

BRIDGES-OVER-BARRIERS

WHAT WE SAID AT RECENT BRIDGES GATHERINGS

(30 May, 27 June, 25 July and 29 August 2009)

ABOUT OUR NAME & PURPOSE

What comes to mind when the words “bridge” and “barrier” are used?

JMD: A Bridge is something to help me. A Barrier is something that stops me.

KM: The word bridge means something to walk across. The computer is my bridge to talk to people. The picture of a bridge means connecting with places and people. I think that a bridge is a good picture to put on a t-shirt because it tells people I want to talk with them. I cross over to meet them and we meet halfway on the bridge.

MM: I am going over a bridge right now. I am feeling good every day. Barriers are too great, too many, go over and under. Try to understand.

KV: Bridges connect people and places. They allow ideas to flow and worlds to expand. Without bridges we would be isolated, voiceless and lonely. We would be uninformed and ignorant.

Bridges take many forms. They can be large, small, simple or sophisticated. Bridges have served us since early times. They are beautiful and wonderful.

Bridges over Barriers is our link to freedom and life, transporting us over the barriers of being ignored, overlooked, misunderstood and underestimated.

KV: Barriers are obstacles in the life of an autistic person.

RA: A Bridge that takes you from one side to the other. Bridges are made to overcome barriers like a train track or a river. In real life

there could be barriers too and we overcome them with bridges which are our families and friends. . Here are some of my own barriers that I am trying to overcome: shyness, so I can be more independent and communicative, and able to initiate conversation.

AB: Bridges makes me think of Supported Typing. A bridge is a metaphor for connecting with others. Bridges are sometimes invisible. I think a barrier is also sometimes invisible. People’s attitudes are often the worst barrier. If others think in limits about us, it is as much a barrier as cement in the road.

Bridges-Over-Barriers is a support group of adults who use AAC (augmentative and alternative communication), to express themselves reliably and share ideas and opinions, struggles and strategies. Ontario members meet regularly in Guelph. We try to keep in touch with members in New Mexico, Nova Scotia and France. We have a worldwide network of friends who wish us well. We continue to speak up about S-T and the need for deep listening to people who may be vulnerable because they cannot use their voices—through newsletters, support for training and networking, special events, and advocacy for communication assistants.

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WE MUST HAVE FRIENDS!

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How do we find and make new friends? Who are our friends? What are the qualities of friends? What qualities do I want in a friend?

TM: Our friends are the people who can be with us and not get upset. My friends are the people here, my circle members and my family.

RA: Friends are people interested in us--my family, the ACES group and here.

KM: My friends accept the way I am. I like calm focused friends who listen to me speak, like the men here at Bridges.

JMD: My friends take time to know me--my family and the people here.

JD: People who want to get together with me.

AB: My friends care enough to take my particular interests in their minds. Family and friends like my Aroha.

KV: People who are caring, interested in my thoughts and believe in me--my family, Bridges friends and housemates.

MM: Friends are the reason why I can communicate today.

Why do we need friends?

AB: Nobody can be alone in the world. I have things to give as well as receive.

TM: We need friends to stay alive and be who we are and not what people think we are.

MM: To eat and live well.

RA: We need friends for company and to share ideas. Life without friends would be so lonely.

KM: I need friends to like me and to do things with me. I like being with friends who

like being busy, like working at the farm. I like friends who go for walks with me.

JMD: We need friends to get to know us; we need people.

KV: In order to have companions and people to share experiences and happy and sad times and to explore ideas.

Do we need different kinds of friends?

AB: We need different kinds of friends. We need to share interests like other people do.

TM: Yes, but now I am thinking about our move and whether I will make new friends there.

MM: Yes, they have different gifts and we go places.

RA: Yes, we need friends our age.

KM: I need friends who like being outside because I like going for walks. I need friends who like animals. And I want to be with friends who like to eat healthy like me.

JMD: I need friends to help ST, go swimming and out to eat.

KV: Of course, because the world has all kinds of people and that's what makes life interesting and worthwhile.

How have I made friends in the past?

KV: They have been in my life already or others have introduced them to me. Some have introduced themselves.

