WELCOME TO DICTIONOPOLIS!

Only once in my teaching career, was I called an unsavory name—"Dampie—" by a first-grader named Liam. Although the insult is not a real word, name-calling is one of the lowest forms of argument in a disagreement. Yet, because I try to listen mindfully and intentionally without immediately evaluating, judging, or disciplining, I saw this was clearly not a disagreement. I saw a different perspective, one that was attained by listening thoughtfully. In calling me a dampie, I saw that Liam was baffled in trying to express a word and trying to get me, as a totally deaf person, to understand it. In the process of trying to make himself clear, he was also a bit muddled at the underlying meaning of the word.

Welcome to *Dictionopolis*, a fictional kingdom of linguistic confusion. Language, after all, is a complex, dynamic, and bewildering constellation of world languages and regional dialects—of nouns, adjectives, verbs, exclamations, conjunctions, prepositions, prefixes, and suffixes; of jargon, slang, puns, and idioms. Letters and letter combinations have sounds (phonology), letters combine to form words and parts of words that have meaning (morphology), words are combined into sentences following specific rules (syntax), words and phrases have meaning (semantics), and we use language in context to convey meaning (pragmatics). Language also includes body language, gestures, sign language, spoken and written discourses, and rhetoric.

During his reading lesson, Liam wanted to remark on additional things besides black cats, bats, spiders, witches, and ghosts that can come out of a haunted house than what the book listed. With his pointer finger shaking upward, indicating just one more thing, he said, "dampie." I thought for a moment, trying to piece together what I was reading on his lips to the context of the story. "Okay, Liam, look at me and try again," I said.

Liam looked at me, inches from my face , and said, "Dampie."

I thought for a moment again before saying, "Hmmm, I'm trying to think of what you mean."

By this point, Liam was a little frustrated. "You know, like YOU are a dampie!"

I sat back, surprised. "I am? Out of a haunted house?"

Liam responded quickly, "NO! But you ARE a dampie!"

By this time, it was very clear to me that he was literally saying *dampie,* but I still had no idea what he meant. So, I came up with a proposal. "Liam, I know you don't like to write, but if you try to put down a few sounds, I might be able to understand what you mean." I handed him a piece of scrap paper and pencil.

Liam wrote: *d . . . m . . . e.* I tried sounding his letters out: "Dam-ee?"

Suddenly, Liam shouted, "Yeah, like this!" Then he stood up and stumbled across my office with arms outstretched and eyes closed. Like a zombie!

With a bonk on my forehead, I exclaimed, "Oh! A ZOMBIE!"

Liam excitedly jumped up and down and cheered, "Yeah!"

But then, with all seriousness, I asked him, "Are you telling me that I'm a zombie too?"

Liam's last words, with his eyes rolling, were "Yeah. It took FOREVER for you to get it."

Here was a clash of language, linguistics, and literacies between the two of us, Liam and me. But we worked through it. Even though Liam was young, English was a second language for him, and I am totally deaf in both ears, relying on both lipreading and the context of the book or conversation. Liam knew what zombies look like and was able to act it out in the end. I don't think he meant to call me a zombie literally, but he didn't have any other way to describe the process of our reaching a common understanding.

Throughout my conversation with Liam, my memory flashed back to a delightful children's fantasy adventure novel I had read as a child. In *The Phantom Tollbooth*, Milo and the watchdog Tock found themselves traveling from Doldrums to the Word Market in Dictionopolis, a kingdom of words, where they sell bagfuls of pronouns, packages of adjectives, an assortment of letters, and even synonym buns. After confusion in the marketplace with Spelling Bee, Humbug, and Officer Short Shrift,

both Milo and Tock somehow ended up in a dark prison cell with a Which. I heard my inner voice greet Liam, "Welcome to Dictionopolis!"

Language and conversations about language, like in *The Phantom Tollbooth*, should be approached with humor, warmth, and amusement. After all, smiling and laughing is universal in all languages—mispronounced words or misused phrases can bring about lighthearted chuckles. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Knowing language itself as a communication system containing grammar and meaning is one thing . . . but deeply entrenched attitudes and stereotypes people hold about language is another can of worms. Although certainly unfair, it is a social phenomenon that people judge a speaker's intelligence, character, and personal worth on the basis of his or her language. However, remaining silent is detrimental to dismantling prejudices and biases within our education systems and society at large. Alas, deaf and hard of hearing people, whether they are part of Deaf culture or are mainstreamed within a multitude of other cultures, carry a narrative of silence.

