

THE GIFT OF A DIFFERENT ABILITY

Karen Putz

Karen Putz: Each of us has a gift within us. The purpose of this workshop is for you to explore your own gifts when you leave this workshop. Let's start with my own story. It began 47 years ago.

I was born with normal hearing. We know this for a fact because my entire family, for five generations back, all were born with normal hearing. I remember way back, when I was three, coming in to bed and listening to my father tell stories every night. But around the time I started kindergarten the stories stopped because I couldn't hear the stories anymore.

That's my first memory of losing my hearing. But it wasn't identified until I was seven when I became very, very sick. Soon after, I had my first hearing test. At that point I was hard of hearing. I didn't get my first hearing aid until I was nine. By that time I already discovered the wonderful skill of lip reading. I had picked up that skill and when I got my first hearing aid, I hated it. They only gave me one because there was not enough residual hearing in the other ear to benefit from an aid. Even though I hated the one they gave me, I was forced to wear it in school. Every day when I got home from school, the hearing aid went on the shelf at home. I didn't feel I needed it and I didn't want to use it. I never used it during the summer.

One of the memories I want to share from my growing up concerns riding the school bus. I was teased. I can remember the kids looking at me, mocking me and teasing me. I had no clue what they were saying. I'm sure a lot of you can connect to this. Even though I grew up hard-of-hearing, I only heard a bit. When you look at written English and remove the vowels from all the words, you usually can figure out what the sentence says. Same thing when you hear English. If you hear the consonants, you can figure out what is being said. When it's the other way around and when you only hear the vowels or you only see the vowels in a sentence, then nothing makes sense.

That's how I grew up. Even though I grew up physically hard-of-hearing, I wasn't functioning very much like a hard-of-hearing person. I was functioning more like a deaf person. I couldn't use the phone. I could rely somewhat on my single hearing aid. I could still communicate; I could hear voices without needing the hearing aid. I could talk with people; I just couldn't understand them very well.

There are five generations in my family who are deaf or hard of hearing. Five of us in my family including my mom all became deaf or hard of hearing. My mom was hearing until she was 16 when she began to lose her hearing. Then she met my father, got married and they had four kids. My mom could still use the phone. She got by in life pretty much okay. One day in the middle of a party, she became deaf. Completely deaf, in the middle of a sentence! She still remembers it very well. She was talking at a

BBQ when all of a sudden she realized there was no more sound to match the words. She had become deaf just like that.

At that time, I had four siblings. When my sister was three, My sister, she fell and hit her head on the baseboard and became deaf. She was raised her orally. My brother, at 36, was at work one day when the roof fell in on him. He woke up two days later in the hospital with half of his hearing gone. He had grown up thoroughly hearing. My other sister began losing her hearing in one year at the same age as my mom and was losing it more and more and more until she was 46. Then, she slipped on a rug and fell and became deaf.

Is there a pattern here? My oldest brother lost his hearing from barefoot water skiing. I was driving. I took him around a turn too fast and he fell and lost his hearing. Talk about guilt! So that's my family. Later, we discovered there was a gene related to hearing loss in our family. We were the first United States family identified with that particular gene. We are one of only three families in the world with that gene. So it's truly rare.

Backing up, I'm sure a lot of you will really relate to this. This describes my life as a hard-of-hearing teenager. Functioning almost deaf at that point, but still hearing a little bit without the hated hearing aid. I look back on my teen years and how I hated it. I was miserable. Trying to fit in socially was a nightmare. I knew no one who was successful as a deaf or hard-of-hearing person, except for those in history. I knew the Helen Keller stories. Every now and then on the news I would find someone. There were so few people in my life to serve as role models.

If I don't know what is possible out there, there is nothing to measure up to, nothing to compare with. So I start to get this vision, to start thinking in limits. I tell myself I can't do that because I can't hear. I did a lot of that kind of thinking. It wasn't healthy. And I did social bluffing, big time. I can remember so many conversations, sitting around and nodding. Giving that funny laugh and the smile that is timed at the right time. Everyone is looking at me and I bluff. Who wins? No one. No one wins at that bluffing game.

