Being and Reading

In a 1974 video of Bob teaching the elements of poetry, he asks his class to read John Masefield's "The West Wind." He guides them toward an understanding of alliteration in the first line: "It's a warm wind, the west wind, full of birds' cries." They discuss their own experiences in using their senses to feel wind and, for some students, to hear the cries of birds. He dramatizes being there, smelling the daffodils. They discuss similes when they reach the second line of the second stanza, "Apple orchards blossom there, and the air's like wine." How would a child interpret "the air's like wine"? Bob asks, encouraging them to think about language and thought and how experience plays a role in interpreting a poem. "Do you smell anything?" he follows as his class reads, "It's April, and blossom time, and white is the may." By the time the class finishes the poem, the students not only know how to use their senses to analyze a poem, but how to *be* there in the countryside, realizing the full meaning of "spring" and "spring fever."

Bob then examines a line from Alfred Lord Tennyson's "My life has crept so long on a broken wing." He asks a student to act out the word "crept" so that the whole class senses the slow

and careful nature of the movement. And in advancing through additional lines, the students become part of the verse. Whether it is Bob or the students acting out the lines to construct meaning, there are smiles on all their faces.

Perhaps the greatest characteristic of Bob's exemplary teaching was his emphasis on the verb "to be." Today there is research supporting student-centered "active," "participative," or "interactive" approaches. But this was "old hat" for Bob, who developed this mode of teaching through intuition and experience. He had always believed in emphasizing the *involvement* of students in the classroom. Over the years, he had collected several dictums that defined his teaching. Influenced by Marshall McLuhan's *The Medium Is the Message,* Bob encouraged his students not only to read a book, but *be* the book. Another influence came from Archibald MacLeish's "Ars Poetica": "A poem should not mean / But be." Bob saw poetry as being much more than words with aesthetic qualities. Poetry, to him, is one of the best means for communicating ideas, enlarging vocabulary, and teaching language. In 1979, he published an article titled "On Teaching Poetry to the Deaf (Or: Let the Student Be the Poem!)" in the *American Annals of the Deaf.* In arithmetic, he argued, children learn such terminology as "add," "subtract," "multiply," and "divide." In geography, they learn "latitude" and "longitude" and many other terms. But, he lamented, teachers have not been trained well to use poetry in the earlier grades to help the students develop a critical vocabulary as well as an appreciation for verse. "Once that happens," he explained, "there's no limit as to where they may go. And it stretches their imagination, enhances their sensitivity to beauty or artistry of written expression."[1] He wrote:

> Why teach poetry? For the very same reason that we teach *the language arts* . . . it helps to stimulate creativity and self expression, and it encourages the development of a student's intellectual faculties—imagination, thinking, and interpretation. . . . As in exposure to dramatics or dancing, it makes students react emotionally and sensitively to artistry of expression. . . . Through the language of poetry, students can learn to perceive how the commonplace is made to seem uncommon, how old words can be expressed with freshness, originality, and beauty.[2]

Haiku provided Bob with another avenue through which to combine poetry with drama. He gave many presentations and workshops at schools for deaf students. In general, he performed haiku poetry on a variety of topics such as "Hail," "Fireworks," and "Flowers," which were met with creative and enthusiastic response. In showing how the students can "be" the poem, Bob would first take a haiku like the following by Shisea-Jo, titled "Umbrella": "As I walk in the winter rain / The umbrella / Pushes me back." He asked his students to imitate the action of the speaker in the poem. In this case, he had them hold an imaginary umbrella in hand. On their first try, they inevitably ended up stumbling backwards, holding the umbrella behind them at a sharp angle, as if the wind was pulling them back. He discussed with them what the poem says about pushing, what kind of wind it is, and how to represent this poem accurately. They must point the umbrella into the very face of the wind, he explained. In this example Bob illustrated the development of language skills, as well as thinking skills, with his student-centered approach. "This is the essence of learning," he stressed, "if we are to get at the

very root of the Latinate term *educare,* meaning 'to draw out or from' the learner."[3]

When people walked into a class or workshop Bob was giving, they quickly saw how he demanded that the students "be the book" as the characters in the story or play became animated and real. His signing of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" was as intriguing as the story of revenge itself. Bob's classroom was his stage, but his students were actors, too. This was the mission of another course he designed, "Creative Interpretation of Literature in Sign Language," which he had taught at the National Theatre of the Deaf summer sessions. For Bob, the verb "to be" was focused on the students and dialogue—not the monologue of lectures. Bob saw the "act" in "active" and "interactive" not just as an emphasis on involvement of students. He also saw it in a dramatic sense. This emphasis, too, was what drove Bob to establish the Drama Club at NTID to "give students as much hands-on experience as possible in whatever their field."[4] This is why Bob's students frequently commented on his "come-alive classroom."[5]

