MANY STONES TO FORM AN ARCH: COOPERATION AND CONSIDERATION AS THE CORNERSTONES OF SUCCESSFUL INTERPRETATION[1]

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I would like to begin by telling you about some training that I completed last spring and early summer. It was four months of training which culminated in a "test" that took place on June 21, 22, and 23. For this training, I had mentors who provided me with guidance along the way, in the form of information and activities to develop skills and strategies that I would need. Even with the guidance and support of other people, when it came right down to it, I had only my judgment, my experience, and my knowledge to rely on. I was not alone, but I certainly was on my own, doing the actual work for which I had trained. This training definitely paid off. I learned invaluable information and gained skills that allowed me to complete the tasks I set out to do. I completed the test, and with great satisfaction. This scenario could easily be applied to interpreting training. But in this case it describes the precursor to traveling 250 miles over the course of three days by bicycle, with 2,000 other people, to raise 4.5 million dollars for eliminating AIDS. And I made it!

I kept seeing similarities and common elements between training for the bike ride and interpreting. Both interpreter training and the training for the ride take the ability to stand back and see the big picture. Both take a certain commitment, and both require mastery of specific sets of skills. In addition, both take a certain level of self-knowledge and an ability to work in cooperation with other people.

I want to focus here on the elements that lead up to the actual event of interpreting. A certain base, a solid foundation allows for effective interpretation. That same foundation or base provided the determination and skill I needed to pedal into camp each night. As I prepared this speech, I was remind-

[1] This paper is based on the keynote address presented by Ms. Shaw at the RID Region IV conference in Colorado Springs, Colorado, July 18, 1996.

ed of a song by the group, Sweet Honey in the Rock: *Step By Step*. The song begins: "Step by step the longest march is begun; many stones to form an arch, singly none." This quote inspires me because it says that wherever we are, that is where we begin. We begin to move forward from that place. By being persistent and proceeding "step by step," we can go to amazing lengths. And we get to rely on others to help us.

One way to conceptualize interpreting and the place of each interpreter in the community is through this metaphor of an arch formed by its many stones. I see the work that we do as a combination of skills and knowledge and determination that we bring forth to work in conjunction with other people. A cornerstone is "a stone at the corner of a building uniting two intersecting walls," the first stone laid that others are built upon. I see cooperation and consideration as the cornerstones of this arch because both require action on our part. These are features of a foundation which must be present for us to do our work and to keep the arch in place. They require that we take responsibility for the work that we do and take responsibility for what we bring to the work.

Capping the arch, in the place of paramount importance, is the keystone. The definition of a keystone is "the central wedge-shaped stone of an arch that locks its parts together." It is the stone that keeps all the others from collapsing into a useless pile of rocks. I see that keystone as dialogue or conversation. Again, conversation and dialogue require action and responsibility on our part.

Obviously, we must have excellent language skills and must always be expanding the range of those skills. There is no question that our interpretation skills must be quick and practiced. We can not lose sight of the linguistic skills or the interpretation skills, or our work is for naught. But we must set these skills on a firm foundation.

The good news is that we are in control of shaping that foundation. We know that, during an interpreting assignment, the content and context are not ours to shape in any way (our prerogative only and always lies with the process of interpretation). So our best bet is to do all that we can to prepare prior to walking in to an interpreting assignment. We have plenty of options at our disposal, plenty of ways to make sure we can be effective. Specifically, I see self-knowledge and preparation as the keys to effectiveness. These we have a lot of control over.

These are in our domain.

Maurice Gravier, professor at the University of Paris, Sorbonne, wrote the preface to *Interpreting for International Conferences* by Danica Seleskovitch. In it, he describes what characteristics an interpreter has to have. He says, "...those persons... [must] handle their native tongue with eloquence and precision... must be *versatile* and they must be *fast thinkers*. Furthermore, they must have *an inborn curiosity* and must have *the ability to take an interest* in each and every area of human activity. Lastly, interpretation requires that one have *nerves of steel, great self-control* and *acute and sustained powers of concentration*" [emphasis added] (Seleskovitch: v-vi).