People with disabilities are generally not thought of as having a political, social, spiritual, or even sexual identity. Instead, they are seen as people to whom something unfortunate has happened. Furthermore, the "science" of studying other people's speech and language, including American Sign Language, especially when it is compared to so-called "standard" English, is so pervasive that it effectively overpowers a different knowledge. Theories, instead, are found inadequate, imbalanced, and sometimes false. If we are serious about addressing inequities in our schools, workplaces, and daily lives, we must do more than just shout about the unfairness we experience. A vague and angry rhetoric will discourage risk-taking among our leaders—politicians, teachers, administrators, parents, and employers—and ultimately maintain the status quo of racism, classism, ethnocentrism, and ableism in our society. But on the other hand, through our passivity, neutrality, or even political correctness in our schools and society, we are unwittingly teaching people that they do not have to tolerate worldviews other than their own. The underlying message is that we do not have to listen to or think about challenging concepts and viewpoints. Thus, children may grow

up without learning to embrace, or at least respect, other people's experiences and viewpoints. Some even become judgmental or dogmatic about practices in our daily interactions, labeling them as *right* or *wrong*. It is a fine line to walk between speaking up and potentially facing the disparaging experience of backlash.

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This book is about language, linguistics, and literacies through the lens of my deafness. It is about the inner voices utterly lodged inside my head. My inner voices went largely unheard, because many of my attempts to explain my unique experiences were often and effectively shut down. Some of the common phrases said to me to end my pleas to be heard were "You don't count!" "You're too sensitive!" "You're just playing the deaf card!" "Never mind!" "You're just making this more difficult!" and "Why are you being so dramatic?" Some people will deny that my deafness is even an issue—"I'm in the same boat!" or that deafness is even an advantage—"You're lucky you can't hear!"

Such defense mechanisms were always used by people protecting themselves from my position in standing up—no matter how gently, humorously, or firmly—for myself. Because being deaf is a phenomenon most people cannot fully experience or entirely comprehend, my inner voice is not an angry one, but one of resignation and acceptance. Therefore, my purpose in writing this book is not only to give my voice a place to be heard, but also to serve as a voice for others, particularly our country's most valuable asset—our children. At the same time, I hesitate to offer a voice for others, but instead, to assert, coming from one who is deaf, that we all must *listen*. For all of us are living day to day in a culturally, racially, linguistically, economically, physically, and academically diverse world.

The narratives that follow in this book are my genuine experiences working and interacting with people of all ages from preschool through high school and beyond. Most names and identifying information have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals. Writing about memories and personal history is a particularly unreliable pursuit, because of the haze and healing of time. And we can never be certain of how our

life trajectories would have been different had we done things differently. However, I kept notes in journals, on scrap paper and sticky notes, on my computers, and in blog posts. Some memories are indelibly in my mind.

At the end of the day, according to the adage, people won't remember what you said or did; they will remember how you made them feel. And quite often, I felt rejected, devalued, and isolated. Liam, bless his little heart, discovered that acting out a word or a phrase is effective when necessary, and we became quite a captivating team of teaching and learning. Young children often pronounce "deaf" as "death," because of the developmental nature of their speech, but Liam actually got the two words reversed as he was reading about a terrible tiger:

"We're going to hunt for the terrible tiger. We're not afraid of the terrible tiger. We're not afraid of anything." Liam exclaimed, "Wait! EVERYONE is afraid of SOMETHING!"

I leaned back in my chair, readying myself for Liam to unleash a long-winded but usually creative narrative about things to be afraid of, and said, "Oh?"

Liam responded just as he happened to be scratching his ear, "Yeah, everyone is afraid of deaf."

And again, I was perplexed. "Deaf? Like people are afraid of me, because I am deaf?"

Liam quickly jumped up and shouted, "NO! Like this." He demonstrated the act of shooting himself and falling dead.

Welcome to Dictionopolis! In my personal kingdom of words—in a world that does not hear—there is discombobulation, disorientation, and my reflections of language, linguistics, and literacies. Even though this book is divided into areas of communication, this is only for ease of clarity and understanding. All areas involving language, linguistics, and literacy are interrelated and reciprocal. Many people believe that people learn to listen and speak before learning to read and write, but I learned to read before I learned to speak. Some people develop phonemic awareness about letters and their corresponding sounds through learning the alphabet before learning to read. Others learn to read first and then later develop their sense of phonemic awareness. But most

people learn both at the same time. Certainly, a solid foundation in oral language helps people to read more easily, but at the same time, reading and writing increases the complexity and nuances of the vocabulary and phrases one learns over a lifetime. Ultimately, readers of this book, most of whom will have normal hearing, will see how to navigate their own lives more mindfully and intentionally in our bewildering but delightful world of diversity through listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and through conversations, literacies, and linguistics.