So my whole experience growing up was simply uncomfortable. I didn't like myself. I didn't like the hearing aid, I hid it every chance I could get. I tried to do what I called "flying under the radar." Don't call any attention to yourself. You know, just blend in. Blend in as much as you can. Then I discovered something. I discovered barefooting. Well, that became my passion, my key to the world. All of a sudden I found a gift: water skiing without a ski which I just happened to have a natural talent for. I was the only girl on the lake who could do it. So naturally I got some attention.

By the way, not only was I hard-of-hearing, but once I took my glasses off, I was blind. One day the two coolest guys on the lake came over and asked, "Hey, do you want to come barefooting with us?" Oh, sure. I was on cloud nine. These two cool guys on the lake asked me to go barefooting with them! It was great. We barefooted until we let go of the ropes. Then, I tried talking with them. Remember, I was not only deaf but blind,

too. I couldn't lip-read them. It was a very awkward moment. Later I found out the guys told their mom I they didn't know I was that deaf. That was before I became totally deaf.

The day that I actually became totally deaf was a beautiful summer day. I was barefooting and tripped on the wave. I fell and tumbled into the water, which I had done a million times before. Never gave it a thought. When I climbed into the boat, I couldn't hear. I couldn't hear those voices. I thought okay it's probably water in my ear. I didn't think twice about it. Well, one week went by, then two weeks and I couldn't even with the hearing aid on. I was wearing the hearing aid 24/7 at that point. I thought it's not really working. Oh, what's going on here? You know denial is not just a river in Egypt, right? It's a nice protective mechanism for people who don't want to face real life. I was on that river a long time.

The day I was supposed to leave for college, Northern Illinois University, I was packed and ready to go when it first hit me. I was like wait a minute. I'm going away from home. I can't hear anymore. What am I going to do? And I started to cry. My mom had known some of what I was going through, but I had held many of my feelings in.

So then I told my mom what I was feeling, and my mom starts crying too. My sister came in and she started crying. My mom told me, "You don't have to go away to college, you can stay home." To me staying home meant never being able to leave the house. No thanks. I decided it would be easier to go away to college. So we got in the car and off we went.

We arrived at the dorm and I discovered that they had put me in the Deaf and hard of hearing dorm. Wait a minute. I'm not like them. I want the normal dorm. My mom said -- moms are really wise,-- "Wait a minute. This is a new experience. Give it a try. Maybe you'll meet someone new. Maybe you'll make some friends." I am mumbling, "I want to be with the normal people."

You know, "Normal" is just a setting on the dryer, right? I didn't know that at that time. As was bound to happen, moving into that dorm was the first step toward a change in my life. It was just amazing. This dorm had two floors of students who used ASL. I was not one of them. It was like being in Japan without knowing the language. I had never even seen ASL up close before. And now I'm expected to speak it, sign it. It was not an easy transition at first. But I thought okay I'm stuck here. I'm in a dorm. There is no car, there is no way out. What am I going to do? I'm going to learn it, right?

It wasn't that easy. I found it hard to look at people. I found it hard to accept this whole language thing. It was so foreign to me. And it was a constant reminder of the change. All of a sudden I could no longer hear anything without the hearing aid. Remember how much I hated the hearing aid? Now I was forced to use it 24/7 just to get by. But I discovered the secret: three beers. By the time I hit the third beer, I was fluent in ASL. If I couldn't read it and if I missed it, by the fourth beer, I didn't care. Actually, I hated beer at that time. It is amazing what you do to cope.

At night, all I did was cry. Night after night after night, I would lie there in the darkness and I would cry. During the day I struggled. If in some classes the professors walked around the room, the college gave me a totally useless FM system that did nothing for me. I sat there with a cute loop around me, trying to lip read the teacher walking across the stage. At home, I studied my books. And cried at night. It got so bad, my roommate moved out. She was hearing and she got tired of hearing me cry all night.

