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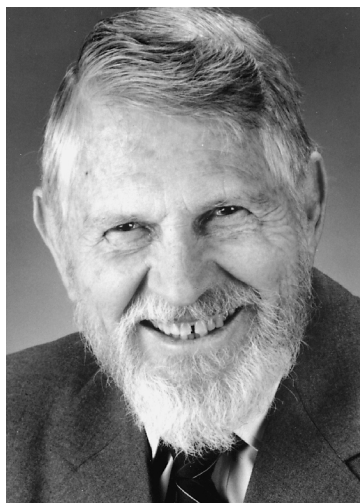
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## APPRECIATION

# William C. Stokoe

*July 21, 1919–April 4, 2000*

Sherman Wilcox



DURING WILLIAM STOKOE'S lifetime, his name became recognized the world over, among deaf and hearing people, scholars and lay people, as synonymous with the linguistic study of signed languages. And yet my sense is that, whenever people met Bill for the first time, they were always a bit surprised. The man whose name had acquired such mythic proportions just didn't seem to match the man with the broad smile shaking their hand or giving them a big hug. Deaf people noticed immediately that Bill really couldn't sign all that well. Linguists often noted that Bill's background in linguistic theory was sketchy at best. How was it, then, that Bill accomplished what he did? The answer is simple: Bill Stokoe was a consummate scholar. And in looking at what made Bill a true scholar, I think we can all learn a valuable lesson.

A colleague who met Bill only recently, Barbara King, told me this about her impression of Bill:

I have always treasured a kind note Bill wrote to me after my review of *Gesture and the Nature of Language* appeared. Somehow he insisted

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Donations may be made to the William C. Stokoe Jr. Chair of Ethnographic Studies in Deaf Language and Culture, c/o Gallaudet University Office of Development, 800 Florida Avenue NE, Washington, DC 20002-3695.

on making it seem as if I was the smart one, which was just his generosity of spirit—he was quite modest and yet . . . so powerful in the “bigness” of his ideas.

This was Bill’s way. He made those around him feel that they were the smart ones. Bill assumed people were smart until they proved him wrong. I believe that this is what made Bill such a remarkable teacher. He was full of big ideas, powerful ideas. But he was never full of himself. The focus throughout his life was not on Bill Stokoe, not even on his ideas, but on what the ideas were about: people and their languages.

Bill constantly learned from others. He often would ask people who came to learn from him what *they* were studying, what *they* found interesting. Rather than telling people what they needed to know, Bill would ask what they could teach him. Most of us, of course, had no idea! But by watching Bill and following his example, we soon found our own way and developed our own ideas.

Bill was a superb listener. As Larry Gorbet mentioned to me, “Whether it was me or someone else talking, I kept feeling like Bill understood what was being said at least as well as the person saying it.” I would add that Bill not only understood what you were saying as well as you did, but he helped you to understand it better than you did before you told him. He not only made it seem as if you were smart, he made you smart.

More than a superb listener, Bill was also an astute observer. It was in merely watching his Deaf students at Gallaudet, after all, that Bill came to the realization that the signs he saw them making were a language.

Bill’s keen observations were driven by a vital sense of curiosity. And he fostered this sense of curiosity in others. From Bill, we learned to observe, to wonder, and to ask why. We also learned not to jump to conclusions, not to be vain in our own knowledge; rather, Bill encouraged us to question our own assumptions, as he had questioned the prevailing wisdom that signs were nothing more than pretty gestures.

Finally, Bill was a fountain of creativity. His ideas flowed so freely that I don’t understand how he could keep up with himself. In early March, when he was suffering terribly from his illness, Bill sent me

a paper he was working on called “Natural Selection and Human Interaction.” His intellect was as sharp as ever.

How did he have so many brilliant ideas? I don’t think it was just because Bill was curious or because he kept his eyes and mind open. I think it was also because he did not accept arbitrary divisions in what he saw or in how he thought. Bill’s life and work blurred the distinctions between heart and mind, between art and science. His study of language was inspired by his deep understanding that the people who use language come first. His profound respect for Deaf people and their language was the bedrock of his work.

Larry Gorbet tells me that when he arrived in Bill’s lab in the summer of 1976, he found a paper Bill had been reading. The topic typified the essence of Bill’s approach to research on sign language. It was a paper describing cultural variation in smiles.

Elena Pizzuto, a sign language researcher in Rome, wrote to me when she learned of Bill’s death. She said, “I think we have all become poorer with Bill’s death: We have lost a friend who will continue to inspire us, and our research, with his incredible intellectual integrity, honesty, far-sighted views, and warm and charming smiles.”

Bill made so many friends. And so many careers. How many of us are involved in scholarly pursuits today because of Bill Stokoe’s life and work? I suspect, though, that Bill would want to be remembered not only, maybe not even primarily, for his life of scholarship, but for his warm and charming smiles. Family and friends were Bill’s great joys. We have all lost a great friend.