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Keynote Address  
By

Paul Preston  
Unfinished Business: Stories of Diversity

Before I begin, there's something I'd like to find out. How do you like this shirt? Thank – maybe this will help settle an argument back home. Last week, while I was getting ready for CODA, my partner Time asked me what I was going to wear to give the keynote. I told him I had the perfect thing. I went into the other room and brought back this shirt. Tim took one look at it and said, “You’ve got to be kidding!” He expected I would give the keynote wearing a suit and tie. I told him if I showed up wearing a suit and tie, you’d know for sure I didn’t belong here.

I wanted to wear this shirt because I wanted to give you a taste of where I’m from. Tie-dyed is sort of typical Berkeley. My home. I guess I’m a little bit of a left over hippie after all. Maybe instead of a Deadhead, a Coda-head. And the rainbow colors in this shirt reminds me of our conference this year, Diversity. Of course, I’ve added a little bit of my own touch – a lavender cast.

I started thinking about this talk a year ago. I remember I was sitting in the back of a large room at the CODA conference. One year ago. Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. I’m surprised I still remember how to say it. Oconomowoc. I learned how to say it from Dave Eklof. Dave, am I saying it right? Oconomowoc. After the CODA conference when I got back to California, I used to just mention casually, “Oh, you know, I just came back from a conference in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin...” Hearing people, their mouths would drop open. They were impressed! “You hear how he says that. Oconomowoc. He speaks so well.” They never think, his mother father deaf. Think. [Signs, “expert”] “He must be hearing.” I guess before we go any

further, I want to make sure I'm saying these right. Raw-lay. Durrum. Nawth Karolinuh. How's that, JoAnn and Mark?

Anyway, when I first got to Oconomowoc I was finally starting to feel calm. I'd just spent three days with my parents. I live in California, they live in Chicago. Berkeley, Chicago. Two thousand miles apart. I see Mom and Dad a few times a year. I love the both, but most of this time the distance works for us. I'm not used to being part of an intense threesome: Mom, Dad and me. By the time I came to CODA, I was ready for a break. After a few hours, I finally started to feel relaxed. Then Trudy (Jeffers) Schafer stood up.

Trudy was the keynote speaker last year. Trudy told a very beautiful story about dragon slayers. When Trudy started her talk, my whole body tensed up. I felt my heart sink. No more feeling relaxed! That's when it hit me. Next year: Me! I'll be the keynote speaker. What am I gonna say? So, for the rest of Trudy's talk, and for most of the past year, I've been thinking about this keynote. We codas! One woman I interviewed for the book said, she thought the biggest trait among us was [Signs, "persevere".]

So, a year ago, I was thinking about this. I already knew that the theme of this year's conference was Diversity. Richness in Our Diversity. When I started thinking about what I was going to say today, my mind went in two directions. First, I wanted to talk about diversity by telling you some of the stories that weren't in my book. Some of the things I found about later – after the book came out. Some of the things I couldn't fit into my book...or maybe wasn't allowed to put in the book. I wanted to tell you about what else was going on, to share some of the stories of people who aren't here today, to add to the diversity I see right now in this room.

But another part of me said that I haven't really shared my own stories with you. What was going on with me. I wanted to tell you some of my own stories.

So, this morning I decided to do both. I'm going to tell you stories that aren't in my book. Stories that were left out for one reason or another. Some stories of other people, some stories of my own. It's part of Deaf storytelling: The Deaf always want you to tell [Signs and says, "Full Story".] Explain, A to Z. So, I'm gonna tell you some stories. The Full Story.

I call this talk,

## **“Unfinished Business”**

### **German Mother**

The first bit of unfinished business is from the beginning of my book. At the very beginning of the book, the preface. Pre-face. Dave, you keep telling me how important it is to learn new vocabulary words, so I'm giving you one. Preface. [Signs, “means, the beginning of the book. Understand?"] Anyway, in the preface, I tried to explain to hearing people why I used the title of the book: Mother Father Deaf. Mother Father Deaf! What the hell does that mean? Bad English? When I was writing, I wanted to explain to people that mother father deaf doesn't just mean, “My mother and father are deaf.” Mother father deaf means something much bigger than that. It means a whole identity and cultural heritage. So, one of the ways I decided to explain this was to use a story about what happened to me when I traveled to Israel.

During my fieldwork, I traveled to Israel. The political climate was particularly tense, and I was foolishly wandering alone through the streets of a nearly deserted Jerusalem. Unbeknown to me, tourists had been warned off the street. I could feel piercing eyes watching me through closed shutters. I nervously scanned the streets and saw a group of ten tourists gathered in front of one of the Stations of the Cross. What caught my eye was that they were signing. They were deaf. I immediately moved over toward them. They were a group of German deaf tourists. Although sign language is not universal, I was able to communicate. Almost immediately, they wanted to know how I knew sign language. “Mother father deaf,” I explained. They all nodded their heads and smiled. One woman came over to me and put her arm around me. “Same us,” she nodded as she pulled me into their group.