JMD: I made friends at school, at PH [Participation House] here, at home.

KM: I did not make friends in the past because I did not know how to and I did not speak by ST with anyone.

RA: I made some friends at school and working at ARC and at Andrew's house where I go on Thursday.

JD: I have made friends at ACES.

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MM: Working is great.

TM: I make friends by being with people and trying not to get mad and being in a good mood.

AB: I think we have to share with others. I have made friends by inviting people to be in my life and to come for dinner and see my garden. I think most families are too nervous to go after new people.

Where might I look for new friends?

TM: I think [when we move to Nova Scotia] we might find them at L'Arche and church and our new neighbourhood.

RA: We can make more friends at work and by inviting people home.

KM: I make new friends with Donna. We go to church together on Sunday. Our friend David introduces us to new people at the church. We could talk to people we meet in the stores in Lefroy and we could talk to our neighbours next door. Beth also finds new support people for me.

JMD: New friends can be hard to find.

KV: Shake hands with friends and people who visit us and when we meet them, so they can't ignore us.

AB: I think the paper is a bad place for finding friends and workers. We need to go places, talk to people, try new things, and ask our friends to introduce us to others at church and parties.

How do you tell people you want to be friends?

AB: Showing up with my dogs always gets people talking. I think smiling helps too if you can get your mouth to do it. But smiling,

when people touch me if I don't expect it or don't know them, can be hard.

TM: I show them that I want to be friends by smiling and shaking hands and being in a good mood.

KM: I tell them I want a friendship with them by looking at them and sitting beside them.

JMD: Try to smile friendly.

KV: Tap them on their arm. Bring them your portable small PC. Don't make angry faces. Look pleasant for the sake of other people.

Thoughts About Andrew's Aroha which has core members of a circle of friends who know a person well and have powers to support his good life and keep it going into the future.

TM: I think it is a very good idea. I have a circle too and they are all my good friends and I love them all.

RA: A very good idea.

KM: I would like to have people who stay in my life like that.

JMD: I need friends to help me.

KV: An Aroha is a great idea for providing a reason to bring together people who are important in your life like brothers and some cousins and new friends. They would help me with my plans for the future and be involved with my well-being.

How do I tell a friend that something she or he does irritates me? Should I just accept it?

KV: I look into their eyes and stare at them, hoping they understand. I try not to lose control because then they don't know for sure.

JMD: I would get really mad and push her away.

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KM: I can tell them I am angry by shouting them or leaving the room. I can sign No in front of them.

RA: I just let them know I don't accept it.

MM: It is hard.

TM: I think I should tell them, because if I do not I will get mad and they will not be my friend any more.

AB: I get Elizabeth to tell them in polite words how I feel. It is hard to ignore some things but maybe we should try to be patient too.

Top Ten Suggestions for Making New Friends

KV: Have T-shirts made with a small Bridges-Over-Barriers logo and large words saying "Talk to Me!"

AB: Do more inviting to others to become friends. Do not be shy about reaching out to others.

TM: We could go to the places like L'Arche where there are other people with disabilities and be their friend.

RA: When out for a walk, say Hello more. Inviting people is a good idea. Play board games and card games with people.

KM: We should smile at people and shake hands with them. I could go with a friend to a dinner to meet more new people. I would need a friend to help me talk and answer their questions.

JMD: Be friendly. Make good friends by having parties.

KV: Be tolerant: look happy when people get close. People might be pleasantly surprised that we can be sociable.

AB: New environmental initiatives to get people who care together. Chat more with neighbours. People who are friends already

can find new friends for us. Ask the "lonesome doves" and other groups for ideas. Our message is "Let the people know".

LET'S TALK ABOUT OUR SENSES!

What are our favourite smells, tastes, sights and sounds. What are our least favourites, and how do we cope with them?

KM: I like the smell of food. It makes me think about eating. I enjoy eating at David's farm because the food smells good and tastes delicious. I like the taste of Mom's carrot cake because I can only eat it on my birthday. I don't like the taste of food that is bitter, like coffee and cabbage. I like the sound of fiddle music. It makes me feel happy and I enjoy listening to happy music. It is good to feel happy in my heart. I don't like loud noises and I don't like shouting. I don't like the highway and all the cars driving fast and passing us. I don't like city buildings. They are too big and crowded. I think I like the peace of the countryside best. I like the cats at the farm. They are happy to see me and they are hoping I will give them food to eat. I like red like my Mom because it is bright and cheerful to wear. I feel I am alive and happy in the red colour.

