

Stories from the brainreels podcast transcript

September 15, 2015

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Introduction

CHERYL: Welcome to Stories from the brainreels monthly podcast about brain injury and disability with a focus on art, culture, and disability pride.

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Today is a short story time segment. I started it to support storytelling from the disability community that doesn't focus specifically on impairments, diagnoses, or details around disability or illness. My storyteller today, Jackie Pilgrim, is a woman from the Autistic community who has talked to me before about how it's not exactly clear why her neurological makeup is considered a disability, though she does connect with the disability community. What she means is that she calls into serious question our desire to label some ways of being as disabled or disordered but not others. Once you're in the "disordered" category, it seems that everything you do is a symptom of some condition. And if you're lucky to remain in the "normal" or "typical" category, it seems that your behavior and communication are always, or often, considered acceptable by default. (Unless of course you break serious rules. And then a mass of people will rush in to explain you away as probably crazy, Autistic, insane, or brain-injured. Disability as insult. Tsk tsk tsk.) I've had conversations with other Autistic people about how strange it is to be labeled as having a communication disorder when you don't quickly pick up on and conform to social rules even though some of our social rules are kinda ridiculous. For example, asking people how they're doing without ever expecting an answer or only wanting "fine" or "good" to be the response. Another social rule being that talking fluently is the most revered, accepted form of communication that is somehow vastly superior to using a speech generating device, writing, drawing, speaking non-fluently, or coming up with some other communication types. I think taking a neurodiversity approach makes good sense, where we readily accept and appreciate all types of neurological makeups.

But that's not what you'll get in today's episode. Today is not about politics. It's about animals.

As always, you can subscribe to this podcast on iTunes, Stitcher Radio, and SoundCloud. More details about guests and links are always at the blog at www.whoamitostopit.com. If you're into showing off your neurodiversity pride with some swag, pop on over to my shop at cafepress.com/whoamitostopit to find all kinds of stuff with brain injury and neurodiversity pride images. Well, it's a brain in the shape of a heart on a lot of things. Cute things in various sizes too.

Now, I turn it over to Jackie, who was so generous to share these gorgeous animal stories. Today, I'm only playing a handful of them. More Jackie animal stories to come in later episodes.

The Stories

JACKIE: One of my most favorite stories is a story of my dog, Champ, was a full-bred German Shepherd, and we had this really cool pet chicken named Susan. Actually, we had two pet chickens: Susan and Gene. Gene was the rooster, and he was kinda mean. So I don't talk about Gene a lot. Susan and Champ became best friends. My dad cut hair for a living, and oftentimes people would barter for haircuts. So that's how we would sometimes get pets like Susan.

Champ, he was the alpha in our family of pets, and Champ was a very loving and accepting kind of spirit. Oftentimes when we'd get new pets, I would just take the pet to Champ, and he would smell it, and he would accept it into our family. And they would find their place in the family, whatever. Champ and Susan, they seemed to really get along. Well, Champ would be Susan's protector whenever Gene had a fit or something. One of their favorite things that they loved to do in the summer is that Susan would hop on Champ's back, and he would give her a piggyback ride to the front yard where they would stretch out in the yard. Champ would lay down first, and then Susan would kinda lay over his belly and spread her wings out across his belly. And they would lay there, and they'd watch the cars go by. But the thing is, the cars didn't go by too fast cuz everybody was slowing down to see what in the world. My mom was an artist, and she always had these statues in the yard. So they didn't know if it was a statue or if they were alive. So one guy stopped.

He was like, "Is that one of your mommy's statues?"

I was like, "No! They're breathing. Can't you see they're looking at you?"

And so he's like, "Don't move!"

And he went home and came back with a camera and was taking pictures. I wish I had gotten one. That was their thing. They would lay out in the sun in the afternoon, and then when they were done, Susan would jump on his back again, get the piggyback ride to the backyard.

We never had to feed Susan because Champ fed her. We would feed Champ, and he would eat first. And then he would save some for Susan. Now, one time Susan got ahead of herself a little bit, and she thought that she would go in. And Champ took his paw and kinda pushed her out the way, like, "No. Wait." And then he would eat, and then she would come in and eat, and all was well.

