KEYNOTE ADDRESS

SIDWELL FRIENDS SCHOOL

"DIVERSITY DAY"

DELIVERED BY

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March 31, 1993

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It is a great joy to be here with all of you and to help you launch this day to look at diversity and conflict resolution issues. I celebrate Sidwell Friends for doing this important program today.

What does diversity mean? That word has been thrown about a lot lately. I created my own definition of diversity following a program that I led a number of years ago in Birmingham, Alabama. I had been invited to Birmingham because the community leaders wanted to try to heal the scars of racism in the city. They decided to hold our program in the same church that had been bombed in 1963 when several young Black children had been killed. We had every religious leader in the city in the church that day.

At one point in the session a woman put up her hand. She was a white woman who taught at the University of Birmingham. She said "Cherie, please help. I feel like the Black students I teach let me into the living room, but not into the kitchen." I never forgot that statement. A living room, after all, is often a formal place. It's the place where we are polite and entertain visitors. The kitchen is where we are with family, where we feed one another -- sometimes where we yell at each other, but where we always return. And how many of us have people of different races, religions, ages, class backgrounds, sexual orientations, living with us in our kitchens? And to me, that's what working on diversity is about -- increasing the kinds of people that are with us in our kitchens.

When we talk about diversity I think it is also important to remember that every group counts, that we cannot leave anyone out. I understood this in a new and profound way a number of years ago after we at NCBI (National Coalition Building Institute) had been invited to help a New England campus deal with a rise of racial incidents (on that campus). The president of the school was particularly concerned after ugly racist flyers, particularly targeting Black people, had been passed around the campus. He decided to cancel classes for the day and have NCBI come and lead a prejudice reduction session for 600 students, faculty, and administrators. We arrived on the campus and the dean of students asked us to meet with the security police, because she had been warned that some people might show up to disrupt our program.

We met with the security police and said, "Unless we wave to you that we are out of control and need your help, please don't intervene." We do not know if anyone came with the intent of disrupting our program that day, because everyone participated. The next day the dean called me up and said that the students from the African-American Center had come to her office the following day and said that it was a great program. They wanted to be trained to lead these kind of prejudice reduction workshops on campus. But what really struck me was when she said, "I'm pretty sure I know the student who was responsible for disseminating those hateful racist flyers; "that student had come to her office and said, "That was a great program yesterday, I want to get involved; I want to learn to lead this work."

I asked myself, what had we done that had enabled not only the people who had been the overt victims and targets of discrimination and oppression to want to take leadership on these issues, but enabled an overt perpetrator to change enough to want to lead this work. I decided that it had to have been the moment in the day when we had asked members of the audience, "What is a group that you belong to that you are not always proud of?" One person said, "Being a white male." We brought that person up in front of the 600 participants and he got a chance to leap in front of the group and say it was great to be a white male, and everyone applauded him.

We can, and hopefully will end all racism, and there will still be people of all different skin colors. We can and hopefully will end all sexism, and there will still be males and females. It is absolutely essential when we think about diversity work that we fully understand how important it is to include everyone.

If we want to end prejudice and if we want to reduce inter-group conflict, we are going to need a specific methodology that helps shift some of the most bigoted and entrenched prejudicial attitudes. What does this?

We have learned in our work in the National Coalition Building Institute that the most powerful way to change attitudes is to hear a personal story -- a specific time that someone has experienced discrimination, particularly when that story is emotional. Here are three different examples of how this particular tool has shifted entrenched attitudes.

The first story took place in Northern Ireland a number of years ago. I had been asked to work with families, both Catholic and Protestant, who had lost members of their family due to terrorism and violence in Northern Ireland. The program began, and within the first hour a Catholic young person slammed his fist on the table and said, "This is a stupid program. It's not going to do any good. I don't know why I came." He proceeded to look increasingly hostile throughout the morning -- until the moment when a Protestant young person got up to tell his story. The story was about the day he witnessed his father being shot and killed by para-military. As this Protestant young person was telling his story and sharing his grief and rage with the group, I looked over at the Catholic young person, who had earlier in the morning said this was a stupid program. He had tears coming down his face, and when the Protestant young person finished his story, my Catholic friend looked at him and said, "If you have the guts and courage to share what you just shared, then I have to have the guts and courage to stay here with you and work together so we can bring a change between our peoples in Northern Ireland."

