

AN  
ADDRESS  
WRITTEN BY MR. CLERC,  
AND READ BY HIS REQUEST  
AT A PUBLIC EXAMINATION OF THE PUPILS  
IN THE  
CONNECTICUT ASYLUM  
BEFORE THE GOVERNOUR  
AND BOTH HOUSES OF THE LEGISLATURE  
28th MAY, 1818.

ADDRESS.

*The following address is entirely the original production of Mr. Laurent Clerc, who was born Deaf, and has never heard a sound or uttered the simplest phrase of speech. He was eight years a pupil of the celebrated Abbé Sicard who now presides over the Royal Institution for the Deaf and Dumb in Paris, in which Mr. Clerc has been eight years a teacher. The Connecticut Asylum for the relief of these children of misfortune, held a public examination of the pupils on the 28th of May, and at the request of the Directors, Mr. Clerc prepared this address, which was delivered by his friend Mr. Gallaudet, who takes this mode of informing those who may peruse it, that a very few alterations have been made in some idiomatic expressions, but nothing which can affect the originality of its thought, language, or style.*

Hartford, June 1st, 1818.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

THE kind concern which you were pleased to take in our public exhibition of last year, and the wish which you have had the goodness to express, to see it renewed, have induced me to comply with the request of the Directors of the Asylum, to deliver this address. I at first intended to write two or three pages, that I might not fatigue the attention of our Auditors; but my thoughts have led me farther, and I flatter myself that you will attend to and keep the memory of these particulars, as a small token of our gratitude for all the favours which you have vouchsafed to confer both upon us and our pupils.

The origin of the discovery of the art of teaching the Deaf and Dumb is so little known in this country, that I think necessary to repeat it. Afterwards I will give you a hasty sketch of our system of instruction, then let you judge whether the opinion of some persons among you is correct, who believe that the sight of the Deaf and Dumb, or conversation about them increase their number, and at length make you appreciate the importance of educating these unfortunate beings.

A lady, whose name I do not recollect, lived in Paris, and had among her children two daughters, both Deaf and Dumb, The *Father Famin*, one of the members of the society of Christian Doctrine, was acquainted with the family, and attempted, without method, to supply in those unfortunate persons the want of hearing and speech; but was surprised by a premature death, before he could attain any degree of success. The two sisters, as well as their mother, were inconsolable at that loss, when by divine providence, a happy event restored every thing. The Abbé de L'Épée, formerly belonging to the above mentioned society, had an opportunity of calling at their house. The mother was abroad, and while he was waiting for her, he wished to enter into conversation with the young ladies, but their eyes remained fixed on their needle, and they gave no answer. In vain did he renew his questions, in vain did he redouble the sound of his voice, they were still silent, and durst hardly raise their heads to look at him. He did not know that those whom he thus addressed, were doomed by nature never to hear or speak. He already began to think them impolite and uncivil, and rose to go out. Under these circumstances, the mother returned, and every thing was explained. The good Abbé sympathised with her on the affliction, and withdrew, full of the thought of taking the place of *Father Famin*.

The first conception of a great man, is usually a fruitful germ. Well acquainted with the French grammar, he knew that every language was a collection of *signs*, as a series of drawings is a collection *figures*, the representation of a multitude of objects, and that the Deaf and Dumb can describe every thing by *gestures*, as you paint every thing with *colours*, or express every thing by *words*; he knew that every object had a *form*, that every form was capable of being *imitated* that, *actions* struck your sight, and that you were able to describe them by imitative gestures; he knew that *words* were conventional signs, and that gestures might be the *same*, and that there could therefore be a language formed of *gestures*, as there was a language of *words*. We can state as a probable fact, that there

was a time in which man had only gestures to express the emotions and affections of his soul. He loved, wished, hoped, imagined, and reflected, and the words to express those operations still failed him. He could express the actions relative to his organs; but the dictionary of acts, purely spiritual, was not begun as yet.

Full of these fundamental ideas, the Abbé de L'Epée was not long without visiting the unfortunate family again; and with what pleasure was he not received! He reflected, he imitated, he delineated, he wrote, believing he had but a language to teach, while in fact he had two minds to cultivate! How painful, how difficult were the first essays of the inventor! Deprived of all assistance, in a career full of thorns and obstacles, he was a little embarrassed, but was not discouraged. He armed himself with patience, and succeeded, in time, to restore his pupils to Society and Religion.

