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FROM ADVERSITY TO PEAK EXPERIENCE

Dr. Lucy Miller

In previous workshops I have talked about adversity – that is when bad things happen to you. When we overcome adversity we win. I started thinking about this and realized that is what the general theme of most novels deal with. But the books that really stay with us, the ones that we give four stars to are about more than that. What they are really about is the triumph of the spirit. So rather than talking today only about bouncing back from adversity, we are going to talk more about bouncing forward.

As I started to think more about this, I realized that to live a life without adversity is to not live life to its fullest and richest. And I began to wonder how we transform adversity—those things that we perceive as tragedy—to a peak experience?

I polled about six deaf people on how they would sign the term "peak experience." And I got eight different answers. So I decided to form my own sign, which I will explain as I show it to you. We start with our hands by our abdomen, like this, raising them up past the heart as in "inspire," then let our hands form the sign for "clear," and follow this with the sign for "understanding." This conveys what I mean by peak experience. Peak experience goes through the soul and the heart and then expands with the understanding and clarity in the way you see the world.

The term "peak experience" was first coined by a psychologist named Abraham Maslow in the mid 1950s. He described peak experiences as self-validating moments which had their own intrinsic value, accompanied by a loss of negative emotions, such as fear, anxiety and self-doubt. Absolute peak experiences have no time. They have no space. They are characterized by unity in which you and your world are one

Peak experiences are inspirational—they are life enhancing and growth fostering and have lasting value. But there are different types of peak experiences—one is a relative peak experience which we may experience many times. The other kind we usually have only very rarely and are lucky if we have one in our lifetimes.

To start today I would like you to just think about some peak experiences that you may have had in your life.

(a moment of silence)

Audience Member: When I first started losing my hearing, I became severely depressed and anxious. I really was not even functional, and spent almost all my time lying in bed. One day I was in a most severe state of anxiety when suddenly a feeling of peace came to me, it was as sudden and instantaneous as a light switch being flipped on, and it just enfolded me into its arms. I lost all sense of existing in time. The peace that I felt was as real as a chair or a table and I felt as if I could reach out and touch it. And it was from that point I realized that I was going to be OK and that I would learn to live again. And I think that this was the first step in my adjustment to being deaf. It is as clear to me today as it was when it happened. Because of this I would never ever consider suicide. It became clear to me that present reality is only part of life. There are mysteries that we don't understand under any circumstances. It made me realize how valuable life is, and I came to the conclusion that there are some things out there that we don't understand.

Dr Miller: Thank you for sharing that. That expresses it so well.

Second Audience Member: I was going through a divorce and it was a huge loss in my life. So I went and sat on top of a ridge looking out over beautiful scenery and my mind got very quiet and my heart just opened. And it was in this moment of clarity when I was able to realize that this was not the end of my life. This is the beginning of a new life. It was a moment of transition, and I felt tremendous love and connectedness with my surroundings and the people in my life. And it wasn't that I didn't have low moments after that, because divorce is a big transition, but the experience did shift in my perception in a way that made all the difference in my ability to heal.

Third Audience Member: When I started dealing with my hearing loss, I came to the realization that while I couldn't change the situation, I could take the word disability and move the dis. And then on the end I could exchange the Y for "ies," turning it into the word abilities. So, I examined the abilities and added the prefix "poss" followed by an "i" to represent me and was able to see that there were possibilities. I knew then that then that if I focused on possibilities of what I could do, I would have a fulfilling life.

Dr Miller: Possibility is one of my favorite words.

Fourth Audience Member: When I started losing my hearing, I also went through depression and massive anxiety. What I found is that process forced other problems that I had been ignoring in my life to the front burner also. And that made it very difficult for me. But in retrospect, I see this as a good thing because it forced me to deal with everything, not just my hearing loss, but everything. When I realized that I began to see it as a huge possibility to start over.

Dr Miller: The one thing all of you talked about in common was losing your hearing. And of course you can have peak experiences without losing your hearing. It can be something else. But you must have one thing. What must you have in order to have a peak experience? You cannot have a peak experience without struggle and adversity.

Adversity means some kind of pain. It means a loss. It means something is very threatening to you—to your life, your body and functioning, or your feelings or your soul. It could be as simple as spraining your ankle, or getting caught in the rain. The natural inclination for the average person is to avoid adversity. We don't want to deal with it. We want to stay away from it. Nobody lines up eagerly to obtain adversity.

