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Keynote Address
By
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The Dragon Slayer

Millie, Board members, and friends. Last year in Spokane, I was approached by Tomi Teske and Mariann Jacobson to give the keynote speech; I was honored but puzzled – why me? Though I am an active member I didn't consider my contribution worthy of this high honor. Tomi's response was the folks in WisCODA had been touched by my writings; the article in the newsletter about my father's heart attack and my closing parable in New Orleans.

As I have thought about that moment it does seem appropriate that my stories would bring me to this microphone today. In many ways, my stories speak for me. "The Dragonslayer" is a work that has been in progress for a year and a half. In fact, I have just finished the first draft. It is a story about a young coda boy who is spurned by his friends because they see him as "different". Sadly, he is not included in their plans to slay the local dragon, which is terrorizing the community. In his sadness, he resolves to slay the dragon himself and encounters a variety of helpers via his closet. During my remarks, I will incorporate excerpts from that story as I feel it fits into some of the points I want to make today. I see the Dragonslayer as a metaphor for my won journey as a coda. I hope it may serve as a guide for our growth as a whole.

Before I begin my remarks, permit me to introduce myself. You all know me by my hearing identity, Trudy Jeffers. But I am really Gertrude Rita Schafer. I was named for my great aunt, Gertrude, a career woman who never married but raised her five orphaned nieces and nephews and lived to be 99.

My middle name came from St. Rita's School for the Deaf in Cincinnati where my father attended high school. Rita Taccona's father was a classmate of my father's and beat us in the name race. Schafer is my maiden name. The name that really counts in the deaf community.

Since I have been involved with CODA, I have been hearing about the notion of needing CODA. "Oh, he's not involved with CODA because he doesn't need it." This statement or variations have been made to me directly or indirectly. Each time I hear it, I try to figure out what it means. What is the implication of this statement or rather the view that we who are here somehow need this group experience.

As I began to analyze this statement, I tried to define the term "need" as its used in this context. Generally, I see it as meaning something inherently negative. Perhaps people who have this view believe that we are a self-help group intent on fostering dependency. Perhaps we are viewed as a social psychological phenomena where we are manipulated into participating such as a cult. Slowly, but surely, against our will, we are seduced into this fellowship intent on criticizing and hurting our parents.

You know and I know that this view could not be further from the truth. Each of us is here for his/her own reasons but it is a safe bet that we are trying to make sense of our childhoods in a way that is not cast in the negative view of the hearing world but just growing up period. Speaking for myself, I choose to participate in CODA because here I have found acceptance and a place to explore myself. Here I can express thoughts and feelings long unfelt or unspoken. This is not an organization solely, it is a place. This is a place neither Deaf nor Hearing but closer to Deaf than anything else in my life. Besides with all of you, I have great fun and with some of you, I sign.

Why does this divergent view of CODA exist? I believe it is based on a lack of understanding about who and what we are. We have not clearly communicated who we are. We need to articulate a view of where we want to go and how we want to fit into the Deaf and Hearing worlds. Elliott referred to this in the February newsletter. We can dispel these misperceptions but it will take work and a plan. I would like to put forth a strategy about shaping the image of CODA. I call it "kneading" CODA. This is an apt description because our ingredients have been given to us by our parents. But only with determination can we work these ingredients into

something meaningful. Dough needs help to become a loaf of bread. I believe that with a recipe and determined work we can alter the misperceptions that exist about us and watch CODA grow. My recipe is quite simple: Define what we are and what we aren't, develop a program which emphasizes our culture, promote local CODA activities, reflect on our own experiences and collaborate with the Deaf as allies.

We need to define a positive perspective to convey to others: "Well, if it isn't a 12-step, what is it?" The response I use and have heard others use is that we congregate to learn about and celebrate our heritage. Sounds great but what does it really mean? Millie's description of what we are and aren't that was in our packets is a great step in this direction and should be widely circulated. We should build upon it so we can put our statement of purpose into action.

