

A Thoughtful Analogy



Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow
www.disabilityisnatural.com

Awhile back, I met a kindred spirit at a conference—it seemed that Donna and I could have been sisters! She and I were about the same age, we both had exhibit booths at this conference (mine for my book and other goodies; her booth showcased her beautiful artwork), and we both cared about disability issues. She really liked to talk—so do I. She talked fast—so do I. She had lots to say—so do I. And she was very passionate—so am I. We made an immediate connection, and during the next two days, we took turns visiting each other's booths to chat. She was a witty, charming, and smart woman.

At one point, Donna said she was surprised we could be friends, since she has autism and I don't. I was just as surprised by her comment, and assured her that I didn't believe one of us having a disability should be a barrier to our friendship! Anger was mixed with sadness as she shared her belief that her diagnosis *had* prevented her from becoming friends with, in her words, "NTs" ("neuro-typical" people).

The next time Donna came to my booth for a visit, she was wearing a big smile and holding a sign she had just made that said: "Free the Giraffes!" I asked what the message meant, and was rewarded with Donna's deep and creative insight.

She began by talking about all the wonderful and beautiful animals on earth (her unique artwork included animals and people). "They're alike—because they're all

animals—but they're all so different, too," she explained. Going into detail, she noted that lions, cheetahs, and other big cats are speedy runners, while other animals aren't so fast; zebras have unusual coats of fur compared to other animals; elephants have long trunks and big tusks, unlike other creatures; some monkeys have brightly-colored body parts, while others are more plain; and giraffes have those incredibly long necks.

Donna reiterated that even though all these animals are different from one another, they're still members of the animal kingdom. She said, "I don't think the animals are critical or judgmental of each other because of their differences. And don't humans admire and respect the differences in these animals? Aren't we sometimes in awe of how different and wonderful they are?"

Donna then wondered why the same wasn't true when people thought about the differences among humans. Then she wistfully added, "Perhaps the animals are smarter than us, Kathie. I'm pretty sure they are."

With her body set in a determined stance and her eyes fierce, Donna described how she didn't like the idea of animals being restrained in zoos, where they can't do what they're meant to do—because they're not in their natural environments. And she compared animals in zoos to people with disabilities, who are "restrained and locked up" in special education classrooms, sheltered workshops, group homes, and other segregated settings, which are also unnatural environments. "People in those places can't do what they were meant to do, either," she vehemently exclaimed.

Then Donna got to the meaning of the "Free the Giraffes" sign she had made. "What if the only animals we locked up were giraffes? And the only reason we locked them up was because of their long, long necks—something that makes them different from all the other animals in the world. Wouldn't we think that was awful? Wouldn't some of us carry signs like this one and speak out, and do everything we could to free the giraffes?" Then she paused for a moment, took a deep breath, and added, "Shouldn't we do that when it comes to people who are considered different because of disabilities? Shouldn't we speak out and do everything we can to free them, Kathie?"

Yes, Donna, we certainly should.