



FIRE! AND LESSONS LEARNED

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

In the middle of June (2002), many Americans heard or saw daily updates on the wildfires in Colorado. The largest of these was the Hayman Fire. It made news not only because it was the biggest fire in Colorado history, but also because it was allegedly started by a Forest Service employee who was supposed to ensure campers obeyed the fire ban in the Pike National Forest!

You may have watched the smoke and flames on the evening news. We did, too. But we also watched the smoke and red haze from our front yard.

Initially, the fire was more than 30 miles from our home. We live a couple of miles outside the city limits of Woodland Park, a lovely mountain town of about 7,000 people. Our neighborhood of two streets is composed of homes with no manicured lawns, just the beauty of natural vegetation and thick stands of aspen, pines, and other evergreens. We live in the forest!

For the first few days of the Hayman Fire, my husband and I assured ourselves and our children that our home would not be in danger. Before the fire could affect us, it would have to travel those 30 miles to the east and cross the two-lane state highway that runs close to our street. Our confidence was shaken, however, the third day of the fire when smoke swirled through the trees in our yard and the smell of burning wood entered our home. We didn't know if the fire had moved that fast or if another wildfire had started. As it turned out, the Hayman Fire had raced across nineteen miles of forest in one day. It was still somewhat distant, but a significant wind shift pushed the smoke and ash our way. This was, we were told, similar to the smoke and ash that poured from the Mt. St. Helen's volcanic eruption years ago. At high noon, couldn't see our mailbox at the end of the driveway.

We got into high gear. For years, we had been intending to cut down several trees that kissed the sides of our home. A chain saw from the local hardware store got us started. A trip down to Colorado Springs (45 minutes away) got us a storage room, where we began storing precious mementos and other important, irreplaceable things. And after purchasing topographical maps of our county and state, we were able to track where the fire was in relation to our home. Surveying the sky and sniffing the air several times each day became routine. Over the next two weeks, distinct plumes were often visible. Other days, the noon sky looked like sundown: an eerie red glow obscured the bright blue Colorado sky.

Watching the news took on a new meaning. The wind direction had a powerful influence on the fire. We became armchair analysts on the fire's progress as we watched the weather forecast and pinpointed the fire's edge on our maps. It was getting closer.

Then one day, the announcement came: our street was put on "standby evacuation." For nine days, we existed in a surreal world. It was hard to focus on work. Meals were hastily prepared and hastily eaten. The relaxing activities of watching mindless television or listening to the radio were replaced by constant monitoring of the news. After two or three days of tension, we tried to "get back to normal." But this seemed impossible. With the walls stripped of photos and our children's artwork, and with packed suitcases lining the hall, our home no longer felt like home. How could we "get back to normal"? We couldn't even pretend.

Fortunately, we learned to exist, one day at a time. Even so, each day was different. On a given day, the fire traveled several miles, cutting a wide swath. Fear and anxiety increased. Then the wind turned the fire back on itself, and we relaxed a bit. Hours later,

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another wind shift sent the flames roaring our way again. And so it went. We were angry at the woman who allegedly started the fire. But we were angrier at the fire. How dare it come near *our* home?

The fire was relentless. It jumped the highway. It was now a short six miles from our home. Many of our neighbors fled. We decided to stay until the “standby evacuation” notice became an official order to leave. And then the brave, hardworking firefighters got the fire under control. It wasn’t “out,” it was just “contained” and no longer growing. The standby evacuation notice was lifted. Suitcases were unpacked; photos were re-hung; mindless television returned.

Life seemed “back to normal.” But was it? We had learned what many others who have faced disaster know: it could happen to us. The Hayman Fire touched us and changed our lives. Living in the forest is a choice we made; we must also live with the consequences. Fire is a natural part of life. How could we be angry at it? In the wake of the fire’s destruction, new trees will sprout and new wildflowers will blossom. The forest will be reborn.

And so were we. Our family is better prepared for the next fire.

We know what’s important. We know what to do. We will not be so frightened next time. We know we will survive, and like the forest, we’ll grow anew. We have created a new “normal.”

Isn’t this what can happen when a child is diagnosed with a disability? Like fire, disability is also a natural part of life. Shall we be angry—at the disability, at the doctor who made the diagnosis, or at the child? Perhaps our anger isn’t focused; it manifests itself as a generalized frustration, sadness, guilt, or other feeling that smolders just beneath the surface, only to explode at some later time.

Many of us keep waiting for things to “get back to normal.” And we wait and wait and wait for this day—sometimes for years—believing that “normal”

will only be restored when a child can walk, talk, feed himself, read, behave, or whatever.

Can we, instead, create a new “normal” for ourselves and our families wherein we see that a person with a disability is fine, just the way he is? That instead of “fixing him” or “restoring him to normalcy,” we simply provide him with the tools and accommodations he needs to be successful? And in turn, can we share this paradigm with our extended families, friends, neighbors, educators, and others?

Can we, as individuals and families, choose to experience a rebirth, so that positive new words, dignified new perceptions, and respectful new ways of thinking about children and adults take root and grow? Can we focus on the strengths and abilities of a child or adult with a disability, instead of trying to remediate the perceived deficits?

During the Hayman Fire, we realized that although a fire may be frightening, it’s a natural force that we need to accept if we want to enjoy the beauty

of the forest. For three weeks, we didn’t see the beauty of the trees that surround our home. Instead, we saw the trees as fuel for the fire, as timbers that could set our home on fire. The trees, in a sense, had become part of the enemy. We’ve had to regain our

perspective to see the beauty of the trees again—to enjoy their height, their graceful branches, the shade they provide, and the whispers they speak when the wind blows. We’ve also realized the need to enter into a respectful co-existence with the possibility of fire.

It seems we can apply this philosophy to disability. We can recognize that disability is a natural part of life, instead of seeing it as an enemy to be defeated. Then we’ll be able to see and enjoy the beauty—the gifts, talents, and abilities—of people with disabilities. We can recognize that disability can and will touch all of us, in one way or another, during our lifetimes. And we can decide to move beyond anger and fear, and enter into a respectful co-existence with the idea of disabilities and differences.

Can we create a new “normal” for ourselves and our families wherein we see that a person with a disability is fine, just the way he is?