Many years after, and before his method could have attained the highest degree of perfection, of which it was susceptible, death came and removed that excellent father from his grateful children. Affliction was in all hearts. Fortunately the Abbé Sicard who was chosen for his successor, caused their tears to cease. He was a man of profound knowledge and of a mind very enterprising. Every invention or discovery, however laudable and ingenious it may be, is never quite right in its beginning. *Time* only makes it perfect. The clothes, shoes, hats, watches, houses, and every thing of our ancestors, were not as elegant and refined as those of the present century. In like manner was the method of the Abbé de L'Epée. Mr. Sicard reviewed it and made perfect what had been left to be devised, and had the good fortune of going beyond all the disciples of his Predecessor. His present pupils are now worthy of him, and I do not believe them any longer unhappy. Many are married, and have children endowed with the faculties of all their senses, and who will be the comforters and protectors of their parents in their old age. (The United States is the first country where I have seen one or two deaf and dumb fathers, some of whose children are deaf and dumb like themselves. Will this prove that the Americans are worse than Europeans? By no means. It is the result of natural causes, which I shall explain hereafter.) Many others of the Deaf and Dumb are the instructors of their companions of misfortune. Many others are employed in the offices of government and other public administrations. Many others are good painters, sculptors, engravers, workers in Mosaic, while others exercise mechanical arts; and some others are merchants and transact their own business perfectly well; and it is *education* which, has thus enabled them to pursue these different professions. An uneducated Deaf and Dumb would never be able to do this. Let us now speak of instruction, and say what Mr. Sicard did while teaching me. By reading or hearing this, you may pretty well judge how we teach the American Deaf and Dumb.

The sight of all the objects of nature which could be placed before the eyes of the Deaf and Dumb, the representation of those objects, either by drawing, by painting, by sculpture, or by the natural signs which the Deaf and Dumb employ, or invent themselves, or understand with an equal facility; the expression of the

will and passions, by the mere movement of the features, combined with the attitude and gestures of the body; writing traced, or printed, or expressed by conventional signs for each letter, or even simply figured in the air, offered to Mr. Sicard many means of instructing those unfortunate beings, to whom he had resolved to devote his life. He afterwards discovered, by his own experience, that it was possible to make the Deaf and Dumb speak by the imitation of the movement of the organs of speech, a movement which the eye alone enabled them to conceive and transmit to their understanding. He saw that they could thus comprehend and express the accents of words which they did not understand. But this artificial speech not being susceptible among the Deaf and Dumb, of complete improvement, nor of modification and regulation, by the sense of hearing, is almost always very painful, harsh and discordant, and comparatively useless. It has neither the rapidity nor the expressiveness of signs, nor the precision of writing. This artificial part of the instruction of the Deaf and Dumb, therefore, appeared to him very limited and of little advantage.

Nevertheless he saw with great interest, when in England with myself, the degree of perfection with which this mechanical movement had been able to imitate speech according to the method of Mr. Braidwood and by the talent and care of Dr. Watson, in London. He heard several of their pupils, in whose voice there was not any thing very disagreeable. Dr. Watson observed to Mr. Sicard, that this artificial speech was a medium which was found peculiarly useful for the Deaf and Dumb among the poor, because the children of this description are placed in manufactories, and are thus enabled to communicate more easily with their masters. This motive of convenience appeared to Mr. Sicard to deserve the greatest attention; but if the question regards the opening of the understanding of the Deaf and Dumb, as to the important end of giving them in society the same rank they would have if they were not deprived of the sense of hearing and the use of speech, his own experience and that of his pupils themselves, demonstrated fully to him, that nothing can supply to them the place of their natural language, *the language of signs*, which all languages spoken or written, are no more to them than translations.

The language of signs, then, ought to fix the attention of every enlightened man who makes it his study to improve the various parts of public instruction; this language, as simple as nature, is capable of extending itself like her, and of attaining the farthest limits of human thought. This language of signs is universal, and the Deaf and Dumb of whatever country they may be, can understand each other as well as you who hear and speak, do among yourselves. But they cannot understand you; it is for this reason that we wish to instruct them, that they may converse with you by writing, in the form of speech, and know the truths and mysteries of religion.