Now, on that same note, Gene--like I say, he was a mean old rooster--but Champ still was very accepting of him. He still loved him even though he protected Susan from him. Well, one time Gene had gotten over to some, I think it was Christmas time, and he'd gotten over to a piece of fruitcake or something. And it made him sick, and not physically ill, but he cocked his head to the side. He couldn't straighten his head up anymore. And he couldn't fly up into the tree to sleep like he used to. So again, Champ being Champ, took it upon himself to help take care of Gene. And when it would rain, Champ would let sleep in his doghouse. Champ would stay outside so that Gene, you know--Oh gosh, I feel myself getting teary because Champ, he was just the most, he was just the most wonderful, loving creature in life, just to see how giving he was, that he would allow this rooster to sleep in his doghouse, and he would sit in the rain. So I look at that, and I think I have been so blessed to have so many wonderful pets in my life. And people say pets are a reflection of you, and if that is the case, then I am very grateful to have been able to merge lives with these beautiful, wonderful creatures, one of which is my favorite: my personal pet Ching Ching.

We found him when I was six years old. Ching Ching is a box turtle, but he's better known as a land tortoise, and he was a small, brown box turtle. He weighed about a pound. Ching Ching was crossing a street on a rainy day, and thankfully it wasn't a busy street. And I asked my mom if she would stop so I could put him where the trees and stuff were. Yeah, I was about six years old at the time. So when I picked him up, and I looked at him, and I looked in his face, and instantly I fell in love. I was just like, oh my goodness. I took him back to the car, and I asked her. I was like, "Mom, can I keep him? He's so cute." And she, you know, she was like, "OK, we'll take him home." I took him home. He was a little bit of an escape artist, initially. And the way I gave him his name was because the markings on his shell

reminded me of Chinese writing. So when I saw that, I was like, "Ching Ching." And being six years old, it made sense to me.

There's this one particular time that I had Ching Ching outside. I liked to take him outside and walk around, and my mom was always outside in the garden and doing things in the year. I diverted my attention to something else, and I looked around. I couldn't find Ching Ching anywhere, and I freaked out. I was like, oh my goodness! Not just losing him, but what if he's out here in the street, and what if somebody picks him up? What if somebody tries to hurt him or something like that? And so we were searching frantically for him and found him in the neighbor's yard. He had dug a hole right at the base of one of their trees and hid in the hole! I was like, gee willikers! So it got to the point where I said I'd just kinda take him to the backyard instead of the front yard cuz we had a fence back there. And Ching Ching would go down there and hang out with Champ. Champ would just watch him roam around, and the other dogs would just kinda look at him. Nobody ever bothered him or anything like that. It was really sweet.

One thing--just to make the record clear--I had Ching Ching for 36 years of my life. And most people are like, "Oh, I didn't know that turtles live that long." The problem is, oftentimes when you put turtles in captivity, they lose the will to live because they're just trapped. I would strongly recommend to anyone, if you have a tortoise as a pet, don't put him in a cage or a box. Have a nice sized fenced area in the backyard where they can get out and feel the sun and dig and stuff and do things. They'll thrive in that. Ching Ching wasn't outside a whole lot, but he roamed the house freely, mostly in my room. I would open the door, and he would go, twitching his little way down the hallway, and he would make his way to the kitchen, where he knew my mom was. Well, Ching Ching loved to be hand-fed. He liked raw hamburger, and I would often spoil him and feed him by hand. Well, one day he went in the kitchen, and to be honest, I really think Ching Ching thought he was a dog. But that's another story. Anyway, so he comes into the kitchen, and my mom was in there. She's cooking, and I usually yelled out, "Mom, Ching Ching's headed your way." And she'd know to watch where she stepped. So he went in there, and after a few minutes, she said, "Jackie! Jackie! I think he's trying to attack me!" So I go running down the hall, into the kitchen, and I look. And Ching Ching has reached up to the bottom of the cabinet door, and he had one foot on the cabinet door. And he leaned back with his mouth wide open, and he just kept leaning there and waiting. I was like, "Mom, he's not going to bite you. He's waiting for you to drop some hamburger in his mouth. Feed him!" [laughs] So I went, and I got him a little ball of hamburger, and I said, "You give it to him." And he took it from her hand, and he was satisfied. That's all. He just wanted a snack. He knew food came from the kitchen. He went there to get something to eat. My mom always, she took very good care of Ching Ching.