KR: I like to smell good things. Lollipops are delicious. Popsicles smell good. The taste of beer and peanuts is my favourite. I like that because it lasts a long time and it stays with me. : I like the sound of the lake. The waves are relaxing. I remember that from going there a lot when I was a kid. I don't like the trucks. They are loud and scare me when they honk the horns. I like to go to the movies to see scary movies on a big screen but I don't like to sit too close. I also like flowers

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on the trail walks I go on. All the wild flowers are nice. I don't like everything green. I need colour.

MM: I like the sound of water and sea water. I don't like any perfume but do like the smell of food

S: I like to see my family as I love them. I find blood scary. I like food, especially banana.

JC: I like the smell of pizza. I bang my head in storms. My face lights up when my mother comes on Sunday to take me home. I like to watch sporting events while rocking in my chair.

AB: I like the smell of ginger and Beth's vanilla scent. I like the smell of the rain in the air. I like walking in the rain. I like the tastes of peppermint and chocolate but not avocado. I used not to like the sound of dogs barking but I am desensitized to it now. I like the sound of soothing music and my mother's voice. There is no silence. I don't like the furnace. I don't like loud banging. I don't mind actual thunder. I do find it hard in bright light; it bombards my brain. I like green, in trees and T-shirts. I don't like red or orange. Red makes me feel mad—it just bugs me. Yellow is OK.

We are hypersensitive to touch—very important in knowing how to support us

AB: I want to mention that tickling is torture. When people tickle me I will clap because I am upset. I don't like gentle stroking. I like a firm touch. I will show people how to touch me [demonstrating the "Wilbarger protocol"]. I relate to Temple [Grandin]'s aversion to touch that is light. Getting used

to the feel of new clothes is also very hard for me. MM: I don't like touch when I am not expecting it. KM: I don't like being touched by the hand if the hand is cold. I like warm hands to touch me like Mom's hand and Beth when I talk with her. They have warm hands and I like that touch. I don't like being held tight. It feels like I can't get away and be free.

KR: I don't like cold water; it is frightening. I like warm water in the shower or tub. I don't like pool water; it is scary. I don't like the smell of the chlorine or the cold water. I like smooth things that are heavy. I like it when people facilitate with me but I don't like my hand or arms touched. I like soft hands, so people need to have soft hands, but also enough pressure. With touch, the heavier the better. Anything ticklish makes me run away. A hug is hard, it feels like being strangled. I prefer a handshake.

JMD: Touch bothers me most. My hearing aid hurts.

S: I do not like to be tickled.

JC: I like massage therapy.

KV: I cannot stand bristly things whether scratchy or soft. I hated almost everything in my sensory bag, even the squishy ball with the tentacles.

Thoughts about other senses, combinations of senses and perceptions

§ We may have other sensory differences from one another. People with movement differences may have some problems with two other senses: vestibular (balance) and proprioceptive (senses and perceptions of one's body in relation to one's surroundings and other people and objects).

§ We also may have acute sensitivities to other things in our environments—such as air temperature, pressure and humidity. Some of us are allergic to things we may eat or breathe or

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touch—we have to avoid them or perhaps take medication.

§ Some of us may have synaesthesia, our senses mixing and mingling, so that when we hear a sound or a word we see a colour.

§ We also use the word “sense” more widely in various important ways. For examples:

Sense of others. Sense of humour. Sense of danger. Sense of security. Sense of danger. Sense of God or spirituality. Commonsense. Sense of time as in routines. Sense of place or order. And how does ESP (extra-sensory perception) fit in?

These are a few of the ideas we shared:

KV: When I hear sounds I think of pictures and colours. Everything I think of is in pictures. The pictures are in colours and symbols. Other people would only sometimes understand my pictures. The pictures are in vivid colours—red, purple, green, black, blue, yellow, white, orange—but often lots of red and purple swirling around like a huge tornado.