Mr. Sicard's first steps, and even the difficulties presented to him by his pupils, made him soon feel the necessity of proceeding according to the strictest method, and of fixing their ideas as well as the knowledge they were progressively acquiring, permanently in their memory, so that what they already

knew, might have an immediate connection with what they were to learn; his pupils unable to comprehend him, if the instruction which he wished to give them, did not coincide with that which they had received before; for thus they stopped his progress, and he could not accomplish his purpose but by resuming the chain of their ideas, and constantly following the uninterrupted line from the known to the *unknown*. It was thus that he succeeded in making them comprehend the language of the country in which he instructed them. This natural method is applicable to all languages. It proceeds by the surest and shortest way, and may be applied to all the channels of communication between one man and another.

It is by this method that Mr. Sicard has brought the Deaf and Dumb to the knowledge of all the kinds of words, of which a language is composed, of all the modifications of those words, of their variations and different senses; in short, of all their reciprocal influence.

In this manner the nouns become to the Deaf and Dumb the sign of all the objects of nature; words, which indicate qualities, become the signs of the accidents, variations and modifications which they perceive in objects. Mr. Sicard has made them comprehend, that qualities may be conceived of as detached from the object; whereby the adjective is far better defined than in the grammar written for youth, and by which means, also, he has so very rapidly led them to the science of abstraction. Besides, Mr. Sicard has made them conceive, that the qualities, which, in their eyes, appeared inherent in the objects, could be detached from them by thought; but then it was necessary to unite them to objects, and they themselves pointed out the necessity of a junction by *a line*. Mr. Sicard has taught them, that, in all languages, this line is translated by a word, affirming existence; in French, by the verb *être*; in English, by the verb *to be*. Tree-----green, or tree *is* green, has equally represented to their minds the object existing in conjunction with its quality, or the quality inherent in the object.

Mr. Sicard has thus made them understand the nature of the verb, and by making them afterwards comprehend that the verb could express either an existence, or an action *present, past, or future*, he has led them to the system of conjugation, and to all the shades of *past* and *future*, adopted in all the various languages written or spoken; an admirable system, in which the influence of the genius and of the thoughts of all ages is perceptible.

It is to this system, which embraces all possible combinations, and which unites all thoughts, that the language of the Deaf and Dumb accommodates itself with wonderful facility. The proofs of this assertion, given by Mr. Sicard's pupils, must astonish even the best informed men.

By the same method of proceeding from the *known* to the *unknown*, he has subsequently brought to the perception of his pupils, the characters, use and influence of all the other words, which, as parts of speech, unite, modify and determine the sense of the *noun*, the *verb*, and the *adjective*.

It is thus that at length Mr. Sicard has led his pupils to analyse with facility the simplest propositions, as well as the most complicated phrases and sentences, by a system of figures, which, by always distinguishing the name of the object which is either *ACTING*, or *receiving the effect of an action*, the verb and its government, *direct*, *indirect*, or *circumstantial*, embraces and completely displays all the parts of speech. The use of this method, when generally adopted, will simplify the rules of grammar in all languages, and facilitate more than any other method, the understanding and translating, both of modern and ancient languages.

This is the way by which Mr. Sicard has initiated his pupils into the knowledge of all the rules of universal grammar, applicable to the primitive expression of signs, as well as to all spoken and written languages.

But names do not only express physical objects; there are some which represent abstract objects. *Whiteness*, *greatness*, *beauty*, *heat*, and many other words, do not express objects existing individually in nature, but ideas of qualities common to several objects; qualities, which we consider detached from the objects to which they belong, and of which we make an *intellectual substantive*, created by the mind. As soon as Mr. Sicard taught the Deaf and Dumb to comprehend that the *will*, which determines our senses and our thoughts, is not the action of a physical Being, which can be seen and touched, he gave them a consciousness of their *Soul*, and made them fit for society and for happiness. The affecting expression of their gratitude, proves the extent of that benefit.

