



*ALDAcon 2007—Rochester, New York*

**The Resilient Self: Thriving Through Good Times and Bad**

**Presenter: Sally Skyer**

SALLY SKYER: Good morning, everyone. It's a real pleasure to be here and the topic I want to talk about is the resilient self: thriving through good times and bad. This is a topic that I'm very passionate about. It is something that I talk about with students that I work with, talk about with families that I help because I work with breast cancer survivors. I also volunteer for hospice, and I work with families going through the grieving process, and I work with people who are dying.

So this is a very passionate topic for me. I spent years reading on this topic. You can see the books on the table. These are all books that I highly recommend, highly recommend to you for reading, to help bolster your own self through struggles. (*Blindsided* by Richard Cohen, *To Begin Again* by Naomi Levy, *After The Darkest Hour* by Kathleen Brehony, *The Women's Book of Resilience: Twelve Qualities to Cultivate* by Beth Miller.)

Many people go through struggles in life. How many of you have not had a personal experience with struggle? You all have been through personal struggles, all of us, different ways, in different degrees. That's just part of life, and my talk will be how to help others through a struggle. This is not a research-based workshop. It's a workshop based on my personal and professional experience and

based on my reading.

My personal philosophy to start with is that I feel that life is a school. It's where you learn many, many lessons. Through learning those lessons, we come out a better person for the experience, even though it is a struggle.

One time, many years ago, I read a book called *The Road Less Traveled* by E Scott Peck. In the introduction to the first chapter, there's a quote that says, "Life is difficult." I could relate to that. That's the truth. Life is difficult. But it's still a good life. Life is good. I feel very strongly about that.

There will be an activity at the end of my talk, and I hope this is an activity that you will enjoy and benefit from. If after the workshop you feel you need to talk with someone or get support, or go through the information we talked about, I encourage you to find someone, a professional, a therapist, to talk with to help you process the information. I also encourage you to find a support group such as the late-deafened support group to help you process the information. No one should go through life struggling alone.

Let me give you a little bit of background as to why this topic is so important to me. I was born deaf to hearing parents. I also had a deaf brother. My experience with deafness has been one of oppression, where deafness was considered a very shameful thing. I was not allowed to use hearing aids, not allowed to sign, not allowed to play with friends in the neighborhood. So I grew up isolated, very alone. Books became my friends. Through reading books, I found many heroes who inspired me to persist through life.

My dad died when I was very young. Within a nine-year time period, my mom died from a long, painful cancer. My three sisters-in-law died. My husband died and my two children had brain and spinal surgery. Then I had my own cancer struggle -- all that within nine years. It was crazy.

I also went through two severe depressions for which I got help. I struggled through the depression. But, look, I'm here. I'm surviving, and I'm proud to be here. I came out a better person for the experience.

I would like to start with definitions of resiliency. My favorite definition is to be able to learn valuable lessons from past experiences. Rebounding from major setbacks, becoming even stronger than before.

I have another favorite definition: Resiliency is the power of the human spirit to embrace challenge, guided by wisdom, experience and support.

Another favorite one: Resilience is the capacity to bounce back, to withstand hardship, and to repair yourself. Resilience is not just struggling from one crisis to another but developing a skill to learn how to become a stronger person along the way.

What are some of the things that make it very difficult to deal with struggle? One is if you are resistant to change, it prolongs the struggle. I will explain that in more in depth later. The belief or expectation that life is always fair prolongs the struggle. It is also hard if you respond as a victim and not as a victor. Responding as a victim prolongs your struggles. Your mindset, how you think, leads you to how you behave. If I think negative, I will behave in negative ways. You will see

things as barriers, which make it very difficult for you to get through a struggle. The good news is that those things can change. We'll talk about that now.

What are the truths about struggles? Here are some basic truths to survive hardship. One is realizing that change is the natural order of things. If there are no changes, we would not be alive. Everyone goes through change. Change is part of life whether from an illness, from a hearing loss, from a change in relationship, a job loss, changes in friendship, change in moving to a different environment. Everyone goes through change whether we like it or not. That's just the basic truth of surviving hardships.