Eventually, we have to de-mystify CODA. I agree with the membership's decision in Austin to close the meetings to people who aren't Codas. That was a painful but important decision. Yet, its very existence sends a message to the worlds (Deaf and Hearing) of exclusivity. They are not welcome here. The moment you begin to exclude people, misperceptions about us and our activities are born. How can we safely describe what we are about without violating confidentiality?

To my mind, we have to be solicitous of questions and input from others. Perhaps one step we can take is to have a "For Non-Codas Only" column in the newsletter. Here we could encourage people to contribute articles or post questions concerning their views of our activities. The magazine Deaf Life has a comparable column for hearing people only which seems to be very successful and may serve as a model.

I view CODA as an opportunity for cultural exploration: Since I am not a full time professional in the deafness area I have no other place where I can learn about Deaf Culture and its impact on my development. I grew up in Chicago, a city of immigrants. My best friend from grammar school is Arlene Engert. We are still in touch. Her parents, like most of the kids in my school, were immigrants. Hers were from Germany, having come to the United States a few years after the end of the war. I vividly remember that Arlene and I would walk home from school on Fridays as she would lament that fact and that she had to go to German School on Saturday morning.

Each Saturday for 8 to 10 years, Arlene went to school for three hours. There she received German Language instruction and classes in the history and culture of Germany. On Friday nights, I would accompany her to German Club where we'd eat bratwurst and dance polkas to the live band made up of club member. During the summer, I'd tag along to the German Club's summer park in Lake Villa, Illinois not too far from here.

I didn't realize it at the time but I felt comfortable tagging along with her and her family because it was just like going to Deaf Club events. But the experience went beyond that. As I reflect, I envy Arlene's cultural immersion and instruction. I have a dream that someday there will be a Saturday school, which Codas and Deaf kids can attend. There they will learn about the intricacies of ASL, Deaf history and have the chance just to play with each other. This vehicle could serve to preserve and convey our culture by joining the energy and commitment of both Deaf people and Codas. Perhaps we can use our conferences as an experimental summer school. That could lead to the development of such a program at the local level.

"Kneading" CODA also involves the promotion of local activities. I had the great fortune to live in Baltimore, Maryland for thirteen years. The last few years, I was an active participant in the DC CODA group. Besides making fabulous friends there, I had the chance to demonstrate to my parents just what CODA was about. Initially, my parents were dubious about my involvement with all of you. "For, For?" But as time went on, they began to see some changes in me. I had two opportunities to bring my parents to local CODA picnics where they could meet my friends and their parents. They enjoyed the experience but even more importantly, they became supportive of my involvement. Once, while in Chicago, I was talking to a childhood friend, also a Coda. I was trying to encourage her to join us. My mother was watching. Suddenly, she interjected. I'm paraphrasing but basically she said, "I've seen that CODA has helped Trudy. She enjoys it and has many friends. I support CODA." What an endorsement! My mother's stamp of approval is far greater than that of Good Housekeeping.

My point is that local activities can promote the good that is us and go a long way toward dispelling those misperceptions I mentioned earlier.

Another step for kneading CODA is reflecting on our own experience as Children of Deaf Adults. My first experience has been evolutionary.

Growing up I loved the distinction that came with being a child of Deaf parents. I was proud of my parents. I thought my father was the most handsome man on earth and my mom the best cook. I signed proudly and never felt ashamed to do so. I also had some sadness about things I perceived as a loss like not have bedtime stories read to me. I recall spending the weekend with a hearing cousin who had just married. To me she was beautiful and graceful. At night she read me stories till I drifted off to sleep. During the day we would sing songs and play. I still remember wishing my mother could do the same.

OPUS COMIC

About a month ago, I saw an Outland comic strip in the Sunday paper. I read it, chuckled, and put it in the recycle pile. For the next several days, that comic remained on my mind. Finally, one night I rummaged through the papers and found it. Let me share it with you here. As you can see, Opus is lamenting a childhood he never had. June Lockhart, Kevin Costner and Lullabies were not part of his experience. His maternal recollection is of his mother's regurgitation. At first, funny, this comic is also quite sad. His poor mother. Whether Opus likes it or not, he is a penguin and his mother is a penguin. Try as she might, his mom could never be what he wishes her to have been. Rather as every good penguin mother, she consumed food, digested it, and in an act of love and sacrifice, gave that food to her child in lieu of keeping it for herself. To me, this seems the ultimate act of love; to forsake one's own satisfaction for the nourishment of loved ones.

