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Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW

A Man Without Words by Susan Schaller,
(Summit Books, New York, NY, 1991).

While growing up, I remember a favorite story was *The Biography of Helen Keller*. Who can forget the moment when Annie Sullivan finally conveys the meaning of the word "water" to Helen by the Keller's pump? Could that same spark of recognition and human contact be ignited in the 1990's amidst our more sophisticated educational trappings? It can and did happen, as is vividly described by Susan Schaller in the non-fictional book entitled *A Man Without Words*. Schaller and her husband move to southern California where she is sent on an interpreting assignment to a local community college. When she arrives, she finds herself in a large group of deaf adults in a sort of remedial language class. She becomes intrigued by one particular male student and tries to initiate a conversation. While the student appears alert, he does not respond to ASL, fingerspelling, written English, or mime. He copies Schaller's signs in a hand of echolalia but they appear to have no meaning to him. Confused, Schaller approaches the teacher and is told "Ildefonso," twenty-seven years old, is an illegal Mexican immigrant who is apparently languageless!

This did not deter Schaller. Daily in the classroom she initiates attempts to establish contact with Ildefonso. She acts, she mimes, she draws and she signs over and over and over. Finally, a moment of comprehension. "Suddenly, he sat up straight and rigid...the whites of his eyes expanded as if in terror. He looked like a wild horse, pulling back, testing every muscle before making a powerful lunge over a canyon's edge.... I stood motionless in front of a cat, petted beyond recognition for the fiftieth time, and I witnessed

Ildefonso's emancipation. He broke through....he understood."

Later, Ildefonso comprehends that there is an English language, a Spanish language, and that these languages can be written. He collapses on his desk in tears, overcome with all he has missed and all that he faces.

Seven years later, she returns to California and after several attempts, locates Ildefonso. He is now a gardener, signs fluently, and has become a U.S. resident. Schaller is able to learn more about his early life in Mexico, herding sheep and goats and harvesting sugar cane. Ildefonso leads Schaller to three other deaf, languageless Mexican men. Ildefonso alone had been able to make the leap to learning our language.

I am equally inspired by the life of Ildefonso as I am by the work of Schaller. With no experience as a teacher, she was able to initiate a remarkable change in a human life. I think it important to note in these days of "autism" that her approach was not paternalistic. She encouraged and fostered independence, not dependence. She has learned as much from her experience with Ildefonso as he has from her. It was a compassionate human connection of the best kind.

Recently I had the pleasure of meeting Susan Schaller. She has established an institute for the languageless.

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