This quote has stuck with me ever since I first read it back in 1982, partly because it is the most candid explanation that I've heard about what it takes to make an interpreter. What Gravier is saying is that interpreters must not only be able to develop these traits if they do not already possess them, but, more importantly, that they must be aware of <u>needing</u> these traits and what such traits mean to the work of interpretation. He is saying that not only are these essential skills, but that we must be acutely aware of and in control of them.

When I first read, "inborn curiosity," and "the ability to take an interest in each and every area of human activity," I thought, if this is what interpreting requires, it must be fascinating: not easy, but fascinating. Working in a variety of situations, with all sorts of topics, and all sorts of people would indeed require a flexible mind, one that would be open to all possibilities. Presented with such a wide range of people and topics, interpreters would certainly want to keep their interest piqued, or the work that was produced would suffer, which would be unfair to the people involved.

I did not, however, understand this to mean that interpreters would place themselves in any and every type of situation. We are not super-human beings. However, I did understand it to mean there would be great depth and breadth of interest necessary, and much learning to be done in those situations with the topics and mixtures of folks with whom we do choose to work. This sounded very exciting.

The "nerves of steel" requirement seemed a bit more daunting, yet understandable, since the interpreter would be constantly walking into someone else's situations and have to deal with other people all the time. A great deal of quick learning

would also be required for each new assignment. On top of that, you have the complexities of interpretation, so these "nerves of steel" would be tested over and over again.

"Great self-control" seemed like more of a personal challenge to the potential interpreter, a challenge that is central to working in this field. Again, interpreters walk into other people's lives and enter into their business, which means interpreters would have to keep their own ideas, opinions, and hopes for certain outcomes under wraps. In addition, they would have to be very disciplined to ensure that they would be prepared for each assignment in order to carry out each assignment effectively. With all of these elements contributing to making an effective interpreter, it meant potential interpreters would need to know a lot about themselves.

Gravier was saying that self-knowledge and responsibility for oneself are essential components in forming the foundation for an interpreter to work. Clearly, the strength of that foundation would have consequences for the people for whom we would be interpreting. Our actions can always make someone look bad, sometimes make someone look good, and easily leave someone with a partial or inaccurate message.

The more I have learned about interpreting and the inherent difficulties of the process, the more I have sought clarity on what the task requires. By knowing what the task requires, we can determine whether we are up to what it takes and whether our limitations will adversely affect the task. With such information, we then have the ability to make decisions about what we can and cannot do. This type of consideration, of the work, of the people involved, of the consequences, and of our own capabilities and culpability, is crucial.

This is where the more knowledge that we have about what we, individually, are able to do, where our interests lie, where our curiosity can be awakened, where our nerves are the strongest, and where our self-control is the greatest becomes a real strength. Armed with self-knowledge, we can now make informed decisions, be clear about the reasoning behind them, and truly take responsibility for our part in the interpreting.

It is as if we each have our own personal arch and we can stand back and look at it, not with other people, just by ourselves. We can see where the stones don't quite seem to sit right, or where there are cracks, or where a flower has broken through the surface and could compromise the integrity of the

structure. We can see where the stones fit together perfectly. (We may not have noticed this before.) We can take an inventory. We can see what needs to be fixed, where attention needs to be paid to keep the structure intact.

How do we fix our arch, when it needs fixing? How do we keep it intact? The "fixing" may come in a form that is personal to each of us. It also might take the form of a study group, or catching up on the literature in the field, or volunteering at the Deaf center. Maybe we will take a course on multi-cultural issues or ASL discourse, a public speaking course, write in a journal, keep a dialogue journal with a peer, go to workshops, set up a workshop, practice consecutive interpreting, role play situations, practice text analysis, practice team interpreting, practice relay interpreting, work with a language coach, work with a culture coach. The possibilities are endless. Whatever forms it takes, this attention, this "fixing" and keeping an eye on our personal arches, ultimately, will lead to a greater confidence and a greater competence, and greater fairness to everyone involved.

