

The Fifth National CODA Conference  
A CODA Retreat: Coming Home

Co-Sponsored by

CODA: Children of Deaf Adults, Inc.  
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The Texas Commission for the Deaf  
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The Texas School for the Deaf  
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About Hank Berman:

Hank is a licensed psychotherapist and maintains a private practice in San Francisco. Born and raised in New York City, he completed an undergraduate degree at Hunter College. He then took two years to travel around the world and finally settled in San Francisco where he pursued graduate work in clinical psychology at the University of San Francisco.

In 1975 he developed the Hearing Impaired Program at Catholic Charities and began providing marital, family, and individual counseling services to deaf individuals and their families. He was awarded the Deaf Services Network's Bridge Award in 1979 for his work both in the Deaf and Hearing communities in the Bay Area.

In 1985-87 Hank served as Branch Director of Jewish Family and Children's Services and continued his clinical work with Hearing and Deaf clients. As a part of his private practice he provides consultation to the Deaf Counseling Advocacy and Referral Agency, Shasta House (a home for young developmentally disabled deaf adults), Men Overcoming Violence, and Catholic Charities Hearing Impaired Program.

Over the last few years, Hank has delivered several major presentations in the field of deafness and mental health. Among the topics he has addressed

at national conferences were “Issues in Mental Health and Interpreting” and “Working with the Chemically Dependent Deaf Client”. He has a particular interest in codependency and substance abuse. Hank lives in the San Francisco Bay area.

\*[Editor’s Note: Coda Louise Fletcher, who won the 1975 Academy Award for best actress for her role as Big Nurse Ratched in “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest”, was filming in Toronto and unable to present the keynote for this conference as previously scheduled].

Introduction of Hank Berman by Sara Machniak:

Hank is probably the best pinch hitter in the history of CODA. He has really come through when we needed him. When I called him to be keynote speaker, at first he said, “Well, really, I don’t have the time.” The next day or two he called back to say, “I thought about it and I can rearrange my schedule to do it.” I just can’t think of the right words to say, “Thank you.”

Hank came to speak to the Houston CODA group on a number of occasions and that’s when I first met him. Everyone had only wonderful things to say about him. He’s a wonderful man to get to know and I hope you’ll enjoy him as much as we in Texas have.

Keynote Address by Hank Berman:

In the spirit of avoiding gossip about other codas, I want to let you know the real reason that Louise Fletcher couldn’t be here. It seems she felt compelled to interpret a medical appointment for one of her parents and had to be checked into a program for codependents in Toronto. Anyone recognize the syndrome? [Wild audience laughter].

I’ve thought a lot about the theme of this conference: “Coming Home”. It is a wonderful and rich metaphor that can yield so many interpretations. Using our newly found empowerment as codas, I’d like to see what we can do together about shaping our own interpretations, and to create our own metaphor for “Coming Home”.

“Coming Home” is really a metaphor for a journey without end. One that is at once forward moving and cyclical. Carl Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist, saw the “journey” as a metaphor for the search for our authentic selves. Home,

for Jung, was the royal residence of the authentic self or – in more current terms – the place where our internal child resides.

Another great thinker, Joseph Campbell, calls it a heroes journey, one in which we test our self against the vicissitudes of the outside world. In this journey, the hero of our self-created myth meets and slays dragons, defeats enemies on the battlefields of bitter experience, rescues those whose suffering we can see before us, and most importantly, conquers the demons that we ourselves create.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, we accompany Ulysses as he makes his journey. His, in fact, was a journey home. He was trying to find his way despite the many obstacles put before him. At one point he even uses a self-imposed – albeit temporary and artificial – deafness to avoid the lure of the Sirens. He does this by putting molten wax in his own ears and the ears of his crew so that they will not hear the hypnotic song of the Sirens. Interestingly enough, I spoke earlier to a coda that shared that he, at one time, feigned deafness, as a way of fitting in when being an outsider felt too overwhelming. I wonder how many of us, in our journey home, have borrowed some aspect of our parents' deafness to make the trip a bit less rancorous?

In musing over the idea of “Coming Home”, I had to give some thought to the kind of home we left in the first place. It was clear to me that they were normal homes in most respects. They contained similar furniture...just a few unusual pieces that made them unique.

Our homes, our families – like all others – served as a laboratory within which our characters were developed. Our sense of self and our sense of home was forged from our early experiences with family, friends, neighbors, and representatives of the world outside. Many of us grew up more quickly than others because the contrast between our relationship with our parents and other hearing adults forced us to an early awareness of “differences” and our role in bridging those differences.

One of the first questions a child is often asked is, “What is your name?” For us it was often, “What did he/she say?” And for us, dealing with this question helped shaped how we responded to the world. Answering that question was more than “He said...” or “She said...” It took on the implications of a “mission” with profound and often lifelong implications.