He advanced a step further, and the access to the highest conceptions of the human mind was opened to them. Mr. Sicard has found it easy to make them pass from abstract ideas, to the most sublime truths of religion. They have felt that this soul, of which they have the consciousness, is not a fictitious existence, is not an abstract existence created by the mind, but a real existence, which wills and which produces movement, which sees, which thinks, which reflects, which compares, which meditates, which remembers, which foresees, which believes, which doubts, which hopes, which loves, which hates. After this, he directed their thoughts towards all the physical existences submitted to their view through the immensity of space, or on the globe which we inhabit; and the regularity of the march of the sun and all the celestial bodies; the constant succession of day and night; the return of the seasons; the life, the riches and the beauty of nature; made them feel that nature also had a soul, of which the power, the action, and the immensity, extend through every thing existing in the universe; a soul which creates all, inspires all, and preserves all. Filled with these great ideas, the Deaf and Dumb have prostrated themselves on the earth, along with Mr. Sicard himself, and he has told them that this soul of nature, is that God, whom all men are called upon to worship, to whom our temples are raised, and with whom our religious doctrines and ceremonies connect us from the cradle to the grave.

All was now done; and Mr. Sicard found himself able to open to his pupils, all the sublime ideas of religion, and all the laws of virtue and of morals.

You see by the above particulars, Ladies and Gentlemen, what Mr. Sicard has achieved for his pupils. Their replies to the questions which have been proposed to them in France, sufficiently prove that they have run the career, from which I have above delineated. This career is that which a man, gifted with all his senses, and who is to be instructed, ought alike to run. The arts and sciences belong to the class of physical or intellectual objects; and the Deaf and Dumb, like men gifted with all their senses, may penetrate them according to the degree of intelligence which nature has granted them, as soon as they have reached the degree of instruction which Mr. Sicard's system of teaching, embraces and affords.

Now, Ladies and Gentlemen, if you will take the pains of reflecting ever so little upon the excessive difficulties which this mode of instruction presents, without cessation, you will not believe, as many people in this country do, that a few years are sufficient, in order that a Deaf and Dumb person may be restored to society, and so acquainted with religion, as to partake of it with benefit, and to render an account to himself of the reasons of his faith. You will notice, that the language of any people cannot be the mother tongue of the Deaf and Dumb, born amidst these people. Every spoken language is necessarily a learned language for these unfortunate Beings. The English language must be taught to the Deaf and Dumb, as the Greek or Latin is taught, in the Colleges, to the young Americans, who attend the classes of this kind. Now, will you, Ladies and Gentlemen, give yourselves the trouble of interrogating the Professors of the Colleges, and asking them the time required, to put a pupil in a state to understand fully the Greek and Latin Authors, and to write their thoughts in either of these languages, so as to make them understood by those who would speak these languages, then you would agree with me that the Greek or Latin would not be more difficult to be taught to the Deaf and Dumb, than the English; and yet to teach the Greek and Latin in Colleges, the professors and pupils have, for a means of comparison, a language at hand, an acquired language, a mother tongue, which is the English language, in which they have learned to think; whereas the unfortunate Deaf and Dumb, in order to learn English, have not any language with which to compare it, nor any language in which they may have had the habit of thinking. These unfortunate have for their native language but a few gestures, to express their usual wants, and the most familiar actions of life. The Abbé de L'Epée demanded for the education of a Deaf and Dumb person, *ten years* of constant labour; and yet, after this labour of ten years, none of his pupils had as yet attained the highest degree of perfection. Will this prove that ten years of study will be required, in order that the American Deaf and Dumb entrusted to our care, may furnish their course of instruction? No, Ladies and Gentlemen, for then what would be the benefit of the perfection which Mr. Sicard has given to his method, and with whose system we are acquainted pretty well? I have the pleasure to inform you that the Deaf and Dumb of this country have very good natural talents, a great facility, and an unusual ardour in learning, and an intensity of application, which we have rather to moderate than to excite. The time which Mr. Sicard's illustrious predecessor thought necessary, will not then

be required by us. From five to seven years only, is the time we wish they may pass with us, (especially if they come to the Asylum young,) that they may truly improve in all the common branches of useful knowledge, after so painful and so hard a course of study, and that their teachers may see with satisfaction, that they have not sowed on the sand.

What must I think of the vain presage which some people draw from certain accidents, purely fortuitous! I compare these birds of good or bad augury, who imagine that the sight of Deaf and Dumb persons multiply them, with those weak minds, who fear beginning a journey on a Friday, or who believe that the meeting of a weasel, the overthrowing of a salt-box, and the salt spread on the table, bring an ill-luck; or who fear hobgoblins, or who say that when there are thirteen persons at table, one of them is to die in the course of the year!