After six months of this, a slow transition began. I started finding some friends. People were teaching me sign very slowly. I started to find out that "oh, wow, this is not so bad." Little things here and there that surprised me. One day I woke up and I had an epiphany. I was lying in bed and I thought to myself that I had met some really happy people in this dorm. They couldn't hear anything. They couldn't speak a word but they smiled every day. I want some of that, I thought. I'm tired of being sad. I'm tired of crying. That morning I realized I could go either way. I could continue to be miserable, continue to suffer, continue to struggle in my classes and struggle in life. Or I could make some changes and accept myself. I could recognize that I'm on a new road and I could become the best possible deaf person I can be.

Now, I would say the choice was both easy and hard. It was easy to make the choice but it was much harder to live it. That living part took a long time to adjust to. But that morning, what happened, I'll give you a few minutes to read this.

Think of a paradigm shift as a change from one way of thinking to another. It's a revolution, a transformation, a sort of metamorphosis. It just does not happen, but rather, it is driven by agents of change.

-- Thomas Kuhn

I realized that that made an entire difference. What I did differently that day was to reveal I wore a hearing aid. Remember, I used the hearing aid, but never had I ever gone out in public showing my hearing aid. It was always hidden under my hair or in my pocket. That day, I wore my hair in a ponytail with my hearing aid on. I got on the bus going to my class. I remember to this day sitting there on the bus, thinking that everybody was looking at me. They're staring at my hearing aid. They're probably staring at my weird hair. But that new feeling was there. It was very strong. It was very foreign to me. I had to get used to this whole new journey. At first, it was not comfortable at all.

I found that the more and more I faced it, the more and more I went out. I put the hearing aid on and I started to forget. Occasionally people might look at me. My attitude started to shift. My comfort level started to shift. My views started to shift. Everything shifted. It was a paradigm shift. I had made a decision that this was okay. This was who I am.

"What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the master calls a butterfly." I had not yet mastered that new journey, and even today I have not mastered it. There are days

when I still struggle. But during the journey I became more and more the master of my journey. As you become stronger, you become more sure of who you are.

The caterpillar thinks it's the end of the world. But wait a minute, this butterfly is ready to come out and when it emerges, there is a whole new world out there. That's the change we go through with this experience of accepting becoming deaf.

Bob Woodruff is an ABC reporter who was involved in a roadside bombing in Iraq and got TBI, traumatic brain injury. He and his wife have four children, one of whom is deaf. He has written an amazing book, *Perfectly Imperfect*. I highly recommend it. From his book,

“Your daughter is deaf”, the doctor said. And it seemed to echo across the crowded clinic. It seemed so final and frightening. We endured months and months of worry, when eight month old Nora didn't hear the little silver bell during a routine checkup, the doctor said “deaf.” Deaf was the word he used. And he said it in such a matter of fact medical manner, like it was just another day on the job and not my own baby daughter's life at hand. And my first thought when he uttered those words were "Who would ever ask a little deaf girl to the prom?" (p.113).

Then along the way, she had her own paradigm shift. The daughter grew up, and she suddenly discovered all these neat things she could go do. She got comfortable with her hearing aids. The shift I experienced, the family experiences as well. Again from Woodruff.

I hadn't factored in the resilience of the human spirit. The very real healing powers of time passing, the grace and perspective found in moments of repose and the ability of the soul to regenerate. In those long ago days, I saw my daughter with a disability, and now I just see a beautiful engaging person with a different ability; one that has been blessed with extra gifts (p. 127).

How beautiful is that, the gift of a different ability? When we look at it that way, we see the ability, not the disability. We start seeing ourselves as whole, complete people, instead of People with Disabilities.