"A poem communicates its meaning," Bob wrote, "by the total impression it makes upon the five senses. The greater our involvement and responsiveness, the more meaningful the poem becomes and the deeper our appreciation. It is the teacher's responsibility to make this happen—to twang the five-stringed lyre within each student and turn them on with all kinds of vibrations. This is the essence of learning."[6] Bob always sought to "get rid of the paper work" in class and to focus on such facets as the aesthetics of verse. He encouraged the students to dramatize the subtleties of their own poetry through

sign language and mime. It was a challenge he accepted enthusiastically.[7] He would describe "circles of meaning" as a means of getting his students to delve more deeply into verse. He would analyze, for example, the rippling, multilayered meaning of the line "I have miles to go before I sleep" in Robert Frost's poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," and in so doing, he would reveal part of his own life philosophy: that as long as a person is alive, there is more to learn and more to do.

Bob's use of dramatization in teaching was influenced by the people he had met over the years. At CSUN, he had interacted with actress Nanette Fabray, and afterwards stage and screen star Vivica Lindfors was impressed with a presentation he gave on sign-mime at the National Conference of American College Theatre Arts Association at Maryland University. He had a lively discussion with her and other participants. During earlier years at the NTD Summer School, Bob had always enjoyed mingling with celebrities. David Hays had brought stage and screen star Celeste Holm to the O'Neill Memorial Theatre Center to speak. Bob had already met her at her farm home when he used to babysit for his cousin Gilda at her summer home near Hackettown, New Jersey, and Celeste was delighted to see Bob again and learn about the NTD theater work. That year, he also had met Robert Cummings at the Americana Hotel in Rochester, where he invited the actor to come and see deaf actors perform. Cummings stayed afterwards and met the students and signed autographs. Jane Fonda was also a guest at NTID in 1974, and Bob enjoyed meeting her.

One of Bob's NTID students, Karen Beiter, currently on the faculty, recalls the act of "being" in a literature course. The

class was discussing a science fiction story about a robot who developed human characteristics that included being able to compose musical compositions. Eventually the robot realizes he is too intelligent and that he exceeds the creative qualities reserved for humans, and he decides to revert to the original role for which he was designed. "Being a typically orally-raised person that I was back then," Beiter remembered, "I presented the story in sign language the best I could without much dramatization. Bob Panara took the same story and dramatized it visually so well that I never forgot how he played the role of the robot and suddenly, at the end, he stopped his piano playing and went back to vacuuming duties with a blank expression again."[8] Beiter especially remembered a discussion in one of Bob's classes about how to improve Deaf education. They defined an "ideal classroom" for deaf students. Unlike what most deaf students experience today in the mainstream, this "ideal" class would be half hearing and half deaf. Everyone would sign. Educational expectations would be equal for everyone, with high standards. There would be no feeling of isolation in this bilingual/bicultural environment. "There were so many benefits to this concept," she recalled, "that when I was in the running for a pageant a few months later, a similar question came up and I had a well-thought-out answer ready and ended up winning the pageant! Bob Panara did have a very positive influence on my life and I thank him for that."[9]

Jackie Schertz, now a docent at the Memorial Art Gallery in Rochester, took three of Bob's courses from him, including creative interpretation of literature in sign language, great world drama, and deaf characters in fiction, film, and drama. In each of those classes, Schertz knew she was in for wonderful

entertainment, more than would be provided by a lecture. "He was a master storyteller," she explained. "He knew the stories by heart. He became the characters in the stories. He taught in a joyous manner, without drilling." But Schertz smiled as she recalled also experiencing firsthand the tendency that led to Bob's name sign being given to him by Chuck Jones in the Drama Club. As she reminisced, "Almost always, Bob would run overtime. This invariably presented a problem for his students getting out of the classroom for their next class. Students often crowded the doorway and the hallway as they waited to get into the classroom."[10]

Bob admits that had he not developed his talent for writing verse himself, his work would have held less meaning to him and his students. His son, John, recognized that one of his father's greatest assets as a teacher was his uncanny ability to make words come alive for his students. For some deafened people, one's own voice was the sole reminder of what speech was like, and as the years pass, the recollection of the voices of others fades away. John remembered frequently waking up on Saturday mornings to the sounds of his father reciting lines. Those from Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" sparked his imagination. Words from Blake's "The Tyger" evoked a haunting beauty. When asked once what his greatest joy was as a teacher, Bob responded, "I guess it's impossible to top Longfellow's three-word statement, saying that the purest triumph of a storyteller happens when they [the students] cry, 'Tell me more!'" In teaching day in and day out over the years, he developed a philosophy similar to the old "on-with-the-show" adage of the stage. He saw teaching as being the leading character in the same play that is performed, day in and out, year after year. In order to

stay on his toes to try to feel fresh and keep the students enthralled, he would single out one or more students in the class and play up to them, with the thought that they were seeing him teach or perform for the first time.