But even though we would prefer to avoid it, the experience catches up with us sooner or later. So we begin to conquer it, look it in the eye and realize we will survive and learn to live with the adversity. We begin to tolerate our pain. I am sure we've all experienced that.

But it is the next step that marks the transition to a positive one. We learn to accept and then release the pain, and with the releasing comes the letting go of the negative emotions of fear and anger, and as a result we begin to embrace life again. It is when we begin to do that, to let go and embrace, that peak experiences may appear, which means we have transcended the negativity that we were facing to begin with.

Now having done this does not mean that we will never face adversity again, but it does mean that we can recognize the steps we can take to begin the process of transcendence. We can actually say that each loss; each adversity is an opportunity and represents new possibilities in life.

I would like everyone to stand up. (pause) Now look around the room and see where you are in relation to the walls in the room, as well as the other people here. And I would like you to just slowly walk around a little bit and find another spot to stand in. Just find another spot, try it out and when it feels comfortable, just stay there.

Okay, most of you are now in a different spot. Now I want you to look around you again, and see where you are in relation to where you were, in relation to the room itself, as well as to the other people here. Think about how the spot you're in makes you feel and how comfortable you are there. Can some of you tell me how you feel about where you're standing and how you ended up being there?

First Audience Member: Where I am now, I have a wider perspective, and that is something I like to have. I am part of the group but can still see the full group also.

Dr Miller: could this be a statement about your life?

First Audience Member: Yes.

Dr Miller: OK, good. Anyone else?

Second Audience Member: A few years ago I would have hidden in the back of the room. And now I want to be up front and part of everything, not just an observer to what's going on. Among people instead of hiding behind them.

Third Audience Member: (hiding behind a screen) I am here because I was curious what was behind here. I also wanted to see if I would like being by myself. And it was hard because I had to keep one part of my mind on not cutting off my access to the interpreter and the other half on the activity. Fear of the loss of access was very real for me.

Fourth Audience Member: (speaking from a back corner of the room) Being back here gives me security because it gives me a wide perspective and I can see everything and everybody in the room. So often when I am with people they sneak up on me when I am not looking because I cannot hear them. So I feel very comfortable with a wall behind me and everything in front of me so I know what's going on. I don't feel at all as if I am hiding.

Fifth Audience Member: When I started walking, I had no idea where I would end up. What came to me was that I like to see the big picture. So being further back and able to see more of the room was important. But I also notice that I am right in front of the doorway. And what occurred to me was that I really like to explore the unknown, and I think the door represents that to me.

Sixth Audience Member: I am in the middle and I like that because when I go to hearing meetings, most of the time I am forced to sit in the front to watch the interpreter. And now here I feel like I have the freedom to be wherever I want. I like being in the middle where I have my own space but I can still see what is going on.

Dr Miller: What I would like everyone to try now is to move a place that's not as comfortable. Move to a place that you would not ordinarily think of going to. (pause) Any comments?

Seventh Audience Member: I am in a spot where I cannot see what is going on and have having no communication access. And that's the way my days go with hearing loss, I can see, but really have no idea what is being said.

Eighth Audience Member: What I did coming to this spot is kind of what I did when I started losing my hearing—which is just escaping. So when I started facing the hearing loss, as well as other problems. That is I started to force myself into it just to deal with people and things. Even today it is easy for me to slide into escape mode so I really force myself not to do things that don't make me really comfortable. And being where I am—kind of apart from things the ironic thing is, really deep down inside, I still have that feeling that this feels good. It really does feel good.

Ninth Audience Member: I am in the back because it seems a poor choice to go back. At midpoint I would also be uncomfortable because I might be blocking someone's view of the interpreter.

Tenth Audience Member: I feel very detached back here from everything and I don't like that. It's kind of how I often feel when I am in a situation where I can't hear. I feel very separate. I don't like it.

Dr Miller: Thank you for sharing. I'll give you a minute to return to your original places where you can sit comfortably. (pause) That was an exercise in finding out how we relate to our environment and ourselves. And it has a lot to do with how we deal with adversity and with discovering our own personal style.

Now, yesterday morning, Mike Harvey talked about a book called "Tuesdays With Morrie." And he gave you a quote from it. The past couple of years I have also been quoting from that wonderful book, and now I'll give you another one. Near the end, Morrie was dying and he was in a great deal of pain. One day his caregivers were discussing his pain and whether or not to increase his medication. And Morrie said, "No, I am in pain, but I don't want to be overmedicated. I am dying and I have never done that before, and I want to be there when it happens." And to me, that was a supreme act of courage. He knew he was about to have a peak experience. Death is a true unknown for all of us, and he was not going to miss it.