Two: change always incorporates loss, even if it's a positive change, my daughter graduated with a Master's Degree. She was ready to leave home to find a job and settle in as an independent adult. That was a positive change for her, something she was looking forward to. It was hard for me to accept that change because my first child was leaving home.

Three: although we cannot always control the events of our life, that create suffering, we can determine our responses to them. I cannot control the fact that my husband died from an illness. But I can control how I respond to that loss. I will explain more about that later. Even though my daughter became deaf, I couldn't control that. I couldn't control it, but I could accept it. Okay. She's deaf now. We'll move on, and we'll do the best that we can.

The fourth truth may be very difficult for many people to see. However, I truly believe that there are hidden gifts in the power and the pain of suffering.

In looking back at my life with all of my personal struggles I have been through I remember that when I was young I couldn't understand why I had to go through this tough time of being so alone and isolated? Why did I have to struggle with communication through high school and college? I had no support services, no interpreters, no note taker, even though I was profoundly deaf. .

I remember when I was at Rhode Island College as a freshman; I said to myself, is there anyone in the whole world who is like me? I couldn't find anyone like me. I could not identify with my brother because we were very different. He went to residential school. I was in public school. It was very different. We were not allowed to communicate with each other. I felt very alone. Why me? Why did I have to go through all this pain and suffering?

After my father died. Why? Going through college, barrier: barrier: barrier. People saying no, you can't teach hearing children because you're deaf. No, no, no, no, no. Barrier: barrier: barrier. I became a very quiet rebel. Whenever people told me I couldn't do something, I proved them wrong. I loved doing that -- proving people wrong. And then I would wonder why I had to go through a severe depression-- and it took me a long time to bounce back from that. Why, why, why?

Looking back now that I'm older, I think, oh, yes, those experiences are helping me with people I work with today. It's my gift. My gift to the students I work with. It is my gift to the people that I am helping. Looking back, it's worth it. For me, it's worth it.

Do I want to go through the pain again? No. Am I glad I went through it? Yes. A big yes, I'm glad I went through it. It's made me the strong person that I am today. So you have to find the hidden gift that your struggle brings to you.

I know that hearing loss is a painful struggle. My daughter became deaf overnight after surgery. Since she knew sign language from the time she was a baby and she was exposed to deaf culture all her life, you'd think it would be easy for her. No. The first time that she came out of the hospital in the wheelchair, she cried. I said, "What's wrong, Melissa?" She said, "I can't hear birds anymore. I can't hear the traffic anymore." It was a huge loss for her. Hopefully in a few years down the road, she'll see some of the hidden gifts in her loss. Not immediately, but down the road.

Here's a quote that I really like from Stephen Hawking. "As long as there's life, there's always hope."

What are the qualities that you need cultivate, to help you get beyond surviving, to go from surviving to thriving? First, and most important, you need to acknowledge your personal struggle, not to hold them in, not to stuff it. Talk about it openly. Whether it's with a therapist, a friend, a support group, talk about it. By being able to talk about the pain and the struggle, it helps you feel not alone. It helps you to build strength, to endure.

You need to allow for grief work. Everyone has the right to grieve at his or her own pace. It's their own process, however long it takes. One month, one year, six months. Go at your own pace with support and with help.

Sometimes I even tell my friends who are going through rough times, you need to

allow for “a pity party.” Get a box of Kleenex, stay in your room, and just cry all day. Cry when you need to. Scream when you need to. Make sure no one is in the house. Scream. cry.

I can remember one time when my daughter's very good friend died. She was only 21 years old. I was in shock. I loved this friend. She was a beautiful woman. I went to church that day, and I used the most colorful language you could ever hear. I was really furious. I just let it all out, and I said, "How could do you this? This was a beautiful person -- young, full of life." I didn't stuff it. I just let it out. That's part of the healing process.

You need to find a support network. You are all very fortunate to be members of ALDA. ALDA is a wonderful support group with friends who share common struggles and common communication frustration. Take advantage of that support. This will become your family for life.

Next, manage what you can handle. You become deaf overnight; you do not expect to be able to handle it and become fine in one week, or even one month or six months. It takes time. You need to go through a process of healing. The more often that you come to support meetings, talk with other people, you more you heal every time.