Interpreting is difficult. There is no question about that. It is complicated and rife with all sorts of possibilities for misunderstanding. Look at what the field of communication says about one-to-one communication (not interpreted) between people who speak the same language: they say that even when people think they are understanding each other, at best 80% of communication is actually taking place. Eighty per cent, at best. You wonder what happens to the other 20%, 30%, 40%.

Now, take a situation where the two people don't speak the same language, and are communicating through an interpreter. How well does this interpreter know:

- each of the people in the situation?
- the cultural/ethnic background of each of the people?
- the relationship and history between these people?
- where each of the people is coming from?
- what has led them to where they are today?

- what each of these people want to get out of the interaction?
- what life experiences bring them to where they are today?
- how well the deaf and hearing people know each other?
- why they are in this situation now?

This background knowledge should not be taken too lightly. This knowledge is critical in determining what percentage of communication may take place.

The better that people know each other, the more experiences that someone shares with another person, the less those people have to say in order to communicate to each other. This puts a person who does not share these experiences with them at a disadvantage — not only in terms of not being able to understand what is being said as easily, but also in terms of not knowing that they don't understand as readily. As interpreters, we are often in situations where two people know each other well or share a cultural background that we do not share or understand. While we think we understand them, in fact we do not realize what we do not understand. Now we not only do not understand what they are really talking about, we also may not know we are in this position.

An example of this comes to mind from a meeting that a colleague of mine was interpreting. The city "Chicago" was mentioned in relation to one of the staff members who was going to be traveling on business to Chicago. It was clear to the interpreter that this was not the first time this staff member had gone to Chicago. But the interpreter searched her brain for something else that had been said that would tell her why everyone started smirking at the mention of this staff member and Chicago. All the interpreter could come up with was what she knew about the staff member: a woman who had worked at the company for a couple of years as an accountant; and what she knew about Chicago: a large midwestern metropolitan city. What the interpreter did not know was the background information — the information that the other people in the room shared. What the interpreter did not know in this case was that

the last time this staff member had gone to Chicago it was not on business, but to scale the Sears tower. That knowledge is where a large part of the communication was.

We cannot know every detail about every person we work with. What this example shows us is that we must be aware of not knowing background information. This is the shared information that forms the basis of the relationships that people have with each other. We must be aware that when we are interpreting for people who are familiar with each other, they are likely to be less expansive in their communications with each other, which means that we may understand less of what they are talking about than they do. As interpreters, we must be able to allow this to happen without getting in their way. This is what knowing about the people, their relationships, their history means.

Knowing why people are together in a situation is also critical. Another colleague of mine often describes the following situation when she is asked why she needs to prepare for each assignment. She went to an assignment once, knowing only that it was an employment meeting. Imagine if you would, what that might mean. She says she figured it would be a staff meeting or employer/employee meeting, probably to talk about the work that was being done. The employer and employee did in fact meet. The meeting was set up for the boss to fire the deaf employee. The interpreter's expectations were way off the mark and she was caught by surprise.

There will always be surprises in our work, but preparation is clearly an essential component to the interpreting process: a big, solid rock on the arch. There is no question that understanding must take place during the actual interpreting, and in order for that to happen while actually interpreting, preparation must be done beforehand. We must be ready.

First we must gather enough information to determine if we are appropriate for an assignment. Run a checklist in your mind: what do I know about the participants, situation, and topic? If I do not know enough about any of the above in general, where can I get additional information to determine if I will be compatible? If I feel compatible so far, where and when can I get specific information for this specific assignment? This can often be accomplished by a couple of phone calls to further insure that I am compatible. We must learn about each assignment.

This is not that difficult to do. It does takes time, and it takes an understanding of how preparation, how being ready, will affect each and every job that we do. There is the topic or the subject matter. We can read up on the topic and gain some some understanding of different views. We can talk to our neighbors who work in the field and to our Deaf consultants about the topic in ASL. (What I mean by a Deaf consultant is a Deaf person who is a friend, a mentor, and a language coach, who we go to for exactly this: to talk about subjects in ASL, to talk to them about how a topic is discussed in Sign; about the semantics of the language; and about our comfort level in various situations.) We can look at our own experiences that are directly or indirectly related and finally we can talk to the participants about this topic.