We can refute facts and figures. We cannot ignore someone's story.

The second example took place in Phoenix, Arizona, last year. We had brought together community leaders from throughout the city who wanted to come up with a citywide plan for doing prejudice reduction work in their community. At one point in our three days together, a heated discussion took place over an issue pending before the City Council -- whether or not to grant specific civil rights to gay and lesbian people, including the right to adopt, to provide foster care, or to share joint custody of children. The group was evenly divided on whether or not the city council should pass this civil rights bill.

During the discussion, I noticed a woman seated in the group who had come out to the group as a lesbian. She looked particularly distraught. I went over to her and said, "Do you need to talk to the group?" She said, "Why bother? Nothing will change." I said to her again, "Do you need to talk to people?" So she agreed to come up before the group to tell her story. She had just gone through an extremely painful court custody battle during the last two years, to try to maintain joint custody of her daughter. It was clear in the telling of her story how deeply she loved her daughter.

Not only had she gone through enormous legal expense but she endured the trauma of being told for two years by attorneys, by the judge, and by everyone in the court system that she was unfit to be a mother simply because she was a lesbian. She heard that she was immoral and incapable of caring for her daughter. She lost the court battle and her ex-husband took her daughter out of state. She was never allowed to see her daughter again. She wept as she told her story. When the participants were then asked to say what had touched them hearing her story -- a man put up his hand. He was a principal of one of the largest high schools in Phoenix, and he looked at her and said, "You know, I was one of the people earlier on this morning in that discussion who said I would not support a civil rights bill for gay and lesbian people in this city, and I just sat here and listened to your story. As I was listening, I thought about all the parents I know who neglect, mistreat, sometimes even beat their children, and here I was, about to deny you, a loving parent, the right to care for your child." He was visibly shaken, and he committed himself to work on behalf of the gay and lesbian civil rights bill in the city council.

The third example took place at a hospital. There had been an increase in racial incidents at the hospital and doctors decided that they wanted some assistance. At one point in our work with them, an African-American woman got up to share a specific time when she had experienced racism. She said to the group, with great emotion, "I have an infant, about 18 months old, and I have a friend who's white who has a baby about the same age. We often go shopping together. Every time we're in a department store the department store personnel go up to my friend's baby and coo and make contact and loving noises at that baby but they always ignore my son."

I looked out at the group of doctors, many of whom looked shocked. The minute she shared her story, of course it made sense to them; this must be one of the results of racism. But it had not occurred to many of the white doctors that this could happen to their colleague's baby. After the program I received letters from the doctors. One wrote, "I can't go into a department store and not remember that story. It has changed how I think about my own medical practice with African-American children here in the hospital." Again, we can ignore facts and figures but we cannot discount someone's personal story.

A phrase we use at the National Coalition Building Institute to describe this idea is -- "Your pain is like my pain." There was a book that came out a number of years ago entitled, The Altruistic Personality. The authors of this book, the Oliners, decided that they wanted to see if they could identify specific characteristics that determine what they called altruism. In particular, they were looking at the kind of individuals who would risk their lives on behalf of others. They interviewed non-Jews -- we Jews call them "righteous gentiles" -- who had risked their lives during World War II to save Jews. Then they did an equal number of interviews with those who had not saved Jews. What they found was very interesting. Among the rescuers, they did not find a single common characteristic in terms of gender, race, class, nationality, age, or ethnicity. The non-Jews who had risked their lives to save Jews all reported that there had been something in the Jewish experience during the Holocaust that had reminded them of something that had happened to them. "Your pain is like my pain."