This got me to thinking about me and my folks. Sure there were times in my childhood when I wished my folks could do things that hearing parents could do. Like Opus, I compared my parents' performance against the standard of the dominant hearing culture and my folks came up short as they inevitably would. It seems to me that the time is here for us to collaborate with the Deaf Community to set standards that are Deaf against which we compare our folks. What do I mean by this? I certainly am not suggesting that we tell Deaf people how to parent. But I do believe that we have a unique opportunity to tell people about our experiences and what we cherish about them. We have already begun this process as evidenced by participation by some of us in panels or workshops where we share stories with Deaf parents.

Perhaps we can take what is happening on an Ad-hoc basis and take it one step further. I envision a “Mother, Father Deaf Day” where we can honor our parents by sharing positively oriented stories about our days of growing up. I don’t see this as sugar coating our histories. But I do believe that by highlighting the good of our experiences, we can reinforce the repetition of these interactions between Deaf parents and their hearing children and begin to establish traditions and standards where Deaf parents can “measure up”. As part of this “Mother, Father Deaf Day” we could prepare a videotape where whomever wants to can relate a positive experience on tape, it could be copied and distributed to KODA Clubs across the country. Imagine if we set up a camera during the CODA conference and people, after signing a release, could tell a vignette either signed or spoken. At last we’d be giving our parents a “card” they’d understand.

When I entered my teen years, I was a wildflower hanging out with the kids in the hood searching for something unknown. Yet during this time, I was very successful in school and was elected to class officer each year including President of my class, Prom Chairperson and various other achievements. I also attended the earliest Illinois RID meetings. Believe it or not, my father used to drive me to RID meetings when I was a sophomore in High School! I was the nervous teenager sitting in the corner smoking incessantly. This was the beginning of my on-again; off-again involvement with interpreting and working in Deafness. My parents never encouraged it. In fact, my dad was surprised that I was even interested but dutifully chauffeured me to the meetings.

Soon after I graduated from High School in 1975, I was recruited for interpreting duty. By the time I was 19, I was interpreting full time and had my own apartment. I enjoyed what I was doing but was restless. I was constantly on the go either working or playing. I was interpreting a great deal and found the work increasingly more difficult. The more I interpreted the less I felt of myself. It was as if my fragile sense of identity was subsumed each time I stepped into that role. Eventually, I felt lost. Where was my voice? I felt that my involvement with the Deaf came at the expense of me so I started pulling back. Eventually, I was rarely interpreting and working in a traditional 9 to 5 job.

At 23, my movement away from the Deaf continued. I married a very hearing man and moved from my native Chicago to Baltimore. I completely disengaged from interpreting and had no contact with the Deaf with the

exception of my parents. I was doing the hearing thing in the big leagues. Eventually, my career in politics took off and I found myself working for the man who was mayor of Baltimore and ultimately Governor of Maryland. The political arena is one of the most hearing environments you'll find and there I was succeeding. But that success was coming at a price.

I recall vividly January 1, 1990. I was walking along Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. It was my second visit there. At that time, I was managing a unit in the Governor's Office with a \$2 million budget and 16 staff members. My husband and I had a condo on the 20th floor of a high rise and a 100-acre farm in West Virginia. I had it made and I was miserable. I was depressed and angry but I didn't know why. That day the despair was so great that I walked along the mosaic path weeping. I walked and wept knowing that something was very wrong but not knowing why.

The preceding summer I attended my first CODA Conference. I had never heard of CODA until I met Hugh Prickett. He informed me that I was a Coda and that the conference would be in Maryland. Would I be so kind to arrange a welcome letter from the Governor, he inquired. I agreed. It was part of my job and besides my curiosity was sparked. When I showed up I planned only to attend opening activities. The first person I encountered was Carol Mullis, my long ago babysitter. I still believe that our meeting sealed my commitment to CODA. Seeing an old friend from my old life kindled in me an excitement I had not felt in a long time.

