

LUNCHEON SPEECH

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I was invited to talk to you about what's happening with me vis-à-vis deafness. That's what I was told to say. I joined ALDA early in 1990. One of my favorite magazines is ALDA news. I really enjoy reading ALDA news. I read it regularly. I feel very at home, very comfortable talking to people who became deaf later, like I did.

I grew up hearing. I was a regular guy with a hearing family, hearing parents, hearing siblings. Nobody in my family had any deafness. Then I joined the Navy. In 1965 I had a motorcycle accident. When I woke up, I couldn't hear. That came as something of a surprise. When I woke up, it was "I see you" concept, and "I see you" was green. Understand it was green. Everything was green. The walls were green. The sheets were green. The nurse's uniforms were green. The nurses wore hats and masks, they were green. So I opened my eyes, and everything is green. So I tried to talk to someone and asked where is this place, where am I? And I had tracheotomy and could not talk. So for a long time, I am trying to communicate with these green beings and they're ignoring me, not paying any attention. Every once in a while they would look at me and do something-- but talk to me? Nothing. Or pay attention to me? Nothing. Then finally it came time for someone to come in and visit me. They could see in my eyes that I was paying attention. So they wrote a note. My first deaf communication, a written note. That was how I learned I was deaf.

At the Navy Hospital they told me not to worry about it. It will go away. It is temporary and soon you will be able to hear again. Fine, fine. Thank you very much. That was April.

May, June, July, August, September, again and again they told me soon you will hear again. In 1965 the military knew nothing about deafness, nothing. In 1995 the military knew very little about deafness. 2001, the military doesn't know much about deafness. When they finally realized I was deaf, then they pushed me out of the military. But it took them more than one year.

One more story about that. Deaf people develop habits. When you leave a room, you check with each other. Before you leave, you check to see what's going on. People in the hospital heard me speak. They suspected I was not really deaf. They suspected I was trying to avoid going to Vietnam. They thought I was malingering. Really! They kept records of things I did that led them to suspect I'm not really deaf. So the day finally arrived when I was supposed to leave the hospital, I filled out all the paperwork, had me sign and I packed my bags. And then I started to walk out of the ward. I got to the door, and turned around. But exactly the same time I turned around, the doctor thought one last check. Called my name. So he called my name. I turned around. And they made me stay in the hospital for 3 months more-- 3 months, while they tested, tested my hearing to be sure that I was deaf.

I'm really deaf. They know, I know. But I couldn't say that for at least five years--at least five years. I could never say: "I am really deaf." I am talking, I think, for many people in this room. I'm told many people in this room who are newly deaf. So if you want to know how to adjust to

your deafness, do exactly the opposite of what I did. I did everything wrong. I refused to admit I was deaf, and I thought of myself as a hearing person who couldn't hear for a long time.

I started college and I found out. It was a big shock for me, big cultural adjustments for me to go to Gallaudet where the main communication is sign. When I went to Gallaudet, I didn't know any sign. I thought that's ok because I am a hearing person. I left Gallaudet without being skilled in sign language. But I was never easy with that, with sign, never. I won't use the word "fluent" because I don't think I'm yet fluent. I don't know if I will ever be fluent. I'm conversant but when I graduated from Gallaudet I wasn't conversant even. But I figured that that was all right because I'm a hearing person who can't hear. Then I went to graduate school. Ironic, I spent four years at Gallaudet as a hearing person. Deaf environment, deaf culture, deaf communication, deaf, deaf, hearing person. Then I went to the University of Tennessee and within a month I became deaf because there it was very clear to me I was different. I started graduate school at the University of Tennessee in 1969.

In 1969 there was no such thing as interpreting. If you had a friend or family member who was willing, then somebody might interpret. Professional interpreting, never, never happened. The idea of support services-- not at University of Tennessee. To them, if other colleges had them, that was good. But you are welcome and good luck. That's what happened in my graduate program. I had to learn how to become a deaf person.