Jackie Schertz also remembered the discussions she had with Bob about the assignments for class. "We often talked about how the themes and symbols applied to our lives," she told me. "During those times, I saw the philosopher in him. We were blessed with Bob Panara's wit, humor, wisdom, warmth, generous nature, and friendship."[11]

Some teachers emphasize understanding a poem, expecting their students to read the poem and then discuss it. They would ask the students to write short answers to questions written on a sheet along with the poem, "as if that is all there is to appreciating and understanding the poem."[12] Bob believed that the teacher should present the poem first on a literal level; then students can attempt to sign-mime the verse. In this way the main idea is discovered naturally but gradually, and subsequently, the students go into the aesthetics of the poetry, including an appreciation of the sound effects—rhyme, rhythm, alliteration—and the visual imagery. Analyzing a poem, to Bob, was similar in some ways to applying the scientific method. It was discovery learning at its best!

The poetry patterns of many young deaf students are often in free verse, and to foster their creative efforts Bob felt it was important to encourage students to read more poetry to strengthen their skill, just as one would practice baseball or dancing. By reading various kinds of poetry, they should learn the intricacies of metaphor, simile, alliteration, and other dimensions of verse. "I believe the final product is still somewhat

like an uncut diamond. The teacher has the duty to help them with the mechanics of English to try to make it as literate as possible." Style, to Bob, develops with time and practice, and a poet, deaf or hearing, has a particular medium for saying what he or she thinks and feels.

Then there was Emerson's guiding principle about enthusiasm that became just as much Bob's trademark as his name sign. "The trick is to have a lot of enthusiasm in what you do," he later explained, "and let it rub off on the students. Plus . . . dramatizing the material in a way that excites them, then getting them to respond."[13] Too, in his interview with Bruce White for the journal *Teaching English to Deaf and Second Language Students* in 1984, he quoted the English writer John Dryden with a related principle—the importance of "teaching delightfully."[14] As Bob told John Clark during an interview about his career, "The rapt attention and wide-eyed look of wonder is satisfaction and reward enough to believe that Cicero was right in saying that 'Teaching is the noblest profession.'"[15]

In 2003, Bob's former student Willy Conley, who became chairman of Gallaudet University's theater department, wrote, acted, and directed a video adaptation of excerpts from *Tuesdays with Morrie* as part of Gallaudet's convocation program called "Building Our Community." Following the video presentation about the charismatic professor Morrie Schwartz, who died of Lou Gehrig's disease, Conley was asked to give a speech, which led him to look back on his own experiences as a student as well as his role as a teacher. He sent me an excerpt from this speech, which mentions Bob:

> Buried deep in my memory was a drama professor who made a significant impact on me. his name was Dr. Robert Panara.

> I will always remember our lunch together in his favorite restaurant several years after I graduated from R.I.T. Like Morrie, he loved to eat—but thankfully, he didn't spray food out of his mouth while talking. He was Deaf, and could eat politely with his mouth closed while signing fluently. One of the most profound things he said to me was: "in the classroom, a teacher should be educationally delightful." He was not a stage actor by profession but the classroom became his stage. He acted his heart out with his teachings. What he meant was that as teachers we must "delight" our student with learning. Panara's job was not merely to entertain or to teach us things that were easy and superficial, but to engage us in learning . . . to be delighted in the process. Professor Panara delighted me and I learned.[16]

Teaching delightfully did not mean grading lightly, however. Gerry Buckley, now an assistant vice president for college advancement at NTID, received his only C grade in his college years from Bob. "I deserved it fully," he remembers. He was enrolled in "Deaf Studies in Literature" in the 1970s, and Bob gave an assignment to analyze a story in terms of the accuracy of portrayal of a deaf character. Buckley didn't put in his best effort, writing a formal paper in a colloquial style, and Bob knew he was capable of writing much better. "Bob was always seeking to push students to live up to their full potential in the theater, in the classroom, and in their lives. He accepted no less from them and continually demonstrated to us through his work the value of this work ethic."[17]

During all his years growing up, Bob's son, John, recalled, he never once heard his father speak negatively about a student or a student's writing: "His heart just wouldn't let him do such a thing." John remembers an article written by Alex

Haley, in which he advised, "Find the good—and praise it."[18] When it came to his deaf students, his father always found a way to do just that. Of course, Bob handed out his share of low grades. It was never easy for him. Not every student could hit the ball into the seats. He could only offer to be the best batting coach he could be and hope that they would break out of a slump.