My intention was to attend only that evening, yet I found myself commuting daily to Westminster from Baltimore. There was something in that place with all of you that resonated with me. Being a somewhat detached observer, I looked at you from a distance (especially the Water Ballet)! I was floored by the international panel. Listening to people from Australia, Belgium, Argentina, Israel and England describe experiences I had had gave me Goosebumps. It still does.

Cautiously, I attended the conference in Austin. I was hooked but the line and sinker were giving me some trouble. I was intrigued but yet unwilling to make myself completely vulnerable and really look at who I was, where I was and where I had come from. Until the rage and anger workshop.

For me, that moment was a turning point. I never knew how mad I was. I was mad at my husband. I was mad at my extended family. I was mad at my

parents. I was mad at my boss. I was mad at me. The slowly simmering anger exploded in a torrent. Tears fell in Niagara quantities. I tried to attend the next workshop but couldn't sit still. I had to move. I had to think. I couldn't run anymore. I came face to face with me. The despair I experienced in Rio started to gain shape.

Terry had a similar experience in the Dragonslayer*...

Expectantly, he looked to the closet door. It opened as half his things and his father came tumbling out. Terry went over and helped his dad up with a good deal of disappointment that his hoped for dragonslayer had not arrived. Dad struggled to his feet, his bowling shirt torn at the sleeve.

"Why are you here?"

His father embarked on a lengthy journey of a response.

"Well, after we left, I was really worried. I wanted to help you, but I don't know how. So I talked to some people on the bowling team, some hearing folks and went to the library. I brought you some books to help you." His father looked at his son expectantly as if seeking approval.

"Wow, Dad, thanks. Let's see."

"O.K., well, I have three books. One is an encyclopedia, the other is a good book, I understand, Puff the Dragon Magic. And a real good looking book Dragons and Dungeons. I thought you could read it and see if it helps."

Slowly, very, very slowly, Terry looked at the books. He did not immediately look at his father. Composure. Above all else, he must maintain composure. With a deep breath he looked into his father's face. After a long look he said thank you. An electricity of discomfort ran through the room. After a moment, his dad placed his hands on his knees and rose. "Well, I better go back to the game. Study hard, Terry, I love you." Terry watched his father's back retreat from him into the clutter of the closet.

Terry picked up each book, looked it over and with increasing energy flung them on the bed. “How stupid. My god. How stupid can you be, Dad?” Puff the Dragon Magic ain’t gonna cut it. Any hearing parent knows that. But, nooo, not my parents. How am I supposed to whip that dragon with Puff the Dragon Magic?”

His anger and frustration were reverberating through his body. Now he picked up the books, anything he could get his hands on and flung them onto the bed at the speed of sound. He was pissed. He needed help. The people who might be able to help scared him so, he couldn’t ask. And the people who couldn’t fathom his situation gave him useless help. The situation was so unfair. His tantrum raged.

Like Terry, my tantrums had been raging but I was unable to let them out so they seethed within me until I couldn’t ignore them anymore. Six months after Austin, I separated from my husband. My formerly conservative approach to CODA was replaced with close alliances with new friends in the DC area. I re-kindled friendships long neglected. And I started the process of growing closer to my parents. We were never estranged but somehow over time things became strained. I realized just how much I loved and missed using sign language in my life. Further, I saw how much the field of interpreting had grown during my exile that I had a great deal to learn.

I see the period from early 1992 to now as my reunion period. Much like a prodigal daughter, I am returning to the place I came from so long ago. As I said earlier, my experience as a Coda has been evolutionary and I believe it will continue to be. But this journey has only been possible because of all of you. In many ways, you taught me how to come back home again.

In the Dragonslayer*, Terry has a similar experience:

“Do you always respond this way when offered help?”

The voice, unexpected, caused Terry to involuntarily levitate two feet off the ground. While in mid-air, Terry turned and saw a tall man standing in the frame of the closet door. He was clad in black – boots, jeans, and a shirt. He had a pair of sunglasses dangling from a croakie cord. The stranger conveyed a sense of serene power.