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. I have read, in a certain account of Turkey, that the great Sultan knowing

not what to do with the Deaf and Dumb of his empire, employed the most intelligent among them in playing pantomimes before his Highness. The forty-two Deaf and Dumb who are here present, except four or six, had never seen each other before and did not even imagine that there were any others besides themselves. Their parents probably imagined the same. It is not then the sight of them, which can have produced them. I think our deafness proceeds from an act of Providence, I would say, from the will of God. and [*sic*] does it imply that the Deaf and Dumb are worse than other men? Perhaps if we heard, we might have beard much evil, and perhaps blasphemed the holy name of our Creator, and of course hazarded the loss of our soul when departing this life. We therefore cannot but thank God for having made us Deaf and Dumb, hoping that in the future world, the reason of this may be explained to us all.

The bible, however, says that the doors of heaven will be opened to no one, unless he has fulfilled the conditions imposed by Jesus-Christ. If then, when the uneducated Deaf and Dumb appear before the supreme tribunal, they are found not to have fulfilled these conditions, they may plead: "Lord, we wished to learn to know you and to do what you had ordered; but it did not depend upon us. Our mind was buried in the deepest darkness, and no man raised or contributed to raise the veil which covered it, although it was in his power!" But let us hope, Ladies and Gentlemen that this will not be the case. You are at peace with all the powers of Europe, and nothing abroad requires any sacrifice of your finances. May this happy state of things, therefore, while it permits you to improve the agriculture and manufactures of your country, allow you at the same time, to improve the welfare of some hundred individuals among your fellow-citizens! Doubtless you ought to use a wise economy in the distribution of the succour, for which the unfortunate sue from the national equity; doubtless you ought to refuse your charity to any establishment which, soliciting benevolence, would be a servant rather to pride than to humanity; doubtless you would have deserved well of your country by stopping with firmness, the first impulses of the sensibility of those among you who are ready to yield to pageantry and magnificence, that which ought to be granted only to the most urgent needs. But are these truths applicable to an establishment of a nature like ours? I believe I can deny it. About one hundred Deaf and Dumb in the State of Connecticut, included in the two thousand spread over all parts of the United States, the greatest portion of whom are born in the bosom of indigence, and reduced to the most miserable condition, all deprived of the charms of society, all unacquainted with the benefit of religion, all more to be pitied than those who are bound by pure instinct, and holding nothing from man but the faculty of more lively feeling, ought they then to be still longer neglected, eternally forgotten! They suspect, doubtless, all the extent of the deprivation they experience; every day they lament their unhappiness; but this is invisible, and the comfortable voice of reason neither comes to soften the rigour of their fate, nor alleviate the weight of their misfortune. Yet do not they form, like yourselves, a part of human kind? Are not the unhappy authors of their existence, Americans like yourselves? On account of having not penetrated our benevolent views, some persons, instead of casting a kind look upon those poor Beings, rose against our project, but we are persuaded that their hearts belied

their attempt, and that even, at the moment in which they thought of opening their lips to remove from the great human family, Beings whom every thing commands you to introduce therein, their arms were involuntarily opened to carry them back to it.

An uneducated Deaf and Dumb is a natural man who attributes the whole good which he sees others do, to the personal interest which governs them; who supposes in others, all the vices which he finds in his own soul. Often prone to suspicion, he exaggerates the evil which he sees, and fears always to be the victim of those who are stronger than himself.

While casting your eyes on so afflicting a picture, do you not, Ladies and Gentlemen, feel a strong wish, that the art of instructing Beings as unhappy as the Deaf and Dumb, may receive all possible encouragement? Ah! what among the branches of your knowledge deserves more to interest Government and literary bodies of men, devoted by their profession, to patronize all that can render men better and happier.

One institution for them, in New-England, would produce the most satisfactory result, and answer all your future expectations. In coming, thus, to lay our pretensions before so enlightened an assembly as this, we have not suffered ourselves to disguise the fact, that we should have for judges, persons to be regarded for their various and extensive information; but the desire of enriching our method of instruction, with your observation, has surmounted the fears which we had, at first, conceived. And we presume to reckon the more on your indulgence, as the progress of our pupils, which you are about to witness, are the fruits of only one year's labour, and of the most constant and assiduous application.

LAURENT CLERC.

See also: [\*The Journal of the Times\*, vol. 1, no. 11, November 21, 1818, p. 162.](#)