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“In the Absence of Fairness”

Keynote Address

By

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I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Conference Committee and you, CODA, for this high honor. I am very humbled by this, and hope that you will find my message at least a little interesting and hopefully entertaining.

I couldn't start my keynote address without acknowledging some of our Keynote predecessors. My historical recollection begins with my first conference in 1992. Each conference left a profound mark and I beg your indulgence while I reflect how they contributed to my personal growth.

New Orleans was the site of the 1992 CODA Conference, my first, Elliott Aheroni who I didn't know from Adam was the Keynote speaker. Elliott, a lawyer, (yuck) impressed me sharing his open, honest, and deeply personal experience and is one of the reasons why I've returned every year. Elliott, a sometimes impatient, angry, brave, eloquent, insightful and most sincere man shared his coda experience, risking his soft spot by exposing it to a large audience for 40 minutes. He showed me that lawyers are indeed human, well at least one is anyway, and it affected my opinion of him and CODA. Anyone who would risk-take like that is indeed a special person and has my gratitude for teaching me this. Thank you E-lot.

Spokane, Washington saw CODA 1993. Our Keynote was our foundress, Millie Brother. There I learned and Indian word, Spokane, which in English translates to pissy weather. Millie, a warm and gentle woman gave a personal historical narrative of what coda meant to her. Her touching ways, smiling face and her infinite amount of patience while conveying our message has always been inspirational. Millie is from Southern California. Initially, I could not decide if she was one of those true dumb blondes baking in the sun for way too long, or a saint. I've since concluded that she's

a saint, who with the help of others, pulled together this group where we celebrate annually our deaf culture and languages. Thanks Millie.

Trudy Schafer, Jeffers, Schafer, Hoffmeister, Schafer, Hoffmeister; which is it, Trudy? Trudy is our current president and was the Keynote in 1994 in my home state, Wisconsin. She is much like Millie with the same smiling face and bubbly demeanor. However, she is not from California, but Illinois. I also wondered if everything that went around her really sank in, but in truth this is one intelligent and creative woman who told the story of the Dragon Slayer. The Dragon Slayer who is coda helps a little coda down a dark and twisted path traversing its turns with love and understanding.

North Carolina was the 1995 Conference and we were privileged to have Paul Preston address us. His address was different from all others, granted I had little to compare then, but since then, this remains for me, true. Paul's address touched many in the audience including myself. My recollection is one of personal sadness and mourning, a serious monologue sharing parts of his book, *Mother, Father Deaf*, touching areas not comfortable for some and perhaps controversial for others. I was also sensitive to a polarizing ripple in the audience. A bright, bright man whose humility is of the highest level.

1996 – Southern California hosted the conference. Peter and Judie Bonser told us of their tales as coda pioneers in a far and distant place called Australia. I first met them in Spokane, as many of you know. A warm, genuinely friendly and inviting couple, as long as you bring the orange juice. By the way, I bought the orange juice, they didn't invite me, and they still owe me money. Wait, I need to re-think this.

Denver, Colorado was the site of the 1997 conference and Bonnie Kraft's "You're the Gift" validated and gave me permission to or not to perform my stories. Bonnie, appears to be a quiet, reserved woman but has a devil streak a mile wide with a Cheshire Cat grin, is like a bright diamond with many facets. Bonnie, one of the deafest people I know takes bluntness to a higher level than most. In an email she sent me, she inquired how I was coming along with writing the note-key. She said that, and I quote, "Yours will be good, I think, you have face straight, not emotionals same mine have it; face same Italians people." Now, on the surface it would appear to be a compliment, but I know better. So, I am practice my face much, move, move look more same her. Bonnie, now look my face...study, finish? (Stick tongue out at her). This woman has the distinct honor of being the first coda,

making me pee my pants. This multi-talented woman is an inspiration, a woman I adore and I bow to you now.

Alexandria, Virginia was the largest CODA Conference ever, presented Sherry Hick as our Keynote in 1998. Sherry The, an animated, hyper-active, wild woman on a mission with a message, like a southern gospel preacher who with her whole heart and soul passed on her message of good medicine to us all. A true unique individual! Her message of love and acceptance of all is a lesson in tolerance and understanding we should learn over and over again.

Last year's conference was held in Collangatta, Australia. Its very, very, very far away from here; I'm here to tell you. Unlike the rest of the Americans who went, I was there for only four days. It was a hell trip, but one I would not have missed for the world. Trevor Johnston was the Keynote speaker. An interesting man, who struck me as extremely nervous, not knowing many of us, we all looked at him with eyes wide open, just like now... a brave man to be sure. The conference itself was small and intimate and a truly wonderful experience. One I will remember always.