That was a very powerful moment for me, but that's not the full story. Now, I'm going to tell you the [Signs and says, “Full Story”.]

Just before that happened, I had indeed been wandering around Jerusalem. That part is true. But I left out a few things. When I was there in 1988, things were very close to war. Soldiers with machine guns on every corner. The day before, my car was stoned. [Signs and says, “Not stoned, high, but stoned with rocks.”] It was very tense. It was so bad that Tim stayed in the hotel. He said if it got any more tense, he would burn up. But, me, well, I'm

always up for an adventure. I played tourist. I didn't really notice that there wasn't anybody else around. I was just wandering around Jerusalem when this man came up to me. The guy was dark skinned and wore a scarf on his head. No, Tome, he was not a drag queen. That's how men in the Middle East dress. Anyway, he did not speak English very well. He asked me where I was from. For those of you who've travelled to foreign countries, you know Americans not always welcome. Or, sometimes they even think, "Boy, rich Americans, better rob or kidnap them." So when the man asked me where I was from, I froze. Didn't know what to say. He asked me again, "Where you from?" I thought about it one more time and decided. I pointed to my ears. [Points to ears, shakes head and throws up hands – like a deaf person would do.] The guy laughed, smiled, grabbed my arm, and pulled me along with him. He took me down alleys, then suddenly into a shop. The door and windows were all shuttered closed. He knocked on the door, and we went inside. The door closed behind us. It was dark inside. Very dark. I could make out several pairs of eyes in the shadows. People staring at me. They talked very low. I couldn't understand them. Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic, not sure. Something foreign. I couldn't understand. The guy points to me, and they all nod. Then he took me to the back of the shop. I'm thinking, in the newspapers tomorrow, the headline will be: "American tourist found murdered." He takes me to the back of the shop. There is a door we go out into a dark alley. Go through more alleys, into building, into dark rooms.

Finally, we came out into an open area. He points over in the distance. I didn't know what he was pointing to. I saw a group of people. He smiled and nodded and pushed me towards them. I looked again. That's when I saw them, people signing. Deaf people. All standing near one of the Stations of the Cross. All this time, that man probably thought I got lost from my tour group and was leading me back to them.

So, what I wrote about meeting with these deaf tourists really happened. In fact, it was only later on, while I was writing about this story, I remember writing the sentence, "Tourists had been warned off the streets." And as I wrote it down, suddenly it hit me. The only people left on any street in Jerusalem were deaf people and me. The radio had been warning, "Stay off streets." But, deaf people, they couldn't hear the warning. Me, I had a radio – but what good? The warning was in Hebrew. I didn't understand a thing. So, the result was the same. Deaf people and me wandering around the

streets of Jerusalem. I guess that's some proof of our common cultural heritage.

I want to add one more piece to that story. An important piece. It has to do with that German deaf woman who put her arm around me, who told me, "Same us." The woman who made me understand that our connection to deaf people transcends geographic boundaries.

Although that was a very moving and powerful moment for me, I didn't fully appreciate all that was going on at the time. I didn't know the full story. What I didn't realize until a few years later was that German deaf woman who hugged me and made me feel like we were the same, like I was her son was that there was another piece to that story. When I met her, this woman was about 60 or 65. I thought, well, she could almost be like my mother. But I was wrong. She could never have been my mother. She could never have had a son like me. Or a daughter. Many or most deaf people in Germany during World War II were sent to concentration camps. If they weren't killed, they were sterilized. A whole generation of deaf mothers and fathers who could never have children like us. Just because they were deaf.

Just because they were deaf. That they would do this just so that they could never have children. That's when I realized how powerful the social forces that stepped on our parents' backs were.

Our people shared those death camps. Jews, Deaf, Gays, Poles, Gypsies, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses. We belong to people who were not supposed to exist. Wipe them out, exterminate them. They are different.

Oppression is part of our history, but also diversity. Our theme at this conference; "Diversity". Diversity isn't easy. It's hard. It comes with a price. We must never judge. Must never say, "I am perfect, I know." We must never assume, "You must be like me. You must [Signs, "same-same".] We must never say, "I don't care." Diversity requires vigilance, and we codas are good at that.

We have a very rich history and culture. But many of us don't know it. We have to find out, remember, and pass it on – to other codas, to our parents, to other deaf people. Our culture and our history isn't something you can just pick up at the library. Writing this book, I learned a lot about myself, my parents, and my culture. There's still a lot more. There are a lot of us out

there who are working at discovering who we are, sharing our culture – with other codas, with deaf people, with hearing people. We do it in different ways: plays, songs, poems, workshops, stories, novels, articles, teaching, and just talking. We need to find out. That’s one of the challenges of diversity. To make sure each of our stories is included.