The next part I'm not the best role model for. Learn to ask for help. This is a very difficult struggle for me, even today. Because I pride myself on being independent and strong it is sometimes good to be human and say, "I need your help. I need your shoulder. I need to talk." I reach out to my good dear friend in Rochester and

to my children. My best friend is here watching me present. I called her many, many times, and I cried on her shoulder, and it helped me being able to heal. You need to find that helper and be able to ask for what you need.

Next: strengths. We all have strengths. Use whatever your strength is to help you persevere. My strength is that I'm very organized. I'm meticulous. I use that strength to help me go through what I need to go through day by day. After my husband died, I made a long list of things I needed to take care of. I said, "Okay, I'll do one thing every day. That's all I can handle." Do what you can handle. It's okay to give yourself permission to handle as much as you can.

Next: persevere and persist with a passion. Never give up that hope.

Things will be better. Today is not that great of a day. Okay, there's always a tomorrow. That's the gift we have. We have a new day tomorrow.

One day at a time. You know the alcoholics anonymous quote, "one day at a time." That's true for everyone. You do not have to belong to AA to make it work. One day at a time.

Next: Change your thought and your belief and the strong power of your thoughts. It's amazing how what's in your mind connects with how you get through things. If you say to yourself when you wake up in the morning, "Today is not going to be a good day. It's a crappy day and I know it. I'm not going to get through this day. I don't want to have to go to work. Why do I have to go through the communication frustration?" If you say all those kinds of things to yourself, you're setting yourself up. Instead, you say, "Okay, I'm getting up. It's a new day." It's a new opportunity to try again.

Last, develop your sense of humor. Humor always helps. I'll give you an example. My husband lost his ability to swallow. He was not able to eat for seven years, and that was difficult for him. Every time we had a holiday celebration at my home and I would cook all these meals and people would come over, and people would say, "Aren't you going to eat with us?"

And he would say, "No, I'm on a special diet. I'm trying to be thin. No, I'm allergic to turkey." He would just make up things to make people laugh. That was him. That was how he got through his personal struggle.

It helped other people to. After I went through my cancer treatment, I had no hair. I was bald, a shiny head, bald. When my hair started to grow back and it was still short, short, hair, people said, "That's so cute." I said, "Yeah, I go to the same barber where all the people go for a crew cut." Humor. That helps you get through things.

Sometimes if I couldn't understand someone, I would say, "My ear trumpet's not working. Hold on a second." I change my batteries. If my speech reading skills are not so great, I say, "My eyes are old." Use your humor to get through things.

You need to explore creative options that can help meet your personal, psychological and spiritual needs. After my daughter became deaf, she went through the grieving period. A year later, she started taking classes again. She took dance classes. She went horseback riding. She invited people from work to come to her home for barbecue. I said to her, "You are amazing. You're getting through things. It doesn't matter that you lost your hearing. You're getting through things and making an effort to learn to grow and to change." That's something you all need to do.

Do not block yourself from opportunities to explore. Life is so full of possibilities, so full of gifts. Take advantage of that. We only live once. That's all. We only have one chance. And if we lose that chance, bye.

Find ways to plow through the hardships. With support, maybe you find someone from ALDA who could become a personal mentor for you, someone that you look up to. Ask this person, “Do you mind if I shadow you? Do you mind if we keep in touch so I can get support and encouragement from you?” Take advantage of that opportunity.

When I went to Gallaudet as a graduate student, I went there without knowing any sign language. Of all places not to know sign language! .

It was very difficult. It was very painful for me because I was trying to figure out my identity -- who am I? I was born a deaf person, but I grew up with that shame of deafness, and I wanted to change that. Boy, was that difficult! I wanted to quit Gallaudet. I came very close to quitting, but I said, “No. I can't quit. I cannot quit.” I found someone who could tutor me one-on-one in sign language. I could help that person with English, so it worked out. It was a win-win situation. I just persisted. What was worst of times for me at Gallaudet became the best of times. I grew from that experience, and it was a wonderful experience--painful, but wonderful in the end.

Next, find meaning and purpose to your struggle. You won't see that immediately. You will down the road. Why do I have to go through all this? Down the road, you'll see. It made me into a better person. I can do more. I can reach out to different people. Use that struggle to your personal gain.

