journey into the Deaf-World: a visit to Gallaudet University

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The first image of Gallaudet: Two students in animated conversation strolling along a walk next to classic liberal arts type buildings – an ordinary, everyday thing to see on campus, only they are talking with their hands. I have, of course, seen people signing before, and once, at a performance of a play in Madison by the National Theater of Deaf, I had been at an event with many people signing, but this was the first time I had visited a place in Deaf world and spoken, with the help of an interpreter, for an extended period with Deaf people. The day was extraordinary.

I was visiting Gallaudet as part of my ASA Presidential project of giving lectures to universities and colleges that serve historically marginalized groups. At first this project was restricted to Historically Black colleges and Universities (HBCUs), but after a conversation with Margaret Vitullo, the director of education and professional services at ASA, I asked if Gallaudet could be added. Margaret had taught at Gallaudet for ten years and was very enthusiastic about the idea. Since it is in Washington where ASA Council meetings are held, this was pretty simple to organize for the Monday after the winter weekend meeting. Margaret picked me and my wife, Marcia, up at the hotel on Monday morning and we spent the day at the university.

As we walked from the parking lot to the Sociology Department, we discussed an article Margaret had published in *Footnotes* in March 2007 concerning protests at Gallaudet over the appointment of a new president of the University in 2006. Margaret explained to us that Gallaudet was torn between two ideals: It was both a cultural center and a University. It was a symbol for Deaf World, a global site where Deaf Culture was dominant, a place that was welcoming to all Deaf people. In that model the university should accept almost everyone. But it was also an institution of higher learning designed to educate people, and for that it needed “standards”. As Deaf students become more mainstreamed and as universities around the country invest more effort and resources in adequate accommodations to their needs, many Deaf students now have options. They can go to the University of Wisconsin, or they can go to Gallaudet. Although there are excellent students who still decide that Gallaudet best serves their needs, more and more frequently many of the best students opt for mainstream universities. This increases the challenges faced by Gallaudet itself.

These challenges struck me as similar to challenges faced by HBCUs. In the era of segregation HBCUs were a place where black students in the South could get a higher education. HBCUs embodied black culture but also advanced black education. They faced challenges of standards because so many black students came from dreadful primary and secondary schools, but it was part of their mission to deal with these deficits and they certainly served a very positive purpose under the historical circumstances. Now with integration, black

students, especially the most talented, have many options. Why go to an HBCU? To be sure, there are reasons: the environment is less fraught with racial tension. Students do not have to be on guard all the time. They can learn and excel without having the context define this as competition with whites. Many of the same issues seem to be present at Gallaudet.

In preparation for the visit I decided to learn some ASL so I could give a greeting at the beginning of my talk. As it happened, I saw Margaret at the Sociologists for Women and Society meeting in St. Petersburg, Florida, at the beginning of February, and we chatted about my upcoming visit and about what I might say. She told me about a book, *A Journey into the Deaf-World*, by Harlan Lane, Robert Hoffmeister and Ben Behan, and explained to me that the expression “Deaf-World” was a term used within the Deaf community to describe their cultural and social world. After discussing various alternative greetings we came up with “Hello, I am thrilled and honored to be in your Deaf world.” Since she was proficient in ASL, she also gave me my first lesson while we were standing on the St. Petersburg pier watching the pelicans. When I got back to Madison I had three more lessons from ASL instructors, one from a deaf woman who taught ASL, and the other two from a professor of communicative disorders and one of her students. The Deaf ASL instructor modified a little what I should say, adding to the original sentence: “...to be here *to give a lecture* in your Deaf World”. I video-taped her doing the signs to help me practice. Later when I showed the video to Margaret at the ASA Council meeting, she noted that the instructor had actually included some other signs that I had not quite noted: “...*Thank you for welcoming me to give...*”, so I added those to my routine. The final greeting was thus: “Hello, I am thrilled and honored to be here. Thank you for welcoming me to give a lecture in your Deaf-World.”

