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Where Do I Fit In?

Lucy Miller

President's Luncheon Keynote Speaker

KAREN KEEFE: Dr. Lucy Miller has studied, taught and worked in the field of human behavior, relationships, and psychological and sociological impact of deafness for many years. Having been severely-to-profoundly deaf all her life, Lucy lived in California before moving to Hawaii in 1993 with her late husband, Dick Burkhalter. Dick was, himself, an avid member of ALDA, and served on the Board for several years prior to his death in 1998.

A participant in the many and often dramatic shifts in the psychosocial and philosophical attitudes that have taken place over the past 40 years, Dr. Lucy will be sharing some of these observations with us as she presents the topic, "Where Do I Fit In?" That's a question that I have asked myself for many years. And I am really eager to hear what she has to say. So let's welcome, all the way from Hawaii, Dr. Lucy Miller.
(Applause)

LUCY MILLER: Aloha!

ALL: Aloha!

LUCY MILLER: How many of you have been to Hawaii? Lots of you - good! It's a beautiful place. In Hawaii we like to greet each other with aloha. How many of you know what aloha means? Yes? What does it mean? (Inaudible response) It's certainly used that way, but it has a literal meaning, which is "to share one's breath," and that's about connection. That's also what ALDA is about.

Now, some of you have heard me speak before, and I've always started with a disclaimer that I'm not technically an ALDA, because I'm not a late-deafened adult. Yet

I felt spiritually connected to ALDA. I started coming to ALDAcon because my husband, who was technically an ALDAn, was on the Board in the early '90s, and I went along to support him, and then began giving workshops. I have said, and I really believed it at the time, that I kept going to ALDAcons after he died as a way of keeping his memory alive for me. But now I know there's another, more personal reason why I remain connected to ALDA.

I want to share my process with you, and invite you to join me on my little journey as you continue to navigate your own.

The title of this speech that I'm giving is "Where Do I Fit In?" You'll soon see how we lead into that question. When you lost your hearing, as most of you in this room did, whether gradually or suddenly, you lost much more than the ability to hear. You lost a core identity that defined you. And you started to wonder: "Who am I? I'm not who I used to be."

More than 2,000 years ago Aristotle observed that man is a social and political animal, which means that the way we forge our identities give us an idea of how we fit into the society in which we live. Our identities tell us where we belong. One of our identities is based on gender. Most of us fall into one or the other of two categories. Identities also include your ethnic group, your system of beliefs, and your profession. Ways in which we are like—or unlike—others... Then there's deafness, or not being able to hear like the others, as an identity subgroup.

I'm going to give you a little bit of the history of deaf identities during my lifetime. They were just beginning to get away from using the word "deaf-mute" which now most people, at least in America, know better. When I was growing up there were two classifiers: deaf or hard-of-hearing. You were one or the other, and this was defined by what your audiogram looked like. If you were below a certain point you were deaf. If you were above, you were hard-of-hearing. Already I was in trouble. My audiogram sat squarely in the middle of that dividing line between the two.

Within the deaf world, there were two more troublesome classifiers: oralists vs. manualists.

Now, an oralist could have any degree of oral skills. You could be a good lip-reader, or a lousy lip-reader. You could have understandable speech or not. What defined you as an oralist was that you didn't use sign language. And somehow that was an important way of identifying deaf people during the first 70-some years of twentieth Century.

The manual deaf, because their signing made them more conspicuous, were considered by the oral deaf and the mainstream to be a little less normal, and therefore more inferior. Most hearing parents wanted their children to be oral so that they would be more like them. Oral deaf children, the ones who were pretty good at it, were recruited by the John Tracy Clinic and the Alexander Graham Bell Association to be shining examples of deaf successes. I know; I was one of them. I remember having to

stand up in a room full of people in front of all of these parents sitting there looking shell shocked, still trying to get used to the idea that their children were deaf. My job was to impress them, which meant giving a little speech or reciting a little poem. I still remember some of the poems.

It had to have been pathetic, really. But this is what we did, and it made my parents proud of me. And I, like most of us, wanted to please my parents. I needed to be what they wanted me to be in order to get their approval.

What I ended up being was a deaf person impersonating a hearing person. While my speech was better than most deaf children, that didn't mean I spoke well. My lip-reading skills at best were only as good as my vocabulary, which was nowhere near the level of hearing children my age. While I could understand my speech therapist and my mother most of the time, I had trouble understanding my father who spoke with his mouth almost closed and a pipe stuck in it.