Last, we all have choices. We can choose to be a victim, or a victor.

We always have two roads. Either we become better or we become bitter. We always have choices. Instead of saying, “Poor me.” Say, “Yeah, me!”

Instead of saying, “Why me?” Say, “Why not me?” That change takes time. It's a process before you reach that point.

Now I'm going to go into a little bit more detail. We talked about hero reflection. It's important for you to find who your role model is. It can be a deaf person. It can be a hearing person. It can be someone who became deaf. I had no role models growing up, except the people I read about in books. When I was young, I read a series of books written by a doctor named Tom Dooley. He was a medical doctor with a very successful practice in Connecticut. He was single, earning a lot of money, but he was not satisfied with his life. He decided to work with Asian people, providing medical services at medical clinics, commuting between the United States and Asia. He used all his money to set up clinics for sick patients in Asia. At the same time, he was dying from cancer, but his medical practice in Asia became his life mission. This person became my hero. I wanted to be like him.

But growing up, I heard, “No, no, no. You can't become a doctor. No, no, no, no.” Now that I'm older and looking back, I see I've already done what he was doing. I'm a healer in a different way. I'm a healer working with students, working with people, and working with breast cancer survivors. The best part is, I didn't have to go to medical school so I don't have any loans to pay off.

I had another hero when I went to Gallaudet. My first deaf teacher was a black woman. She was deaf. She was black. She was a woman. She was a single mom

of a very young child. And I thought, wow. I never thought a woman could work at a university. I never thought a deaf person could reach that high a level. I wanted to be like her. And look where I am now. I work at the university. I work at NTID, and I'm doing exactly what she was doing. And I'm thrilled. She was my role model.

Storytelling. When you are going through a difficult time, write a story from the hero's perspective. What would your hero do? How would your hero handle the situation that you're in? You've heard of the question many people wear on their wrist, "What would Jesus do?" Same as what would my hero do? Write the story from that perspective.

Be the author of your life story. Do not allow difficult, disappointing experiences to dictate the outcome of your life. You have the power to be the author of your own story. You write the outcome of your own personal life. You have that power. It's amazing how much power you really do have.

Write what the lessons are that we've learned. Write a journal of blessings.

I do that with many, many people I meet, and I do it myself, personally. Have a book of blessings. What are the things you are thankful for despite what you've been through? Despite the fact that I lost my husband of 28 years I am thankful. We had a very close relationship. We had ups and downs like many couples do, but we were very close. I miss that closeness a lot. I miss him very much. At the same time, I count my blessings because we had 28 years together. I look at it from that perspective.

My daughter became deaf, but I count my blessings. She is surviving. She is thriving, and I'm thrilled for her. I'm blessed with two wonderful children. I look at it that way.

I got up this morning, and I said, "Yes! I have a home. I have a roof over my head. I can pay my bills. I can work. I have legs that work. I have arms that work. My eyes work. My ears are no good, but my eyes work." That's a blessing. That's always a blessing. You have to find these blessings every now and then. Write them out every day. Two or three blessings every day. You will feel different. I guarantee that.

Next: inner voice. Self-talk, we already talked a little bit about how what you think leads you to what you believe. You can change your thoughts. Your mind is a tape recorder. If what you say to yourself is negative, change the tape. Throw out that old tape. Put in a new one. Start with positive affirmation. Yes, I'm a good person. Yes, life is good. Yes, I have many good friends. Yes, I met new friends. Yes, I can get through this.

A letter to yourself. This next helpful practice is one that we're going to do as an activity, all of us together. It's a really critical activity. It's something I do with my students and it's something that I've done for myself.

Write a letter. Write about the struggles that you are experiencing. Write about how you've managed so far. Write about what you've learned from your experience. Applaud your own efforts. Acknowledge the strengths and express admiration for the person that you are. This is really critical.

I am going to read something that I wrote. This is from 1988. I kept all of my journals. I'm not always able to do it every day, but I try to write as much as I can.

This is from 1988, when I wrote a letter to myself after going through a serious depression.