For some of us, it’s easy to talk, to share, and to express. But we need to listen, to include, all our brothers and sisters. For some of us, it’s easy to listen, to stay in the background. We need to speak up. We need all of us – all that diversity – to make sure our story is complete.

## **Another Interview**

When I was working on this book, sometimes it was really hard finding you guys. I mean, codas don’t wear big signs on them. You can’t find them in the phone book. We don’t have big ears...well, maybe not all of us. It was important to me to find as many different kinds of codas as possible.

In the book, I say I interviewed 150 codas. Actually, I interviewed a lot more than 150 codas. Most of them only briefly. But there were others that I didn’t include for other reasons. There’s one coda, in particular, that’s not in the book. Not his real name, but this morning I’m gonna call him, Pete.

Pet and I sat in his kitchen and we talked for a couple hours. We talked about a lot of things. About deaf parents, about our jobs, about cooking. Pet liked to cook. Then after a couple hours Pete turned to me and said, “You know, I keep looking over at that tape recorder.” For those of you who haven’t experienced my interviews or didn’t read about it in the book, I usually tape record every interview. And almost everybody else was fine about it. So I asked Pete if he wanted me to shut the tape recorder off. He said,

“No, not right now...but maybe later. Or, maybe when we’re finished, I’d like to decide about using all this. It’s not that I don’t trust you. It’s just I’ve never had a chance to talk to someone else like this. I’ve got friends, but their parents aren’t deaf. There are some things I’d like to talk about and not have to worry about whether or not I’m being tape recorded.”

Over the next few hours, Pete talked about a lot more personal things. By the end of the interview, he asked me not to use his interview in my book. But he did agree to let me share part of his interview with codas. With you. So, for the first time, I'm going to share Pete's story.

Pete had been telling me about how he never got a chance to talk with other adults with deaf parents. Then he suddenly stopped and asked me:

“Do you ever go to those coda meetings? [Yeah, I just went to one.] I don't know. It must be really something, to be there with all those other people. Everybody's mother and father deaf. Everybody, huh? [I explained that maybe a few just their mother or father, but almost everybody else, both mother and father deaf. Pete smiled and nodded for a while.] Huh. I thought about going, but I just can't. [Why not?] Because...because there's some things I can't tell everybody...especially not people like that.”

I have to [Signs, “digress”] here a little bit and explain. Earlier, Pete had been talking about himself, about his relationships. But all the time he was a little [Signs, “vague”.] Finally, Pete told me he was gay, and I said, “Well, that makes two of us.” Pete started to relax. I told him how on the first day of the very first CODA conference I was asked to be on a panel about different kinds of codas. They thought I was going to talk about being an only child. I got up in front of everybody and told them about being gay. [Signs, “Surprise for them!”] I told Pete that every coda I've met has been open and accepting. And I thought he would be just as accepted.

Pete: “But, I couldn't trust. I couldn't trust that things might not get back to my parents. You know, Deaf way. Gossip, news. [Do you parents know you're gay?] They know, but they don't really accept it. You know when I asked you about the tape recorder? I'd like to tell you some things. Maybe later you can tell those codas about me. [Why not tell 'em yourself?] No, I can't. Can't. And I don't think I'll get the chance to do it.”

[Pete paused for a long time, and got up from his chair. He looked right at me.] “You tell 'em for me.” [Pete pulled up one of his pant legs. I looked down and saw two purple spots, and I knew right away what they were. KS lesions. Kaposi Sarcoma. One of the really awful and ugly signs of having AIDS. Pete didn't say much for a while. He didn't need to.

[Pete started to talk again. He pointed to his leg.]

“See this? This is how life has branded me. I used to wonder how come life branded me twice. First, you know, first I had this invisible mark. My parents were deaf. Then I was gay. Sometimes no one would know. I could be in a room full of people and know one would know. Don’t know my parents are deaf. Don’t know I’m gay. But, then I got branded a third time. And this time can’t hide. It’s kind of ironic, you know? Life has found me out. So now people know I have AIDS, and they probably know I’m gay. But they still don’t know about my parents. It’s not because I’m ashamed of them. Maybe when I was a little kid. But not now. [His voice choked.] But now they’re ashamed of me.”

“Sometimes I think I’m gonna be fine. But, really, in my heart, I know I’m gonna die. And my parents don’t want anyone to know. They’re so ashamed. So, I know if I go to one of those coda meetings, maybe that day I’ll have a big, fat purple mark on my face, or my hands, or something. And I won’t be able to hide it. And maybe they’ll ask about me, or maybe they’ll know me. The Deaf community gossips so much. Aren’t codas like that? I know plenty of interpreters do it.”