Back on his feet, Terry struggled to find his voice. "Who, who are you?" he creaked.

"Well, I'm a by-stander. I heard of your situation and stopped by out of curiosity. I heard that you want to slay a dragon.

"Yeah, that's right. But I don't think I'm gonna do it. I've got to go alone cause the group won't let me join them and I don't know how or what to do. And my dad's answer is to give me these stupid books. Kid stuff. So I guess I'll just have to wing it."

"Let's see the books," respectfully, the stranger picked up each book examined the covers and early pages. "Actually, these references are quite good. Of course, nothing compares to the first editions, but these are worth substitutes."

"Terry's mouth fell open. "Oh, come on, you don't really think these can help slay a dragon, do you?"

"Look, Terry, you want to slay the dragon, right? Well, let me tell you it requires knowledge from every possible corner. It requires ingenuity. It requires faith. It requires perseverance. It requires confidence. These books and other tools can help provide some of these things. If you're really serious about learning then you can't discount any source. I can help you, if you ask."

Perhaps, for the first time, Terry understood what the phrase 'music to my ears' meant. "Yes, yes, I'd really like your help." The words flowed from his lips so easily. Somehow the knowledge that his request for help would not be rebuffed gave him the freedom to acknowledge his need.

"Then we better begin. There's a lot to cover. Help me with this bag."

On the floor of the closet was a large, black leather duffel bag, which was also very heavy. They dragged it into the room. As the stranger surveyed Terry's desk and moved things from it to the floor, Terry peered into the bag. It was filled with an odd array of books, weapons, household items and very unusual things. "Hey, what is this stuff?" he asked.

“My arsenal.”

“Wow, who are you and what are you?”

“I’m a dragonslayer. That should answer both your questions.” They weren’t looking at each other. One crouched over the desk, the other over the bag.

“Are you really a dragonslayer?” Terry pressed.

“Yes, I really am.” With that the stranger turned and looked into Terry’s eyes. “I am a dragonslayer.”

“How many have you killed, how’d ya do it, what weapons should I use, were you scared?” The questions rushed out of Terry like gushing water.

“A dragonslayer’s past is private. Each of us has a story to tell for each slaying. What works for me, may not work for you. We each must find our own way. I can only be a guide.” With that, he returned to his final preparations on the desk.

Terry reached into the bag and withdrew a leather-sheathed knife. Removing its cover, he could see the gleaming, sharpened blade. Gingerly, he placed this on the bed. He reached in and removed a large feather duster. Bewildered, he asked, “Hey, what’s this for?”

Looking over his reading glasses, the Dragonslayer replied, “Oh, that’s for ticklish dragons.”

Terry couldn’t believe his ears. “What do you mean ticklish dragons?”

The stranger turned and explained: “Terry, not all dragons are slain with knives and bloodshed. Some are. But many others are slain by various means. Some are destroyed through laughter, others through tears, and others through love. Each dragon is different.”

“How can you kill a dragon with love?” This seemed preposterous to Terry.

“Terry, we’ve got such limited time, I can’t explain everything to you but I will try this important concept. Dragons are complex creatures, conceived at varying times for varying reasons. Hatred, abuse, misinformation, sadness, ignorance, malice, neglect, indifference all create and foster dragon development. To destroy a dragon or even to cut it down to size, you must analyze what created it and address its root cause.”

“How do you do that?”

“Well, I’m going to try to teach you a few points tonight. Certainly not the whole gamut but the key ones. Just give me one more minute.” With that he turned to the desk.

Meanwhile, Terry returned to the bag. Something caught his eye. Reaching deep into the bag, he retrieved an envelope, which was glowing chartreuse green. “Hey, what’s this?” Terry inquired.

“Be careful,” with a lunge, the Dragonslayer grabbed the envelope out of his hand. “This is the most potent weapon I have. For God’s sake stop rummaging through the bag, you could’ve killed us.” The seriousness of his tone and face told Terry he meant business.

“But, what is it? Why is it glowing?”

“This, Terry, is a Coda letter. A note penned by a child of deaf adults. These words, this letter, cut to the core. It’s radioactive.”