“Sally, I always wanted this opportunity to speak with you this way. No distractions. No burdens. I cannot get through to you. Now I see that you've learned to slow down. You slowed down enough to be able to hear my voice. I always wanted to tell you I'm very proud of you. You've made a tremendous progress in your struggle. You've conquered your deafness. You've developed deaf pride. You've been a tower of strength. Even your children look up to you, and admire you.” I wrote this in 1988.

Another one, "I'm so proud of your accomplishments. I cannot help but say how much I really love you. Take care of yourself. Try not to do too much. Slow down just enough to be able to hear my quiet whispering when I want to tell you I love you."

I typed it. This took me 10 minutes to type, type, type. I'm reading it now and I have goose bumps. I kept that letter. Once in a while, I go back and read it, again. That's a powerful tool for me to get through that first depression. I wrote another letter in February of 2007. This is a letter written to me from my husband's perspective. I'm writing as if he's writing to me.

"Hi, Sally. It's been a while since I last wrote. It's quiet tonight. And we are alone together. I just want to tell you how amazing you are and how relieved I am that you've done so well. In fact, I feel honored that you are truly living your best life in my memory. What better way to honor me than by doing what you love, doing what truly inspires you, being your best, cheerful self? You are such an incredible

pillar of strength, and I feel very proud of all that you've been able to handle. Despite what you've been through. I see the work that you're doing with students. What a gift you have. You have such a gift for reaching out to people in pain and suffering. How in the world do you do that after being through so much pain yourself? Thank you for all the love that you shared with me, with the children, with my family, with your family, with all of your friends and students. You are blessed with a very loving and caring heart. I will always love you until the end of time."

I wrote that. I finished and read it, and I thought, wow, yeah, yeah! Yes! Yes! Writing letters to yourself is a very powerful tool to help you acknowledge your strengths.

One last part is really important for me and it will probably be important for many of you. This is a belief in the higher power, whatever your higher power is, whether it's God, Buddha, or whatever your religion or spiritual beliefs are. For me, the God that I worship and the faith that I have has helped me through the difficult times, and I rely on that to get through life. The belief in a higher power sustains you through struggles. There is an affirmation I say to myself almost every day, which helps me through the day. "God is my strength, my comfort, and my help." That helps me.

I'm going to end with a poem that I found many years ago, whose author is unknown, and I really love this poem. I'm not going to read the whole poem but just the end part of the poem. "So plant your own garden, decorate your own soul instead of waiting for someone to bring you flowers. And you learn that you really can endure, that you really are strong, that you really do have worth."

Now I'm going to close. This is an activity we're doing right now. There is plain paper right in front of each of you. This is homework for all of you. You can't leave without doing your homework. I want you to spend 10 minutes thinking, seriously thinking and write a letter to yourself, write about the person that you are. How you have survived, how you have endured. Write about your strength. What you're proud of. Write to yourself. Nothing negative allowed, only positive statements. This is a positive, loving letter to yourself. Five minutes, 10 minutes, do that right now. After we're done, maybe I can ask for one or two volunteers to read from their letter.

(Ten minutes lapse while audience member write.)

SALLY SKYER: I would like to ask if anyone would volunteer to read the letter that they wrote?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: All right, I wrote, "Dear Jim, I am pleased that you have hung in there and kept on working through the struggles in your life. It is important you have chosen to remain positive and strong, as you have faced many challenges in your life. You survived your difficult childhood and found a balance in the relationship with your parents. Good for you. It has brought many rewarding experiences and memories. You should be as proud of your education as I am proud of this accomplishment for you. Through the years of interruption, you succeeded in reaching your goal. Good job. Now I support you as you journey through the ups and downs of your deafness. Good for you that you have found this group of people who can help give you support and guidance. Wishing you the best, lots of love, always, Jim. (APPLAUSE)

SALLY SKYER: Yea! Beautiful letter! Beautiful! Other volunteers?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: “Dear, Lynn, I should have taken time long ago to write but I always seem too busy. Just a short note to tell you how important you are to me. Often, days, weeks, months, go by, and I neglect to acknowledge how wonderful you have been in spite of the all the adversity you have been through. I can't imagine how difficult losing your parents and three brothers within seven years was. Instead of giving up, you decided to go on and become a nurse. And then you took that on and became a healthcare professional, taking care of seniors. Your heart has always been one of compassion and service. On September 29, 2005, I was there when you woke up and realized you couldn't hear in your left ear. I have been with you through all the doctors' visits, and all the times you couldn't get answers. I was there again on February 1, 2007, when you woke up to the same experience in your right ear. Most people would have given up. Sure, you cried and became scared. But you sought some support and now you are at ALDAcon, finding there is a whole life ahead of you. I am proud of you. Love, yourself. (APPLAUSE)

