

Following the Right Star Home

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Address to the Summer Institute on
Inclusion, Community and Diversity

Toronto, Ontario

8 July 1997

A Ritual To Read To Each Other

William Stafford

If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our
star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood
storming out to play through the broken dike.
And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park,
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should consider—
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.
For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
the signals we give—yes or no, or maybe—should be
clear: the darkness around us is deep.

Last year, at the end of the Summer Institute, I heard exactly the words that I needed to hear. When Janet and Darryl spoke at the end of the week, they said, "Bryce is a blessing, not a problem."

"A blessing not a problem." I heard this, and I wondered, "So, what am I alive for?"

I have spent many years hell bent on persuading people that there is no such thing as disability. That we will only live together in the right way when we recognize people's gifts. In hearing this clear statement about Bryce, I realized that the message I have lived to deliver is planted enough. Enough people know it that it will continue to spread and grow. And I know from years of advocacy work that you can ruin your own work by continuing to do it when you are done.

I had a sense of being done with something deeply important and I felt a kind of depression.

A few months later I was hanging upside down in my van, covered in gasoline, cold, and almost unable to breath. The van had slipped in the freezing rain and turned upside down, and for forty five minutes I hung there.

For several months after the accident I found that I could not fully focus my attention. A good

friend, who is a speech-language therapist, says I probably suffered some trauma to the occipital region of my brain. The experience was like finding a rock in the middle of my mind. Every thought had to split into two streams to flow around the rock, and there were unusual whirlpools and eddies in my thinking.

During the four months after my accident, I spent a lot of time considering the question, "Why did I let this accident happen to me?" I could have stayed off the icy roads, but I did not. I wondered what the lessons of this difficulty I had got myself into were for me.

In living through this difficulty, I have found blessings.

The first blessing was five months of income sufficient to let me get off the road and stay in Toronto. For some years, I have wanted to construct a life centred in Toronto instead of a life centred on an aeroplane. These months let me build a foundation for that life. I now think I will be able to generate enough income locally so that I can significantly reduce my travel time.

The second, more significant blessing, was to discover a little bit about what it is like to be someone whose mind isn't completely under her

own command. I now know, from experience, the difficulty of finding the pathway to the words I want to say.

This lack of control was uncomfortable and a bit frightening for someone as accustomed to being in charge of her own mind as I am. But as time went by, I discovered that this difficulty was like a doorway between the world of ordinary experience and a flood of colours, sounds, and experiences that I cannot find words to speak of because they happen in a different world from the realm of words.

As time has gone by, this door has slowly been closing. Now I am mostly in control of my thinking and my language. While I am relieved, I am also a little bit sad. And I am grateful because this time has allowed me to understand people to whom I have always felt a special connection: people who do not use words to communicate.

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star.*

As I remember my childhood, I do not remember thinking I was having any problems until I was four years old. Before that I had the adventure of figuring out challenges like how to roll over. I never thought that I had to do things any other way than as I did them. But after the age of four I began to think there was something wrong with the way I am. This very substantial problem was created by the idea that there is only one way to do things and that one way defines who someone is. I was persuaded not to follow my own star by many well intentioned people, some of whom loved me very much.

I have discovered that there is, after all, a star that is mine. And a star that guides people who don't speak. I sense the struggle that we who do things our own way face and I feel anger and sorrow. Anger at the forced choice: either follow your own star or be competent in everyday life. This false choice forces us to either be helpless or

to deny the genuine blessings of our particular star.

I don't want to make that choice. So I have chosen to make a personal and political choice to honour the blessings of different stars. And I intend to live this political statement in a way that does not ruin my personal life.

I have chosen to live with Matt and Sheldon. Matt doesn't use words and I intend to honour his silence. If at some point he chooses to change his ways of communicating, I intend to honour those choices as well. I look forward to using all that I have learned from so many people about organizing assistance on Matt's behalf. Until now, I have mostly applied these lessons in my own life and I think it will be fun to struggle with Matt's issues in following his star as well.

It is not just that the glass is half full, but that the emptiness is also full. The emptiness provides some of the most powerful guides to a person's star. Out of emptiness come the most powerful ways of inviting.

*And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park...*

I feel anger. Anger because, rather than talk about the blessings of different stars, we mainly talk about the hard parts.

I once identified fifteen blessings that people who experience the world very differently bring. Gifts like helping us to learn more deeply where we are and who we are by slowing the rest of us down. Gifts like bringing people into relationships that never would otherwise have occurred: think of all the people here who would never have been in one another's presence except for their connection through a person with differences.

But people too seldom talk about these gifts. And the idea grows that we are an almost intolerable burden. And, with that idea, line after line of elephants march down the wrong road toward the dangerous conclusion that "they" don't belong.

I am not just angry, I am fearful. Here in Canada another boy with a disability was recently killed by his mother, who received a suspended sentence. I am fearful because this continues to happen publicly and so little seems to be done to stop it.

This is partly our fault. We, who know or can know who each other are, do not speak clearly, and consistently, and continually about the blessings of difference. And this silence is killing us.

*...the signals we give—yes or no, or maybe—
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.*

There is indeed a deep darkness in the culture around us. A darkness so pervasive that if we do not accomplish a major transformation in the ways we live together and with the earth, our culture will lose the capacity to support all of our lives.

We have something essential to say in shaping this transformation. Unless people hear and heed it widely, the necessary transformation cannot happen. If we do not say it clearly, it cannot be heard: When we welcome one another, and support one another, differences give our world the deepest possible kind of strength.

We must share that message. Our common life depends on it.

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An Elevator Edition from
Inclusion Press
24 Thome Crescent
Toronto, Ontario M6H 2SD5