

12th CODA-International Conference
Denver, Colorado, USA
1997

“You’re the Gift; Telling Our Stories”

Keynote Address
By
Bonnie Kraft

Ann Topliff’s announcement at the 1996 Los Angeles (Buena Park) CODA Conference: Once upon a time in a CODA land far, far away, there was a little coda girl who had a wonderful knack for telling stories. She grew up to be a famous storyteller and will come to Denver CODArado as the keynote speaker.

Throughout human history, those who could make hearts soar, whether with laughter or tears, brought others a sense of human-ness and family and connection. Traditionally, these people were given a special place of honor among the local tribe. Whoever could bring a smile to a tired, hopeful face was a member of the family. Those who carry the tales of tribal history, common threads, visions, and folklore are still always a welcome guest. We have done no different here. Stan Schuchman, Paul Preston, and Trudy Schafer are among the storytellers who have headlined here before me and I thank the Denver Committee for letting me share this honor and privilege.

Throughout our own short lives, especially in times of sadness and stress, humor is a much-valued commodity. Among oppressed peoples, humor develops as a supporter of, and a testament to, the survival of the soul. In the conspicuous absence of joy, humor is a nurturing lover, a village Shaman; laugh and your belly won’t feel so empty; laugh and your heart won’t feel so broken; laugh and your problems will be held at bay – even if only temporarily. Laugh and remember your humanity because in that moment, you re-invigorate the soul. Not to do this is suicide.

I was a books and TV kid, and grew up watching every funny show I could find. Johnny Carson, Ed Sullivan, and the Red Skelton Hour were the best, and the last two often had clowns on their shows. I always wondered why so many clowns painted sad faces with their makeup instead of the big

Brainless Bozo smile. Why was there a connection between sadness and laughter? A Coda woman came up to me one year after I had been telling some stories and whispered in my ear: “laughter is the mistress of tears.” I’ve thought about it for years and it’s clear to me now; so many comedians came from painful beginnings. Red Skelton was working Vaudeville as a child because he had to help the family survive; Jackie Gleason sold newspapers to help his family struggle through the Depression in a cold water flat; Carol Burnett’s parents were divorced alcoholics, and Carol was raised mostly by her grandmother; Richard Pryor, son of a prostitute, was raised in a brothel; Robin Williams was the very lonely childe of affluent parents who weren’t home much; and Caryn Johnson was a welfare mother until she became known as Whoopi Goldberg.

It doesn’t matter where you come from.

Each makes fun of their own and the world’s situation, laughing both with and at themselves, both important because the healing happens in both directions. It doesn’t matter if you’re telling a story, laughing, wondering, or a combination, the life-affirming benefits cannot be dismissed.

It doesn’t matter what you do.

Generally, people laugh the most at things familiar to us somehow. Laughing at images of yourself reflected in another is crucial to taking a lighter-hearted view of your own circumstances. I believe stories were and will always be one way to open people’s hearts and minds. In both the giving and receiving, stories have their part in the survival of humankind. It has also had its part in the survival of CODA.

Those of you who have come to know me well, know that I’m passionate about a good story – always in the watching and later in my life, in the telling, too – I love the kind of story that makes you forget where you are and what time it is... Growing up, I was blessed to be raised among a community of very talented and creative storytellers. Many were in the Boston area Deaf Community, and many were in my own family. Three generations surrounded me with stories, each one with his or her own style, each one with a different focus, each one just magnificent. Of all these great storytellers, only one was hearing; my maternal great-grandmother, a Russian immigrant (and I’m proud to say, a possible bigamist – but that’s

another story!) who would let me snuggle with her in bed while she shared her tales of the old country. Sometimes, I can still hear a whisper of her accent.

It doesn't matter whether or not you sign.

I always wanted to tell stories, too, but my skills weren't developed and the stories often fell flat. (I did half of a Red Buttons routine in first grade and didn't even get a smile from the other kids.) As a younger adult, I tried signing stories to some of my young interpreter colleagues, but they didn't understand the stories, never mind really appreciate them. Even when I told them in straight English (not much fun for me, and I wasn't using my Deaf voice with hearing people), I got that same flat response. I was losing my motivation to keep trying. And then I came to CODA.