Have you ever thought that what we go through might be someone else's gift? One day when I was talking with the former executive director of Hands and Voices, she said, “One of the lessons I learned by being the mom of a deaf son is that maybe my son is someone else's gift.” Maybe her deaf son gave people the gift of patience, compassion and empathy. Other people are learning lessons from our journey as well. That's something to think about.

I want to share something personal. In the process of getting back on the water in barefoot water skiing again, I met the World Champion of water skiing, Keith St. Onge. We started writing a book together. At the very beginning of writing this book, I had

thoughts going back to my teenage years, am I good enough? Why would he want to write a book with a deaf person? Why does he want to give up his time and his patience to deal with the video phone and interpreters? I started thinking in limits. Before this program even began, I started putting limits on the project. It came from my own lapse of values. When you start thinking in terms of those limits, you start missing the gifts that we give. That was a lesson for me.

Later, when Keith and I had almost finished the book, two things happened. Number one, working on the phone with me, Keith learned how to pace himself when he was speaking. In the past, he always spoke very fast or he'd slur his words together. But he got something from working with me. One day, he said, "Wow, Karen, thank you! I really have changed the way I speak." He wants to become a motivational speaker. That was a gift.

The second gift came because he had chosen me to write this book instead of his cousin. Later, when his cousin was editing the book, Keith realized he would have written a very different book with his cousin. We didn't discover that until we'd almost completed the book. Then Keith said, "It was a gift that you came into my life because we wrote the most amazing book." Here I'd been thinking that this guy had to put up with interpreters and video phones and all of that--a little bit of the "poor me" thing again. Look at the gift that resulted in that process.

Team Hoyt story offers a gift. Tim Rick Hoyt can't walk or run; he can't speak, either. One day when he was a teenager, there was a 5 K race in town he wanted to be part of. His father questioned, "How are we going to do this?" His father had never run a race either. They came in second to last but the smile on his son's face was priceless. This father and son team have run over one thousand races, triathlons. The father swam with his son on his back, biked with his son in front of him and pushed the wheelchair through one thousand races.

However, the story isn't about them. The story really is about the one who is running next to them, the one who wants to give up. Then, he looks at Rick Hoyt and his father and what happens? The tired runner doesn't give up. The lesson is the gift is for the other guy. Rick and his father have their own journey, their own struggles, their own triumphs, but the gift is for the people around them who are running, ready to give up. All a runner has to do they is look at Team Hoyt and the runner keep going.

That's why I want to challenge you to think you that never know who you are going to inspire. Here is W. Mitchell's amazing story.

First, over 65 percent of his body was burned in a motorcycle accident. Then he was in an airplane crash and became paralyzed. Today he is a very well known motivational speaker. He travels all around the world to speak. He runs a \$65 million business. And he still pilots airplanes. The message he shares is about how we think negatives about ourselves. How many times have you said to yourself, I can't because I'm deaf or it

would be too hard. Then maybe we give up. We don't think imaginatively because right away we set those limits: it's impossible; I'm deaf; I can't.

Each one of us is born with gifts. We all have something inside of us that we can share, that we can contribute, that we can develop, that we can cultivate. If we focus on that, we focus on the 9,000 things we still *can* do, not the 1,000 things we can't, just because we became deaf. So the message is ditch those limits and start focusing on your abilities. What can we do? How can we grow? How can we contribute?

Imagine you just learned something here today. Does that change something within you? I was 19 when I became deaf and I'm 47 now. Although I think I can call myself experienced on the journey at this point, I'm still learning. When I look back and remember those days of being so miserable, it was the worst possible thing that could have happened in my life. There was no way anyone could convince me to see any blessing in it. I was too deep into it, too much into the pity poor me stage. But over the years, things shifted. I met my husband. I have three deaf kids. I've done a lot of different things. I've had different jobs. I'm back on the water and I have faced the thing that scared me the most.