I developed what many of you may have heard referred to as the Mona Lisa smile. That's the expression that you put on your face when you're not understanding a word but you're not about to admit it. I got really good at that. I inherited and lived with my parent's shame at having a defective child. I got to school age and the folks at the speech and hearing clinic advised my mother, "Treat her just like a normal child. Put her in a normal school where everybody goes in your neighborhood."

Off I went to school, and a month later I was flunked out of the first grade and given the label retarded, which I believed to be true. It didn't help my self-esteem a whole lot. Eventually I was sent to a Christian boarding school. We weren't Christians, but I know now it was the only place that would take me, and presumably, my mother's money, as she remained determined to keep me out of special ed programs. And in this boarding school, which was modeled after the stuff you read in Charles Dickens, was not a happy place to be, since I was the only deaf child there, and I was the only Jewish child there, at a time when Jews were equally out of favor.

In addition I was short, chubby, and uncoordinated. I had a perpetual frown on my face trying to lip-read people, and I talked funny. The teachers did not know what to do with me. I was very unpopular. I was the one that was left standing after everybody else had been picked to be on a team. I had few friends and was often the butt of jokes and pranks. So I was really, really miserable. I tried to tell my mother, but she told me, "Stop complaining. Be grateful you are getting an education." Have any of your mothers ever said "Stop complaining"?

So Mother wasn't much help. And here I was in this really awful place where nobody liked me. This school near downtown Los Angeles covered a city block, and it was surrounded by a big, high chain link fence with barbed wire on top. I began to plot my escape. Now, I knew that there was no way I was going to be able to climb over that fence without killing myself. So I studied the gate that would sometimes be open when people came and went. But it was always guarded by a teacher. I kept watching it for

weeks and weeks, and finally one day a truck had pulled up, opened the gate, got whatever he was delivering out of the truck and carried it into the building, and there was nobody guarding the gate. It was open, and I saw my chance. I slipped out. And I started walking. And I walked and I walked.

Now, that was a great plan for getting myself out of there. But I didn't plan what I was going to do next. I got to the first corner, you know, where there was a cross street. Thus I faced my first obstacle; I wasn't allowed to cross the street by myself. However, I figured out a solution. I just waited at the corner until somebody else was going across, and I crossed the street with them. And I kept on doing this at every corner. I walked, and I walked, and I walked. I had no idea where I was or where I was going. It was starting to get cold. I was getting hungry. I had to go to the bathroom. But I was free!

So I kept on walking. It got late, and it began to get dark, and scary. Pretty soon I saw two policemen coming up towards me. And they saw me—and they were definitely coming towards me. And they were talking, but I couldn't understand them. I was really scared because I knew I had done something wrong. I'd run away. I didn't want to go to jail. So I did what any normal kid would do under those circumstances. I turned around and I ran in the opposite direction as fast as I could go. Now, remember, I was little and I was uncoordinated. It took the police officers maybe 10 seconds to catch me.

They kept trying to talk to me. I didn't say a word. Nothing. I'd been told never talk to strangers—nobody ever said “except policemen.” I didn't understand them. I didn't say a word. And this went on for a while. They were nice. I mean, they got down to my level on their knees and tried to get me to say something, probably my name. I said nothing.

They put me in the car, and I thought to myself, “Here I go to jail.” They drove into a drive-in restaurant. Now, how many of you are old enough to remember drive-in restaurants with car hops? A few of you? Oh, goody! So I don't have to describe it too much. But at that time I had never been to one before, and I'm sitting in the backseat of a police car, and a car hop comes and talks to them. I didn't know what they're saying. And she goes away. I'm sitting there in the back seat of a cop car, wondering what's going to happen to me. A few minutes later the carhop comes back with some trays full of food, and one of the cops hands me a tray with a hamburger and a milkshake on it. Now, I had never had a hamburger before, and I'd never had a milkshake before. This is the kind of upbringing I had. I was hungry, and I ate that hamburger so fast, I just wolfed it down, and it was the best thing that I'd ever eaten in my life. Obviously the cops were impressed, and they bought me another one.

And I ate the second one, and slurped the chocolate milkshake with a straw. Every last bit of it. Finally we're finished eating and we drive out of there, down the streets of downtown L.A. And I'm thinking, “Oh, well, I've eaten now. Now they're taking me to jail.” We get to the police station, and they walk me in, through the central part of this old building, and then to a room off to the side. There was a lady pacing (indicating) in the middle of the room, and then she turned around and she saw me, and she cried and she threw her arms around me. To my surprise, it was my Aunt Jeanette. I had no idea

how she knew I was here. And not only that, but she was actually glad to see me. She wasn't even mad at me.