The first conference I attended was CODA's first ever in 1986 at the California School for the Deaf in Fremont. At the wine and cheese greeting, I tried telling a story (the mechanic story) to Rubin Latz. Shortly after I started, he turned purplish and tears started squirting out his eyes. I was amazed. He called Gary Sanderson over. Gary, **attitude**, you know finish. He stood next to Rubin and give me constipated face. I quickly caught him up and finished the story for both men. By the time I was done, only five minutes later, Gary was my slave for life. Vindication is good!

I realized then that part of the reason my stories were falling flat was because I had been telling them to the wrong people. One night, about a dozen of us were gathered in the lounge area of our little Fremont School for the Deaf dorm houses and I asked if people had stories about their families. Everyone said no, not me, nothin', nope. It took a little while and a little encouragement to get them to try. Sometimes, we just need the right trigger, and exposure to someone else's stories can help, so I started telling some of mine and sure enough, others started remembering theirs. I remember one woman told us a story about the time she was locked out of the house and how she used the garden hose to wake her very deaf parents in the middle of the night. I think it took us a while to warm up, but once we started laughing, we didn't stop until it was time for bed (yes, we actually **slept** back then).

It doesn't matter if you don't think you have stories to tell.

Later, at that same conference, facilitators, Gary Sanderson and Sharon Neumann-Solow were trying to get people back into the auditorium after a short break and, frankly, **they were failing miserably**. They were being very Hearing-Polite, gently telling people to “...come on back, it’s time to begin now, let’s take our seats, please...” In Sharon’s frustration, she started yelling at us in Deaf Voice. **AEGH!** Right away! (And by the way, no one said, “What the hell was that?” That’s one of the reasons I come back to CODA every year.) Heads up! No talking! File into auditorium! I was stunned – partly because it actually worked and partly because it was Deaf Voice in a **PUBLIC PLACE**. Well, it wasn’t really public...but mimicking Deaf Voice was a **BAD** thing, wasn’t it? I had a lot to think about that year!

The second conference was in Rochester, NY. I had thought for a whole year about this Deaf Voice stuff and had started really enjoying it. There was a guy in Rochester named Arden who stood on a chair and told a story as if he were a regular member at the local Deaf Club – storytelling style, Deaf Voice and all. I was mesmerized. Suddenly, I was about nine years old again and in the Boston Deaf Club, watching the membership discuss **true important discussions**. We enjoyed ourselves, but I don’t remember every having any discussion about whether or not it was okay to use Deaf Voice in anything other than our own well-locked homes. Something had to make it more overt, more in your face, before a real discussion would happen.

There was no question that I was hooked on this Deaf Voice thing; it was too important a part of our stories to be overlooked any longer. The stories I told often required the use of Deaf Voice in order to make an important point. Some stories were fine without any Deaf Voice, but others made very little comedic sense without it.

Arden and I had agreed to take care of the entertainment at the 3rd conference, held right here in Denver. It was here that we chose to take Deaf Voice out of the closet in a big way by introducing the Ear Therapy skit. We brought Darlene Prickett and Elliott Aheroni up on stage (after getting their ok first) and made them do a kind of reverse speech therapy in which we gave them words to say in Deaf Voice. People in the audience were screaming. We have the pictures to prove it! This skit eventually developed into an annual short session with the whole group at some point early in the conference where we **ALL** practiced Deaf Voice using local vocabulary. When it comes to playtime, I say there’s no time like the present.

(5 minutes **EAR THERAPY TIME!** Gary assists.)

That's something I always look forward to because it trashes a big taboo right away, and trashing taboos is something that storytellers can get away with now and then. More personally gratifying, it gives me great pleasure to challenge authority. It's covered by what's known as the poetic license clause.

One of the performers that first year was a Coda named Lynette Taylor. She performed a vignette recalling an incident in her childhood. I was crying right away. It was so personal...it reminded me of such painful times...it startled me because it was so **familiar**. I think I never blinked once while she was on. That's when I realized that not all our stories are for laughing; that sad and painful stories have their proud place in our history as well.

For the first many years, most of our stories were positive and funny. This was perfect because it was important that we experience an abundance of laughter, especially about issues that may not have ever brought a big grin to our faces before. Laughter is like a booster shot, and I thought we needed a little transfusion just to help get us started. To be fair, I don't know if I would have told any sad stories, and you **know** I had some. When my deaf grandparents died in 1991 and 1994, things changed. And I understood that not every story has to be funny.