I focus best on one sense at a time. I listen to TV and only glance at the visual unless there are no words such as in an episode of scenery. When I am anxious, all my senses are too acute.

KM: I have a sense of God when I am in the barn. It is quiet and I feel relaxed there. I think I hear peace. I like the farm work

because I can be quiet and listen to the sounds in the barn.

KV: I like it best when the air is warm and dry and not too hot and humid. Winter is fine as long as I don't get wet feet or gloves. I need to feel secure. This includes the confidence of being with people who understand and respect me.

S: I have a sense of humour and like to share it. It's good to laugh. A sense of security is important; my family gives me that. A sense of danger: God keeps me safe. Time is not important. Order and routine can be important—it's sad when I don't know what to expect. ESP is picking up people's thoughts. Please be kind and listen to me.

KV: Autistics have ESP to a higher degree than other people. This gives us a uniqueness that is special and valuable. We have awareness of the feelings and moods of people and animals and plants. There are times when we feel the presence of God and family members who have died. I am also visited by my guardian angel. St Clare is my special saint who is often with me.

KR: I think I have ESP with people. I am in touch with people and how they speak to me is a way I sense what they are feeling. I like to watch people and can get a feeling of what they are feeling. People don't have to say anything to say a lot. It's a lot of ways to talk: people forget I can hear well. I sense their fear in me. I am a lot of feelings bottled up and when I get to say things I cannot stop. I think people don't take the time to talk, really talk. They don't take time to communicate.

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USING OUR HEARTS TO CALM OUR MINDS IN NATURE

*By Lea Tran, Horticultural Therapist at The Guelph Enabling Garden,
and friend of Andrew Bloomfield and Bridges.*

We all have places that are dear to our hearts, places that give us a sense of peace and well-being. Working in The Guelph Enabling Garden, I often hear people comment that being in such a garden, and appreciating its beauty, makes them feel calm and relaxed, especially after a mentally or emotionally exhausting day. In other words, after too much thinking and worrying!

What is it exactly about nature that makes us feel so peaceful? What changes must occur in us so that we are able to interact with nature to benefit from and to fully appreciate what it has to offer? Perhaps there are ways to enter into a state of being while we are in a natural environment to significantly lessen the stress and anxiety that we might feel on a daily basis.

During the last Bridges-Over-Barrriers meeting, the group discussed how we might be able to quiet our anxious minds by consciously focusing on our sense perceptions, and also on our hearts to communicate with and feel more interconnected with plants and nature. Stephen Harrod Buhner's book *The Secret Teachings of Plants* goes into detail about how the heart can be used as a reliable organ of perception.

Many friends at the meeting agreed that being outdoors on a farm, at a lake, park, or garden gives rise to more positive feelings because of the ability to interact with more natural smells and sounds. Kevin R. mentioned that although he doesn't enjoy *all* natural smells, seeing things in nature makes him feel connected to the world. Kevin V. said that he notices the "peace and freshness of nature. [He] feel[s] alive, and at the same time, relaxed."

This last comment by Kevin reminded me about the connection between our states of mind and the body. Whenever we focus our consciousness on an external object in nature using our senses; on our breathing; or on our hearts, our cardiac cycle slows down and our pupils dilate (Buhner 2004, pg. 98). The ultimate effect on the body is a relaxed feeling due to a reduction in the release of stress hormones, and an increase in adrenal gland hormones that are associated with a sense of well-being (Buhner 2004, pg. 101).

John MD and Sara mentioned that they feel a spiritual connection when they are in nature, and I am wondering if this is because they are communicating with nature through their hearts.

According to Buhner, in the proper state of mind and being, humans and plants can communicate with each other. Some ancient native ancestors from different parts of the world are familiar with this form of communication as they claim to have learned about the uses of plants from the plants themselves rather than from scientific experiments in a lab (Buhner 2004, pg. 2).

How can this be? How can we possibly communicate with plants without talking to them? Believe it or not, we are always extracting meaning from the environment through the interactions of energy frequencies that each person and thing gives off. All living things communicate by means of electrical and magnetic signals as they go about their everyday activities, emitting their own unique energy field that extends beyond their form (Buhner 2004, pg. 86).