So we need to look at these experiences in our lives. We can't say, "I am going to have a peak experience" and then do it. It doesn't happen that way. What we can do is to be there when it happens by not trying so hard to escape the adversities that life throws at us. Escaping and avoiding include many things as we already have seen in our exercise; there is also drinking and drugs or spending excessive amounts of time doing something such as working on your computer to avoid human interaction. That last one is really tempting, because it is socially acceptable to sit in front of a computer. You're not doing anything wrong, but you're also not going to any places or doing things where you might be uncomfortable, and not giving yourself a chance to try to embrace your total self.

Going back to Dr Harvey's talk yesterday where he talked about who we are and who we are becoming we need to realize that we are all going somewhere, and like it or not, we are on the ride of life and we can learn to enjoy the bumps on the road. Life is a journey and we can learn to enjoy the detours that go with it.

Now let us all take a minute and really remember that peak experience. If you want to just do some deep breathing it may help you to get yourself back to a place where you can go inside. Focus on your breathing, and allow your mind to take you back to a peak experience that you've had in your life—a time when time stood still—a time when you felt totally whole—physically, emotionally and spiritually. And when you capture that, when you're feeling it, just allow yourself to re-experience it. Savor it. Enjoy it again. And after a few minutes, when you're ready, open your eyes. I am going to pass out little three-by-five cards. When you're ready I would like you to write down just a word or a phrase that sums up what you felt as you relived that experience—the essence of it.

(pause) What are some of the words you wrote down? Who wants to share?

Words and phrases from the audience:

Peace of God.

Passing all understanding.

Serenity.

Love.

Became a part of me.

Aha!

That's the mind expanding.

Life changing.

I will never ever give up.

Adversity and strength together.

Dr Miller: I want you to hold on to that card and use it as a reminder to yourself from time to time when you're going through something that does not feel good. Because you could not have experienced those wonderful feelings without the adversity that came before it. For many women, childbirth is a peak experience. But remember how painful it is. Remind yourself how something so painful can be so wonderful.

I am going to end today with a story from another wonderful book. The book is called "The Art of Possibility" written by Benjamin and Rosamund Zander. Zander is an orchestra conductor for the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, and his wife is a psychotherapist. Here is the story, it is called "Rule Number Six."

Two prime ministers are discussing affairs of state. Suddenly a man bursts into the room, apoplectic with fury, shouting and stamping and banging his fist on the desk. The resident prime minister admonishes him: "Peter," he says, "kindly remember rule number 6," whereupon Peter instantly becomes calm, apologizes and withdraws.

The statesmen return to their conversation, only to be interrupted yet again by a hysterical woman gesticulating wildly, her hair flying, again the resident prime minister responds to her with the words: "Marie, please remember rule number six." Complete calm descends once more as she, too, withdraws with a bow and an apology.

When the scene is repeated for the third time, the visiting prime minister addresses his colleague: "my dear friend, he says, "I have seen many things in my life, but never anything as remarkable as this. Would you be willing to Share with me the secret of rule number 6?"

"Very simple," replies the resident prime minister. "Rule number 6 is "don't take yourself so goddamn seriously."

“Ah,” says the visitor, that's a fine rule. And what may I ask are the other rules?”

“There aren't any.”

So keep in mind, along with all the very serious things we've talked about this morning, don't take yourself so goddamn seriously. Thank you.

Dr. Lucy Miller, a marriage and family therapist whose practice has long included deaf and hard of hearing clients, is licensed both in California and Hawaii. She also teaches, consults, and has recently completed a novel titled *What Beth Heard*. She has presented experiential workshops on relationships, communication, and resilience in previous ALDAcons; all were well attended by enthusiastic audiences. Her Email address is drlucy@lava.net

This publication is available to the public in this on-line format. If you are interested in using any portion of this publication the reference is as follows:

Miller, L. (2003). From Adversity to Peak Experience. In L. Piper & D. Watson (Eds.), *Selected proceedings of 2002 conference of the Association of Late-Deafened Adults*. [on-line] available: <http://www.alda.org/aldapubs.htm> and <http://www.uark.edu/deafrtc/publications.html>