A colleague of mine phoned me about an upcoming assignment that she was considering accepting in which she would be interpreting at a soccer and volleyball camp. We spoke about options that she had at her disposal. She had already talked to a Deaf friend of hers who would meet with her and talk to her about the sports, and she would set up a similar meeting with a hearing friend. In the end, she met with each person who watched soccer and volleyball matches with her and walked her through them. She also checked with libraries nearby her, and eventually located ASL tapes on the subjects through her regional Federal grant office. We all have access to the libraries the grants maintain and the mountains of information that surrounds us.

Next, there is the situation or the setting. How familiar and comfortable are each of us with monologues, staff meetings, doctor visits, children's story hour? How can we find out more about the situation? We can ask for a description from our contact person; call someone who is familiar with this situation or setting and ask for more information from them; go visit the site; talk to other interpreters and Deaf people who work in this setting. We are often called upon to interpret in situations where we have no personal experience. This puts us at an extreme disadvantage. Take for instance interpreting on stage for a speech. How many of us have given speeches, have stood on stage on our own behalf? How many of us have taught school? We need to put ourselves in these situations, as the speaker or the teacher or the reader of children's stories. Role play is an excellent way to do this: study how other people

operate in these situations and settings and talk to people about their experiences.

There are the participants. Can we communicate with each of the participants? Does understanding take place? Do I know these people? Have we had prior contact? Do they know me? Will they be comfortable with me as the interpreter? Will I be comfortable working as the interpreter with these people? Do we come from different cultural backgrounds? How will my presence affect the interaction? The only way that I can I think of to answer these questions is to have a conversation with the participants.

We need to know who we are interpreting for, and what the purpose of the interaction is. We need to have a context. That context, that framework, will be filled in with the particulars with the information that arises during the actual interpreting — but we must start out with a place to hang the information on. A blank slate does not work.

Walking in with a blank slate will effect our understanding and the participants' interaction, usually adversely. We know that seasoned interpreters — in a situation where they are unfamiliar with the context or the people or the content or the culture, enough so that they do not have the framework to understand what is going on — will not function effectively because understanding takes place on only the most superficial level. Likewise, we can put interpreters with little interpreting experience in a situation where they know the people and the situation, and they will be highly effective.

I want to describe an exercise I that I took part in recently that illustrates understanding on different levels. (This passage and exercise was first shared with me by Sandra Gish, who received it from a student. Sad to say, the origins of this exercise are otherwise lost.) I was at a workshop for interpreter educators — both Deaf and hearing. We paired up into groups where one person was the "interpreter" and the other person was the "consumer" (there were three people in a group for relay interpreting). The instructions were that a short passage would be read, line by line, and the "interpreter" in each group was to work consecutively. The "consumers" plugged their ears and got the information only from their interpreter. The interpreters were instructed to interpret each chunk and not to wait until the end of the entire passage. They were encouraged to do the best they could, not to worry about it, but to "play with"

what they were given. The passage follows. Think about interpreting each line as you read this.

> First, you arrange things into different groups, depending on their color and texture. If there is not much to do, one pile may be sufficient. If you lack the necessary equipment, you must go somewhere else. It is important not to overload. It is better to do too few things than too many. Complications can arise if all directions are not followed, and a mistake can be expensive. At first, the whole procedure may seem difficult, but soon it will become just another fact of life. You can get caught up, but never ahead on this task.

After the passage was read and interpreted, line by line, the workshop leader asked the "consumers" the following questions: "How do you arrange things?" "What do you do if you lack the necessary equipment?" "Can you ever get ahead on this task?" and so forth. The "consumers" answered each question correctly; they had passed, but they still had no idea what they were talking about. Next, the workshop leader told the "interpreters" but not the "consumers" what she was talking about: doing laundry. They discussed the text, line by line; what each line meant and how you would talk about it in ASL. After this discussion, the passage was read again and the same "interpreters" interpreted it again to the same "consumers." This time, the "consumers" got a full message. The "consumers" were sure that a different passage had been read the second time. This exercise gave us a great deal of food for thought. For me, it brought home, more clearly than I can remember in my fifteen years of interpreting and training, what the task of interpretation requires us to do, and how understanding, on more than a superficial level, will make it or break it.

