

# ALDAcon: Deaf and Don't.

## Doing what they'll let me do.

Katharine Woodcock

It would be my privilege to present you today with an inspiring message like King Jordan's back then in the days of Deaf President Now, when he thrilled deaf people with the message "Deaf people can do anything except hear." I remember those days so clearly. I was thrilled too, because up until that point, I had been indoctrinated with the message I could do anything I put my mind to. In other words, nothing was impossible IF ONLY I put my mind to it, in other words, I could even HEAR if I would put my mind to it. In fact, the expectation was that I could even hear if I would just pay attention. I got plenty of the old "you can hear when you want to" and smacked in the head not a few times, metaphorically to clear out my ears. So at the time everyone else was dancing in the streets with the yoke of "deaf can't" lifted from their shoulders, I was going through the awakening that I didn't have to hear. I could NOT hear, and that was okay.

This was about the time I was winding up my career as a hospital executive and heading back to school for the gamble of a PhD and the hopes of an academic career. I had wonderful encouragement from my mentors through my undergraduate years and terrific feedback from my Master's research. There was no question of being limited by other peoples' prejudices at all. To me, to tell you the truth, the Deaf-people-can-do-anything message was a big "Duh!" Other peoples' expectations of me were far from irrelevant, however. Soon after arriving in the PhD program, I received a mandatory invitation to the weekly graduate seminar, and I replied with regrets that, since it was not possible to get an interpreter, I would not be attending. I was informed by the chairman that all I needed to do was to arrive in time to sit in the front row and I would thus simply be able to lipread and follow the overheads. Now, this gives you an idea of just what kind of superhuman powers they thought I had, because this would have involved lipreading someone backlit by the only source of illumination in the room, a bright projection screen, mumbling complex mathematical notation into his beard, in thickly accented broken English while half the time looking over his shoulder at the screen. Doesn't it just make you feel like they think I am magic or something?

This is somewhat dismaying particularly given my specialization in ergonomics, or human factors engineering. This is the study of matching human capabilities and limitations with the designs of environments, tools, and tasks. For instance, people do not see effectively in pitch dark, therefore do not give them visual tasks in a dark place. Yet I have had conference interpreters physically obstructed from turning up the room lights a little so that I could see them. In one case, the offender was an author of one of the most popular textbooks in the field. Surely he should know better.

I did have the opportunity to encounter the "deaf can't" folklore, for the first time, when I participated in a workshop on deaf leadership. Surprisingly, the question was "can deaf people be our own leaders?" which I have to admit struck me as another big "duh" until several successive speakers recounted their personal awakenings of realizing what they could achieve by virtue of meeting a role model deaf person who had done the thing. So, okay, I was willing to concede that maybe people sometimes need to see it to believe they can do it. I was shocked, however, when one of the people, someone I considered a deaf leader, asked the hearing people present, "so, do you hearing people think deaf people can be leaders?" This time, it wasn't a "duh". My mind produced a stream of full-tilt

profanity, which for your tender eyes I will clean up and render as, “who gives a fig what they think? What business is it of theirs?” I came to suspect that this self-censoring was a result of too much exposure to working in a deaf environment, not from each other but from the hearing people who worked there and exerted this subtle control. I had been invited to participate in planning a symposium on automatic speech recognition technology along with two deans of engineering, from the host universities, a couple of technology researchers, and chaired by a deaf-education researcher. I brought my expertise in ergonomics along, as well as my experiences. The only person who had any difficulty with my input was the deaf-education researcher, who seemed to take every opportunity to try to portray me as “just” a consumer. If the other professors thought my program suggestion was good, he would assign me to chair the social subcommittee; if the symposium participants thought my scientific analysis was convincing, he would say it was so good, it was a shame we hadn't invited more consumer presentations. While the deans of engineering accepted me as an engineering professor, the deaf-education researcher seemed determined to make me into a deafened spokesmodel. By the time the symposium was over, I was fit to be tied. I have never been treated as an inferior in the mainstream world as I have been in deaf services agencies and programs. Maybe that was why some deaf people seemed to need to be told they could do anything but hear. I was only just learning what it was like inside the sheltered workshop, and I had to get out.

