

LIGHT

A woman with a prosthetic left leg is standing on a rooftop in a city. She is wearing a white t-shirt, blue jeans, and black sneakers. She is holding a large map with both hands and looking at it with a smile. A camera is hanging from her neck. The background shows a cityscape with buildings and a clear sky. The word "LIGHT" is written in large red letters at the top of the image.

Exploring Independence

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LIGHT

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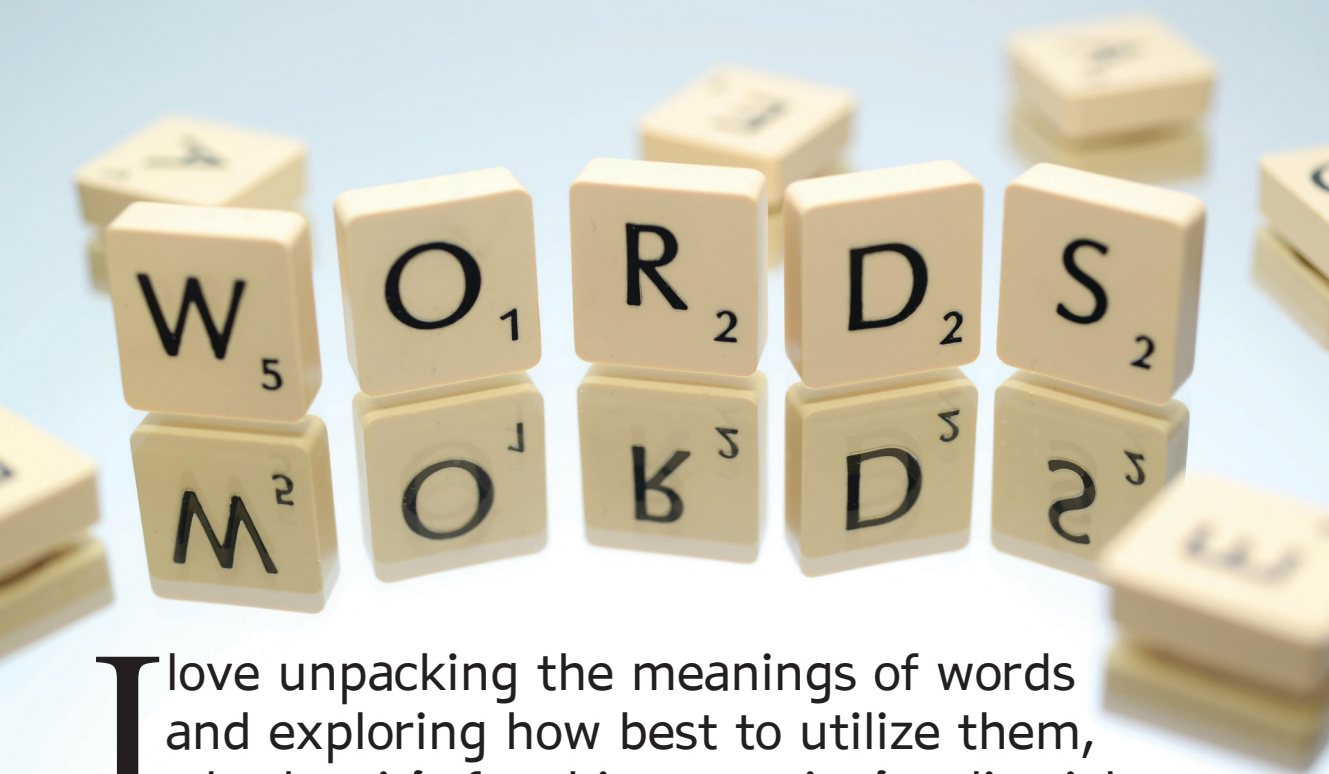
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What's in a Word?

by Jeri Lyn Rogge



I love unpacking the meanings of words and exploring how best to utilize them, whether it's for this magazine's editorial or more creative pursuits like sonnets or haikus. Their interplay can inform, educate, entertain, convict, and evoke emotions. Historically, words started and finished wars, ignited protests, and facilitated necessary political and societal changes. Words can wound, and words can heal.

Regardless of the language of origin, words have two primary identities: denotation and connotation. A word's denotation is its dictionary definition; it's what the word literally and explicitly means. What's printed or displayed in a dictionary reflects a snapshot of the language at that moment. English, for example, is a living language. It's a growing and ever-changing linguistic system that creates, economizes, and acquires (read here: steals) words from other languages. Today's dictionary editors must often scurry to catch up.