“It is? How’d you get it?”

After a moment’s pause, the Dragonslayer responded, “I wrote it.”

Last month my parents came for a visit. My Dad for three weeks and Mom for one week. My father has a great case of wanderlust and loves to see the world so he came to visit New England for the first time in his life. Since I am unemployed, I was able to spend most of this time with him. The two of us took a couple days and drove to Bar Harbor, Maine making several stops

on the way. I will always cherish the memory of that trip. I had forgotten the noises my father makes. His breathing, coughing, calling, cooing, yelling and laughing had been lost to my mind's memory banks. Listening to him was familiar and comfortable. I didn't realize that all my life I had been listening to my Father's sounds as well as his hands.

My Mother's arrival coincided with my graduation ceremonies at Harvard University. By the way, Ruth was there and sends her regards. Harvard was a very unusual experience for me. I must confess that I was thrilled to have been accepted into the John F. Kennedy School of Government. I was daunted at the thought of the institution and questioned if I would succeed but I went. Academically, I am proud to say I passed and even learned something. But the real insight and learning about myself came from interacting with my classmates.

There were 250 of us in the program; one half from the United States, the rest from points all over the globe. From the day school started until it ended on June 9th at Commencement, I felt very isolated and unable to connect. I spent the year on the outside looking in. As cliques formed and friendships blossomed, I was there but more observer than participant. This position seemed familiar. I recalled that earlier in my life, when in school, I had the same feeling. I was able to forge a few close friendships and had casual acquaintance with many but the social banter and connection that seemingly came so easily to most evaded me.

My closest friend from school was Christina. A woman approximately my age who was raised in East Germany and fled to West Berlin two years before the wall came down. She told me of the day she left home certain that she would never see her parents again and the joy she had when her parents walked through the wall to her. She had just learned English two years ago, so she was conversant but fluency frequently escaped her. Remarkably, I acted as her interpreter in the classes we shared. She would sit next to me and I would explain the subtleties of English. At the time, I marveled at how life keeps repeating itself and how it was only with this woman and few others from foreign lands that I truly felt comfortable.

I spoke a lot about my folks in school, just like my childhood, I reveled in my distinction. At times I wondered why I had this penchant about discussing my folks and my youth. After all, other people never brought up their parents during social discourse. Why did I have this compulsion?

Thankfully, Paul Preston in his book, *Mother Father Deaf* helped supply an answer. He speaks of disclosing our heritage as providing “a sense of belonging in an otherwise faceless and disconnect society.” He goes on to explain that disclosure “is an affirmation of the relationship.” After reading this, it is clear that I was searching for the anchor that would give me a sense of being connected. My anchor is firmly secured in the Deaf world through my Mom and Dad. Upon finding myself in the most hearing environment conceivable (You can’t get more hearing than Harvard!), I held on tightly to my past displaying it proudly for all to see. Paul, I want to thank you for your work. You not only wrote your book, you wrote ours.

As we prepared for my commencement, I spent a lot of time with my folks. Sightseeing (or see sighting as they say) and talking. The more time I spent with them, the more I came to see just how much like them I am, especially my Mother. We both expel nervous energy by cooking and cleaning. We love fiercely and have a quick temper. We love chocolate and German Potato Salad. And innumerable other ways, I am her offspring. I reflect on the years spent moving away from her only to discover that she is inside me and I cannot deny her influence. She is my Deaf side. It is sad that in American culture there exists an inherent wedge awaiting insertion into the Mother-Daughter relationship. Of course, the complicated nature of this relationship is compounded for us. I envy the women of my generation who are close to their mothers (hearing or deaf). I wish to be closer to my own than I am. Learning how to do that is difficult. There don’t seem to be models in either the hearing or deaf worlds that can help. So we are left to our own devices. In the *Dragonslayer**, Terry seems to create his own model.

He knew his first step. He had to enlist special assistance. This dragon was unique. He could the slaying alone. While his eyes were closed, he put on a mental call to the person he needed most. Would he come? What if he didn’t? Quiet but anxious, Terry waited.