In our homes we became, early on, unconscious, but none-the-less very acute, students in the ways of human interaction and communication. Some of us were impelled to sacrifice great pieces of our childhood in the service of learning and utilizing these lessons. In the quiet – sometimes not so quiet – places in our homes, our developmental challenges were tested against the constant backdrop of deafness, the Deaf community, and the Deaf World.

When I say “constant backdrop”, I’m referring to an environment where the idea of “DEAF” or “NOT DEAF” was so omnipresent that we became either professionally or personally caught up in these notions, or, perhaps like some of our absent brothers and sisters, we had to run completely away from them. It was a constant theme, a perennial debate, a refinement or repetition of the implications of deafness. Every issue, every behavior, could be related to “Deaf do this” or “that...Deaf way”, or “that...hearing world”. There was a daily comparison or highlighting of Deaf and Hearing which began early-on in our development which shaped how we saw the world and what many of us chose to do in the world.

When I think of how this contributed to who I am in the world, it’s obvious that the flow led me to become a therapist. Many of us chose to be in the helping, or what I term, “bridging” professions such as interpreting and counseling. These are the ways we converted our strengths into vocations. But well before we could transform these experiences into strengths and finally into careers, we had to work our way through a maze of challenges. I like to think of these as developmental tasks along the way. Some of these had the power to sidetrack us and lead us into whirlpools of non-productive or even self-destructive periods.

We had to define for ourselves a balance between dependence, codependence, independence, and finally a healthy interdependence. Certain memories capture how these tasks were made more difficult. I’ll never forget the day our family doctor said, “Tell your mother that she may need a hysterectomy.” Hell, I must have been eight or nine and had no idea what a hysterectomy was. It was all wrong. I shouldn’t have been there but who else could tell her in a better, more understandable way? Actually, I couldn’t beg off, it just wasn’t an option. That was a marker for me: the whirlpool of codependence had begun.

In our homes we struggled, too, to find a balance between passivity and rage. How can we express our anger when the forces of “loyalty” and guilt

are arranged against our doing so. I remember our coffee table when I think of my early encounters with anger. My mother was fond of crocheting so there was a spool of twine and the crocheting needle wrapped in it, pointing upwards. We had, what was for us, a typical fight. I must have been around thirteen. She used her winning maneuver, which was to turn her head away after she got the last word. But this time I was not going to let that happen. My anger was out of control. I banged my hand down on the coffee table. "Mom, you are going to look at me and 'hear' my point." We were locked in combat. I smashed my hand down again, but this time it landed on the needle which went right through my hand. I ran across the living room, put my hand in front of her face and yelled, "See what you did? See what you did?" She pulled the needle out, and took me to the hospital where I was given a tetanus shot. The message was clear: anger is dangerous. I'm still trying to find positive ways to deal with anger.

We are making our way back to the homes where we learned how to cope with feelings of humiliation and shame and to develop pride and humility. I'm healing by opening up the existence of these feelings for myself, and by talking about them with other codas to receive the support I need for dealing with them. So what about shame? Shame, for me, was in the mailbox. I stole a copy of the mailbox key when I was nine or ten so I could intercept any mail that came from the PTA, or any invitation for my mother to come to my school. I tore up this mail so she wouldn't see it and wouldn't come to my school where she might "talk" with my teachers or be seen by fellow students using sign language. Humiliation is in the memory of joining my friends in mimicking my mother's voice. This was the price I thought I had to pay to fit in and find acceptance with my peer group. It was a costly trade-off and the memory still brings me shame.

Our homes were experiments in finding the limits of privacy and openness. We were taught that gossip could be playful or harmful and we struggled to develop appropriate boundaries. A message in my family was, "Be a child and a friend at the same time." I didn't realize until much later that "friendship" should have waited until I was an adult. But by being made a friend at an early age, my childhood was somewhat violated. I didn't need to hear about Mrs. Eisenberg's troubles, the fact that her husband was having an affair or was laid off from the Post Office because of a drinking problem. What I needed was some protection from the more distasteful elements of adulthood. The legacy that remains is my continuing struggle to set limits and develop healthy boundaries.

We saw our parents try to find a balance between “active” and “not active.” For us, this translated into our own question of what level of involvement to pursue in the “Deaf world.” For those of us who are hearing and work in the deafness “field” (I don’t much like that term), this is a difficult problem. Because of early input, it’s not easy for many of us to forge a healthy path between giving and receiving unencumbered by guilt. People have spoken to me about working sixteen-hour days and doing things “for the Deaf” that they don’t do for their own families.

Perhaps we return “home” with a better understanding of fairness and justice. We are doing better at making our peace with the ongoing presence of unfairness and injustice while continuing to struggle against them.