On the other hand, a word's connotation is influenced by the reader's emotions, cultural influences, and personal associations. This means a word could be defined in one way but be understood in another, and that second part can differ widely from person to person. Part of what makes learning English difficult, outside of its ever-shifting grammatical exceptions, are these connotations. For example, saying something is "sick" literally means feeling physically or mentally unwell; however, it can also mean something is top-notch, excellent, or shocking.

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

Let's play an association game. I'll supply a term and encourage you to think about the concepts or ideas that come to mind. If you're reading this edition with a friend or loved one, ask them to join you. I'll play along, too.

- **Cookies:** These delicious, traditionally circular treats are made from seemingly limitless flavor combinations. However, did you know there are cookies in the technological world? Those aren't edible, and often they're misunderstood. Cookies on my computer sound like a "crummy" mismatch of concepts to me, but my husband, a technical guru by trade, quickly tells me they're not. He also groans over my terrible puns. I did say I like to play with words, right?
- **Follower:** During my high school days, this referred to the people associated with the kids from the elite "in" crowd. In religious circles, it can mean someone who believes in Jesus Christ. On social media, it's someone interested in and engaging with a person's or company's content.
- **Diet:** This word is frequently used to indicate an extreme change in daily caloric intake and increased physical activity to achieve a lower number on the bathroom scale. It can also mean what a person or animal typically eats every day. Another definition indicates a routine or regimen, such as a diet of great stories like the ones in this edition. More on that in a bit.

How did you do? Did these examples bring to mind additional word pictures or associations? I enjoy playing this game when gaining context

into how others think, and it shines a light on the dangers of assumption. It would be very easy for me to believe that, in combination, the three terms above mean something in a church context, such as “The followers of the local church adopted the pastor’s diet advice and avoided the cookies at the church picnic.” However, these terms could also refer to social media: If you’re concerned about what advertisers can track from your social media diet, clear your web browser of its cookies and invite your followers to do the same. These are not the same outcomes. How many arguments start because the parties involved are invested in mismatched word connotations?

INDEPENDENCE? HMM.

Here’s a final word to finish our game. What do you think of when contemplating the word “independence”? My top-of-mind association recalls national patriotic pride, especially during the United States 4th of July Independence Day holiday, which includes family gatherings, picnics, parades, and fireworks displays. The holiday celebrates the United States becoming a nation by gaining independence from Great Britain in 1776.

This word also brings to mind my previous career in education, first as a preschool teacher and later as a middle school educator. My job involved helping children acquire skills to

perform successfully and independently to attain academic achievement. I learned about the challenges some of my students faced, such as those who needed an IEP (Individualized Educational Plan), struggled in the standard classroom for various reasons, or were English language learners. Independence is nuanced and varied, even in educational settings.

While a standard may be set by a school's administration or national benchmarks, the pinnacle of independence is a moving target. My six classes with 35 students daily amounted to more than 200 ever-changing aims, goals, and dreams. That was before we began the grammar lessons!

Paying bills is another association I make with the word "independence," and so are matching expectations with our spouses. Here's an example: We attempted to draw cash from an ATM during a short weekend getaway on our first wedding anniversary, only to discover a problem. Why was our bank balance so low? Panic set in momentarily. Had someone stolen money from our account? We realized when we called the bank that we both paid the monthly bill for our car loan. I thought I could do this independently to surprise my husband, and so did he. Oops! The news transformed our celebratory plans, leading to a meaningful conversation that set the course for how we manage our finances today. We can laugh about it now but were not jubilant when

the error was discovered. Our parents didn't talk with us much — at least, we didn't think so — about separating our responsibilities, communicating expectations, and sharing the load as independent adults. There has been plenty of learning in our relationship, first as a twosome, then as our sons came along, to today, as we look ahead to being empty nesters. This year is our 30th anniversary. We continue to learn, often with a lot of laughter. While we remain independent of our parents, we rely on each other.

GET READY FOR VARIETY

If you believe that's all we'll cover in this edition, you'll be in for a surprise. These creative contributors gave careful thought and prayer to their submissions, and what they share will explore the meanings — the connotations and denotations — of the word "independence."