I'll tell you about another turning point. Remember when I became deaf, I had fallen in the water. So naturally I was afraid to barefoot again. It required some speed. It required experiencing it again. I didn't think I could do it. One night I was talking with a 62-year old woman, a fellow bare-footer who asked me, "Why don't you try it again?" No. I don't think so; I'm not ready for that. She told me that there's only one way to get ready. To do anything that is hard, you have to go through it. If we continue to avoid our experiences, we will never grow from them. We will never be powerful enough until we go through the very thing that scares us the most.

I went through it. I accomplished it. All of a sudden the fear had diminished. The only way to face fear is through it. Some of you may be holding back on something that scared the heck out of you. Go through it. Push yourself. Get out of your comfort zone. Today, I look back and I recognize and I understand that this is a blessing. I'm standing here, I've got all of these new friends in the room, wow, what a blessing!

Our experiences will take us on a journey that we can never imagine. We have to be open enough to welcome the journey. We have to see what we gain. Not what we miss but what we gain. When you make that shift, when you look at it, the blessings become so apparent. Today I can tell you in all honesty that that making that shift was the best thing that ever happened to me.

This quote sums up my experience.

I certainly don't regret my experiences because without them, I couldn't imagine who or where I would be today. Life is an amazing gift to those who have overcome great obstacles-- and attitude is everything. --Sasha Azevedo

Each one of you has the ability to create whatever life you want. When you leave this room today, whatever changes you want to make, you have to make the decision to do it.

If you've been thinking in limits, today when you walk out of here, I want you to remove some of those limits. Try something new; do something that is scary. Go out there and have a new experience. You may fail, you may fail a thousand times, but you may succeed.

"The purpose of life is to discover your gift. And the meaning of life is to give it away." You have been given a gift on this journey. You may not see it as a gift right now. It may be really hard where you are on the journey. It may be years later and you're still struggling. But within each one of you, you have a gift. You have skills. You have talent. You have ability. There is only one "You" out there. So it's your job to give that gift away.

Now, let me ask you a question. What was your scariest moment on your whole journey of becoming deaf?

Audience Member: I had a very slow, progressive hearing loss. I went from hearing to deaf over a period of 34 years. During the 24 years that I used hearing aids, my greatest fear was that I would become deaf. And I overcame my greatest fear the day I took my hearing aids off and put them into my pocket.

Karen Putz: How did you get up to that point?

Audience Member: I had been in and out of audiologists offices for about four or five years, trying to find the technology that would keep up with the hearing loss. Nothing kept up with the progressive loss. I simply reached a point where I told the audiologist to fix these damn things because they don't do anything for me. The audiologist tested my hearing aids and tested my ears where she got absolutely no response from me. When the audiologist said, "I'm sorry, there is nothing wrong with your hearing aids, you're deaf," the whole weight of the world lifted off my shoulders. Twenty-four years of fear were just gone. I had crossed the line. I thanked my audiologist. When I walked out the door I said my favorite prayer, "Okay, God, what now?" At that point I made the decision to learn how to live as a deaf person and I went on from there.

Audience Member: I had a very slow loss from the time I was 12. I thought I just didn't hear very well. I couldn't understand a word but with a hearing aid, I could hear all the sounds. I could hear my voice. I could hear people's voices. I didn't know I wasn't understanding the words so I was always so confused. I grew up thinking I was stupid. Fortunately, I was able to work in my family's business. Then I married, had three kids and I got divorced. Suddenly, I was in my late 40s, had to go out in business and I had no education. That's when I became terrified. How was I going to earn a living for the rest of my life? I was terrified. I went to a therapist who was the one that told me I was deaf, not just hard of hearing. I was very relieved. It took three years of therapy before I

could get myself into college. There was no way I was going to be able to earn a living without going to college. I started college when I was 53 years old.

I was lucky, I could afford it because I had some money saved. I was able to get wonderful help from the Illinois Department of Rehabilitation. Eventually, I got a Master's degree in social work. I started working in a school with deaf and hard of hearing children when I was 62 when all of my friends were retiring. I am still doing it and I love it..