Well meaning friends asked me how my speech was coming. I always responded, "it's almost complete." In truth, I had several drafts filled with many ideas. None of them said exactly what I wanted to convey to you. In fact, I've been making little changes every day. I hope this effort completes that purpose.

Now it's Michigan and I'm the Keynote speaker. It's my turn to pass on my message to you. Two years ago at the Alexandria, Virginia conference this year's conference committee approached me and asked if I would be the Keynote speaker. A greater laxative I could not have asked for! I worried, what I would say? What did this conference committee now and see in me, which instilled confidence in their decision to ask me? Did they think I am smart? I wondered for months afterwards. This is serious stuff, there is a legacy of Keynote addresses that have left impressions, good or bad with me and I'm certain with others. How will this one be thought of? This is my risk; I take.

Some of you know that I've been working on a book entitled, *In the Absence of Fairness*. Its purpose was purely self-serving. As it evolved into book form, it took on a life of its own. Its birth was spawned upon the ashes of my

marriage. In the county that I live, the divorce court favors women; the entire process was absent of fairness. But, more about that later.

This year's conference theme, Bridging Our Past to Our Future, is highly symbolic. The word, bridge, itself is full of metaphors. There are many kinds of bridges. Toll bridges, drawbridges, covered bridges, steel bridges and the phrase, "don't burn your bridges" comes to mind. With each period of growth, I've crossed a bridge. Some have been toll bridges, crossing with a price, some have been drawbridges having to wait for something more important to pass through and some have been covered bridges...dark, creaky and a little shaky.

CODA has played a major role in my adult life. It has been my "Dragon Slayer", my awakening, my gift, my good medicine, my light on my dark and mysterious path. With each and every conference, I've come away with experiences and a little self-discovery. Not everything I saw or experienced was positive, but added a piece of the puzzle to help me discover who I am. What am I? Who am I? You know what? I don't have a clue! All of the pieces I've gathered didn't come with directions on how to put them together. Yeah, I'm a piece of work, aren't I? I'm still working on it; still trying to see where it is I fit in, in this great big world. I am sure that there are even more bridges to cross in my future. But, let us not forget that bridges work both ways. I think its commonplace to cross and recross the same bridge over and over; least we remember our past and heritage.

I do want you to know a little about me. Well, here is the obvious. I'm 42 years old, overweight and divorced. I am the second child of four born to Royal William and Iva Boggs Eklof. They are deaf, so by virtue of birth I am Coda. The not so obvious; I am a dad, my son, Erik, will be starting college this fall, God willing. I work in Health Care finance, and teach ASL at my local technical college. I developed the first 3-credit course in ASL and convinced the academic powers that be, that ASL is a foreign language and it currently fulfills a student's foreign language requirements. Occasionally, I am also a freelance interpreter.

When I first heard of CODA, something instinctively told me I needed to go. It's more basic than that. It was primordial, a survival instinct that panned inside me. I knew if I didn't go, a piece of me would die. I was a coda in a coma. Shutting down more and more with each passing day. My then wife wanted to know what I was going for, why was I spending this money just

for myself? I could not answer her immediately. Luckily for me, another coda, which she knew was going, made it “okay” for the moment. She even offered to let this coda woman share my room to save money, without my initial knowledge. She made it clear to this coda she trusted her. Nice, huh?

I went to New Orleans with both excitement and trepidation. On the plane, I was quietly reading a book after a delicious plastic lunch when I felt a stomp on the floor of the plane. I instinctively turned around to look. Another coda noticed that I reacted to something purely Deaf. With huge eyes, she finger spelled C O D A, you? I nodded, she screamed. I shit my pants. The plane landed and I went rushing off to baggage claim. This coda, with her brood of other codas hollered, “wait for us, wait for us!” I debated whether or not to catch the plane back to Chicago then and there. I’m so glad I didn’t. Nowhere outside of my parent’s home have I felt such warmth with perfect strangers. It was truly amazing! This was also the place where I heard deaf voice for the first time outside my immediate family. My siblings, expert in deaf voice, never disclosed our secret. How did these strangers know my secret?

I learn that it has a name, Coda talk. These brave folks talked and acted like their role models, their parents. Not in a mocking way but in celebration of who we are. This is why God didn’t strike them dead, I’m sure.