If you are new to the blind and low-vision community, this issue may introduce terms that beg to be explored. Does independence mean the same to everyone, absent of context? Of course not. Our word association game highlights how our growing-up years, routine adult activities, monumental occasions, and much more color how we understand the world around us.

Do all our authors' essays align perfectly with each other? No, and that highlights this

subject's varied tapestry of expression and emotion. This content blessed me, and I hope it does you as well. Your feedback is welcomed and encouraged. Please send a letter or email to share your thoughts on this edition (contact details are on page 2), and feel free to share ideas with our team for future issues.

As stated in past editorials, when we know better, we do better. By broadening our understanding of the diverse implications of "independence," we can foster opportunities to dismantle barriers of misunderstanding, discourage excessive individualism, and mitigate the adverse effects of detrimental outcomes. These efforts may ultimately benefit ourselves, our families, communities, and society.

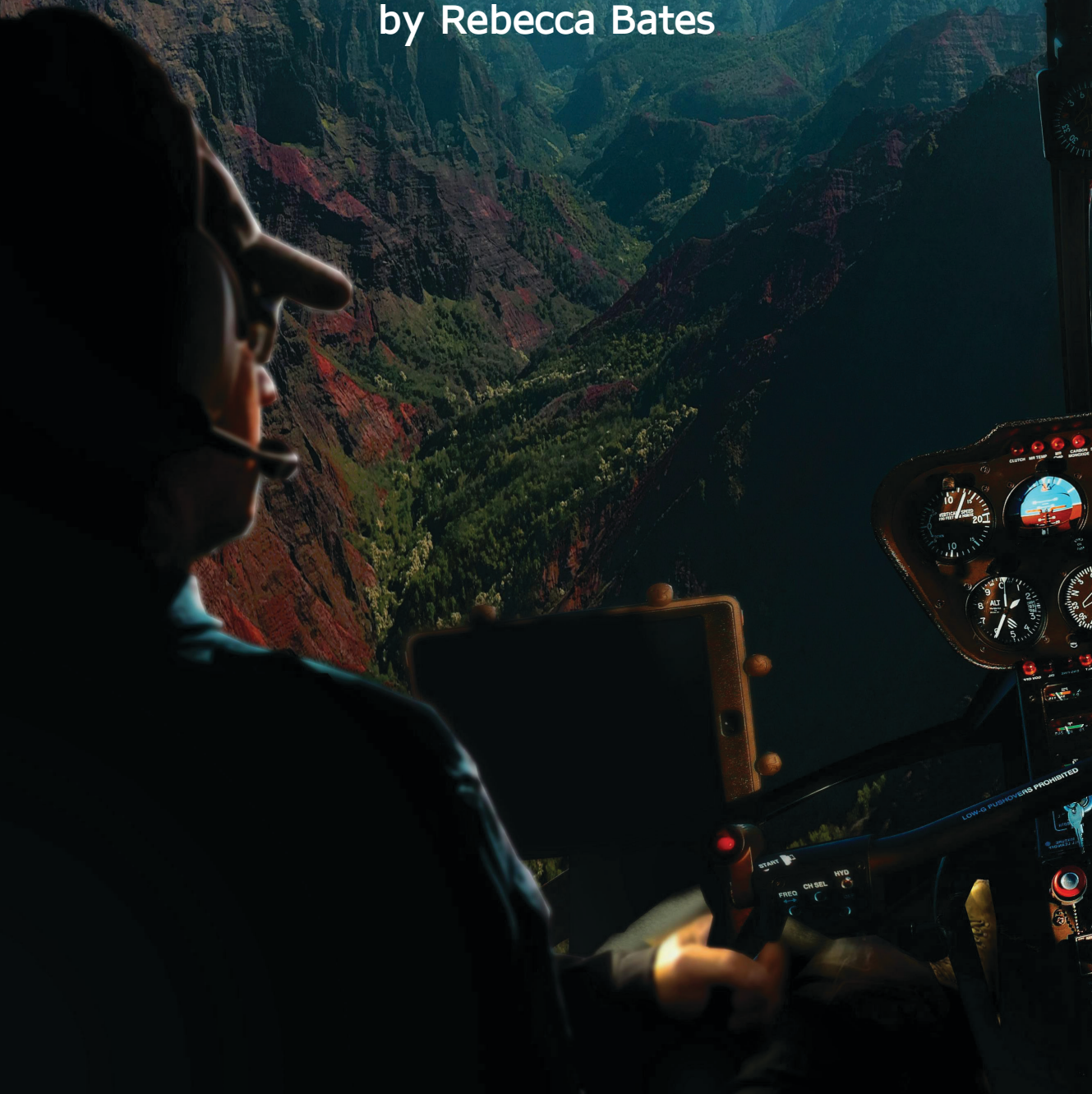
This edition is more encompassing than the connotation and denotation of a single word. Instead, it could start a conversation about what independence means to you and for you. Perhaps this discussion needs to happen with your friends or loved ones. Maybe it could include your church and community. When we each have a more straightforward concept of independence, authentic societal and spiritual community change to improve accessibility and inclusion can begin with the Lord's leading.