SALLY SKYER: Thank you so much! Thank you. Yea! What an inspiration! Any more volunteers?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: This is not quite what I expected to write, and I could go on, but I'll just start out with "Dear Rebecca, you have survived a lot from birth. Being born a little earlier than expected so you could go to the right parents who could and would raise you better than the parents you were born to. They could

also help you use your strengths and appreciate your talents as well as temper your genetic weaknesses. Your mother, especially, served as a role model for perseverance and for being more than could have been, and as she has always said, you've had your own strengths in not giving up when things have been hard for you, especially with learning disabilities.

SALLY SKYER: Yea! Thank you. (APPLAUSE) Volunteers? We're not finished yet.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I have a hard time writing about myself, so I decided I would pretend I was my husband writing this. This is kind of what my husband would say to me. "Dear Patty, I have watched you through the years grow from a very shy girl to a wonderful, outgoing, loving and caring woman. You are one of the most loving people I know. You give unconditionally of all you have. You have overcome tremendous obstacles... and hearing losses. Always trying to be proactive, looking for solutions that will enable you to have a full and good life. I have watched you struggle through these losses, and then I have watched again and wondered as you regained most of your hearing back. It had been both joyous, and overwhelming, but also sad when you realized how much you missed in life as you were losing your hearing and vision. But this was your life, and you learned and gained more than you lost. I love you."

SALLY SKYER: Other volunteers, please.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: "Dear Linda, you started out early today. You have always been a morning person, determined to get up by yourself and start the day. You've had a good week. Since you returned to Rochester, things haven't changed

much. You're still feeling -- your feeling of expectation and excitement. You have seen a lot of differences these past few days. Heard the rustling of the leaves. You push forward new technology in your life. You have had a wonderful education, which makes you aware of this technology. It is a wonderful time to live in. Enjoy what you have today. I'll write later, Linda. "

SALLY SKYER: Thank you very much. We'll have one more volunteer.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: "In one year, I lost a son and a daughter and my mother and my husband. And despite all this, I have survived, and I've been honored by my contributions to friends and neighbors in life in general. And I'm proud that I have done and had a very long life, and despite having only a high school education plus some courses, I still believe my philosophy is I'm only going to be here once, and I don't expect to pass this way again. So I'm going to do it all now. Thank you." (APPLAUSE)

SALLY SKYER: Thank you for volunteering to share your personal letter. This is an activity I want you to continue doing from time to time. This is not a one-time thing. I want you to continue doing that, writing a letter to yourself, a loving, and cherished letter to help you through your struggle

Let me read a quote from the quote a book called *To Begin Again*. "I hold the power to choose a response to my fate. May I never be defeated. May I never grow bitter. May my struggle lead me to strength, to wisdom, to passion, and to you." Another one: "The most powerful tool to heal you is yourself."

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I heard on TV relating to what you are talking a about that if your bad thoughts tell you to do bad things, take the remote control and

change not only the TV but your thoughts.

SALLY SKYER: Yes, yes, I agree. Last quote; “What happens during this lifetime is not always my choice. But what I gained from it is.”

I want to close this workshop by telling you that I feel very blessed that you all came to hear this topic and I hope you leave feeling inspired and that you've learned something from this experience. Remember, please continue your letters. Thank you.

*Sally Skyer was born profoundly deaf to hearing parents. She married Rick, who was late-deafened husband and has two children one of whom became deaf in early adulthood. She has handled challenges of surviving cancer, helping her family with NF2 issues and survived the death of her husband. Despite multiple challenges in life she has a positive outlook on life. She has a Master's Degree in Deaf Counseling from Gallaudet and has worked as a counselor for deaf students at NTID for over 29 years. She has a wealth of experience helping deaf people develop resiliency and confidence and is an avid reader of books related to mental health and self-help.*