Willy Conley recalled Bob's course on deaf characters in literature and film. Bob gave his students creative writing assignments that allowed them to find the Deaf experience within each of them. Conley wrote about his medical photography internship that dealt with photographing open-heart surgery in an environment where there were no interpreters and he could not lipread the surgeons and nurses because they were wearing face masks. "Bob gave me an A," Willy remembered, "and encouraged me to submit it to R.I.T.'s literary magazine. I ended up garnering my first publication, which led to an ongoing love for creative writing."[19]

Bob often used a bilingual approach to evaluating learning in his classes. He would give students the opportunity to demonstrate their mastery of the course objectives and the ability to express themselves through the printed word (English) or in sign language (ASL or sign-mime). Students taking his 1982 course "Great World Drama," for example, could choose to do either a dramatic sketch or a written essay as a final project. Among his students' choices for dramatization were a dialogue from *The Hairy Ape* and a monologue from *The Glass Menagerie.* The written reports included essays titled "Commedia dell'Arte: An Overview" and "Renaissance Theatre: New Stage Designs."

Jackie Schertz reflected on the engaging approach Bob used in class: "After we gave our 'performances' by reciting monologues or teaming up with class members to do scenes as part of our assignments, he gave us feedback on a positive note and demonstrated ways we can improve. He created an environment that made us want to get involved. He combined the best of both old-fashioned traditional and modern innovative ways."[20]

Bob's students could also express themselves through other art forms. One student chose to model costumes in miniature for *Oedipus Rex,* while another developed a stage set model for *The Glass Menagerie.* As with his courses on poetry, Bob based his evaluations on accuracy of interpretation, translation of the printed word (script, verse, etc.) to signed form, coherence, creativity, and emotional impact.

The notion of making verse "come to life" through sign language also brought Bob into contact with the internationally known poet Allen Ginsberg, who was invited to meet with him at RIT in 1984. Articles in the Rochester newspapers welcomed the poet laureate of the Beat Generation, reminding readers that the political activist had been arrested several times for his antiestablishment protests, and that he was a self-styled "gay, Buddhist-Jewish peaceful poet in a hyper-military landscape."[21] Bob looked forward to this exchange with Ginsberg.

Some people who attended the workshop had expected Ginsberg to simply come read his poetry, and they were pleasantly surprised that he had come to learn about deafness and signing as a means of enlivening his own poetry. They first discussed Bob's experience as a person who had once heard as a child

In 1984, RIT invited the beat poet Allen Ginsberg to discuss poetry. Left to right are Jim Cohn (coordinator), Kip Webster (sign language interpreter), Ginsberg, and Bob.

and how this affected his ability to interpret poetry. Pat Graybill, deaf from birth and also on the faculty at NTID, was also there, and he described his own concept of poetry. Graybill explained that he enjoyed reciting poetry in sign, "but I don't know its rhythm." Ginsberg and Bob discussed with Graybill how this might mean he saw poetry as a "picture and an idea." As Ginsberg explained, "That's what most twentieth-century poetry is—ideas in the forms of pictures. Two of the greatest 'Imagist' poets are William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound. There's a tendency to develop an international poetical style without rhythm and rhyme, but with harder and clearer *pictures*."[22] Through their discussion of how signing poetry was like "painting pictures in the air," Bob and Ginsberg agreed that a performance of poetry becomes pantomime or "poetry in motion"—another art form like dance. Bob got an up-close understanding of what one of the most famous, and eccentric, of the Beat Poets was like.[23]

The real fun began when Ginsberg read several of his own poems, including "Howl," with its "pornographic" verse and abstract terms like "Angelheaded hipsters," "Starry dynamo," and "Hydrogen juke box." The deaf actor Pat Graybill attempted to translate by miming the words for "music," "box," "coin from pocket," "vertical record becoming horizontal," "needle going around," "thunder shaking," and "bomb exploding."

"That looks like it, that's good!" Ginsberg said excitedly. "There's a logical jump in that whole other picture—that's interesting!"[24] Jim Cohn, who had invited Ginsberg to meet Bob, recalled the use of ASL to sign "hydrogen jukebox" as an "extralinguistic moment that verified the sonic quality of images."[25]

Bob reflected that the workshop with Ginsberg was "the kind of happening I've often dreamed of—the opportunity to have a dialog with a distinguished poet, and to demonstrate signed poetry as a totally different mode of expression."[26]