What's in a word? Quite a lot!

Jeri Lyn Rogge is the editorial and outreach ministries director at Christian Record Services in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Finding Strength in Connection to Christ

by Rebecca Bates



Imagine being a pilot of your own plane. You have self-sufficiency and control to successfully navigate the skies of life. This sense of autonomy and freedom empowers you. Independence is not just about what we can physically do but also about the emotional and mental strength needed to steer our aircraft. If a part of your spiritual, physical, psychological, or emotional well-being is off, your plane might struggle with turbulence. This is why attending to all aspects of our wellness, including connecting with God, is essential.

Individualism is all around us. We live in a society that tells us we need to be successful, independent, self-reliant, self-sufficient, competitive, compare ourselves to others, and have personal bonds over collective ones. In contrast, the apostle Paul says, "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17, NIV). When we are connected to God, we experience true freedom as we live independently from the pressures and expectations of the world. Be mindful of the social norms you feed into. Are there values of individualism ruling your life?

What happens when we need to rely on others? Perhaps you have a chronic illness, disability, or mental health condition that requires support. I found there is an intersection between independence and mental health. When we struggle with mental health, we can

feel like our independence has been taken away. Maybe anxiety and depression isolated us due to core beliefs and unhelpful thoughts. Perhaps a disability led us to not being able to do what we used to be able to do. This can elicit feelings of loss and grief, which are entirely understandable.

On the other hand, independence can lead to positive mental health outcomes. Independence can help us preserve our integrity, especially when we align with our values and beliefs.

Near the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, He prayed, "I have given them Your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that You take them out of the world but that You protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it" (John 17:14-16). Jesus is talking about how we are to be independent from the world, meaning that we uphold our values of faith and identity in Christ. Independence is also linked to improved life satisfaction and can have a profoundly positive impact on our mental health. We can feel more empowered and autonomous, especially when we are able to make our own decisions and have a sense of self-control.

Balance is important. Sometimes, we become hyper-independent, too reliant on others, or

codependent. Hyper-independence means we are so focused on being independent that we refuse to reach out for support and feel we need to handle everything ourselves.

I have seen this, particularly in people who have experienced trauma. Hyper-independence becomes a trauma or stress response, a survival strategy, or a coping mechanism. Signs of this might be feeling like you need to take on everything, intense mistrust of others, or having few close or long-term relationships. Causes can be feeling like you do not deserve support or care or your growing up experiences included abuse or neglect. Codependency is when a person neglects their needs in favor of fulfilling those of others. There is a difference between wanting to serve others and ignoring our needs. God created us with unique preferences, limitations, individual needs, and distinct characteristics.

Balance is important. Sometimes, we become hyper-independent, too reliant on others, or codependent.

So, what can we do to find balance? We can look to Scripture, especially verses emphasizing the importance of depending on God. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in Me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

We can apply this verse by connecting to God through a spiritual relationship with Him. This connection to Christ can sustain us through our struggles and help us support others. We can draw on His strengths and values when connected to God.

The Bible also talks about the importance of interdependence in the body of Christ, as illustrated in 1 Corinthians 12:21-26: "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it." This passage demonstrates that independence and dependence are not mutually exclusive but can coexist. We all have gifts that come together as one in the community of Christ.

We can work toward independence by learning to look to God to validate ourselves instead of looking to others to validate us.

Steps to validating ourselves can include:

1. Acknowledge our emotions and experiences. This involves taking a non-judgmental approach to how we are feeling. Maybe you are having a rough day because you feel triggered or down. Acknowledging your emotions might look like saying to yourself, "I am feeling sad at this moment."