I saw this principle in operation again five years ago on a college campus on the east coast of the United States. A controversial speaker had been invited to the campus. During his speech he was alleged to have said, "The only good Zionist is a dead Zionist," Zionism being the Jewish political movement that had led to the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948. A Jewish student stood up, following this speech, and said, "I'm proud to be a Zionist." The Jewish student got hit. It was the lead story on the 6:00 o'clock and 11:00 o'clock evening news that night. The college administrators were concerned about all the negative publicity and decided they had better do something. They brought two different mediators to campus who were unable to build any bridges between the students and faculty. We were then asked to lead a program for Black and Jewish students and faculty. We arrived on the campus to find CBS, ABC and NBC camera crews set up. I invited the newspeople to return at the end of the program to hear reports of what happened but insisted on leading a closed session.

At one point during the session we brought up the Jewish student who had stood up and said he was proud to be a Zionist.

We asked him to tell us what it had been like for him that day. The student said, "You know, my father left Germany in the late '30s. All my life while I was growing up he kept trying to tell me how scared he was to live in Germany in the '30s. But, I could never understand what he was talking about until I heard that speaker. Then, I was terrified." The student began to cry.

Following his story, the director of the African-American Center on campus stood up and looked at him and said, "I want you to know that I was one of the students that was instrumental in bringing that speaker to campus; yet as I sat and listened to you, I kept thinking the whole time you were talking that I could remove your face and put a black face there and he would be saying the same kind of thing that you are now saying.

This student was visibly shaken. The room was electric from that moment forward. We continued to hear stories from both groups. But a profound moment had taken place. A shifting of attitudes had begun.

Even in places with the most entrenched conflicts, this is the fundamental principle that we have found to work again and again. I have led training programs twice now in South Africa. The second time I was in South Africa, I had arrived 20 minutes before Nelson Mandela was released. We had been invited to lead a program for educators from across the country who wanted to learn how to bring Black and White young people together. In the room that day we had members of the ANC; we had security police; we had the youth leaders from the Black townships around South Africa. At one point in the program one of the Black youth leaders stood up to tell, with enormous grief, the story of what had happened to his grandmother when the government ripped down her house and forced her, an 85-year-old woman, to move.

He finished his story and one of the Afrikaners, the Afrikaners being the White Dutch of South Africa, stood up. He turned to this Black youth leader and said, "For all these years, I've read and listened to all the reasons to end Apartheid; but I want you to know this is the first time, listening to your story, that I knew in my heart why it must end."

You may never work in Northern Ireland. You may never visit South Africa, but you have daily opportunities here in Washington, D.C. to confront prejudice. What are the every-day skills that you can practice to be able to take leadership to reduce the prejudice and intergroup conflicts that take place around you. There are four specific conflict resolution skills that I would like to put forward that I know you will have a chance to practice this morning during the workshop sessions.

The first and probably most important skill that you can use is to listen to someone, even when you strongly disagree with what that person is saying.

Ten years ago, I was giving a speech with an Arab man, trying to model cooperation between a Jew and an Arab. There were probably about a thousand people listening to the speech. At one point in my talk I said I was proud of Israel. I did not know it, but there was a woman in the room who had been working as a nurse in the PLO camps in Southern Lebanon. She had come to the United States to get surgery for her ears because her hearing had been impaired as a result of Israel's bombing into southern Lebanon. She stood up from the back of the room and screamed at me, "How can you be proud of Israel?" She proceeded to list all the atrocities that she felt Israel had committed against the PLO in southern Lebanon. Many of the things she said I agreed with. Some of the things she said I did not agree with. But I did not interrupt her. She vented for fifteen minutes.

If you have ever been around someone who says something you strongly disagree with, fifteen minutes is a very long time. She finished and suddenly she looked up at me and made eye contact with me from the back of the room for the first time. She said, "You're the first Jewish person who's ever listened to me. Can we meet for lunch?" That did more for every single person in that room than had I interrupted her at some point and tried to dialogue or debate the issues she had presented. She and I continued to meet for several months. As a result of our time together she went back to the PLO camps in southern Lebanon and we began to lead workshops for Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs.

In addition to listening, another fundamental skill is to be able to identify and reach for the hurt that is underneath oppressive jokes, comments, and slurs. I believe that human beings are either being loving, thoughtful,

caring, or they are calling out for help. People can do some awfully stupid things as a way of calling out for help. One example of this skill comes from one of our NCBI staff members. He tells a story of the time he first came to one of our training programs in Boston, Massachusetts.

