My interest of the problem of communication and the disturbances in communication among people has been focused most specifically on one group. This group comprises people with profound hearing loss from birth or early infancy. This hearing loss has been so great and the onset has been so early that these people have never been able to establish verbal communication in the normal way, that is, by hearing other people talk. These are the people referred to as the "deaf."

It is about this particular group that I wish to make my remarks and report my observations, and then see if my observations can have any validity concerning the problems of communication among normal hearing people inside and outside the therapeutic situation.

The earliest descriptions concerning the deaf emphasized the fact that for the most part they were regarded with great fear and very little understanding. Often they were treated as mentally retarded, as imbeciles or psychotic. One of the prime reasons for reacting to them this way was the apparent inability to communicate with such people and the subsequent assumption that they were incapable of communication. Here an implicit assumption was being made by the hearing population, namely, that communication can occur only through verbal means. Later, another assumption was made. Not only could communication occur only through verbal means, but it had to be in the structure, form, and context that the user was familiar with. I will return to this when I discuss the problem of communication among the hearing, and the meaning these assumptions can have in hampering attempts at communication.

To return to the problem of communication with the deaf: In the seventeenth century a priest became interested in attempting to educate the deaf. He invented the sign language and with it was able to teach them to communicate. Once meaningful communication with the deaf was possible, their status slowly began to change. They were able to be educated to a certain degree and to be taught gainful occupations. A new understanding of the deaf began to emerge. It became apparent as time went on that the original descriptions of the personality and character of the deaf were gross distortions. As the ability to communicate grew, the great difference that seemed to exist between the deaf and the so-called normal hearing personality began to diminish. This made a tremendous difference in the deaf person's relationship to his environment, as well as his relationship to himself. The ability to communicate is of great importance in the individual's ego development. Only with the ability to communicate could there be any real ego growth. In addition, when hearing people could communicate with the deaf, the feeling of strangeness that existed on both sides began to diminish.

As time went on, more and more efforts were made to educate the deaf and improve their means of communication. And it was assumed that im-

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improvement in communication for the deaf meant that the deaf should have the ability to communicate the way hearing people do, namely, through speech. It was found that the deaf could be taught with considerable variations in the degree of proficiency to communicate orally through lip-reading and verbal speech. The enthusiasm for teaching oral or verbal communication increased, and as it did many people began to feel that it could be taught with the greatest degree of efficiency if all attempts to use the sign language were restricted. It was felt that because the sign language was easier for the deaf, they would use it to the detriment of their oral speech, unless they were forbidden in every way to use it. As a result, some schools became known as purely “oral” schools. In these schools no sign language was to be used or taught. Parents were advised never to respond to anything other than oral or verbal attempts at communication by their deaf children. At the present time, this constitutes one of the areas of considerable controversy in the education of the deaf.

Now a strange thing appears to have happened. In spite of every attempt by the oral schools to prevent the deaf child from learning or using the sign language, practically all deaf students do learn it. And once they are out of the school and away from the watchful eyes of the school authorities, they seem to prefer to communicate through signs, rather than orally. In observing what goes on when the deaf “talk” through signs, as compared to their oral communication, one gets the feeling that a great deal more goes on in communication through signing. There appears to be a much more animated and total involvement. The entire body seems to come alive. Emotion and facial expressions are added as part of the total communication. Many hearing parents have experienced this when their deaf child meets another person who can communicate with him through signs. There is a sense of an immediate emotional relationship quite different from that which exists between the deaf and the person who cannot sign, or where communication is restricted to oral means.

The deaf have been described as being pessimistic, suspicious, and lacking in a sense of humor. However, to anyone who has ever seen a group of deaf people socializing such descriptive terms would not seem appropriate. Where they are able to communicate meaningfully among themselves one can observe no difference from any other group having a pleasant social relationship. The only difference one would notice is the fact that communication goes on through signing rather than verbally.

I was impressed a number of years ago by a newspaper story concerning Puerto Rican baseball players who were then playing in the major leagues of the United States. They were described as taciturn and rather non-communicative. As soon as the ball game was over, they would hurriedly dress and go off among themselves. One day a reporter asked one of them why this was so and the player replied, “Well, why should we show any more interest in you than you show in us. When American ball players come to Puerto Rico to play, we show our interest in them by trying to talk to them in English. If you were interested in us, you would try to learn to talk to us in our language.”

We are only now beginning to be aware of the fact that differences in communication do exist. The outstanding difference, perhaps, is the difference in language. One may get