Last year’s CODA conference keynote speaker, Lou Fant, looked at the gifts and blessings we received from our parents. I get the feeling that this year we are looking at our own creations, things that we make for ourselves. We are forging our own meaning from our unique experiences as codas. I talked to an old friend about where we may have gotten our sense of social justice, political liberalism, and belief in progressive causes. For me, it was both a gift from my parents, and something I did with my experience of their struggle for human rights as deaf people. My dad was a maker of women’s handbags and was often the first one in his shop to be laid off. In fact, that was the first sight that I remember learning... “laid off.” I asked, “Why is daddy home?” and my mom explained that he had been “laid off.” I understood, early on, that it had something to do with his being deaf. The boss treated him poorly and even the union wouldn’t go to bat for him as they might have if he were hearing. I took that kind of experience and turned it into a way of seeing the world.

As children we learned the art of compromise. For me, the metaphor for the “give-and-take” game was the telephone. Being a 13-year-old Jewish boy, I was asked what I wanted for my Bar mitzvah. I wanted a telephone so I could be like all the other teenagers and call girls, say a few dirty words, and hang up. I was given a phone for my 13<sup>th</sup> birthday. About two weeks after it was installed I asked my mother to remove it from the house. When she incredulously asked why, I answered, “All that ever happens with this phone is that you ask me to call Lenny to ask him if his parents will be home on Sunday at 2:00 so you can visit. That’s not fun. Take the phone out.” What emerged, after the guilt trips, was an argument leading to a compromise. My

parents would use the phone with my help between five and seven every night (except for emergencies) and then I had control over it.

One of the unique developmental tasks for all of us was to serve as communication links and bridge builders without losing too much of ourselves. Some of us felt compelled to lay ourselves across the troubled waters of misunderstanding and mistrust. We had to discern whether the car salesman was dishonest or whether a bargain with the linoleum salesman was a good one. Many times we had to find ways not to let on that we were playing this role. This was not an easy task, but one that both took its toll and sharpened our perceptions at the same time.

After moving through all of these so-called developmental tasks, the next stage in our journey was, of course, taking our experiences into the world. We had to leave home so we could make our way back home. Leaving home had its lighter moments. For me, it was a process that had its fits and starts. As I was packing my suitcase, my mother walked into my bedroom and asked where I was going. "I'm just going away for the weekend," I responded. She then asked, "For, you need nine pairs of sox for the weekend?" I was busted! I did move out that summer, only to return in the fall for a few months but then finally to leave for good, gathering strength within that back-and-forth loop.

I also think of leaving home as something we've done as a group when we came together as codas. I'm reminded of the first CODA conference in Fremont, California. My response to the circumstances may not have had anything to do with other peoples' reality, but I remember my reaction when I opened the packet of conference information. There were six or seven letters from organizations like the California Association of the Deaf, the National Association of the Deaf, from the executive director of the Deaf Counseling, Advocacy and Referral Agency, and various other deaf-run organizations. When read between the lines, these "letters of support" seemed to be about giving us "permission" to hold our conference. I can only think that we had initiated this response by asking for their permission. This year's conference packet didn't contain any letters like this. I guess we now realize that we have a right to take the initiative on our own behalf.

At the 1986 Fremont, California CODA conference, there was even a little brouhaha where a deaf women's organization had a heated discussion whether or not to prepare lunch for conference participants. It seems that

some felt they shouldn't support an organization that was about "criticizing Deaf parents." Thank God we've all pretty much moved beyond that kind of criticism.

After leaving home we made our own homes. We chose mates and lovers, and we chose careers. We also needed to create a home where we felt safe to explore the nature of our journey. It's no accident that we chose the theme of "Coming Home" for this conference as a way of acknowledging the value of a "clean, well-lighted place" for us. Our "home", the one we have created in this room, is not the home of our parents, but has certainly been shaped by our experiences in their homes. From this room we can, with love and support of our peers, look back where we have come from, and look forward to where we are going. Sometimes this gaze can be quite a humorous one, and sometimes a painful one. The analyst Viktor Frankel said, "For a light to illuminate, it must also burn." That thought gives me the strength to do the work that I need to do.

In *Portrait of the Artist* by James Joyce, Cranley, upon coming home, asks Stephen (the main character) about his childhood. "...and were you happier then?" Cranley asked softly, "Happier than you now for instance?" "Often happy," Stephen said, "and often unhappy. I was someone else then." "How someone else? What do you mean by that statement?" "I mean", said Stephen, "that I was not myself as I am now, as I had to become."

We, too, are in the process of becoming. It is a beautiful and wondrous process, and, in fact, it is a hero's journey that we have embarked upon. When I reflect on yesterday and the piece of the journey already gone by, I think of the Grateful Dead line: "...what a long, strange trip it's been." When I think of the next part of the journey, I say to all of us, "...rejoice, rejoice, you have no choice!"

Thanks very much.