

A Note from the President



By Samuel J. Supalla



Food for Thought in Difficult Times

As anxious and distressing as it may be in the present time of Coronavirus, I am struck by watching the national news and seeing clips of signed language interpreters standing next to mayors and governors all across the country conveying information about the outbreak during the emergency briefings. Although I have seen interpreters signing alongside different government officials during other times of crises, what we are experiencing in the last month or so is unprecedented. During the time of this pandemic, we are witnessing deaf people's language receiving widespread attention like never before, with millions of people watching television and seeing ASL in action.

With this experience, I find it appropriate to refer to the scholarly work of A. Avon, who published *Watching Films, Learning Language, Experiencing Culture: An Account of Deaf Culture through History and Popular Films* in *The Journal of Popular Culture* in 2006. Avon made important insights as follow:

...the visibility of sign[ed] language interpreters reinforces not only a respect for the use of sign, but also that the use of sign unites those for whom sign is their dominant language. Although once severely oppressed, through sign[ed] language, stories are told, information is given and received, and a culture is reinforced and strengthened... (p. 199)



Source: <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2020/03/26/detroit-mike-duggan-coronavirus-relief/2918670001/>

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While some might wish to believe that Deaf culture is here to stay and it is stronger than ever, or that deaf people have finally earned respect as signers after many years of oppression, I say not so fast. Yes, society seems to acknowledge and recognize ASL as a human language. This means providing televised signed language interpreting services for disseminating news on the Coronavirus and other emergencies to deaf people. However, it is important to remember that signed language interpreting is not the only factor in the relationship between deaf people and society.

Avon herself talks about the importance of hearing people learning and using ASL to communicate directly with deaf people. Avon's analysis of *Mr. Holland's Opus* that came out of Hollywood in 1995 produces additional insights. For example, Cole is the deaf son character who has hearing parents that had to cope with ASL as a language. The father's name is Mr. Holland. Avon writes as follows:

Mr. Holland and Cole are struggling with how they can relate to each other. Mr. Holland needs his wife to translate, supporting the notion that not only does one need knowledge of the language to understand, but the ideas expressed by Cole are not simple and limiting thoughts. (p. 200)

Representative of the time when *Mr. Holland's Opus* was produced and for most of American history, the public has had some misgivings about ASL. The signed language was thought to be inferior to spoken language, for example. It is easy to understand that Cole's father took advantage of the social misgivings about ASL, and he would not sign. Mr. Holland should have noticed that his own wife was acting like any interpreter translating human languages, but he had put himself above the needs of his own son.

Avon goes on to write about what Mrs. Holland sees in her son, Cole, that demands our attention. The mother "does not see [Cole] as having limitations because of his deafness, much like the situation on Martha's Vineyard. Deafness is not seen as a disability because of a mutual understanding between Cole and his mother" (p. 198). The reference to Martha's Vineyard is noteworthy as it is supposed to be our sociolinguistic model. Hearing residents living on this island off Massachusetts had a healthy attitude about deaf people that included a strong willingness to learn and use a signed language. The benefits for deaf islanders are understood to be abundant, and the ramifications of their hearing loss are dramatically reduced.

It is interesting that Avon writes that, "[b]y the film's end, Mr. Holland's own effort to sign authenticates his acceptance of his son and the culture of which he is a part" (p. 201), which suggests the power of ASL. While Cole, the son may be deaf and not acting like a hearing person, he is still a human being. Cole might have differences, but not necessarily deficiencies. This includes the father, Mr. Holland's recognition that Deaf culture belongs to his son. All Mr. Holland had to do is to support Deaf culture with ASL at its core, which he did by learning how to sign.

With this in mind, I realized as I watched so many clips of ASL interpreters during emergency briefings on the national news that we need to do *more*. We do not need to just have interpreters on television during the emergency briefings, but rather society needs to embrace deaf people, as Mr. Holland did with his deaf son. So many hearing people in society remain ignorant of any signed language, including ASL. Everybody learning and knowing ASL (even if only rudimentarily) can make all the difference concerning the lives of deaf people and for the country's enrichment in general. So, while this pandemic has brought many issues to light for all of us, an additional food for thought is that we need more signers among us!

Reference

Avon, A. (2006). Watching films, learning language, experiencing culture: An account of deaf culture through history and popular films. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 39(2), 185-204.