I was a bit relieved as well as fully optimistic when I moved back home to Canada after my stint in the U.S. Even my colleagues here thought the job advertisement fit me to a “T”. They didn't even know that the Dean and I had been friends for years, that he had personally invited me to send my CV some months before the committee wrote the ad. The ad was fairly non-traditional in an academic sense, asking for several kinds of experience that I had but most academic applicants would not, like business and consulting experience. It didn't make a big deal about the types of publication history, which I figured was my weak point, given that I had worked in a wider variety of environments and didn't have so much incentive to churn out scholarly journal papers. It was almost like they had used my CV as a model for the advertisement. I went confidently to the interview. I had hand-picked the interpreter so I would be answering the right questions without concern for interpretation. Now, for those who don't know, interviews for academic jobs are all-day affairs. You meet with all the members of the appointment committee usually one at a time for a whole interview each, and you have lunch with someone, and then in the afternoon you give a seminar provide a sample of how your teaching might look. I used my own voice, but I took all the questions through the interpreter, which was lucky because the room size and lighting would have made it hard to lipread. Other than a couple of meetings where they specifically requested that I not bring the interpreter, nobody asked or expressed any concerns about the interpreting. Then time passes. And passes. Months and months. I realize that interpreter was not a non-issue. They were just too Canadian to say, “what's up with the girl over there? We have to pay her every day you work for us? What's the deal with that?” Too polite to ask about it, but unable to get it out of their minds. Five full months after the interview, I received a letter saying that although they did not find another candidate, they were not going to offer me the position, but instead were going to advertise internationally for someone who would be a “better fit”. Notwithstanding the fact that they knew everything about me before they wrote their ad, all of a sudden, they discover I am not a good fit. If they did not want me, all they had to do was put a requirement in their ad that I could not satisfy, like ability to teach biology, or hit a squash ball. But I'm not a “good fit” so now they're going to advertise overseas... Rather than hire someone who couldn't hear English, obviously they would rather have someone who might not even speak it.

At this point, I made what I called my deal with the devil. I joined the waiting list for the CI clinic. This may have come as a surprise to many people here. I understand that at least one past ALDAcon there was whisper campaign going around, "Have you met that Kathryn from Toronto? She doesn't want people to get implants." Aside from being a total lie, I can't imagine why anyone would even care what I thought about implants. I did, however, say that I couldn't see wanting one. Unlike many ALDAnS, I could not have cared less if I could hear. I never liked music much, had no musical ability myself; my whole family is not very musical. My mother would jokingly say, "no singing in the house! Yes, I know it's *O Canada*, but take it outside if you're going to make that awful noise." I was actually so relieved to realize I was deaf, because it finally explained why I could not understand what was going on. So, I was actually not very interested in having a CI and rejoining the hearing world. I have a deaf husband, a child who signs; my friends are deaf. My waning days of using residual hearing were full of nothing but people expecting me to do everything INCLUDING hear, and I was just not interested.

But the hearing world does pay better, and there is more job variety. I concluded I would not get an academic job until I could fake my way through an interview without an interpreter there. I took another job—at much more money, I must say, but not what I went back to school to do, and in about 18 months my number came up at the clinic. I went, and I had the CI done. And sure enough within 6 months, I had an academic job offer. I can't say, get a CI and the job of your dreams will be yours, but something is awfully fishy about the timing. It seemed to reinforce my emerging consciousness that you can only do what people let you do. Your actual ability is only half the picture.

Some people have decided that what we need to do is to change the public's impressions of deaf people. I personally have never felt that people thought the problem was that I didn't have the ability, but that they were preoccupied with the idea that I would cost them extra money to accommodate my communication needs. However, there is this idea that people think we are not quite on the ball intellectually. Recently some people with that theory raised some money to produce some TV and magazine advertisements with the slogan, "I am deaf but I am definitely not dumb". (You can see it on the Internet, at [www.deafened.org](http://www.deafened.org)). The ad shows me, standing on a bridge with statements popping up: I'm an engineer. I'm a writer. I'm a professor. I'm deaf. But I'm definitely not dumb. When they asked me to participate, I worried that the slogan would revive the almost extinct expression deaf and dumb, but when I saw the ad, that wasn't what struck me. What bothered me was that with all the "I am" things popping up, it looked like I couldn't make up my mind what I wanted to be when I grew up. But, well, I am an engineer, and then I became a professor, and all professors write if they want to keep their jobs, you know, publish or perish. But what they meant was that I wrote this book.

The story of this book was that I was accumulating a pile of material and continually answering questions from the Internet, and I decided to compile it once and for all. Miguel's master's thesis research on rehabilitation needs with deafened people was producing valuable information, and so it all came together. At this point, you have to make a decision: who will publish the book? As compelling as we all find deafness, this isn't the sort of book that will be stacked by the hundreds in the front windows of Barnes & Noble, with book-signing tours from coast to coast, and breakfast interviews on Good Morning America. I didn't seriously think that a big commercial publisher would pick it up. I wasn't interested in publishing it privately, paying money up front to have it printed. University publishers like University of Toronto Press work like commercial publishers, in the sense that they commit to printing and marketing your book at their expense, but first they have to put the book through the peer review process to determine whether there is "scholarly merit" to the work.

Peer review is the foundation of academic life. Unlike the Internet, where anyone with a keyboard can make any assertion at all, scientific journals have this quality control mechanism. Reviewers make comments and criticisms and recommend whether the paper will be accepted. Sometimes they reject things just because they are unconventional. This gave me some anxious moments.