2. Practice allowing yourself to feel the emotion. "It's OK that I am feeling sad," or "This sadness will pass."

3. Take a moment to try to understand your emotion or experience. You might use gentle curiosity to explore possible reasons for feeling that way. This might involve reframing criticisms towards yourself.

Cognitive reframing is a technique where you change your perspective on a situation or a thought. Some people refer to this as challenging unhelpful thoughts and replacing them with more balanced thoughts. We cannot always completely control the thoughts that come into our minds, but we can choose the thoughts we want to focus on. This can take some practice.

Let's say Sidney is struggling with chronic pain and is not able to work a full-time job. Sidney might think, "If I cannot work full-time anymore, I must be useless." This thought is

harmful because it fosters helplessness and self-loathing and focuses on the negative. This thought also does not capture the whole picture. Sidney might still be able to work part-time, volunteer, or be a great friend and community member. If Sidney reframes her thought to, "I might not be able to work as much as I used to, but I am still finding ways to contribute to others," she might feel better and more hopeful.

Another way to balance independence with dependence in Christ is to reflect on your identity, which can involve contemplating personal growth. Some questions you might ask yourself are:

What are your values, beliefs, priorities, and goals? How do you cope and draw from your own resilience? What spiritual beliefs and values can help empower you through difficult situations?

You can also navigate the trap of comparison by accepting your physical, mental, or emotional limitations. Trust in who God made you to be as being enough. Practice gratitude for what you are capable of.

You might try embracing healthy spiritual relationships. An example might be choosing who you want to connect with (groups or individuals). Take time to think about what boundaries you need to make to stay healthy

and work towards communicating these boundaries.

Practice letting go of fear and control by trusting in God's plan. Share with Him how you are feeling.

Independence, mental health, and faith intersect in our life's journey. Independence does not suggest we must always be self-sufficient. It can mean that we depend on God and engage in community fellowship, using these as the foundation to trust ourselves, embrace our uniqueness, and have the courage to navigate life's journey. We can let go of the shame, anger, and sadness that might come from the physical or emotional changes we are experiencing and seek God's support and love. Embrace who you are in Christ. You are enough. Therefore, independence is found in Who you depend on.

Rebecca Bates is a college professor, registered social worker and therapist, and freelance writer from Ontario, Canada.

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Beyond Independence

by Ray McAllister



Is independence the best goal for disabled individuals? Is it reasonable for anyone, regardless of ability, to seek a goal of total independence? Is total independence logical or possible? While it is good to be able to perform many skills without assistance, might there be a way to approach this that better supports the concept of community? Let's examine how individuals with disabilities can most effectively meet their needs in a manner that promotes overall health and well-being for everyone.

DEFINING TERMS

To start, let's imagine a man we'll call Joe. He has a wife, Mary. Neither have diagnosable disabilities. They wake to the sound of an alarm clock they did not construct in the bedroom of a house they did not build. They enjoy morning worship. Joe reads Scripture verses he didn't write, print, or distribute. Mary plays a song on the piano that required four strong men to transport into their living room. Joe puts on a suit, asking Mary to ensure his tie is straight. Then, the two of them go into the kitchen to eat oatmeal Mary prepared from oats neither of them grew. A few minutes after Mary departs for work in her car, Joe attempts to leave for his job. Unfortunately, his car battery is dead, so he asks a neighbor to jumpstart his car. We'll leave Joe, finally at work, amid a team of employees who cooperate to complete various projects.

Is either Joe or Mary completely independent? No! They are people working together in a social system where labor is distributed. I'm sure Joe could make a fine bowl of oatmeal, and Mary is perfectly capable of reading the Bible. Of course, if Joe and Mary plan to have children, they will undoubtedly have to work together there.

Let's say Joe originally wanted to be totally independent. Instead of marrying, he chose to live alone in the woods. Guess what? He's not totally independent there, either. Nature is centered around the idea of everything having a part to play. Joe inhales oxygen, which the plants exhale, and he exhales carbon dioxide, which the plants absorb as part of a process called photosynthesis.

As Joe explores the woods, he notices lichen, a composite organism consisting of algae and fungus living together as one. He finds berries, which he did not plant nor cultivate. After eating them, millions of Joe's beneficial gut bacteria help Joe digest them.

