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The Magic Language of Charles Bliss

BY STEPHEN JOHNSON

*Because of one man's obsession,
children once shut off from the
world are now able to break through
their barrier of loneliness*



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BY STEPHEN JOHNSON

RUTH Harrington fought back her tears. Her seven-year-old daughter Kari had just said she was sad because her pet guinea pig couldn't think for itself. For Ruth, a 39-year-old mother in Markham, Ontario, it was a poignant moment. Until then, Kari, a victim of cerebral palsy, had been able to communicate only by nodding her head, pointing with her arm or making virtually meaningless noises. Now she herself had become the guinea pig in a unique programme at the Ontario Crippled Children's Centre School. The project: to see if a revolutionary system called Blissymbolics could help palsied children "talk back" to the world around them.

Today, five years later, Kari demonstrates Blissymbols with an immense grin of satisfaction. She is the star pupil in her class, zooming about in a newly designed wheel-

chair for children. Seated in front of a 50-by-60-centimetre tray, Kari has before her 400 brightly coloured symbols, arranged in rows on a board: yellow strips for nouns and pronouns, green for verbs, white for conjunctions, blue for adjectives. "Can you tell me a bird that begins with a colour, Kari?" asks the teacher. With her one workable finger, Kari points first to the symbol for "blue," then the letter "J," and the class lets out a cheer.

Until she was 20, an unresponding body limited the lively mind of Sue Odell, who also has cerebral palsy. Then Sue was given a symbol board and learnt to use it in two weeks. Totally self-taught, Sue now assists Shirley McNaughton, programme director of the recently established Blissymbolics Communication Foundation, in workshops at the Ontario Crippled Children's Centre. Being

able to communicate fully through symbols has expanded her world, and she was married in April. Recently, Sue and Shirley conducted a church service together, Sue's thoughts, via her symbol board, forming the closing meditation: *I know symbols are good because I am a changed person. The self is not as you see on the outside. The other person has to feel with the heart inside your body.*

Chinese Key. Kari and Sue are just two examples of the 750,000 North Americans who suffer from cerebral palsy, a disability causing loss of muscular control due to brain damage before or after birth. The victim may suffer from poor muscular co-ordination, speech disturbances and muscular spasms that interfere with movement. Though half of all such children have normal intelligence, they often appear subnormal.

These symbols that have enabled Kari, Sue and hundreds of others to break through their barrier of loneliness are a method of communication invented by Charles Bliss, a scholarly and voluble 80-year-old who runs a boarding house in Sydney. As a young man, he dreamed of uniting mankind through symbols.

He was born Karl Blitz in the Austria of the Habsburg Empire, where, he says, ten different nationalities "hated one another because they thought and spoke in different languages." As a student of music, mathematics and chemistry, young Karl was fascinated by the fact that the symbols in these three disciplines were universally understood. After

graduating from the Vienna Technical University in chemical engineering, he became chief of the patents department of an electronics firm. There he often wrestled with specifications in as many as 20 different languages.

Then Hitler came to power. Karl Blitz, a Jew, was sent to Dachau and later Buchenwald. Incredibly, he escaped with the help of friendly guards and fled to Britain. Changing his name, he worked as a factory manager in London, then left to go to Shanghai. Meanwhile, his wife Claire travelled east from Germany through Russia and China, to be reunited with Charles on Christmas Eve, 1940.

In Shanghai, he found the key to what became his life's work: the picto-ideographic writing of China. When he discovered that many tribes became united through a writing which any of their wise men could read, no matter what their spoken language, he dreamed of a universal symbol language.

Interned by the Japanese in 1943, he and Claire emigrated to Australia after the war. He took a job on a Sydney car assembly line but buried himself in his real task. Finally in 1949 Bliss completed his opus, a three-volume manuscript entitled *Semantography* (from the Greek *semantikos*, meaning; and *graphein*, to write).

Bliss used only 100 basic symbols, relating to meaning rather than sound. But he combined them to make thousands of meanings. Often they imitate the things they stand for,

HOW TO READ MY SYMBOLS

BY CHARLES BLISS

My 100 basic symbol elements are the "elements of meaning." This is a man Λ and this a woman Δ When they want to marry, the first thing on their minds is a roof $\wedge$ over their heads. Here then is a married couple $\Lambda\Delta$ Then their first baby is born. How to symbolize this? For centuries, newspapers advertised all births with a star $*$ Here I show how a star appears under the roof, a birth $\wedge*$ And here are the happy parents $\Lambda\Delta$ Now the roof symbol takes on the meaning of protection $\wedge$ Thus a father is $\uparrow$ and a mother Δ A simple symbol of only two lines shows an upright standing human being of either sex $\downarrow$ A number added indicates the first, second or third person. Thus, I is $\downarrow_1$ With the multiplication mark on top, we get the plural we $\downarrow_1^x$

More basic symbol elements are eye $\circ$ mouth $\circ$ nose L ear $\mathcal{Z}$ I have abandoned most verbs. Instead, I use this symbol Λ fashioned after the Latin *Actus*, for action. Putting this symbol on top of a thing symbol turns it into an action symbol. Mouth $\circ$ becomes to speak $\hat{\circ}$ Mouth $\circ$ combined with the ground line of our Mother Earth $—$ means food $\ominus$ With the action indicator on top, it means to eat $\hat{\ominus}$