This one I think, is the most heartfelt story I can tell. One day, I was feeling really low, just kind of beside myself, not feeling like I was worthy of anything at that time. And I was dragging myself out of bed to go to work that day, and I noticed there was a spider in my bathroom. It was a granddaddy longlegs, and it was missing a couple legs. So I said, well, hmm. I don't really want to put you back out into the world. I mean, I wasn't sure what to do for him. So what I did was I went through my morning routine, and I went to the closet and got a clean, white bath cloth. And I put water on it and wrung it out a little bit. And I put it on the floor. And I said, well, I don't know. He may not understand what I'm trying to do, but I'm trying to give him water, OK? So I went to work, came back home, didn't really see the spider or anything. Got up the next day, and the spider was on the wall again. So again, I did my morning routine, I got that same cloth--cuz I hung it up--water, and I put it on the floor. But the spider just sat there, and I went off to work. And I warned Ching Ching: "if the spider comes down the wall, do not eat it! OK? Be a good host to our guest."

So anyway, I go to work, and I come back. And it's the same thing: I don't see the spider, I pick the cloth up, I rinse it off, I hang it back up again. Well, on the third day, I went, and I did my routine, and put the cloth on the floor. And the spider came down the wall, quickly came down the wall and walked over to the cloth and began to drink. That was one of the most touching moments of my life because I said, here I am. I had valued this wonderful, precious little life, and there were all kinds of barriers: I couldn't talk to him and tell him what I was doing for him or anything. But he understood. He understood my act of kindness and was grateful for it. He appreciated it. That meant the world to me, and so when I came home, I didn't see him again. I did the same routine the next day, but I didn't see him anymore. I have to question myself if Ching Ching got to him or not. I don't know! I'm not blaming him! I just hope that maybe he got strong enough that he could make his way outside. But Ching Ching did look a little guilty. I'll just leave it at that. OK?

My mom was kind to my pets. My dad was not connected to any life--human or otherwise. I know that family members have had pets, but they don't talk about their pets like I do. I've never heard stories like mine. My pets have always been unusual. I mean, even like a simple story like Champ loved to chew gum. And between the two of us, I was always the one to swallow my gum! He never did! That's a little peek into my life, my little animal life with all my beautiful animal family. There was never a dull moment. Never a dull moment. They were the true, the absolute joy of my life and my saving grace as a child. My childhood with my humans was always painful. There are only small glimpses, windows that I could see happy moments with them, like when Mom let me bring Ching Ching home, that kind of thing. But there were also very damning moments. You know, it was just constant, constant cruelty. I can't even describe the level of cruelty that my parents inflicted on me, but I always had my animals, my pets that were my lifeline. They showed me the human side to being human, if that's even possible! You know what I'm saying? They made me realize what love was and what a connection was and that we didn't need to have language to be able to communicate to each other. And that's something that was really deeply instilled in me, and that's something I thoroughly believe today. I mean, I'm turning 50 in a couple weeks, and I still live by what my animals taught me, is that in all things there is value. And you don't have to be able to speak the same language--or a language at all--to communicate. And that's what I teach my son, too.

I think animals have a way of connecting with us, a way that we have forgotten. I oftentimes said having language, I think, is a plus and a minus. Being able to talk is fine, but we forget all of the other beautiful ways that we were equipped to communicate. But animals remind us of that because they have all those senses and feelings, and they can pick up on biorhythms and all that. We're all equipped to do that, but we just don't utilize it. We forget.

Well you know, sometimes having a disability of sorts, especially a neurological one, when you're rewired differently, it's like those things--biorhythm picking up and the senses--those things are more natural than talking. So I'm thinking that's maybe that's why nonverbal children and animals have such a strong communication, because they are back to the root, the original communication, and language hasn't gotten in the way. So that's what it is for me, and that maybe would be why I have that kind of connection with animals, and why my son is developing that kind of connection with animals, even though he's not much for touching animals like me. But they draw near to him. They like being close to him, even though he doesn't talk to them. You know, they feel his energy. So that's very important.

And I think if more people could appreciate life and not this superficial crap that we base our judgments on, we would be able to get along so much better. Differences wouldn't matter because we wouldn't really--I mean, it's not see them like ignoring them. But a difference has nothing to do with a person's

feelings and the energy that they exude and the beauty of that life. What does having a limb missing or being neurologically different have to do with that? Nothing! But because we're such a superficial, crappy kind of society, that every time we see a difference, oh! We gotta talk about it. We've gotta exploit it. We've gotta capitalize on it. We've gotta do all this crap, and then it's like, well, what about the life that's there? Oh, really? There's life? That's not really living. It is. We're here. We're not going anywhere.

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CHERYL: Thanks for joining me for another episode of Stories from the brainreels. Find more handy info on brain injury and disability art and culture on my disability arts blog, WhoAmIToStopIt.com.

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