There is a place in Boston -- if you have every been to Boston -- maybe you know it -- it's called Filene's Basement, where people shop for bargains. A bunch of participants from our training program decided one evening to go down to Filene's Basement. They were standing in the Boston subway station looking a bit lost, and the conductor came up to Al and said, "Where are you going?" He said, "Filene's Basement." And the conductor said, "Oh, you're going to love Filene's Basement," and then he said, "You know, I was at Filene's Basement the other day. I went to try to get an anniversary gift for my wife; the bells went off; the lights started flashing and there was this huge rush. I realized that people were all rushing to a table where there were scarves. I knew my wife would love a scarf, so I started rushing over to that table to get my wife a scarf."

And as Al listened, the man said, "And then there was this Chinese lady, you know the kind, with the elbows, and she started pushing me out of the way." Al thought, "Oh, my gosh, I've just come from a training program on prejudice reduction. What am I going to say?" He remembered the principle he learned that day of trying to reach for the hurt underneath, so he simply moved a little closer. He looked at the conductor and said, "So you didn't get the scarf for your wife?" And the man said, "No, I didn't." And Al said, "I'm sorry about that." In that moment they made human-to-human contact, and the man suddenly looked at Al and said, "You know, you're going to love Filene's Basement. There are people from all over the world there. You've got your Jews and you've got Black people and you've got Chinese people who go there -- it's a great place." That shift happened because Al understood that it was not so much that the man wanted to say something awful about Chinese people, but he was looking for a target for his hurt. In Al's reaching out to him and acknowledging that hurt, the man was able to shift.

A very different kind of example of this principle took place when we were launching an NCBI Chapter in Los Angeles this past fall. We had participants from the Los Angeles Police Department; we also had present several Los Angeles County human relations commissioners. What I learned

from that program, which was held just following the riots in Los Angeles, was that if we wanted to work with the police and to assist them to move forward in their commitment to work with Latinos in Southeast Los Angeles, we had to first work with them on how they had been victimized as police. We had to listen to where they had been hurt.

During the sessions, the officers told stories about their painful experiences -- going into McDonald's and having five parents haul their children in front of them and say, "Look. If you're not good this mean policeman's going to come after you and arrest you." But the story that got to me the most was from an African-American police officer who said that following the events of the Rodney King trial -- his mother, who had always been completely proud of him, told him, "I want you to know that I'm ashamed of you because you're a police officer." This police officer, with all of his colleagues present, burst into tears and wept about how devastating his mother's comments had been.

That moment I fully understood that if we wanted to assist police officers to work on their racism, we had to work with them first on how they got targeted, misunderstood, and mistreated.

The third principle in being effective at resolving conflict and being a bridge builder is to be able to appreciate someone even when they say oppressive things that we do not like. I remember a number of years ago, I was invited to lead a program in a high school. On the previous Friday afternoon, a teacher, just to make connection with the young people, had said, "So what are you all doing this weekend?" One of the students had put up his hand and said, "Oh, we're going to go burn Jews." The teacher decided that she wanted some assistance. So we went into the school and decided to ask the young people what was something they wanted to be proud of. And one of them said, "I think it's great to be a skinhead." So at one point we had them saying how great it was to be a skinhead. I looked at the teachers, who were cowering, thinking, "Where is this going to go?" Yet right after we did that, one by one, the young people started opening up saying, "You know, I don't like it when my friends say racist and anti-Semitic things but I'm afraid to interrupt it. I'm afraid of losing my friends." It was only when we gave the young people an opportunity to claim pride in the one thing they had

figured out to be proud of, being a skinhead, that they were able to hand us their racism, and their anti-Semitism -- where they were calling out for help.

To give a very different kind of example, one of my favorite stories, took place at an elementary school in the Republic of Ireland. We had been asked to teach fifth-graders to be prejudice reduction leaders in their school and we taught a simple process. If somebody says something you do not like that is hurtful, find something first to appreciate about them so you can make a good connection. Two girls volunteered and said, "We want to try." One of the girls got up and said to the other, "You look really ugly in those glasses." And the girl looked back at her without skipping a beat and said, "But I couldn't tell how beautiful you were if I didn't wear these glasses." Those children got that principle so quickly -- to come back with an appreciation was to shift the oppressive comment.