At first doing this sequence of signs was really hard – I had to constantly look at my notes and everything was stilted and jerky. By my third lesson the ASL teacher said that I was making a lot of progress, but needed to pay a little attention to phrasing – otherwise it would be like speaking in a monotone with equal emphasis on every word. She also said not to worry about little mistakes. They would just seem like someone saying “wabbit” instead of “rabbit.” The University ASL teacher also told me I should practice three or four times a day and do it in front of groups whenever possible, so I did the routine in front of the undergraduate students in my real utopias seminar, at a faculty meeting in the Sociology department, at my 65th birthday party on February 9th, and then at the ASA Council meeting. I am sure there were still wabbits frolicking through my routine, but at least I could do the whole thing without balking.

The lecture was in a beautiful space designed with the specific objective of being congenial to the Deaf. This meant having lots of light and good sight lines for visual communication. The room was a kind of atrium-like space with a circular balcony on the second floor overlooking the lecture space below and with clear glass panels perhaps four feet high instead of a guard rail. You could sit behind these panels and still communicate with people below -- communicating through walls, I was told. The elevators that went up from the bottom of the atrium-space also had glass sides so people in the elevator could talk to people outside with ASL.

I was introduced at the talk by Thomas Horejes, a young, energetic, very appealing Deaf sociologist on the Gallaudet faculty. Then I did my signed greeting – quite smoothly, without

hesitation, I thought. Later one person said that although everyone understood what I meant, my “thrilled” look a little like “pasta,” so the greeting was: “Hello, I’m pasta and honored to be here...” Other people reassured me that my sign looked pretty close to “thrilled.” Anyway, wabbit or pasta, everyone seemed very appreciative of my effort.

After I did my signed introduction, I added a few comments about my experience signing. This comes directly from the recording of the lecture:

“Before giving my lecture I would like to tell that this past week when I had my first exposure to sign language has been a powerful and moving experience -- a new engagement with language that was outside of my life experience. I found one of the signs I learned especially meaningful -- the sign for “lecture”. [I gave the sign: thumb on palm; four fingers extended, open; first finger touching temple then the hand moving towards audience in a kind of wave, twice.] The idea conveyed by the sign was that I was taking ideas from my head and sharing them, throwing them out, with you. That image, visually, made me feel differently about the word “lecture” – it was a kind of revelation: that when you put words into visual, body motions, you can learn something about the words. I feel that after a week of this I have a little, a little [I give the conventional hand image of “tiny” – thumb and first finger just a little separated] understanding of what is in play with Deaf culture. I have told some students that it is worthwhile to take one week of sign language. To take one sentence that they would like to say and learn it well, because it will change the way you think about speaking a language. So before I begin my talk I want to thank you for the opportunity to be here, because of what you have already given to me.”

I then gave one version of my real utopias “stump speech” -- a general explanation of the idea of “real utopias” and how to think about its moral foundations, followed by a discussion of a few choice examples. At the end of the lecture I briefly explored the question “what would be a Deaf real utopia?” Here is what I said:

The first thing to clarify is what would be your deepest utopian aspirations. Now I will share with you my thoughts on this but I am not presuming at all that I am tell you what you should think about this. I am new this array of issues, although I knew something about deaf culture and controversies around deaf culture over the years. My mother was a rehabilitation psychologist and was involved in deaf community issues, so I knew about some of this as I was growing up. So I am offering this not in the form of a Hearing person who is president of the American Sociological Association who knows what he is talking about. I am offering this as my reflections in light of my work on real utopias.

So, here is one way of thinking about the utopian aspiration: the utopian aspiration is for *full participatory inclusion in both the hearing and Deaf worlds without undermining the cultural vitality of the Deaf world*. [This is on a power point slide] I read a very interesting paper by Thomas Horejes, a sociology professor here, as part of my preparation for coming in which he talks about the deep tensions in the identities of four people he studies in this particular piece of research as they think through issues in their lives and the lives of others around cochlear implants. What struck me was the complexity of the tensions around that issue, not the simplicity of the choices. One way

of thinking about this is that it is hard to imagine how all three of the elements in this utopian aspiration can be fully come together. How can you have *full* participatory inclusion in both the hearing *and* the Deaf world without also undermining the vitality of Deaf culture? If you could, actually, realize all three of these fully that would be the realization of the democratic and egalitarian values I discussed earlier. It would be full realization without regrets. We could have our cake and eat it too. This is why I call this the *utopian* aspiration.