It is our responsibility as interpreters to be satisfied that we have enough knowledge and are comfortable enough to walk into a situation so that we can be effective as interpreters. Why would any one of us want to go to a job less than satisfied with our preparation? Why would any one of us want to go to a job not knowing whether we are compatible with the assignment?

For example, I know little, if anything, about airplane maintenance. This is not a subject that I would agree to interpret a speech on, nor a topic that I would consider myself qualified to

interpret in any circumstance. So, when approached to interpret for two airline mechanics, it was only after a great deal of discussion and with the clear understanding from both of them that I lacked the knowledge, vocabulary and familiarity with the workings of airplanes, and that the inability to convey what they were saying, pronounce or spell words would be a reflection on my own limitations and not those of the other person. I agreed to do the job after speaking with both people, and because they were aware of how my limitations would effect the interpreting and their interaction. With this knowledge on their part, and flexibility from us all, there was a lot of pointing and gesturing; frequently, as I was stumbling to interpret, they would often look at each other and nod and tell me they got it already.

Compatibility takes shape in a variety of forms. Being creative, having conversation, and taking responsibility to present an accurate picture of ourselves can lead to effective interpreting situations, especially when there may be no interpreter who is compatible in all departments. By talking with each other, the options are endless. But first we must be clear about what we have to work with. With a bit of conversation (describing what I will and will not be able to do — taking responsibility for my part as the interpreter and describing my limitations and my willingness, and where that ends), we may become an acceptable interpreter for a situation.

Another option that is often underutilized is working with a Deaf (or relay) interpreter. This is a fantastic option. Often, our own insecurity prevents us from recognizing when a situation requires a team of Deaf and hearing interpreters. (How will it look if I say I need a Deaf interpreter to work with me?) It is indeed a reflection on us when we state that a Deaf interpreter is needed: a reflection of our self-knowledge and a reflection of our understanding of the task.

Even when we are compatible with the topic and the people, sometimes we are still not the right interpreter for a job. A colleague of mine regularly interprets a staff meeting for a small company. As she and her contact person were discussing the particulars for an upcoming meeting, she discovered that they would be discussing the workings of the meetings (including interpreting matters). She suggested that another interpreter replace her so that the meeting participants could speak freely about the interpreting. Even though this meant added expense

and time to secure the services of another interpreter and to prepare them, the substitution was well worth it for everyone.

Interpreting agencies have an obligation not only to provide interpreters, but to provide effective interpreting services. In order to meet their obligations, agencies need information from us. We are not everything to all people. We do not each belong in every situation. We are not always the right interpreter, even though sometimes we are the only interpreter. So the more we know about ourselves, where our interests lie and where they do not, the more we can work with agencies or individuals who call on us to fill interpreting assignments. The more we share this information with other interpreters, the more likely that appropriate referrals can be made.

The frustration that interpreters feel often comes from a feeling of powerlessness: a lack of power to act effectively, a helplessness. But we do not have to stay stuck in that state of powerlessness if we realize that there are almost always options. We can create a sense of control. The possibilities are there. Shari Lewis (known best as Lambchop's best friend) tells how her momma and daddy raised her by telling her stories. When she came home one day after not being able to do something she tried to do, her daddy sat her down. This is the story he told her:

> Once there was a little boy whose daddy said, "See that rock over there? I want you to move it over here."
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> And the little boy said, "Ahh, it's too big."
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> The daddy said, "I want you to use all your strength and move that rock from over there, to over here. Now go on."
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> So the little boy trudged on over, bent down, and couldn't budge the rock, which to him resembled a small boulder.
>
> "Daddy, I can't do it."
>
> "Sure you can. Use all your strength and move that rock from over there, to over here," he repeated.
>
> The little boy went and tried again, huffing and puffing, but couldn't budge it. He looked up at his daddy longingly, who said, one more time, "I want you to use all your strength and move that rock from there to over here."
>
> The little boy tried and his father repeated himself several more times. And finally, he came back to his

daddy and said, "I can't get that rock to move at all, much less move it over here." His daddy said, "Sure you can. Only you forgot something." The little boy looked all around, rather puzzled, and looked back up, and asked, "What?"

