

## HANDS OF MY FATHER

By Myron Uhlberg

Throughout my life, whenever people found out that I was the first-born child of two deaf parents, they would inevitably ask, “How did you learn to speak?” This question rests on the assumption that we all learn to speak by a method one might call “Motherese:” Mother says to her baby, “Look at the *horse*!” See the *horse*!” There’s a *horse*!” and soon baby learns a new word. Yet, if Motherese is our first language, why is it that whenever I go to the track and watch the exciting finish to a race I don’t hear the crowd screaming for their *horse* to win? The answer is that this idea is simply folklore. We do not acquire language via Motherese. As Noam Chomsky explains, we are hard-wired for language; or as Steven Pinker puts it, we have a language instinct.

I don’t know much about wiring and instincts, but I do remember that my first language was sign language – which here I have intentionally spelled with a lower case “s,” and “l” because, during my childhood, in the dark-old days of ignorance about the deaf, the language by which the deaf communicated among themselves was not considered by the hearing world as a true language at all. Rather, it was viewed as a pathetic, gestural method of miming, capable of only the most shallow levels of communication.

But the deaf knew otherwise. They knew that their language, the language contained in their hands, the language now known and accepted by linguists in America as American Sign Language, ASL, was capable of expressing their most complex and profound thoughts, as well as their deepest emotions. This was the language they taught their children—and the language through which they expressed their love for their children.

I did of course learn to speak. But speech was my second language. Though I have no clear memory of how I acquired my second language, what I do remember is that my deaf father placed a tabletop radio next to my crib, and left it turned on at all times. So the sound of voices was always in my ear, singing and talking me to sleep each night, while the illuminated dial on the radio shed its yellow light on me as I lay in bed. I still have memories—imagined, perhaps, but nonetheless real to me—of listening to those voices and basking in the warm glow from that yellow light.

Was it through the radio that I first learned to speak? It probably played a big role. However, considering that my apartment building in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn contained at least 120 kids, and the street below, at least another 500, the sound of spoken language was, literally, everywhere at once. I couldn’t have avoided it if I’d tried. The language instinct would inevitably have kicked in.

Of course since my parents were the only deaf people in our neighborhood, and, like all kids, I didn’t want to be singled out, I not only learned this second language fluently, but I was often ashamed of my first language. Speech was the language that

would predominate in my life once I left my parents' silent, deaf, house, and speech was the language I long assumed to be superior to sign. Now, however, I understand how wrong I was.

Speech is a method of communication that is, for me, too facile: a mere breath, passed over the vocal chords, and a speaker says, "I love you." A truth, a conventional utterance, or a flat-out lie? Only the ears can be relied upon to answer that question, and the ears merely pass the sound on to the brain. But in Sign language, the Signer uses his whole body to communicate his feelings – the look in his eyes, his facial grammar, the position of his hands . And the eyes, those miracle organs that connect not only with the brain, but with the heart as well, are the ultimate judge of those sentiments.

Some sixty-five years after I acquired my first language, long after my parents had died, I decided to write about my life growing up with my two deaf parents. I immediately knew what the title would be: *Hands of My Father*. And when I wondered how I would begin my story, unconsciously my hands Signed: *My first language was sign*. And I began to type their story. And in telling their story, for the first time, I found my own.