The symbol for the mind is the outline of the upper skull that protects the brain $\cap$ With the international symbols of plus $+$ and minus $-$ and the exclamation mark $!$ we get good $\cap!$ and bad $\cap!$ and doubt $\cap?$ The heart symbol is used to express emotion $\heartsuit$ With the international symbol of the arrow $\rightarrow$ we get heartlifting joy $\heartsuit\rightarrow$ and downheartedness $\heartsuit\leftarrow$ Adding the symbol for to be $\circ$ we can form a full sentence, "I am happy to see you." $\downarrow_1 \circ \heartsuit \hat{\circ} \downarrow_2$

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or at least provide visual clues. The system is concise, logical and fun, especially for children.

To complete it, Bliss had mortgaged his house and lived on a diet of beans and cheese. When the system was ready, Claire Bliss sent out 6000

letters to linguists, educators and scholars. Some recipients were enthusiastic. Said biologist Sir Julian Huxley, "Bliss's work provides something of real importance." Lord Bertrand Russell described it as "an important service to mankind." But

others were silent. Scores of his letters to UNESCO went unanswered. In Australia, his system was ignored. It was too much for Claire; she suffered a heart attack. When she died in 1961, Bliss lost interest in his life's work.

Ten years later, in Toronto, special-education teacher Shirley McNaughton was combing through textbooks in a library, in search of a way to communicate with children suffering from cerebral palsy. She picked up Elizabeth Helfman's *Signs and Symbols Around the World* and, with growing excitement, read a chapter outlining Bliss's work. She finally unearthed a copy of his book at Laurentian University in Sudbury.

Two months later, Bliss received a letter from Shirley McNaughton: "The communication class would like you to have this picture of Kari, so that you will have an idea of Stage Two of our research programme. Stage One involved the children pointing manually (some with great effort) to the symbols. We are looking forward to Stage Three, which will allow us to expand the number of symbols."

"The Heavens Opened." To Bliss, now 74, the snapshot of a laughing Kari sitting at her symbol board was a stunning vindication. "I can't describe the tumult of my thoughts," he recalls. "The heavens opened up and I was delirious with joy."

Bliss had to see his dream in action. In 1972, he flew to Canada. At the Ontario Crippled Children's Centre School in Toronto, he saw Kari's face light up as she turned a radial mov-

able pointer with her paralysed hand to form sentences. The principal told Bliss of one little girl who was taught to use the symbol board. One of her first questions to her parents was, "Why are you not speaking to me?"

"The father was taken aback," said the principal. "He was a truly loving parent but he just hadn't understood that his daughter was lonely because she needed people to talk to her, even though she was unable to respond."

Teachers told Bliss they sometimes felt as if they were uncorking a pressurized container. Said one, "With these children, you feel that so much past knowledge and thinking has been bottled up inside that it literally explodes outward when it receives this means of expression." Bliss returned to Australia a contented man.

Before the symbol breakthrough, Ruth Harrington had lived through seven years of heartbreak. "Kari would try so hard to tell us things," she recalls. "She'd make guttural sounds and we'd all strain to catch the idea. Finally, in total frustration, Kari would bang her wheelchair tray, put her head down and cry. We all felt so helpless." Now Kari smiles, holds up a finger for attention and points to her board. Once, when her little sister was banging a sauce bottle on the table trying to get the dregs out, Kari suggested, "Put water in it."

Remote Control. In January 1976, Gwen Mann, teacher of a special primary class in Markham, decided to use the symbols to teach aphasics

(children with severe language disability), autistics (children who have withdrawn from human communication), and children with perceptual, physical or learning disabilities, as well as slow learners. When Kari was placed in the class, she began to help out, and the children took to her at once, especially aphasic Billy. Kari began taking him aside each day, and he now communicates in symbol sentences and is reading ordinary words.

Today, there are more than 2000 North Americans either using or exploring the use of Blissymbols. For those who cannot point, a remote-control device indicates the symbols. Levers, knobs, touch plates, paddles or joy sticks activate switches that control either a pointer, which is like the hand of a clock, or tiny lights that illuminate the symbols. A U.S. variation has the symbols on a cylinder. The child pushes the cylinder round with his foot until he gets the symbol he wants. Researchers are experimenting with symbol displays on video screens, and sending symbol messages over telephone lines.

At the Wellesley Hospital in Toronto, stroke-damaged adults are starting to use Blissymbols. "Physically handicapped people might be the first people to communicate via symbols all round the world," says Shirley McNaughton.

In 1974, the National Film Board of Canada and Film Australia made a documentary called *Mr. Symbol Man*, the name given to Mr. Bliss — unprompted — by his "children." Critics responded warmly, and audiences at Australian film festivals gave the film a standing ovation. Bob Kingsbury, who directed the Australian sequences, calls Bliss a genius.

"In other circumstances," he says, "this gentle boarding-house keeper would be pictured on Australian stamps and currency."

Charles Bliss's ambition now is to produce a symbol dictionary to complete his work. But already he has brought laughter and understanding where once there was nothing. As Shirley McNaughton says, "He never raised a family, but his symbols have made new lives for special children."



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