Audience Member: I became late deafened at the age of 42, after a slow progression. I went into isolation. I became afraid to interact with the hearing world. I was afraid to go to the store because the cashiers would talk and I never understood. I was always having to apologize for myself, "I'm sorry. I can't hear you." I was terrified to come out of isolation but when I did, it was like the caterpillar and the butterfly. It was an emergence.

Right now, I need to go back to work. I've been a dental hygienist for 30 years. Since I got my hearing aids, my hearing has improved dramatically. I keep saying, yeah, I'm going back to work. But I'm terrified of going back to work. I don't know how to get through this. I don't know.

Karen Putz: I'll tell you something, the only way you're going to know is to do it. Say you go back and you discover okay you really don't want to do it. You will know for sure whether it's not so bad. You may find it's not so hard, that you can do it. Or you'll discover you really don't like doing that job. You just may decide to do something else. The only way you're going to have those answers is by getting out there and facing it. Go through it.

Fear is always fear of the unknown. We don't know what's going to happen. We don't know how we're going to feel. When we get out there and do the very things that we're afraid of, we either discover that it's more fearful than we imagined or that it's not that bad because we get through it. We discover stuff for ourselves when we actually do what we fear. it.

Audience Member: I have to admit I have some fears, too. What I really want is to get a degree in music. I have a hearing loss. Generally, one requirement for music majors is two years of ear training. I also run a group for musicians who have hearing loss and quite a few people like me, who grew up with hearing loss, but are thinking about studying for a music degree. Some are telling me that the ear training courses are the hardest thing in the world because you're being asked to identify notes being played, chords being played, one note being played from another note. So I don't know how I'm going to get through those exercises. To me, that is a major obstacle. If anybody has suggestion, I'm all ears. No pun intended.

Karen Putz: First of all, I have a story to share with you. A couple months ago I met Mark Levie who he loved music. He was hard-of-hearing, almost deaf. We went to a

DORS counselor and said he wanted to major in music. The counselor said, "I don't know if you know this, you're deaf. No, I won't support it." Mark wanted it so badly. He got three jobs, put himself through school, graduated from Columbia College and he works right now in the music industry. All these people said he couldn't, but somebody has to blaze the way. Somebody has to be the first.

So maybe you can't do those things that that program requires, go talk to the director and come up with an alternative so you can get the degree. Go to a different college that will give you what you need. If you come to one closed door, kick open a window.

If you want something badly enough, you need to think outside the box. It's a great first step for you to say, "This is what I want to do but I'm scared to share it." Now go out there and you get a team around you to help you come up with the solution that gets you where you want to go. You're always going to come across people who will tell you, "No, I don't think that's a very good thing."

I've got another story for you about a deaf veterinarian. The Dean of a college told him, "No, this is not the right program for you." So many people told him, "This is too hard. This is not the appropriate profession for you. How will you hear the heartbeat of a dog?" They put up roadblocks left and right. Nevertheless, my friend has been a veterinarian for the last 12 years, running his own clinic.

Sometimes we have to be the first one to break those barriers.

I think we're done. We need to wrap up, but I want to finish up with one last story. In college I wanted to be a nurse. I had just become deaf so I listened to the counselor who said it was just too difficult a profession for me to be a nurse. How could I communicate with the doctors and all? I listened to that counselor and didn't become a nurse. However, I have a friend who is deaf working in the emergency room in a Chicago hospital. I could have been a nurse.

Thank you everyone, for coming here today. I hope when you leave here, you give your gift to the world.

Karen Griffard Putz was born with normal hearing and began to lose her hearing in elementary school. She received her first hearing aid at the age of 9 and hated it. In fact, she disliked everything about being hard of hearing. Since then, Karen has gone on to become a mentor, a champion bare-foot water-skier, and a gifted speaker. Her inspirational story was showcased in More Magazine, November, 2011. <http://www.more.com/reinvent-yourself-after-misfortune> >