[Pete looked over at the tape recorder.]

“If you don’t use my name, you can tell ‘em, those other codas... [What do you want me to tell them?] Tell them I’m sorry I didn’t make it. Tell them I had trouble, all my life, accepting who I am. Son of deaf parents. Gay man. Man with AIDS. There’re too many secrets in my life. I had to keep everything, you know, separate. Gay friends, straight friends. Deaf friends, hearing friends. I guess we all have some secrets... I don’t know if it’s because I had deaf parents. Tell those codas I wasn’t strong enough to trust them.”

“But tell them I thought about ‘em. I wondered what it would be like to talk with ‘em, to just sit around, to be adults together. Maybe, like you said, maybe they would accept me. But I know a lot of deaf people don’t. I know my parents don’t.”



“It’s not really my parents’ fault. They have a hard enough time being deaf. My mom always used to tell me, “You know, not easy me deaf.” And I always told her I knew. But I don’t think she really understands that I know how hard it is. I know because I can hear. I know what she misses. I know how our society isn’t ready for someone who doesn’t speak or hear perfectly. We want a race of all perfect people. And we have very definite ideas about what we want. We want perfect little boys and girls who are blond and blue-eyed. We don’t want ‘em if they’re too black or too gay or too deaf.”

“But I don’t understand why my mother doesn’t make the connection. Why she doesn’t see how hard it is for me, too. Being gay. Living in a society that doesn’t accept who I am. A society that wants to make me into something I’m not. And it’s the same society that doesn’t accept her because she’s deaf. I just don’t understand why she doesn’t make the connection. How come she doesn’t see that the shame she has about my being gay is no different than how her mother felt about have a deaf daughter.”

“So, that’s what I want those codas to hear. I want them to know that we have a right, a duty to stand up for those who are different than us. And you gotta be really careful with that shit. I see too many gays trying to make straight people out to be the bad guys. It’s the same thing with deaf people. ‘Terrible Hearing people. Mean, can’t talk with us, spying on us.’ All that crap. We gotta stop this business of my side is better than your side.”

“I want those codas to go home and do what I can’t seem to do. Tell their mother or father, or whoever, explain about how we’re all in this together. Deaf and hearing and gay and straight. All of us. All of us.”

[Pete looked at me for a long time. He shook his head as his eyes filled with tears.]

[For the first time, Pete signed completely.]

“I wish my parents proud of me. I’m proud of them.”

Because he asked me, I didn't use Pete's interview in my book. But I did use some of his thoughts. And his thoughts on diversity seem particularly important to the spirit of this CODA conference.

I call this guy Pete because that was the same name as my first lover. Pete. Pete and I lived together in Chicago over twenty years ago. My first lover, Pete, died of AIDS in 1985. This coda, Pete, died of AIDS last year. This is my way of remembering both of them.

## **Surprise!**

Not all my unfinished stories are so poignant. I was talking with one woman about anger. She was telling me about her father?

“I was so scared. My sister and me. We were so scared when Daddy got mad. He got mad like no one on earth. His face would just turn that shade of red you only hear about in the movies. But it was true. My daddy's face turned bright red and he was yelling. Couldn't hardly understand a thing he said even when he wasn't mad. When he got pissed off, it was off the scale. Not that I think about it, I guess it was the volume that made the difference. It was the same (heh-heh-heh) only now it was [HEH-HEH-HEH].”

As she was telling me, she really got into it. Even scared me a little. All this time she was telling me all this, we were sitting on the couch in her living room. Neither one of us heard her husband come home from work. He couldn't see us, but what he heard was her screaming and grunting, going “[HEH-HEH-HEH]”. Then he comes in and sees me sitting on the couch with his wife. So he runs in and starts yelling, “What the hell you doing with my wife?”

She jumps up and says, “It's okay, he's gay.” So he says, “Oh, yeah, I heard that one before. You trying to convert him?”

It took us a while to sort it out. That's one of the things that made writing this book so interesting.

## **Paul**

You know, it's a little difficult getting up in front of this whole group. Not because this is a large group. I've been a college professor, sometimes lecturing to 75 or maybe 200 students. But with you it's different. I'm used to talking to you individually. To Bonnie, to Tom, to Sherry, to JoAnn, to Millie, to Nancy, to Mark. To each and every one of you.

It's hard for me to get up and say something to you as a group. Partly, because I tune into different things with each of you.