What I didn’t know was crossing the bridge to CODA would awaken a piece of me and begin the rebuilding of my self-esteem. I began to believe in myself and trust what my insides were telling me. I no longer was willing to acquiesce to my wife or other hearing people. CODA was not the reason for my failed marriage as rumored by outsiders, it was the catalyst for me to become the person I knew was somewhere deep inside me.

CODA offered me a source to check my feelings. I’ve often told the story of my ex-wife’s first deaf Christmas and my first hearing one. Her experience was not at all positive, she told me how boring and how long everything took. Something was seriously wrong with us, she said. My first hearing Christmas was over before I knew it. No fancy dinner, no chat, just eat as fast as you can and then race to the tree and rip open every gift with your name on it. I watched in horror. I was completely stunned and my gifts were untouched waiting my turn. They were wondering what I was waiting for. This is how Christmas is celebrated by hearing? Something inside pulled at my heartstrings telling me this can’t be normal, but it must be, hearing said

so. This one incident I carried in my mind for years and with my first CODA Conference, I would be able to check this out! Asking perfect strangers at this conference how they celebrated their family's holiday became my question and I asked many people. They confirmed my suspicion that my deaf Christmas and my deaf family were NORMAL! I couldn't wait to get home and tell her. This is something that still brings smiles to my face because my son prefers my family's method of celebrating holidays.

Another bridge I didn't expect to cross was the end of my marriage. My divorce was catastrophic. I didn't know how to stop the process and was emotionally and financially destroyed. At that time I felt loss and grieved openly. My friend and personal physician was alarmed at my 96-pound weight loss, prescribed little blue happy pills and ordered me to see a therapist. I went but wasn't able to hear my own words. The therapist suggested I write down my stories, my feelings that eventually became book form and is my story, my coda story. I found solace in my writing, sitting quietly in front of my computer keying for hours. A part of the healing process came from codas. I'm not sure how the word got out, but it did. The support was phenomenal, phone calls, cards, letters and e-mails came in droves. They wanted me to know that they loved me and if I ever needed anything to pick up the phone and call. Codas even offered to loan me money so I could enjoy a few extras at the Denver Conference. It was both wonderful and shameful at the same time. Wonderful because there were codas that loved and trusted me by loaning money and feelings of shame, failure and embarrassment because I no longer was in the same economic class as I once was. My pride wouldn't allow me to accept their kind offers; it was enough to know that they cared. The climax came when after more than two years of litigation and court appearances, I was a divorced person. I decided to throw myself a divorce party. I invited people not really knowing who would attend. A friend of mine conspired with some codas that flew and drove great distances to surprise me. A more true form of friendship could not have been found. Few of my hearing friends showed a tenth of concern. A very healing process, a lesson in love and validation of my self-worth. This is one bridge I didn't mind crossing!

The book's title is, "In the Absence of Fairness". As I mentioned before its birth came from a place of despair and depression. While working on the book I began to see that this wasn't the only time I've felt this way. I see the world with somewhat jaded eyes. My entire life had been rifted with unfairness and struggles. Things that you may have overlooked as normal,

I've noticed and in my mind questioned. My parent's treatment by their hearing families, my role as the buffer and interpreter, my role as an advocate having to demand qualified interpreters for them when my father suffered his heart attacks and later his open-heart surgery and when my mother suffered a stroke while recovering from a minor surgical procedure from my employer, the hospital where I work. As their health declines, my worries increase making sure that their needs are met.

During my divorce, my parenting skills, morals, my Catholic faith and my financial responsibility came under severe scrutiny. Even though there was no precedent, no history, the court system questioned me on every little thing. At no time while I was present did the judge ask my soon to be ex-wife about her parenting skills, her morals, her faith, or financial responsibility. I felt because I was a male I was immediately suspect. Because I came from Deaf, maybe I was not good enough. This causes me to flash back to when I was in first grade, my mother had a social worker tell her that she had been reported for being unfit. Simply because she was deaf, her hearing mother, my grandmother, didn't think she was capable of raising children. I never forgot this, the hurt my mother must have felt, and the feeling of betrayal must have been enormous. It alienated me from her, my grandmother, for the rest of her life and sowed the seed of mistrust in me for anyone hearing.