So what then are the *real* utopian questions? There are two kinds of questions you would ask in a real utopian framework. First, *what institutional forms in the world today move us in this direction?* Where can we find examples, however incomplete and internally contradictory that move us in the direction of the utopian aspirations in the sense that if those institutions did not exist we would be further away. I think your university is an example of a real utopia in this first sense. This university exists and it embodies however imperfectly that utopian aspiration. That is the first question. The second question is: *what institutional innovations and transformations are needed to move us forward?* That is the context in which these very difficult tensions around new technologies can be thought of: these are tensions because of the uncertainties about whether these technologies move us further in terms of these aspirations, or move us to the side – may they have no effects – or move us backwards. What are the trade-offs? How do they undermine one goal while perhaps moving us closer to realizing another?

I went on to briefly talk about the Real Utopia theme at the ASA and invited everyone to come or to watch the plenary sessions on the web with closed captioning.

After I was finished speaking there was a lively question and answer discussion. A number of students and professors came up and asked me questions in ASL. Here are some of the questions:

A young African-American woman: “I wanted to ask you about utopia. Do you think that this ignores individualism or individual expectations because it focuses so much on the group? Especially in such a highly individualistic society I think it would be hard in American to combine both a group and individuals goals as well.” I responded by talking about the utopian aspiration being to create the conditions for individual persons to flourish. The issue is really about the relationship between institutions and individuals more than between groups and individuals. [I also realized when I was listening to this young woman’s question that I was looking at the interpreter who was speaking rather than at the person who was signing the question. I guess this is a natural mistake by someone not used to interacting with Deaf people – making eye contact with the speaking interpreter rather than the silent signing person. But from then on I looked at the person asking the question].

A professor asked me a question about the tension between incremental changes that I talked about and Marx’s vision of the need for radical system change – how can these small incremental changes ever accomplish an alternative to capitalism as a system? I responded that Marx wrote 150 years and that we have a lot of historical experience since then. Above all in the 20th century we have experience with the consequences of the attempts at ruptural systemic transformations. These all resulted in societies very different from the kind of society

revolutionaries hoped for. We have to learn from this experience: ruptural transformations universally failed to achieve democratic egalitarian goals. They didn't fail in all respects: they succeeded in their *destructive* mission of eliminating older forms of oppression, but they failed in their *constructive* mission of creating what the revolutionaries really wanted -- truly democratic egalitarian social order. Marx lived before those experiences. If he wandered into the world today, as a good social scientist he would want to avoid those failures. My second point is a bit more complicated. There are many different kinds of incremental changes. Some of them just make things better for people but do not move us forward, but other open up more space for future changes. Solidarity finance (which I had discussed in the lecture) opens up more spaces for change in the future by anchoring firms in economic regions and making them more accountable. This is what we need to think about: what kinds of changes open up spaces for more changes in the future.

A young man (who I later found out took Introduction to Sociology with Margaret) asked: "I would like to ask you about the moral foundations and about the quality of democracy. I am trying to understand the two ideals -- about new institutions and how we can be included in those. How can we reorganize institutions to allow for full participation, full inclusion of individuals? Often times there are marginalized groups, so there will be gaps as to who is really involved and included. How can we overcome that?" I said that this is exactly the sort of issue that we have to worry about in the design of institutions -- we have to be attentive to what will in fact make them inclusive. In participatory budgeting [which I had talked about in the lecture] you need trained facilitators. You need training sessions for citizens that teach people about budgets. You have to recognize that there are obstacles for participation and you have to counter these. Providing childcare in meetings is an example. So you work on these issues always knowing that the solutions will not be perfect. We need a spirit in which we experiment and learn from the experiments rather than imagine we can have a blueprint where everything is perfect.

When the lecture was done, we went to lunch with a number of faculty members from the sociology department. At lunch there was a really interesting discussion of the complex issue of cochlear implants between one person who had been Deaf from birth and the other who became Deaf as an adult. Both had actually learned ASL as adults. The person who was Deaf since birth had been mainstreamed as a child, learning lip-reading, and only learned ASL as a young adult. Many issues were in play in the discussion:

- At what age was it appropriate to have cochlear implants? If a young child is to have this procedure done, then it means that the parents would have the power to impose it on a child. One position is that this should not be done until around age 9 when the child could decide. But, the contrary argument goes, the benefits of the procedure are greatest if done very early, since then the brain can adapt more easily to the cochlear implant signals. Also, if done earlier, this can have a bigger impact on language acquisition and cognitive development.
- A deaf child born to a deaf parent is a very different situation from a deaf child born to hearing parent.