It doesn't matter if it's funny or sad because everything tells a story.

In the last few years, I've told some stories about more serious issues. The passing of my grandparents was shared with CODA audiences who, bless your hearts, stood strong and allowed me to remove the jester's hat for a while, even if it meant risking tears instead of the much beloved laughter. Over 100 people stood firm and let me share my rage and grief at the circumstances surrounding these deaths. It is a testament to CODA and to Codas that we bond so well in times of need.

Remember that tears are also Lover and Shaman; cry together and your heart won't feel so broken; cry together and know that your strength **will see** you through. (Codas are some of the strongest people on the planet. Think of everything you have lived through that has brought you to this day and place. Tell me that doesn't take strength.) Your tears will equally remind

you of your humanity because in that moment, you again re-invigorate the soul. Not to do this is the other side of the suicide coin.

A good story is a good story whether it's light or heavy and I'm grateful that my funny stories far outnumber the sad. I do love to tell, especially to you because you **know**. It is sheer bliss to share this part of myself with you. No one else but Codas can help me create the intensity of emotion, from joy to heartbreak and back again, that I share with you.

Even joy can have surprising roots. For example, the dog story. Many of you know the story I tell about getting him neutered, but not everyone does. To even things up, here's a clip from last year's conference.

(10 minute dog story video clip from convention '96LA)

That's one of my favorite stories. In this one, I talk about how I always asked for a dog. I'm an only child with an overprotective mother who really didn't let me go too far away, which means if she couldn't feel my body heat, she got nervous. Don't laugh – she checked me for crib death for 22 years **AFTER** I was out of the crib! If it wasn't for books and television, I would have lost my mind. It wasn't just the loneliness, but the alone-ness of being the only Coda kid for miles, that made me pester my folks for a dog.

In the story, it seems like the Schnauzer might have been my first dog. What you don't know is that at the age of 11, this was my 4th puppy. Three other puppies, 3 kittens, 6 parakeets, and a handful of doomed carnival-won goldfish had all come and gone before him. All were brought home to me with all the best intentions, but none lasted more than 3 months. Except for the poor goldfish and a couple parakeets, they all were returned or given away...but from my perspective back then, they were all **taken** away.

When Mama brought the Schnauzer home, she didn't know he was full of worms, he just had a big puppy-belly. A few days later he threw up on the sofa. She went to clean it up and just before her hand clamped down on it, she saw a pile of worms – **and they were moving!** Well, if you've seen the tarantula story, they **you KNOW** what she did! This time, I didn't let her take the pet away from me. I knew that this time was very serious, that I could not take it one more time. I stood up to her, fought for a long time, and won. That psychopathic little dog stayed with us for 13 years, plenty long enough for the story you just saw. And he never got worms again.

Don't underestimate your lives; everything tells a story.

People tell stories for different reasons; maybe for my Mother, Grandmother and Great-Grandmother, it was a way to counterbalance their pain and get some positive attention. My father's mother lost a lot of her family in the Holocaust. My mother's (Deaf) mother had very little education, was married at barely sixteen and a mother for the first time at seventeen. My mother was regularly beaten bloody at Clarke, the residential oral school in Massachusetts that she attended in the 1940's.

Maybe for us it's a way to show pride – sometimes defiant pride – in the face of disbelief. **We have survived in the face of oppression.** We are the shining examples of survival. Every time a grassroots Deaf person challenges the system and wins, I feel pride. When my own **dear...sweet...unassuming...** short, round exaggeration of a Mother got frustrated at a car dealer who repeatedly pushed her aside, she grabbed him by the knot of his tie and dragged him across the showroom floor, yelling at him and signing with the other hand the whole time. No question I was mortified, but at the same time, it was another Victory. And it sure was another good story.

Remember this, because it's coming again: Everything tells a story.

Now, I'm not one to advocate for moderation in much of anything, but storytelling really can go too far. There was a time in my life when I told stories all the time; I hardly let myself come out because I was always telling some story. A Coda was the first person to point it out to me. When people do that – when I do that – it helps create a separation between myself and those around me. In overwhelming doses, it becomes a mask; easier to hide behind. It created just enough cover that I could work on my stuff through it and still feel the protective cocoon that shielded me all my life. I'm not saying that this is a good or bad thing; it was just what I needed to do at the time. Over time, I've felt less and less need for that.