I'm sure someone smart said, "Don't sweat the small stuff." I'm not always successful. It would seem that fate plays a part in this. I think my life is one huge story that thankfully, I'm able to see the humor in it. If not right away, soon after. Take the grocery store as an example. When I'm done shopping I take a few minutes and scan each check out line searching for the quickest moving one. Inevitably I get behind someone who doesn't have enough money, needs a price check, the store declines their check, tries using an expired coupon, or that little old lady who takes forever to fine exact change by digging in her purse for that 17 cents. Or, my ten plus hour odyssey to Detroit. This was supposed to be a simple, one and half hour flight. I flew first class as a treat to myself. My first flight was delayed two hours, I missed my connection in O'Hare, had to wait over an hour in line to get my ticket changed, learned that my connection had been cancelled, the gate changed several times, and the flight was postponed. I couldn't believe my luck. I had planned to meet codas at the airport in Detroit and have a nice, quiet (if you can believe that) dinner. None of my plans worked out. It was then that I wanted to scream and press that imaginary button inside my

pocket that opens the floor and swallows all of them up. I know that sounds a little passive-aggressive, but I can't help it. My mom, a really wise woman, often told me during my divorce with each upcoming court appearance, that angels earn their wings one at a time. This was her way of telling me that this too will pass. I now have 16 pairs of wings. They will be on sale in the lobby for \$199.95 if you're interested.

Fitting in has never been a skill I've mastered well. In my professional life I'm told I'm too direct, blunt if you will and in my personal life I'm too indecisive. It seems as if I act Deaf with hearing and act hearing with Deaf. I don't fit in easily.

To me, CODA has been where I fit best. Not always, but most of the time. As CODA has grown I was unable to see something I felt in the very beginning, that I searched for and felt last year again in Australia. Organizational growth is of course a natural process and with growth comes pains and conflict. Our Board is working, trying to develop a strategic plan to build the bridge of our future, the future of CODA. Please invest your time and share your opinions with each other. You need to understand what it is all about. Without a plan, the growth may be uncontrolled, or the outcome undesirable. The responsibility is yours.

There have been conflicts as a part of this growth. Some have been caused by CODA subgroups, each asserting their thoughts, actions and ideas upon the group as a whole. Our environment of acceptance, love and understanding perpetuates this. The problem is two-fold. Silence doesn't always imply acceptance or approval. By my silence I abdicate my opinion for fear of hurting someone's feelings and alienating myself from them. Codas who were oppressed become oppressors amongst their own. When voices are raised opposing another sub group's views, tempers fly and feelings are hurt on both sides. No winners, its absence of fairness is sad. Something that I hope stops as we all remember Sherry the's message.

I've seen all of this, seen the development of a diversity statement, and until now have successfully avoided addressing this area of unfairness to both sides. I choose, my choice is to overlook our differences and not align myself with any one particular group but to celebrate CODA. Yes, I'm male; Yes, I'm middle-aged; Yes, I'm overweight; Yes, I'm Catholic; Yes, I'm a sex god, just kidding...but I don't come here for any of those reasons, I come because I am Coda. The same as you. It is coming home and is enough

for me. As our numbers grow, we need to pull together and not establish barriers within the organization. I cherish the richness and diverse community CODA as an organization attracts. Something I think that our CODA Quilt represents. I've benefitted interacting on an individual basis with most of you, more than you will ever know or that I'll be able to say. We need dialogues between these sub groups so a level of understanding and acceptance can prevail. This organization is too precious to me not to.

With the bridges that I've crossed in the land of CODA, I've shared with you some of my stories. Something that I never would have imagined doing. You honor me by listening/watching them. I'm still looking for the van man by the way; I owe him a debt of thanks. I also enjoy listening to your stories, the old and the new. Another bridge that I crossed was in 1995 in North Carolina, where I experienced my first male-to-male kiss on the lips in front of the entire membership at a dinner. It was an interesting experience, and I should thank him now, (mouths, I LOVE YOU ABABABA!)

They say humor is born from sorrow. To a point I would agree. I have the ability to look at most any situation and see some element of humor in it. It's been a source of embarrassment at times, a curse if you will, since I've been known to burst out in laughter when it may not be appropriate. Humor has been my compensation for the trials of life. It's been a fair trade.

In the land of CODA, we have a multitude of talented and gifted people. I am so proud to be part of this organization. CODA, in and of itself, fosters creative thinking. The 1994 conference, O-5, of which I was co-chair, saw the birth of the yearbook, the CODA art gallery and the CODA quilt. Each conference has built on the previous one, improving with each year. I look forward to every year waiting to see my family. It is you that I have come to see, and I will cross the bridge to CODA every year for the rest of my life. I thank you for your acceptance and love.