- All this raised the issue of what is “normal” and what needs to be “fixed.” The deaf/hearing spectrum is a natural form of variation, and so being deaf is not “abnormal”, it is just one form in which human lives take place.
- There was also an interesting disagreement over whether a person could in fact be fully part of both worlds. Why can't a child with a cochlear implant which results in some hearing also become fully conversant in sign language and thus be in both worlds? The person who was opposed to early childhood implants felt that this is in practice very unlikely. This led to a very interesting discussion of ways in which the long term trajectory of medical solutions to deafness is likely to undermine the support for signing and deaf culture. The disappearance of those supports would mean that in the future ASL would become less of an available option for parents. One of the hearing people at lunch who was fluent in ASL said that she would be happy with a deaf child, but if the supports disappeared she would definitely do a implant because the task of providing those supports would be overwhelming.
- There was a time when most deafness was the result of medical conditions, not genes, but now medical interventions have greatly reduced deafness as a consequence of disease. Eventually most deafness will be because of genes, rather than disease, and since the genetic conditions are rare this means that being Deaf will become very rare. As Deafness becomes rarer it will be harder to become proficient in sign since there will be no one to sign with. There is also a decline in Deaf schools with more mainstreaming, which also results in decreased proficiency of signing.
- The next controversy will be over aborting fetuses with the deaf gene, just like there is controversy over aborting fetuses with Down syndrome.

After lunch we had a brief tour of the campus. It is a lovely environment – some old, charming late 19th century buildings along with new, well designed modern ones. The University was chartered by Abraham Lincoln in 1864 and clearly has become an anchor for Deaf culture and education. Thomas Horejes took us around, introducing us to various University administrators in the administration building (including the Gallaudet president) and telling us various anecdotes from the college's history. The funniest one was about the indoor swimming pool, which was reputed to be the second oldest such pool in the country. Apparently it was most frequently used by men on campus, but whenever it was used by women students the campus employee in charge of the pool would drain it and clean it before refilling it with fresh water for the women, on the belief that otherwise they might get pregnant.

At 3 pm Marcia and I spent a lovely hour meeting with a friend of my niece, a linguistics student at Gallaudet who had just finished her PhD on some problems in sign language in Rwanda and was teaching as an instructor this semester. She was a lovely, engaging, interesting person. She had gradually lost her hearing from about age 15 and began in earnest mastering sign language in college. I was struck at the difference in the ease of speaking of someone who had full mastery of spoken English before losing their hearing compared to someone who was Deaf from birth.

At 4 pm I met with a group of undergraduates for a freewheeling discussion. A few of the questions seemed a bit naïve to me, or at least not well informed. Later Margaret explained that many of the students at Gallaudet have large challenges to overcome because they haven't had access to the kind of diffuse general knowledge while growing up that most undergraduates have. Much of this knowledge is picked up serendipitously in overhearing conversations, casually watching the news and listening to the radio, all things which are much less likely for a Deaf child, especially if their parents are hearing. A child Deaf from birth also has a much bigger challenge learning to read, since the English words are all purely marks on a page with no sounds connected to them. This is more like learning to read Chinese or some other system of symbols that have no sounds connected to them. Each word has to be learned as a separate entity. As a result many students read at a pretty low level, but are still trying to do college work. These are really very stiff challenges.

The day ended with relaxing, laughter-filled dinner at a Sushi restaurant with a number of sociology faculty and two interpreters. The interpreters had to work really hard, and their professional code meant that they weren't supposed to eat while on the job. It really is a full translation issue, because the grammar of ASL and spoken English are not the same. As it was explained to me, ASL does not have a fixed word order the way spoken English does. And of course, there is not a direct sign for every word in English, so sometimes the interpreter has to spell out the word with hand spelling. They seemed to do a really good job, because the conversation flowed very smoothly and easily. In one way this was a bit easier than if they were translating from English to a foreign language: in ordinary translation, the translation needs to be sequential at a dinner table, because the interpreter cannot speak at the same time as one is talking. But in signed interpretation, they can do the signing as a simultaneous translation, since there are no sounds.