So, here I am in front of you. How to talk to all of you at once? When I look out, I see faces of people who helped me write this book. Your stories. Not mine. Codas are always asking me, what was it like? Writing the book, interviewing all these codas. And one of the things that's happened since I wrote the book; I use your stories to explain things – not only about our experience, but I even use your stories to explain my experiences. Sometimes your stories are more compelling; hit point. They help people understand. But somehow, in the process, I lose my own stories.

Writing this book was a lot of work. Not just the sitting and interviewing, but the hours and hours and hours of sitting alone. At night in my room. Sitting alone. Hard for me, sometimes. To sit and be alone with myself. But through this, I learned something about myself. About my culture. About who I am. Hard work. Wonderful, yes, but hard work.

I say this because I know how hard we all work. We're stuck: deaf or hearing. Mother father. Okay? Not okay? Explain about deafness. Explain about this. Sometimes, tired of explaining. Hard work. Sometimes we run away from the work – if we can. And even in running away, we work hard.

This morning I've been sharing stories of people who aren't here. But there's still one more person not FULL STORY. Me. I listened to your stories because that's how I've been trained. Professional Researcher. Listen. Watch. Observe. Don't put yourself in the story. This is the hearing way. Don't reveal too much of yourself. Keep yourself separate. So, mostly I wrote the book in that way. But that's not FULL STORY. Still part of me left out. Deaf part. Deaf heart. Heart not always show in my words. But I can cheat. Can use your words. You're not always so polite, or careful, or hearing. Sometimes you're Deaf. You show your heart.

So now I want to balance the picture. Time for one last bit of unfinished business. My story. No I'm going to read you the draft of a story I'm working on. It's a story about my other two grandparents. The ones I didn't write about in the book. I know, in Deaf storytelling, you're not supposed to read. But this is my story. And I'm both Deaf and Hearing. And that's what this story is about.

This story is called:

## **Window Panes**

The windowpanes in our bedroom used to rattle whenever the wind picked up. A low rumble of wood and glass which connected our room with the world outside. Just outside the bedroom window, I can look out over the garden we've tended over the last fifteen years. It's a small, urban backyard in the flats of Berkeley, but we've managed to cram a little bit from every corner of the world we've lived in: Australian kangaroo paws nestled under a red banana tree, a sandy mound of desert cacti and succulents complete with cow skull, a pond of goldfish, turtle and bullfrogs. Horticultural memories, I guess. Sometimes I spy ruby-throated hummingbirds darting and battling over the foxgloves, or watch the afternoon sun disappear into the fog steamrolling in from the Golden Gate. But as I watch nature unfolding just outside the bedroom window, I'm aware of being separated by a thin pane of glass. The rattling windowpanes give a sense of life – more immediate, more unpredictable than just gazing out the window.

We had a terrific storm the other night – the howling, gusting, thrashing and crashing kind. But not a peep out of the windowpanes. They don't rattle any more. One night a few years ago, in the middle of a storm, Tim bolted out of bed shouting, "I can't stand it any more! Those windows are driving me crazy!"

I jumped out of bed, grabbed some notepaper off my desk and folded it again and again. I stuffed the wad of paper into the windows. Not exactly engineering marvel, but effective immediately. Silence. Since then, no more rattling...except when we have earthquakes. In California, when we have an earthquake, everything rattles.

Not too long ago Tim was away from home. He had to go to Colorado to be with his brother who's dying of leukemia. Tim hadn't spoken to his brother for fifteen years – but that's another story. Anyway, Tim was off to Colorado. And I was home alone. I remember this because, you know, sometimes I get afraid. What if something happened to Tim? Something bad. A plane crash. Colorado blizzards, snows, car accident. I don't let myself think about things like that too much. But, there's something about brief separations that touches on separations more final and more permanent. I start to remember some of my friends who died too young. I remember my grandmother who died when I was 12. I picked out her coffin. Grandma was my mother's mother. She was my one living connection to the hearing world. Grandma adopted me as if I were her long lost child.

My other grandmother, my father's mother, died two months before I was born. Veronica Prezenski. Veronica was from the Old World. She came over to the United States from Poland, a poor peasant woman. But she was smart. My dad always said Veronica was real smart. My dad was real proud of his mother, she made good. She ran a delicatessen, and raised seven children. Alone. Her husband, my grandfather, got drunk one night. He worked on the railroads. My grandfather big drunk. One night, he was too drunk. Didn't see the train coming. He lived for only a few hours afterwards. My father remembers seeing his mother cry. He understood. Feelings don't need to be explained or labeled. They show on the face. Sometimes, deaf children don't understand their hearing mothers and fathers. Sometimes, they miss a lot. But sometimes, hearing and deaf are the same. Joy and Pain and Sorrow show their face for deaf and for hearing. Sometimes hearing people try to hide their feelings, cover up with words. Sometimes hearing people don't notice faces. But the Deaf, they see easy. My grandmother didn't try to hide her feelings, she let her face show. My father understood.