And the fourth principle -- in addition to listening, in addition to reaching for the hurt underneath, and in addition to being able to find something to appreciate is -- reach for the higher ground. We must reach for real humanity with each other. Let me give you an example.

A number of years ago I went with a friend for a vacation weekend. We went to this hotel where it turned out -- we hadn't known it ahead of time -- there was an in-house comedian. We went the first night and the comedian told all those horrible ethnic jokes about every group, and people were drinking and laughing. My friend and I said to each other -- are we going to go up to this comedian and try to find the hurt underneath his professional choice? Are we going to try to find some appreciation we can say to him first? No, that will probably not work. What can we do?

It just happened that the hotel management announced that the last morning was going to be a talent show. I said to my friend, "Why don't you volunteer for the talent show?" My friend said, "Come on, Cherie, you know that's not what it's going to be about." I said, "I bet we can pull this off. Why don't you volunteer for the talent show and offer to sing the song that you sing about Derry, a city in Northern Ireland." My friend is Irish

Catholic. And there's a very moving peace song that he loved to play on the guitar about what happened in Northern Ireland when the British police took over.

So my friend signed up for the talent show and asked to go last. All weekend we practiced exactly what he was going to say and how he was going to say it. Monday morning came; the talent show began; and just as we had anticipated, the first person came up to share his talent and the comedian decided the person had a large face and got everybody laughing at his fat face. My friend looked at me and said, "I'm not doing this, Cherie. There's no way." I said, "We can pull this off."

So it got to be his turn. He went on stage and, just as we had practiced all weekend, he stood with complete dignity and complete self-respect. He looked out at the 500 people and with absolutely no blame in his voice said, "We've been talking about ethnic groups all weekend. I bet every one of you is proud of the group you come from. I'm Irish Catholic and I'd like to sing a song from my people in Northern Ireland. He sang his song. He got a standing ovation. People cried. People came up to him and said, "You know, we hated what was going on all weekend. Thank you so much for what you did." We modeled for every single person there what it meant to talk about ethnic groups in a dignified way, that left everyone feeling proud. That's an example of holding people to their higher ground.

The last thing I want to say, and probably the most important, is that every single one of you can be a leader. You can make a difference on these issues. If I had to say the single concern that I hear over and over in my work all over the world, it is the sense of powerlessness that people feel. "Who am I, a single person, to make a difference against all the oppression that's out there?" Yet, what we have learned in our work in NCBI is that if we train people to see themselves as leaders we can make a difference. That is why we in NCBI have launched programs to train high school students all over the United States to be prejudice reduction leaders in their high schools. I remember this past year at a high school train-the-trainer session here in Washington, DC. We got to the part of the training where we teach how to change somebody after they have made an oppressive joke, remark, or a slur.

One of the young people who had been active in a gang put up his hand and said, "Come on, Cherie. I mean, this is really stupid. You know what? If someone calls me a nigger, I'm taking out my knife." I stopped for a minute and thought, what do I have to say to this young person that is going to make a difference. But I searched inside and looked at him and the other young people who were waiting to see how I was going to respond, and I said, "How many of you want to walk around feeling really powerful?" They looked at each other. Was anyone going to admit it, and yet one-by-one they put up their hands. Then I said, "How many of you want to walk around feeling completely good about yourself?" Again, they looked at each other and then slowly started putting up their hands.

And I said, "If you want to walk around feeling really powerful, if you want to walk around feeling really good about yourself -- you have to know that you can change somebody. Because otherwise you're stuck, either walking away, ignoring what's going on out there or taking out a knife. And this training is about learning another alternative that gives <u>you</u> power and does not hurt anybody." That is what today is all about here at Sidwell Friends -- to learn skills, to have an alternative. to really be able to make a difference. Each of you can be powerful leaders. Take the skills you will learn in the workshops. Take them into your lives both here in your high school and everywhere. You <u>can</u> be leaders at reducing prejudice and taking on the conflicts around you.