My wife, who is hearing, I married while I was a student at Gallaudet. We met in a junk mail business but she never met a deaf man before. Of course, she didn't know any sign but now she is a signer. My wife, she travels with me and interprets for me when I need someone to interpret. She is not a certified or a professional interpreter. But for me she signs well enough that I use her for interpreter. I have two children: One son who was born and grew up while I was a hearing person who couldn't hear and one daughter who was born and knew me only as a deaf person. My daughter, oh, she signs like a native, and has fantastic receptive skills. My son can sign but can't interpret. My grandson is four and-a-half, and I see him often. But best of all, he goes to Day Care at Gallaudet. And signs really well. But I notice something that many deaf people already know but I didn't know. But when I see my grandson, if I talk he doesn't sign. If I talk to him, he talks back. Even though he knows I'm deaf. He knows that. He can't do both things. You either sign or talk. You don't do both. So now I know enough when I see him, first thing, I talk to him and sign and then have a whole conversation, and fine. We can talk very well.

So, I was going to the University of Tennessee, and I had a very interesting career at the University of Tennessee because no one I knew could sign or knew anything about deafness. Then I found out that for the Tallahassee School for the Deaf, I started to go there and meet other deaf people and practice sign communication. When I finished University of Tennessee, it happened that there was a faculty position open in the Department of Psychology. So I applied. I applied for that and was very, very lucky to get it. I went back and when I got there, realized how much I had to learn about communication with deaf people. I started teaching as a deaf man at a deaf university but my sign skills were like the hearing people who were hired to work at Gallaudet. So I had to work hard to improve my skill. One of the people who started right around the same time as me was the distinguished Vice President of the Rochester Institute of Technology, Robert Davila. We started at the same time at Gallaudet, but he taught many more skills related to deafness than I did. He and

other people who were there helped me a lot, and that's where I started to learn that it is all right to be a deaf guy, and it's not a problem to be a deaf person.

I thought that I was very different, that something was wrong with me, but I'm not different except in the way I communicate. I can't hear. I can't lip-read very well. At the airport I have to be careful to not get on the wrong plane. So I told the woman at the desk, "I'm deaf." I scared her. "What do I do?" So then she said, "We will take care of you." I said, "You don't have to take care of me. All you have to do is tell me when the plane to Providence leaves. I don't want to get on the wrong plane. Okay?" It is like she stared at me because I'm deaf. True, true. You must have experience where people are frightened. They're frightened because they don't know how to deal with someone who communicates differently. We have to help them. We have to show them that it is all right to write with a paper and pencil if you can't lip-read. That's what I did with the woman at the desk. But the airline attendant on the plane said to me, "Do you read lips?" I said, "That's not a fair question because everybody can understand the phrase "Do you read lips." So you are stuck. The question, "Do you read lips" and if you say no, they wonder how you knew what they said. If you say yes then they start talking fast. So you end up having to explain. So I told this woman, some people are easy to lip-read, some are not. Then she started to talk. Not! Very good. It was hard for me to understand her.

You know, it is amazing, nobody carries paper or pencil. All the time on airplanes when people come up to talk to me, what do you do? They don't have anything to write with. So I carry extra. I suggest you carry extra paper.

I knew, knew in about 1975, 1973, 1974, around that time, that I was permanently deaf. Wow! A big relief to know that. When I could finally admit to myself that I was a deaf person, then things started to become much, much easier. I stopped faking. The hearing smile, the deaf smile like when people talk to me and pretend like I'm understanding. I don't do that any more. It is easy to do, especially if it is not important. If someone says it is not important, be done with it. But now I insist that either we try to find a way to understand each other or stop. Why pretend? Sometimes this makes me not very popular but sometimes it educates people, and educating people, I think, is very important. I know that many of you who have been deaf for a while are advocates, but I also know that people who grew up hearing and became deaf find deafness to be a pain in the neck. It is inconvenient. When you want to know something, you ask somebody a question and want to be able to find out the answer. Sometimes people are very rude and it is frustrating. This morning's Washington post has an article that says: "D. C. Deaf postal workers are against the city because they're not providing enough interpreters to explain about anthrax." So postal workers have many, many meetings and many, many communications, many instructions, but the deaf postal workers are not getting adequate information. Frustrating. It is a pain in the neck. But if you are going to become deaf, 2001 is a pretty good time. It is a lot better to become deaf in 2001 than 1960 or 1970. There are pagers. Captioning on TV. Movie theatres carry open captioned performances Not as often as we like but increasingly more and more you can go to the movies and see first run movies with captions. I went to see the Smithsonian movie about Galapagos Island, in 3 D. They use rear view captioning. I have to tell you I'm not a fan of rear view captioning. You know the thing where they project, I'm not a fan because you have to look down, look up, look down, look up. But if you try to do both at the same time, you have to shrink down to look up. But they're trying and they're doing the right thing. Technology: great changes are happening. Attitudes