As the closet door opened, Terry could make out the silhouette of a man. Slowly, the man stepped into the light. It was his father. “Great! I am so glad you’re here.” Terry jumped up and hugged his father tightly. Stunned, his father lightly wrapped his arms around the boy. “What’s wrong? I felt like you needed me.”

“Yes, I do.” Terry quickly and fluently told his father about the dragonslayer and the dragon. He explained that the boys would lead them to the den but that the two of them would have to enter the den and together, slay the dragon. After taking his son’s rapid-fire explanation, he stepped back and asked, “Do you really want me to go with you?”

“Yes, I need your help.” After several questions and careful consideration, the father agreed. Together, he and his son would tackle this challenge.

It seems to me that the logical destination of this Coda’s voyage is to make friends with her own Deaf side, her parents and other deaf people. As a Coda who has vacillated between Deaf and Hearing sides and worlds, how can I cultivate a Deaf connection without being employed in the Deafness business? How do I develop Deaf friends when I never really had any? Like many of you, the Deaf kids were never around when we were growing up because they were away at school. My historic connection has been through my parents and interpreting clients. I want to create a place in my life where the interaction between myself and a Deaf adult is based on quality and friendship not my ability to hear as contrasted with their inability. Yet, I am not sure how to go about doing that. Again, I feel plagued by this inability to connect, this life on the border. However if I am serious about nurturing a Deaf side, it must involve interactions that move from a child-parent dyad to one of peers.

My recipe for kneading CODA is working as an anti-defamation league. Misconceptions of who we are or prejudiced toward us or our parents should be challenged. I was quite bewildered by the cavalier way a hearing professional in Deafness referred to Codas. His statement was something like, “Oh, she’s a Coda, you know how they can be.” It is funny that in an era of political correctness some folks seem comfortable disparaging us. To me, this belies an underlying belief that somehow we are “less than”. If I am correct, it also says a lot about how these people think Deaf people can raise children. After all, isn’t what that statement really says equivalent to, “Well, her folks were deaf. No wonder she’s the way she is.”

I recently read Alexander Graham Bell’s memoir, *Upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race*. It should be mandatory reading for each of us. In it, Bell sets forth his justification for nazi-esque laws and policies

which would prohibit deaf people from interacting, marrying and having children for fear they would have Deaf offspring. Further, he suggests that people with Deafness in their families (i.e., us) be forbidden to marry each other, again to prevent the procreation of Deaf children. Reading it will turn your stomach but it will also strengthen your resolve; it did for me.

I don't intend to suggest that the anecdote about the hearing professional is as heinous as Bell's. But it does indicate that we face a kind of prejudice today that existed long ago. The prejudice, or as Preston puts it, stigma, extends from our parents to us. There is a role we can play with the Deaf community that will challenge these beliefs and expose them.

During this past year, I took a class on authority. It was a fascinating exploration of how we relate to authority, how we exercise it and how we abhor it. In that class, I came to see that I have serious fear of authority. To me all hearing people represented "authority". I ascribed to them a near god-like aura, which inhibited my ability to critique or challenge. The seeds of this viewpoint were, obviously, sown in my childhood. Much like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, I accompanied my parents in our common search for things we didn't believe we had. Somehow those had to be conferred upon us by better-knowing hearing people. I can clearly see the three of us shaking our way up the long aisle of the emerald palace to face the fire-breathing "Wizard of Hearing".

Well, guess what folks, the Wizard of Hearing is just an old man from Kansas. He has no right to judge me or my parents. He is not interested in my well-being or theirs. But you are. Like Toto, you helped pull back the curtain to reveal that the only person who can bestow upon me love, respect and acceptance is myself. You have helped me to become a Dragonslayer. Together, we can slay the dragons of Bell, doctors, aunts, uncles, callous hearing people who don't give a damn, and hearing professionals in Deafness who should know better. I have shared the story of my evolution, my voyage, to demonstrate that the journey is manageable and definitely worthwhile. We don't need CODA. But by kneading CODA we can bestow upon our parents that which every parent deserves, Honor, and yield unto ourselves what we have earned, respect.

Thank you.

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