I had written a paper about the failure of assistive technology to address the need for relational communication with people who are deaf. Relational communication is the non-content component of communication, the communication of the relationships between the communicators. I could have been making eyes at a gentleman in the front row all this time, hoping to strike up a rapport, but if he's been watching the captions on the CART display, he would have no idea, even though he had received 100% of the content of my speech to this point. Technical developments for hearing access tend to focus exclusively on the content of communication, and what we have problems with is relationships. Can you imagine using a text-display device for pillow talk or flirting? By way of background in this paper that I had written, I pointed out that deafened people like us are the statistical majority among deaf people, and fact that most social program spending is targeted at deaf children or deaf culture. This was a minor point that I made to justify why I was writing this paper about deafened people, and addressing this neglect. Well, the anonymous reviews came back excoriating me, "throw this paper out and do not publish if it was the last paper on earth; if possible, have the author executed at dawn." You know? Vicious commentary. "Does the author mean to suggest that deaf children do not deserve access? Shocking and ignorant!!! Clearly this author knows nothing about deafness." Oh. Okay, I guess not. I've only been deaf most of my life, but I have obviously never learned to regurgitate the conventional wisdoms that the establishment likes to propagate in relation to deafness.

Fortunately, that wasn't a problem with this book. The feedback that came back from the anonymous reviewers was overwhelmingly encouraging and the Academic Board "ruled" that the book would be published. After that, the book goes to an editor who goes intensively over the actual writing and ensures that it says what you mean it to say. Working with the editor was great, and if I had known how helpful that process was, I wouldn't have tried to make it 100% perfect before I submitted it in the first place, because you can never make it 100% perfect on your own. Editing is a process of totally letting go of your ego, because you can't partly accept the editor's advice and partly reject it, or it will look like you wrote the book in your sleep. It ended up with some expressions that I don't use in everyday life. Apparently, the expression "that said," has become quite the popular figure of speech since I became deaf... That said, the book says what I meant to say. There were just a few other details to arrange. It seems to be obligatory in books about deafness, so we hired a biomedical illustrator to do the lovely ear picture. The publisher had my hands photographed for the cover art showing the signs for "support, adjust, grow": those are my actual hands on the front of the paperback version. And that was that! Because a great majority of the chapters came from research I had already done, or articles that I had written over the years, and Miguel's thesis research, the only really hard thing was making the index at the back. Apparently you can pay people to do this for you, and if you ever write a book, you should definitely do that, because it was just excruciating. And if you want to get rich, you better write a romance novel, because a year's royalties for a book like this equate to about 6 hours of salary, although it took about 6 months work spread over 2 years to write it. Still, I wouldn't hesitate to do it again. It was fun to realize I could do it. Also I hope that it helps someone and brings more professional awareness to our situation in the spectrum of deafness.

At the moment, I have a few irons in the fire related to communication technology and deafness, but my real interest is in researching accident investigation and safety inspection. And it's not a question of believing I can do it. First I have to convince someone else to give me money to enable me to do it. And that's the big secret. We have all kinds of abilities. Being deaf doesn't change the amount of potential we have, although it can change the type of potential. But all that potential depends on what people will let us do. The reality is that none of us can do anything unless other people think we can. It is a continuing campaign to figure out who is standing in the way of what we each want to do, and what it will take to get them to see things our way. If that entails advocacy, then advocate. Sometimes that is human rights and accommodations, although in Canada we don't have an equivalent to the ADA, and as a general concept, the whistleblower never wins. He or she makes things better for other people, hopefully, but the chance of getting a direct win from kicking up a fuss is small. Removing the obstacle might entail adjusting our own approach, then consider what is negotiable and what is not negotiable, to let go of the deal-breakers that come across as negative. I was angry to open my head and let them put the gizmo in. I was waiting in the hall outside the O.R. and the nurse came to explain there was a delay because the doctors were all excited about this first Hi-Focus electrode, since I was in the clinical trial and they always like the new things, don't you know, and I snarled at her, "no! I am not excited. I am annoyed that people cannot accept me and give me a job the way I am. The sooner you guys put me under the general anaesthetic, the happier we will all be." As angry as I was, though, it turned out to be helpful, if not instrumental, in getting what I wanted. For someone else, that flexibility might be sign language or a new work skill. And sometimes the best way of getting past an obstacle is to go around it and pick a new goal. When I used to visualize myself teaching in a university, I actually never even thought about where I am now, but this past year at Ryerson has been an invigorating and stimulating time. It's not necessary to lower expectations and pick lesser goals just on account of deafness. Some objectives are easier to achieve just because of someone else's attitude, the way prepared ahead of time by someone else's experience, or some other lucky break.

We need people to let us realize our potential. If we can think positive, look positive, and act positive, we can make a positive and competent impression. Research shows that trust in people like weather forecasters and stockbrokers is more related to their confidence than to past accuracy. And as a key to showing that confidence, we need to find confidence in ourselves. Self-help in groups, or individually through healing journals, can be a key to cultivating that confidence and positive outlook. Congratulations for coming to ALDAcon and taking a step toward your own success.

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