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USING OUR HEARTS TO CALM OUR MINDS IN NATURE (CONTINUED)

How do we hear? From sound waves of a certain frequency hitting our ear drums and communicating that information to our brains. How do we smell, see, touch, and taste? It is because our bodies understand the non-verbal language of energy waves coming from the world around us. And since we are also a part of this world, we too are giving off signals that others can sense without us even opening our mouths.

So why would focusing on our hearts be so important when communing with nature? Stillman states that the “higher order of logic and understanding of the multisensory human originates in the heart” (Stillman 2006, pg. 23). The heart produces an electromagnetic field that is stronger than that of the brain (Buhner 2004, pg. 86). When the heart’s energy field is in close proximity with another energy field, they affect each other to produce a unique field containing new meaning and frequencies that Buhner says humans experience as emotions (Buhner 2004, pg. 92).

If the electromagnetic field of our heart changes, our state of being is greatly affected (Buhner 2004, pg. 71). Changes in our heart field can affect the frequency at which electrical waves are produced as our heart beats (Buhner 2004, pg. 90). Cardiac waves work in coherence with the flow of blood, carrying oxygen, chemicals, and important information to all cells in the body, including those in the brain that affect our physiological well-being, cognitive abilities and emotions (Buhner 2004, pg. 71).

A wonderful thing about our heart is that it doesn’t judge, or worry about the past or future. Our analytical minds do these things more than enough for us! Placing consciousness on our hearts creates a feeling of harmony and interconnectedness as non-verbal communication occurs between living things (Tolle 2005, pg. 26). This is when it is apparent that the intelligence of our bodies is inseparable from all living things on Earth (Tolle 2005, pg. 195).

When we focus on our mind and it is not peaceful, we easily feel anxious because most times our emotions are the result of our hearts responding to what we are thinking (Tolle 2005, pg. 132), rather than what we are perceiving directly from nature (Buhner 2004, pg. 150). When we observe a situation and respond with our mental interpretation of it, we place attention on our analytical mind so that our brain waves affect the energy field of our heart (our emotions) (Buhner 2004, pg. 105). The mind is good at thinking about the meaning of an object or situation in an analytical manner, isolating and separating it into parts, and so feelings of isolation and separation easily arise in the thinker.

So, in order to more accurately learn about nature and its benefits, we should do so directly, through our hearts. Just like people, plants also have an energy field, and both can interact with each other so that a connection on an energetic/spiritual level is possible (Tolle 2005, pg. 5). Since a perturbation in our heart’s energy field can be experienced as an emotion that gives rise to a release of hormones that affect our physiology and sense of well-being (Buhner 2004, pg. 101), communicating with plants in this way can heal us emotionally, spiritually, and physically (Cowan 1995, pg. 33).

During our Bridges meeting, we were fortunate enough to have nice weather and so were able to spend some time outdoors in the Ignatius Courtyard Garden. I introduced an exercise based on suggestions in Buhner’s book that might help us to focus on our senses, including our sense of well-being using our hearts.

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USING OUR HEARTS TO CALM OUR MINDS IN NATURE (CONTINUED)

Sara picked a plant in the courtyard that she found attractive and we all gathered around it. She chose the plant Echinacea, a tall medicinal plant with pretty pink petals and a stiff bristly centre.

I introduced the concept of the exercise, encouraging folks to try it on their own later in a more private and quiet place in nature. The exercise involves focusing on a plant using each of our senses, and then focusing on our heart's energy field using a visualization technique.

In the company of friends, John MD was able to enjoy good emotions using his sense of sight. Andrew B. also appreciated the plant's beauty with his eyes and could "feel the colour in [his] heart". Ken M. also used his eyes to observe the plant's qualities, its interaction with the wind, and how nicely it fit in with the rest of the garden. The plant invited Ken "to enjoy looking at it."

