

Wednesday, July 11, 2007

Press Release

## Speech by Laurent Clerc on the origins of bilingual education for the Deaf, May 28, 1818

Deaf educator Laurent Clerc, in this speech from May 28, 1818, delivered before the Connecticut legislature and the governor of Connecticut, provided an incredibly strong defense for the intellectual equality of educated deaf people in relation to their hearing peers, explaining that deafness is a part of the variation of the natural world and that Deaf people, though use of what was then called the "natural language of signs," can contemplate the highest abstractions conceivable.

Clerc explains how bilingual education for Deaf people began in Paris in the 1700's, giving details about the ingenious methods developed to teach concepts of universal grammar to Deaf students using sign language, in which way Deaf children could even receive an education superior than that of their hearing peers.

LINK TO CLERC ADDRESS:

[http://saveourdeafschools.org/laurent\\_clerc\\_address\\_1818.pdf](http://saveourdeafschools.org/laurent_clerc_address_1818.pdf)

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Thursday, May 28, 2009, 1:45 pm Eastern Time

## Commentary on the Origin of Today's Focus on Diversity as a Socio-Political Topic

It was exactly 191 years ago today, on May 28, 1818 that Laurent Clerc stood before the Connecticut legislature and the governor of Connecticut and gave an address (which he signed, while TH Gallaudet voiced by reading the text). The address was incredibly well written and includes this famous passage:

QUOTE:

Every creature, every work of God, is admirably well made; but if any one appears imperfect in our eyes, it does not belong to us to criticise it. Perhaps that which we do

not find right in its kind, turns to our advantage, without our being able to perceive it. Let us look at the state of the heavens, one while the sun shines, another time it does not appear; now the weather is fine; again it is unpleasant; one day is hot, another is cold; another time it is rainy, snowy or cloudy; every thing is variable and inconstant. Let us look at the surface of the earth: here the ground is flat; there it is hilly and mountainous; in other places it is sandy; in others it is barren; and elsewhere it is productive. Let us, in thought, go into an orchard or forest. What do we see? Trees high or low, large or small, upright or crooked, fruitful or unfruitful. Let us look at the birds of the air, and at the fishes of the sea, nothing resembles another thing. Let us look at the beasts. We see among the same kinds some of different forms, of different dimensions, domestic or wild, harmless or ferocious, useful or useless, pleasing or hideous. Some are bred for men's sakes; some for their own pleasures and amusements; some are of no use to us. There are faults in their organization as well as in that of men. Those who are acquainted with the veterinary art, know this well; but as for us who have not made a study of this science, we seem not to discover or remark these faults. Let us now come to ourselves. Our intellectual faculties as well as our corporeal organization have their imperfections. There are faculties both of the mind and heart, which education improve; there are others which it does not correct. I class in this number, idiotism, imbecility, dulness. But nothing can correct the infirmities of the bodily organization, such as deafness, blindness, lameness, palsy, crookedness, ugliness. The sight of a beautiful person does not make another so likewise, a blind person does not render another blind. Why then should a deaf person make others so also? Why are we Deaf and Dumb? Is it from the difference of our ears? But our ears are like yours; is it that there may be some infirmity? But they are as well organized as yours. Why then are we Deaf and Dumb? I do not know, as you do not know why there are infirmities in your bodies, nor why there are among the human kind, white, black, red and yellow men. The Deaf and Dumb are everywhere, in Asia, in Africa, as well as in Europe and America. They existed before you spoke of them and before you saw them.

UNQUOTE (*See the entire address in the link in the press release above*)

*(Commentary, continued:)*

This passage in this address by Laurent Clerc from 1818 may indeed be the ultimate historical origin of today's socio-political-philosophical focus on diversity.

Although Clerc himself did not use the word "diversity," he did use the term "variations," which is the same concept with a different name. However, the concept was carried over in political-philosophical discourse by Edward Miner Gallaudet, who did use the term "diversity" (and thus also carried the concept over into today's socio-political discourse). EM Gallaudet would have been well aware of Laurent Clerc's 1818 address and would have been well aware of the passage within the address where Clerc explains why being deaf is a good thing, because it is a part of nature, and variation is an essential part of nature. Variation (diversity) is a *sine qua non*, without which, nature

could not exist. In this way, hearing people's existence, as people who hear, depends on the existence of Deaf people who do not hear.

Some types of variation do cross the line and become defects. Mobility is an extremely important function of an organism in nature. If an organism is severely mobility impaired, then that organism is indeed disabled (in the sense of "*per se* disability"). But there is nothing about being deaf that involves immobility qua immobility. A deaf person has all four functioning limbs and is able to navigate the environment unimpaired through vision and the other senses.

Having the additional faculty of hearing might enhance navigational skills in SOME circumstances--some, not all. People who think that hearing is essential should keep in mind that the faculty of hearing can also *interfere* in one's ability to navigate, such as when the faculty of hearing provides *too much* information and puts the brain in an overloaded state, or such as when the faculty of hearing provides scant or ambiguous information that causes the brain to misinterpret and have false conceptions of what is being perceived. In these situations, being deaf is an advantage, not a disadvantage.

In analyzing the value of the Deaf experience, it is necessary to focus on the entire experience of being human, not just some experiences. In this way, we can reach the obvious conclusion to be made, which is that overall, deafness is not a "*per se* disability." There is nothing inherent about being deaf, within the context of being visual beings, which logically or rationally requires that this partial aspect of one's being be "lifted" from secondary to primary. On the contrary, proper logic and reasoning prohibit such lifting. Therefore, fundamentally, deaf people who are visual beings are not disabled. Secondly, deafness could be considered a minor disability in the same way that nearsightedness, pollen allergies, sensitivity to scents, etc., are minor disabilities. But then, everyone--every person on earth has some minor disability. Yet those people do not use the concept of "disability" to define themselves. This is because definitions and identity must be made in fundamental terms, not secondary terms, in order to be rational and coherent. Confusing the secondary with the primary is a type of invalid philosophy which must be rejected. Deaf people are thinking-visual beings, and hence are normal in every fundamental sense.

[*End commentary*]