"You forgot to ask me for help, and that would be using all of your strength."

This story illustrates well, what often happens for us as interpreters: we just need to remember to use all our strength. As interpreters, we can ask for help or assistance, we can respond to a request, we can offer help or assistance. (I am not advocating doing things for the sake of another, or on other people's behalf — this takes away all agency from that person). We can talk to each other, make agreements, look at options together. This is the cooperation and consideration of which I am speaking.

Because we have the obligation to stay fresh and alert and hold our work to the same high standards for each interpreting job that we do, we have to keep things in perspective. We don't want to find ourselves bored, or hurried, or even take ourselves too seriously. I say "ourselves," not the situation. There is no room for us to not be serious about doing an effective job of interpreting — there is no room for us to make a judgment about the seriousness of someone else's business. We do not have the right to judge the seriousness of someone else's interactions and how that plays out in their life. We would not even want to attempt to.

It is common to lose sight of the big picture. Indeed, it is common to lose sight of the fact that most things work out in time. We lose sight that we are playing a role in someone else's life; that this is about someone else's business. There is no reason that these people whose lives we're entering are not, or can not become experts on interpreting. This might make our jobs easier. A Deaf friend of mine was in an accident a while back, and now interacts with the medical profession on a regular basis. She is not able to sign quickly or easily anymore, and many people assume she can not or does not want to communicate. Unfortunately, that is the perspective they begin with. Her appointments with medical professionals, even the alternative therapy professionals, usually begin with strong undertones of her being in a very powerless position. For an interpreter to struggle with understanding her signs only puts her in

a further powerless position. Normally, she meets with each interpreter before they go to interpret for her, to bring them up to speed and fill them in on the purpose of this visit, the specifics of this visit, and to make sure they know where she is coming from. If the interpreter has never worked with her before, she provides a written autobiography detailing her life prior to and since the accident. She has had opportunities to see very clearly why interpreters need to be prepared, and how our preparedness and our perspective affects her life in very real ways. She has opened a lot of minds and hearts to talking to each other and working together in a sense that we don't often see. We really have to talk to each other, ask questions and listen. Paying attention is one of the best things we can do.

We need to de-mystify the process of interpreting, both for ourselves and for other people. We do not fool anyone by thinking that we can be everything to everyone or do everything. Once we understand what the task of interpreting requires, we can look at ourselves and see whether we are up to the task. Not everyone has the skills, the abilities and the interest, the personality, the motivation that interpreting requires. Not everyone is a parent. Not everyone writes books or articles. Not everyone rides a non-motorized, 2-wheeled contraption (a bicycle) 250 miles. Nor does everyone need to. We each get to find our own niche.

Knowing ourselves, our likes, dislikes, limits, motivations, what drives us is the at the core of being able to interpret. It is at the core of how we select assignments, how we decline assignments, how we realize that we not only have the right to be compatible with assignments, but that it is our obligation to make sure we are compatible with each assignment. How else do we know that we need someone else to help move a rock and ask for help? Maybe this is, in part, what Deaf people mean when they say how important our "attitude" is.

I encourage each of us to continue to learn about ourselves, and to bring those "selves" to the table and talk to each other. I encourage each of us to consider our own stones, no matter how large or small they seem, rounded or pointed. Consider how those stones take shape and how we will work with their fit.

I have offered several possible stones for this arch. Each of us can offer additional stones. I have offered cooperation and consideration as the cornerstones. And as the keystone, I

offered us dialogue and conversation. As we proceed with this conference and workshops, as well as our individual lives, I wish for each of us to go forth in the spirit of working together and talking with each other.

Reference

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