My father read his mother fine. His mother signed maybe just a little bit, but she knew how to communicate with the Deaf. She hugged. She embraced. She talked with her hands, even if she didn't use sign language. Maybe she could have done more, but I'm still proud of her. She raised a fine man, my father. He's a good man. And above all else, his mother, Veronica, taught him to be proud of himself.

My father read his mother fine. She was happy my father married my mother. A deaf woman. She was proud of her son. She never lied to herself. She knew her son was Deaf, and she let him go. She never tried to make her

son hear. Big loss for her, big loss. But she never tried to change him, to make him hear. She was happy my father had deaf friends. She saw her deaf son had a better education than any of her other children. She saw her son had a life separate from her.

My father read his mother fine. She was not disappointed my father changed his name from Presinski to Preston. Her son was an American. She was a poor Polish immigrant who struggled to come to American so her children would have a better life. And now here, her son, her deaf son, was proof that America was indeed the land of opportunity.

She didn't lie when she told him how happy she was to hear that she, Veronica, will have her first American grandchild. Her face didn't give mixed signals: I am happy...but what if my grandchild is deaf, too. But my father noticed something else. He noticed his mother's face. She pretended nothing was wrong. But there was something wrong. She had ovarian cancer. Didn't tell her son. But he knows. He read her face. He knew before his hearing brothers and sisters found out. He knew before they came and told him, "Momma has cancer." My Dad told them, "I know." My father's way, when he talks, he signs, [Signs, "know. Finish, know."] "know. Finish, know." And shakes his head.

I know this story because it leads up to my name. My mother and father love to tell me how they couldn't decide what to name me. They didn't know if I was going to be a girl or a boy. But names stood out. One was Veronica – my grandmother's name. My father remembers lying next to my mother when she was seven months pregnant. At that time they lived with my other grandmother. One night my father told me couldn't sleep. Broke out in a big sweat. Tossed and turned. Unusual for my father. He's a good sleeper. Watches TV, falls asleep by eight o'clock. But that night he couldn't sleep. Cold sweat. He knows. Knows. Finished. Early morning, just before dawn, my mother's mother came into the room. She turned on lights. She looked at my father. She spoke while awkwardly spelling out in two-hand alphabet, "Y-o-u-r m-o-t-h-e-r d-e-a-d."

My mother says she felt me kick right then. She thought it meant I would be a girl. She and my father decided, "We'll name her Veronica." If I were a girl, I would be Veronica.

If I had been a boy...if I had been a boy, my mother told me she wanted to name me Uriah. But she quickly adds that she didn't think about it very long, only for a few seconds. Uriah was her father's name. But my mother knows that Uriah is not a common name. Maybe too strange for the Hearing world. My mother has a special sense of the world. Sophisticated. She learned the polite ways of being in the world. She grew up in a wealthy family, went to private school. She knows high society, East Coast. Providence, New York City, Boston. Prominent family. Home on Cape Cod. She had a maid and governess when she was little. Even her own pony. But she also knows her father gave up his wealth. Gave up all his money to try to save her. Save his little deaf daughter. Went to doctors all over the country, even went to Vienna, to the best doctors in all the world, anything to save his little girl. His only child.

My mother went to a school that used the Rochester Method. She's a strong believer in the Rochester Method. She thinks all that fingerspelling helped her English. My mother reads a lot – more than I do. One or two books a week. My mother, born deaf, is one of the most Hearing educated deaf people I know. Maybe Rochester method helped her, but something else.

Uriah used to sit next to his daughter in movies, in restaurants, at people's house. Everywhere. And everywhere they went, he finger spelled everything to his baby girl. Everything. Uriah was very educated. A publisher, a writer, a poet. Uriah knew the importance of language. He probably didn't know about ASL. Seventy years ago, he only got one message from the Hearing world: teach the deaf to speak, to lip-read. But somehow Uriah wasn't convinced. I can't ask him why, but somehow he knew the real truth. Because of Uriah, his daughter didn't have to rise out of the ashes to find language.

My mother understands Hearing language so well that she knew not to pick a strange name like Uriah for her hearing son. Uriah. It's too old fashioned, my mother told me. My mother understands that names and labels can stick with you for life. She knows that stigma is all too real. She understands how deafness can cut off more than most. My mother is almost hearing sometimes. Almost. Not because she can speak or hear. She can't. Nothing. But she's as close to the Hearing world as someone deaf from birth can be. She shares their language. She loved her father very much, wished she could honor him by naming her son after him. But she honored him another way.

She learned so much about language from her father that she honored him by not naming me Uriah.

Uriah, this grandfather I was almost named after, died when my mother was 18. For many years, for most of my life, I couldn't understand why it was so painful for my mother's parents. I didn't know they lost another child.