The best part of this story is I never had to go back to that school. Instead I was enrolled in a day program for deaf and hard-of-hearing children. My parents gave in when they realized their experiment wasn't working. That it was an oral school was important to my mother. No signing was officially allowed. However, what my mother didn't know was that the minute the teacher turned her back, the kids were signing to each other. And I learned sign language in that school. And after that I led two lives, the secret world of signing with my deaf friends whom I wasn't allowed to bring home to the house, and the world of pretending to be hearing, to fit in with my parents' world.

I won't go into all of the details of those years—but I will mention that in my senior year, Dr. Elstad, who was then the President of Gallaudet University, which is sponsoring this lunch today, was on a recruiting trip in California. Somebody told him about me. He met me, talked to me, and he urged me to go to Gallaudet, and invited me to at least visit it.

So, despite my parents' trepidations I was allowed to visit Gallaudet while I was still a high school senior and found it fascinating. It was also strange to see so many people signing. And they signed so fast that I didn't understand it. I only knew a home-grown, kids-behind-the-barn-kind of sign. (The sign language they were using at Gallaudet wasn't called ASL until the 70's). But it did appeal to me, and I did fill out the application. And then every night at dinner my parents had serious conversations that I would be limiting myself by going to Gallaudet. I would become one of "those" people that couldn't fit into the real world, which was not how they raised me, and not what they wanted for me. Besides, Gallaudet was in a dangerous neighborhood, and they were afraid.

I gave in to their objections and did not go to Gallaudet. My life would have been probably quite different if I had; I will never know. Instead I went to UCLA, without any support services. I was scared to let anyone know I couldn't hear because I was afraid they would kick me out if they found out. Occasionally I was able to make a friend with somebody sitting next to me in class and copy their notes. Sometimes I made enemies doing that. My grades reflected a varying ability to understand the class or fake it.

The next ten years of my life I managed to fail magnificently at everything I tried. I failed academically. I had a failed marriage. And every job that I could get during those years—I would get fired when they found out that I was deaf and that I had lied on my application. But I knew that if I told them up front they wouldn't hire me in the first place.

So this was a time of not very good self-esteem, although I eventually managed to complete my BA degree from the University of California, and eventually got hired to be a VR counselor, the first deaf VR counselor in the state of California. That was 1965. The Civil Rights movement was at its peak, and with it came other movements like feminism, and Deaf power, both important turning points in my life. Deaf people began to take pride in their culture. The National Theater of the Deaf started about that time.

The Leadership Training Program for the deaf was established at Cal State University Northridge for training graduate students who were, many of them, deaf. So deaf people could actually hold leadership positions schools and educational programs and rehabilitation programs.

I was a member of the Leadership Training Program Class of 1971. We had interpreters, as this was the dawn of the age of interpreting, which meant my deafness was no longer a handicap. That was where I began, for the first time, to claim my identity as a deaf person. Success was possible as a deaf person, and I no longer had to fake being a hearing person. That is why I am a good fit for ALDA. I was, at long last, finding out who I was and where I fit in.

I'd like to backtrack a little bit. It wasn't until junior high that I started to wear a hearing aid. People may ask, "Well, why didn't you wear one before that?" My mother didn't buy me one earlier because, like sign language, a hearing aid would make my deafness visible, and in those days there were only the big body aids with the cords dangling down, and it would be like wearing a neon sign that flashed "stigma," which was not what she wanted.

I don't think that it ever occurred to her that I might hear something with my hearing aid and that it might make my speech better. She only capitulated because the deaf ed teacher at the new school, the oral program, insisted. Unfortunately, once I started wearing the hearing aid, I inherited Mother's sense of shame. So we worked at concealing it—I had long, fuzzy hair and I always wore high collars buttoned up to here, so not too much dangling cord showed, and loose-fitting clothes so that you wouldn't see the bulk. And, oh, gosh, if my hearing aid emitted any feedback noise or if I had to change a battery it was just dying time. It was that "I'm being found out!" feeling.

Deaf people were second-class citizens, and it didn't matter if we were pretending to be hearing or if we were using sign language. We accepted being second-class citizens. Not insurable, couldn't legally adopt children, limited job opportunities, until the movements of the seventies and eighties led to two important things; improvements in technology and the passage of the ADA, not to mention the famous Deaf President Now movement. We realized that we had a right to equal access, nothing more, nothing less. And that it could be done.