Kevin V felt a special connection with the plant:

"I feel joy because the plant has such beautiful flowers, and I feel it in my stomach. I like the sound of the wind whistling through the trees. I see the beautiful rosy petals and the green leaves and the graceful stems. With my skin, I feel the leaves are rough and raspy and the centre is like a burr. What is it? [Seed]. I feel the energy of the plants as a force of greens and blues, and I feel this in my centre near my stomach. The [pink] colour of the petals is different from the energy forces. I love being here in the garden and it loves people looking at it and staying with it. I feel that the plants and I are friends and that we feel the presence of God in our midst."

Later when back indoors in the meeting room, Kevin V shared more: "Autistics have ESP to a higher degree than other people. This gives us a uniqueness that is special and valuable. We have awareness of the feelings and moods of people and animals and plants....Plants have awareness of thirst and cutting. They emit sounds and colours like an aura. All of creation throbs with smells and colours and sounds. Even stones have sensory emissions but theirs are muted."

Nature has a lot to teach us, and we can learn a lot by opening up our hearts. I encourage folks to try again and again to connect with nature using their whole bodies to perceive communications from the environment. It will take a lot of practice, but perhaps we will get better and better at calming our minds when we focus on the beauty around us. I hope you will be able to visit The Guelph Enabling Garden at the next Bridges meeting to try it yet again. I look forward to hearing about all of your experiences.

References:

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PRAISE FOR BRIDGES

On Saturday, 29 August 2009, I was invited and privileged to attend a gathering of Bridges-Over-Barrriers. It was held in the Canadian Mental Health Association's Board Room in Guelph. For me, it was an eye-opening experience to see and hear a group of autistic adults exchanging ideas, using either simple or more sophisticated tools of Augmentative or Alternative Communication (AAC). I was impressed with the patience and respect of each member of the group who typed answers to some very specific questions. Their answers, to questions about feelings, for example, were unlike those that would be usually expressed in everyday conversations among other people. They were true reflections of each person's innermost thought--deep thoughts about their relationship with God, with nature and their environment. Other discussions were most sincere, with not a trace of artificiality.

I came away from this meeting with a good feeling, realizing that these people really care for each other. I applaud and admire the family members and friends who accompanied and assisted communicators in their desire to have their ideas expressed properly. I congratulate and commend Andrew Bloomfield who initiated and has developed Bridges-Over-Barrriers into a dynamic and promising communication tool.

Wishing you success in future meetings, and thanks for sharing.

-John Verhart, Board Member and Treasurer of Guelph Services for the Autistic (GSA) the charitable organization that shelters Bridges.

HOW TO REACH US Postmail: Bridges-Over-Barrriers, c/o GSA, 16 Caribou Cres, Guelph, ON N1E 1C9. Please make donations payable to GSA, with "Bridges" on the subject line. Tax receipts are issued. Visit the Bridges webpage at:

<http://www.ont-autism.uoguelph.ca/bridges.shtml>

COMMUNICATION NEWS

"Many Methods, One Goal: To Communicate"

Sponsored by the AAC Awareness Task Force for ISAAC (International Society for AAC) to mark AAC Awareness Month in October 2009. People who use AAC are submitting stories, poems, essays or narrated slide shows or video--describing all the many ways in which they communicate effectively - at any time, in any place, with any person, and about any topic. The goal is to encourage writing activities and literacy instruction for all people who use AAC and to highlight the importance of literacy in improving communication. Visit website: <http://www.aacawareness.org/index.htm>

Communication Access for people who have communication disabilities: Guidelines and Resources on Communicating with People who have Communication Disabilities

A guide produced mainly by Augmentative Communication Community Partnerships-Canada and published by the Accessibility Directorate of Ontario (2009). Print edition may be ordered from Service Ontario: ISBN 978-1-4435-0421-8. OR search the ADO site to download in PDF.

"A Back Door Approach to Autism and AAC" is the title of a recent article by Professor Pat Mirenda, published in the journal AAC 24, 3, Sept 2008, pp.220-234. From the abstract: "The conventional view is that most individuals with autismhave no significant motor impairments but do have severe intellectual disabilities..... However, recent research has provided evidence that challenges these assumptions The author encourages practitioners and researchers to ...invent and investigate new ways to support people with autism to communicate." The back-door approach of the title involves literacy and facilitation.