Last year, my mother told me about the attic. After I wrote the book, my mother was so happy to find out I was still interested in the Deaf. Years ago, when I taught in the deaf schools, my mother felt more sure of me. She knew I accepted Deaf. When I use ASL too much, she thinks maybe I've gone a little too far. But when I changed jobs, she wasn't sure anymore. My new jobs weren't connected with the Deaf. Anthropology, medicine, research, AIDS, leprosy, Australia, South America. Nothing connected with Deaf. My mother was truly happy when I began research on codas. The spark had returned. She felt more confident.

My mother started to tell me stories she hadn't told me before. She told me about one time when she was a little girl she went up into her parents' attic. She was 7 or 8. She had never gone up in the attic before. She found the secret door and climbed in. She saw old trunks, clothes, boxes, and books. Then she saw a drum. My father echoes her story. Never saw before, drum. My mother didn't understand why it was there. She told me, years later, she found out it was her brother's drum. She never knew her parents had another child. He died before she was born. She doesn't know anything more. My mother is like me. An only child. She never knew she had a baby brother. Doesn't know that story. She told me that maybe that was why it was so hard for her mother to accept. Accept that at 42, this was her last chance to have a child. And then her last chance, her only chance, is born deaf.

I can't ask Uriah about all that. Can't ask him what happened that he lost his first-born. And then his daughter born deaf. Uriah – the poet, the violinist, the writer – could have given up. Become crushed. But instead Uriah gave his only child an important gift. He gave her language.

I started telling you about the windowpanes in my bedroom. As I write this, there's a big storm coming tonight. Time is gone. And I'm all alone in the house. Sometimes now I'm more afraid of the dark than when I was young. Sometimes. Maybe just a touch of loneliness. I never let myself admit it before. But now I can be afraid. I need some comfort. I think about the



windowpane, the windowpanes stuffed shut with folded papers. No more rattling. Tim said that the rattling windowpanes kept him awake. But now I realize something. I am comforted by those rattling windowpanes. When I was a child, lying in the dark, I would hear the windows in my parents' house rattle. I wasn't bothered by it. Wasn't afraid of it. It was the same with thunder. I liked the noise. The booming, the rattling. I felt connected to that noise. When I'm lying in my bed in the dark I know I can do something my parents can't. I can hear the shutters in different rooms of the house. I can tell which room. Kitchen. Dining room. Their bedroom. Even in the dark, I can tell. I know there's a world outside. That rattling gives life. I know there's a world outside. I know I'm alive.

In the darkness I feel the loss of connection. Some mysteriously lost hearing part of me. So I go to the windowpanes and pull out the folded paper. I go back to my bed and lie in the dark listening. I listen as the rattling starts up again. Quiet rumbling. The storm is well under way and the windowpanes respond eagerly, banging, jerking, and nearly crashing. Wonderful rattling.

But it's not just sound that's important. What's important for me is connection. That's my heritage. Not deaf, hearing, talking, signing. But connecting. Communicating. Eye contact. Deaf voices. Hearing voices. Music.

My grandparents taught me that. My grandmother Veronica who showed her face and her heart to her deaf son. And my grandfather Uriah who shared his language with his daughter. Veronica and Uriah. They connected to their children, and now to me.

It's connection I need. Sometimes the connection is eye contact, bodies in motion, or a heartfelt hug. Sometimes the connection is spoken voices, acid rock, or crickets on a warm summer night.

Sometimes it's just to connect to myself. To listen to who I am. To feel connected to some center in myself that's beyond hearing or deaf.

And sometimes, the connection is just rattling windowpanes.

## Normal Heart

Each of the stories I've shared this morning touch on part of our larger history...somewhere imbedded between two cultures: Deaf and Hearing. A little bit, a lot from one or the other.

This year's theme is "Diversity". Diversity. It's kind of ironic having our conference here in North Carolina. Home state of Jesse Helms – someone who definitely does not appreciate diversity. But it's also very fitting that we have our conference here. Because when I traveled all across North Carolina doing interviews for this book, I also saw how many of the people of North Carolina understand and celebrate diversity. I saw people who fought back against hatred and oppression. North Carolina is a battleground, and we codas know battlegrounds very, very well. How fitting for us to be celebrating diversity right here in the middle of things.

We codas are the greatest dichotomy and the greatest synthesis. People like us. Half-breeds. Never fitting in. Always fitting. Our diversity isn't just among hearing children of deaf parents. Not just whether we're the only child, or live in Idaho, or are gay, or are black. We have to accept the challenge of our birthright. Diversity requires work. For all of us. All of us humans grow up in a family, in a community, in a culture. And we can never deny our cultural heritage. But all cultures come with a bias: Ours is better. Or, sometimes, ours is inferior. Only for us who are in the middle, who know the confusion, the pain, the conflict, we're the ones who can see both sides, deaf and hearing, black and white, gay and straight.