Sometimes we still have to remind the world and fight to keep those rights we had won, but it had never occurred to most of us before then that we could. Now that we know we have these rights as people who are deaf, deafened or hard-of-hearing, it doesn't matter how we're defined. We're starting to see some subtle shifts that reflect this. One is the movement away from deafness as pathology, to deafness as just another way to do things with rights to interpreters, as well as rights to access through technology. You know, technology has just been amazing. When I was growing up, there was no such thing as captions on TV. No such thing as even TTYs. All of that came about later.

Be sure to walk through the exhibits next door because to the old-timers it's really mind blowing to see all of the things that are happening, and that's why many of your workshops are about technology. As fast as we develop technology, and it becomes available, we have more and more choices of what is going to work best for each one of us.

Predictably also as we get this and as the world has been more about cultural diversity, we splinter into sub groups. Backlash is inevitable—for every action there is a reaction, basic law of physics, basic law of human behavior. In the world of the deaf, there are many organizations representing pieces. In the early years there were two organizations: the National Association of the Deaf, the NAD, is the oldest and longest-running one primarily for what used to be called the manual deaf. Their primary function in the early years was as a social network of local clubhouses where deaf people could find each other back when telephone communication was inaccessible to the deaf. They have evolved to providing a political voice for deaf culture and ASL.

The second organization, serving what used to be called the Oral Deaf, is the Alexander Graham Bell Association of the Deaf. This organization focuses on advocacy of speech and language development and providing resources for parents and teachers of deaf children. In the late sixties the forerunner of TDI was created along with the invention of the TTY, focusing on telecommunications devices and other technology, and is a wonderful advocacy organization for relay and captioning services. The Hearing Loss Association of America, which used to be SHHH, is primarily for hard-of-hearing people who rely on amplification technology and assistive devices. And ALDA, where we are, the Association of Late-Deafened Adults. There are more, but these are the ones who are represented here.

It's no wonder that when people become deaf, they look at all of these alphabet soups and say, "Why are there so many? Where do I fit in?" You can think about these questions tomorrow night when you attend the banquet. The program features a panel, *Under the Arch*, with representatives from each of the main organizations I've just mentioned that serve the deaf, and there you will get some answers. And like all good answers, more questions.

Baby Boomers are now reaching an age where unprecedented numbers of them are losing their hearing. Technology continues to create more and more options. Sign language has lost most of its stigma and is no longer just for deaf people. It's become popular as an alternative approach to teaching young babies as well as children with other disabilities. As deafness itself loses its stigma, the fight for survival becomes less intense. Ultimately deafness will just become another attribute, such as height, body type, and left-handedness.

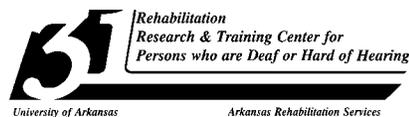
My dream is that as we become less politicized and there is room for us all, maybe we'll be able to take our communication access needs for granted, just like left-handed people who sit on the left side of a table so that there won't be too many elbows in the way. Nobody thinks anything of it other than a slight inconvenience. You don't see

political movements very much about being left-handed. I really dream of a world where we have options, and among those options we'll be able to choose to use sign language or not; another option can be to get a cochlear implant or not. In my dream world we will all be equally valuable, and we can, each of us, determine the best way possible to meet our needs as they arise, in this best of all possible worlds.

Thank you very much.
(Applause)

Biographical

Dr. Lucy Miller is a marriage and family therapist who has studied and taught human behavior, relationships, and the psychological and sociological impact of deafness for 40 years. Having been severely-to-profoundly deaf all her life, she lived in California until she moved to Hawaii in 1993 with her late husband, Dick Burkhalter, an ALDAn. Taught in oral schools, Dr. Lucy learned to sign later, and used interpreting services for the first time when she was studying for her Master's Degree in Special Education Administration at CSUN. Her Ph.D. dissertation (in Educational Psychology) earned her a Military Order of the Purple Heart for Outstanding Research in Services to the Handicapped as well as a listing in Who's Who in American Women. Her professional careers have included Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor for the Deaf, Student Services Counselor and Advisor, Program Coordinator for Deaf Students, and Educator before opening a private practice in marriage and family therapy in 1980, where she developed specialties in hypnotherapy and psychodrama and adapted them to use with deaf clients. She has actively served on the Disabilities and Communication Access Board of Hawaii under three administrations, including several terms as Communication Access Committee Chair, two terms as Chair of the full board, and currently chairs DCAB's Planning and ADA Coordination Committee.



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