Introduction

Hearing people frequently ask me to explain what constitutes deaf culture. Now I can direct them to this engrossing autobiographical montage of stories told in sign language by America's leading deaf theater artist, Bernard Bragg, and rendered into English with great brio by Eugene Bergman. *Lessons in Laughter* is about deaf culture and it is an artifact of deaf culture at the same time (how right that it should have originated in signed stories, often about communication). Many of the recurrent themes addressed by deaf authors across the centuries, legends rooted in the deaf collective unconscious, are to be found here freshly presented. Listen, for example, to Pierre Desloges, the first deaf man to publish a book (it, too, was autobiographical), as he describes his discovery of the power of French Sign Language.

> *When a deaf person encounters other deaf people more highly educated than he, as I myself have experienced, he learns to combine and improve his signs, which had hitherto been unordered and unconnected. . . . He acquires the supposedly difficult art of depicting and expressing all his thoughts, even those most independent of the senses, using natural signs with as much order and precision as if he understood the rules of grammar.*

Compare Bragg:

> *What electrified and enthralled us about Mr. Panara was his very embodiment of a living breathing revelation of the potential of sign language. . . . In contrast to the choppy, abrupt, and often homemade signs we normally used among ourselves, his signs were a miracle of vividness and eloquence. . . . We had never realized that this, our native language, could be such a powerful vehicle for expressing the richest and subtlest feelings and conveying nuances of meaning as sophisticated as those of the most articulate English speakers and writers.*

Or consider John Kitto, the deaf, English, Bible commentator, writing in the middle of the last century on the medical approach to deafness:

> *They poured into my tortured ears various infusions hot and cold; they bled me, they blistered me, leeched me, physicked me; and at last they gave it up as a bad case.*

Compare Bernard Bragg:

> *The left side of his face was partially paralyzed owing to an operation done on his ear when he was six by a so-called medical doctor who thought he could restore Ken's hearing. Being nerve-deaf, Ken of course remained deaf as a post, and the only result was that when he smiled only half of his mouth turned up, so that his smile was crooked.*

In *Lessons in Laughter,* the reader will find such timeless themes of the deaf experience as the deaf man who is valued by his beloved mostly as an object of study, who turns his deafness to advantage on the job, who tries to pass as a hearing man, who is exploited by unethical hearing people, who resists transformation into what he is not, whose deafness disqualifies him from someone's love, who comes to see he is a member of a linguistic and cultural minority—but one different from all others.

There is much more to this engaging work, however, than solely a lesson in deaf culture. Self-portraits, painted or written, are an appealing genre, for they not only satisfy our curiosity about the artist and his times but, like halls of mirrors and rollercoaster loops, they titillate our sense of relativity; they play with the contextual frame in which perception occurs. When, in addition, they convey a fresh vision of the human condition, their appeal transcends their time and place.

Lessons in Laughter is such a book. On one level it is about the richly textured life of someone who has traveled widely and reflected deeply. On another level, it is an exploration of the story as a form and of storytelling as an activity. It is an autobiography constructed of vignettes. This is exactly right; as a history is more than a record of a social past, an autobiography is more than a record of a personal past. It is a construction, an art form.

The life of a storyteller is naturally composed of stories of all kinds—in sign language, in mime and visual vernacular, and in English, with both direct and indirect discourse. There are stories about the theater, where stories are performed on the stage, and there are multiply-embedded stories. For example, Bragg tells the story of an acquaintance telling a story in which a teenager

goes to the library and happens on a biography of Bragg. The teenager finds the story of how Bragg cofounded the National Theatre of the Deaf so engaging that he attends one of their plays. There he meets Bragg and has him autograph his own biography. The acquaintance who tells this story proves to have been that very youth.

Lessons in Laughter is a coming to terms with one's self, and it takes place in the setting of the theater, where art is created and the stage is a metaphor for life itself. We learn the story behind the National Theatre of the Deaf, and behind the Russian mime theater to cite two examples. We learn how the artist constructs his story, with a colorful palette, projecting himself onto the subjects treated, addressing enduring human issues, including yearning, suffering, and death.

The fundamental reason that Bragg's life story appeals to a broad audience is that it engages the universal issues of the human condition clothed in the particular of relations between hearing and deaf people and among deaf people themselves. *Lessons in Laughter* is a cry of outrage at the crimes of the intolerant: the unwillingness of hearing people to allow deaf people self-determination; the recasting of deaf people's difference as deviance; the fraud perpetrated by hearing people who claim to normalize deaf people; and the refusal of hearing society to acknowledge deaf language and culture. Every deaf person, and every hearing person in the professions serving the deaf, will laugh and cry and rage—and reflect—while reading these stories. So will anyone, hearing or deaf, who has suffered the oppression of minorities by majorities.

These stories will cast their spell on a wider audience, however, for the deaf people in them battle bravely with life—to make peace with a dead relative, to care for a loved one in the hospital, to search for a profession compatible with one's identity, or to win the love of a beautiful woman and the respect of a coworker. Bernard Bragg's autobiography reveals that, beyond the uniqueness of the deaf experience, lies our common humanity, including the universal love of a good story.

Harlan Lane