CODA is a place where each one of us can be safe. We can be honest, open...whoever we are. Gay? We're accepted. Parents who were Peddlers? We're accepted. Don't know signs? Accepted. Black, poor, Jewish, Catholic? Accepted. Whore? Accepted. Well, maybe a little gossip, but we're accepted. Here each one of us can be themselves. First time, sometimes, first time we can be ourselves. First time.

Some of you have seen Diana Nelson and Carol Mullis do their skit about their train trip to the Coda conference in New Orleans a few years ago. You know, every time something happened, Diana got excited. Whenever she saw something, she had a panic attack. She was worried. She kept asking Carol, "What's the matter? What's wrong?" But Carol always said the same thing, "Everything's fine. Don't worry. It's normal. Normal."

It's the same with us. Deaf? Normal. Hearing? Normal. We can't let either side convince us, Deaf: Bad, no good. Hearing: Bad, no good. Deaf, hearing. Deaf, hearing. They've fought long enough. It's time for Hearing, Deaf to make peace. Time to heal. Time to have peace inside.

For those of you who have been to CODA before, you know how hard it is to explain when you go back home. "What was it like? What did people talk about?"

Deaf parents:

"Deaf parents?" People think, "What's there to talk about? Short. Maybe one hour – finished. Three days! Can't imagine it. Other, other, what?"

How can we explain everything we hear and see? The bond. The connection. The feel. This is our one chance. To be both deaf and hearing. Some little deaf, big hearing. Some big deaf, little hearing. But we're all both. We have a hearing part – and it's not always bad. And we have a Deaf part – not always positive, not always wonderful, wonderful. Here we can be both. It's okay to feel mixed up. We're both deaf and hearing. Our eyes. Our hands. What about our hearts?

Did you ever feel or listen to a Deaf heart? Maybe your mother's heart? Your father's heart? What about a hearing heart? Your grandmother or grandfather? Maybe your husband, or your wife, lover, best friend? Hearing heart? Deaf heart? Different? Just normal. There's diversity all around us. Deaf, hearing, gay, straight, black, white. Diversity, differences, all outside. But inside, inside, it's the same heart. Normal heart.

## **One Year Ago**

Thanks very much. I'd like to share something that I've never really talked about before. Exactly one year ago, at the end of the CODA conference, I left Oconomowoc and flew to Denver. In fact, I was sitting on the plane to Denver with Darlene. When we arrived in Denver, I met my partner, Tim. Tim's brother lives in Denver and the plan was that we would drive back to San Francisco the next morning. I arrived in Denver late at night, and we left early the next morning. We were headed for Yellowstone. Around 10 o'clock the next morning, we were driving along the backroads of Wyoming.

We were all by ourselves when we came upon a terrible car crash that had happened a few minutes earlier. A family: mother, grandmother, aunt and two boys. A rollover. It was very bad. Very bad. We dragged bodies out of the car, into the sun. For the first time in my life, I did CPR. We worked hard to try to save them. It took almost an hour before the police helicopter arrived. We were so far from anywhere. I worked on the grandmother and one of the boys. Tim worked on the mother and the older brother.

Tim and I were on either side of the mangled car. I worked on the grandmother until a trucker came along to relieve me. Then I went to the little boy. His name was Jonah. Jonah's head was very bloody, and we weren't sure if his neck was broken. I held his head in my hands to keep him still. He was conscious. I talked to him to try to keep him calm.

I couldn't think of what to say. All I could think of was to tell him that I had just come back from CODA conference. I explained to him that everybody there is like me: mother father deaf. I told him, I have no brothers and sisters. So Jonah said, "That's like me, I have one brother. He and I fight sometimes, but we're pretty tight." Jonah couldn't see where his brother was, so he asked me if his brother was ok.

I told him he was hurt bad, but Tim was helping him. I told him Tim was a doctor, so he was in the best hands possible. A few minutes later, Tim came around the wreck. I looked up at Tim and just with my face asked him how the other boy was doing. I remember so clearly seeing Tim sign back to me, "Finish, dead."

One of the last things Jonah said to me before they took him off in the police helicopter was about codas. He still didn't know his brother was dead, but he said, "So, codas are like your brothers and sisters?" And I thought, "Yes, they are my brothers and sisters. Sometimes we have lots of fun. Sometimes we fight. But we're family. Family."

Being with you, a year later, I think of Jonah and what he said. He did recover. I wish I could tell him. Some day when you grow up, I hope you find other brothers and sisters. I feel very fortunate I've found mine.