really have changed. And they're continuing to change for the better. I can think back to when I would travel, and if I told the stewardess I was deaf, she would make a face at me, one more problem for her responsibility to have to deal with the deaf guy. Now if I tell the flight attendant -- remember they used to be stewardess, and if I tell the flight attendant, sometimes they will come back and they want to talk to me because they want to practice their sign. That's really nice. I think it is terrific, really terrific. And children, more and more, all over the place, are learning signs and learning about deafness. Many people who work at Gallaudet go to elementary schools, junior high schools, and high schools to talk about what it's like to be a deaf person. The people are really interested and they ask questions and they seem to want to know more, what's it like to be deaf. I think the attitudes are wonderful.

In 1988, when I became President, I had an opportunity that no other deaf person ever had, ever. I still think that I'm probably one of luckiest men in the world. To me deafness is a clear advantage, it's an advantage. If I were not deaf I would not be President of Gallaudet. If I were not deaf person, I wouldn't have the opportunity to travel all over the world and meet people and talk about deafness. So for me deafness is a fantastic advantage. For many of you, professionally deafness is a terrible disadvantage. So in one sense I feel guilty talking to you because you think, well, that's easy for him to say. But deafness doesn't help me with my boss. So some of the lessons are the same. Educating people, finding out what technology helps you, they're the same if you're a deaf person working in a deaf community or working outside the deaf community. You know, I have a TV phone on my desk. I can talk with people on TV. Marvelous technology! I'm told that soon, if you have good computer connections, then you have a regular PC and you buy a camera, put it on your computer and then you will be able to call any other deaf person who has that same equipment.

Two states, Texas and Washington State, have video relay. And you can call there and call another state using a video interpreter instead of relay. That works for me. Some of you may be not sign well enough to do that and would prefer to use relay. But relay is there. It didn't used to be.

E-mail! I don't use my regular telephone more than once or twice a week. I almost never call people on the regular telephone because most of my communication is E-mail. It's good but it's bad because you know you have mail. "Oh, no! More mail!" But it is a wonderful technology.

The importance of these technologies is that they are allowing you to stay in the mainstream. If you can buy the technology, use the technology, be able to communicate with people who can hear and can't sign, then you can continue doing what you already do. You can continue with your current job. You can continue to interact with family members the way maybe you thought you couldn't do. It is really wonderful to be a deaf person in the 21st century if you are going to be a deaf person, but it's still inconvenient to have to acknowledge that it is never going to change.

One final word I have to say about deafness. If you are deaf, then most likely you will be deaf for the rest of your life. There are some surgeries and things like cochlear implants that are very effective for some people, and for people who can take advantage of those technologies. But for many or maybe most of us, if you are deaf today, you will be deaf tomorrow. You will be deaf next year. You will be deaf five years from now. So if you haven't said to yourself "I am deaf," then I

suggest that maybe later on this afternoon, when you are in your room by yourself, look in the mirror and say, "I'm deaf."

Thank you very much, thank you.

Dr. Jordan is the first deaf president of Gallaudet University, the world's only university with programs and services designed specifically for students who are deaf and hard of hearing. He has a BA in psychology from Gallaudet, an MA and PH.D. from the University of Tennessee. Upon earning his doctorate, Dr. Jordan became a faculty member of Gallaudet in the department of Psychology. In 1983 he was appointed Chair of that department, and in 1986 he became Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. Dr. Jordan has made international contributions in education. He served as visiting research fellow at Donaldson's School for the Deaf in Edinburgh, Scotland, as an exchange scholar at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland, and as a visiting scholar and lecturer at Schools in Paris, Toulouse and Marseilles, France. Dr. Jordan has served not only as an international spokesperson for the deaf and hard of hearing, but also as an advocate for persons with disabilities of all kinds. Much sought out as a speaker Dr. Jordan continues to challenge the American public to examine their attitudes towards people with disabilities, and to open their minds, hearts and workplaces to people with disabilities.