My walls, as Mark Colonomos shared in the most recent **CODA Connection**, have always been high and strong. They've come down remarkably in the last ten years. Maybe it's CODA, maybe it's age, maybe it's coincidence, maybe it's everything together, maybe I was abducted by aliens; I'll never know, and I don't particularly care. I'm just grateful. My

defenses relax the fastest here at CODA Conferences. It is a little scary, but scary is different from unprotected, so it's okay; I can be a little scared and still do it. Hey I'm even a real Stephen King fan; I read all his books, and he scares the shit out of me.

I love to give stories as much as I love to receive stories. For a few years there, I felt like the only storyteller. One of my greatest delights has been watching the growing pool of resident entertainers that we have here at conferences. It is so very wonderful to have company now! It warms my heart – or as the family would say, it **feels me good** – to see more and more of you joining me and taking the risk to be vulnerable in public. I know that all we need to say are a few buzz words: “Train Ride from Hell, K-Mart, Dad Doling Out M&M’s, Sausage-Woman, I’m Blind, Mayor Koch’s Cousin Fay, or My How Festive,” and a full length movie instantly unfolds in our minds.

You don't have to stand on a wobbly chair and tell a tale in order to be a Storyteller-Shaman; telling is done in many forms; Sherry Hicks and Michael Velez are storytellers. Artisans and painters and writers are storytellers. Works by Margaret Collier, Jill Sheffield, and Bob Steidemann grace my home, along with a framed poem by Mark Colonemos; yet another storyteller, and Lord knows Gary Sanderson IS a story all by himself. None of us can escape it; storytelling is a fundamentally human act.

Everything tells a story.

Every contribution to the newsletter (which I am not shamelessly plugging) tells a story.

Folktales, Poetry and Music tell a story;

Drawing, Photography and Movies tell a story;

Pottery, Painting, Sculpture, Dance, Sewing, Weaving, Quilting.

Stories, everyone of them.

Funny, Sad, Historic, Uplifting, it doesn't matter.

Express from the heart, and you have added to CODA, enriching those here and those who will come after you.

ASK: What tells a story? Everything tells a story!

Our fascination with our stories is a symbol of our very strong feelings about the Community that raised us. It is another facet of our development as a group bound by ties that are stronger than we ever realized. Our history is our folklore and our folklore is our future.

Here it comes: What tells a story? Everything tells a story!

Coda Folklore has developed slowly but surely over the years. We started with skits and stories and have evolved to add dance, painting, music, son, poetry and prose, sculpture, textile work, doll-creation, pictures for the photo albums, and one more time – articles for the newsletter! I’m sure there are many more that I’m overlooking and you already know why.

Because WHAT tells a story? Everything tells a story!

About a month ago, Vince called and told me he had some great travel stories to tell, but then he added that they weren’t “coda-related stories but they would be stories from a coda...almost the same.” This is another valuable facet of our Coda Folklore. Even if it isn’t a coda-related story, it was experienced by a coda who sees through coda eyes. YOUR eyes will bring us to places because your eyes tell of coda life.

So, rich or poor, performing or watching, speaking or signing, deaf-related or not; it doesn’t matter when it comes to telling a story.

One last time, say it for me good, now: What tells a story? Everything tells a story!...That’s right!

I’m in grad school now for what’s beginning to feel like a really long time, and so I’ve been listening a lot to teachers lately. They talk about scaffolding as a way to bring students along in their learning. I picture it looking like a staircase: students reach a step and teachers stand one or two steps higher, ready to guide them to the next level. Some steps are bigger, some are rocky, slippery, or steep, but all can somehow be navigated with the right support. We are each other’s support and inspiration. Certainly, you have all been, and will continue to be, my support and inspiration.

I know this will be a bit disruptive, but I brought presents for you all. If you would look under your seats, there should be a little something taped there for you. Please find it and have a seat.

And so, in closing, I ask you to hold on to those buttons and remember this:
When it comes to this growing phenomenon that is CODA,
YOU are the scaffold.
YOU are the structure.
YOU are the story.
And always remember,
YOU are the gift.

Thank you.