Joe's environment, regardless of location, relies on interdependence rather than independence. Every part of this system has tasks to complete and reaps the benefits of what other members do. If this approach is effective for individuals without disabilities, could it also benefit those with disabilities?

The real concern of a disabled individual like me, who is totally blind, is not to become

dependent on others, so they have to take care of me. I don't wish to be treated like a child or someone needing extra attention. I want to be able to do various tasks and live in a world where I give and receive just like everyone else.

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

What does the Bible say on this subject? Let's unpack Paul's counsel to the Corinthian church, supplying guidance that is also instructional for societal roles. "For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:23, NASB95). Paul outlines how each member of the Church has different gifts to share. I use my gifts to help others, and they use their gifts to help me. The body isn't made of individual parts that function without meeting the needs of the others. Instead, each part, physically or spiritually, has unique requirements to fulfill and receives benefits from the unique tasks completed by other parts.

We must note that in the body of Christ, we don't find parts that contribute little but are taken care of by the rest of the body. Dependence is not part of the system, but neither is independence. In fact, nowhere in Scripture do we find a description of the Church where everyone is completely independent without needing others. Every member of the Church is part of an interdependent community,

which creates special bonds and enables the Church to do things that would be impossible for an individual to do alone.

FLESHING IT OUT

Interdependence is logical and biblical, but how should it work for the disability community? True interdependence still involves knowing how to do many useful tasks for myself. I don't want to burden others, and someone may not always be around to assist me. As a result, I need to know how to navigate various environments. Someone may occasionally be able to give me a ride, but if they can't, I must be able to get where I need to go.

An example of interdependence is the relationship between my wife Sally and me. She is a better cook, but I know enough to care for myself. As a result, she does most of the cooking, though I could take over if she was ill. I also enjoy making things independently now and then, like cheesecake. I'll ask Sally to look over a recipe if I'm cooking something new, as she could help me work around impractical instructions and know what ingredients to buy.

I am physically stronger than Sally, so I help her lift heavy objects and carry bags of groceries into the house. I also help with tech matters, such as paying bills online.

Sally and I also do ministry together.

We pray together for people. When I preach, she drives me to the location and orients me to where I'll speak.

Neither Sally nor I are skilled at handy tasks around the house, like repairing a toilet or replacing a doorknob. I work as a reflexologist, so when friends help with repairs or tasks, I pay them with a relaxing and rejuvenating session where I work all the special reflexology points on their feet and hands to promote well-being.

Everyone has different strengths and weaknesses. While not everyone has a diagnosable disability that profoundly impacts daily living, no one is exempt from difficulties. It's in learning to work together that we all can have our needs met and help meet the needs of others.

In all, interdependence is much more achievable and reasonable as a goal than independence. Interdependence also helps the disability community meet the need to contribute to society. Most strikingly, interdependence better reflects how things should work in God's Kingdom.

What does interdependence mean to you? How might interdependence benefit you and those around you? I invite you to explore how interdependence can enrich your life.

Ray McAllister is a frequent contributor to Light magazine from Berrien Center, Michigan.

The Burden of Independence

by Rhianna McGregor Hajzer



Much like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, independence for people with disabilities is touted as the prize for a lifetime of breaking barriers and defying expectations. The pursuit of it promises freedom and fulfillment. However, the burden of independence is a heavy load to carry. Along with a toolbox stocked with resources, skills, and technology, we are expected to bear the emotional weight of advocacy, education, and the constant pressure to meet and surpass expectations. People with disabilities become figures who inspire when obstacles are overcome and pitied when culture's expectations cannot be met.

This approach to independence preaches a false narrative and only breeds misconceptions, insecurity, discouragement, and, too often, burnout. It's time to stop idolizing independence and embrace the kind of freedom that, through Jesus Christ, brings true peace, relief, and joy.

Society defines independence not just as a set of practical skills for daily living but as a mindset — an attitude toward disability that determines one's success. It is framed as the ultimate goal, the measure of worth for disabled individuals. But independence, in and of itself, is not a bad thing. It is a valuable skill and, in many ways, a gift. I encourage those with disabilities to seek ways to further

their independence and find the resources and solutions that best support their needs and goals.

However, when the world's definition equates one's level of independence with one's worth as an individual, that brings a heavy burden. In my experience, this burden manifests in three key ways: advocacy fatigue, a reluctance to ask for help, and the unspoken competition to prove who is the most independent and, thereby, the most successful.

As I grew up, nothing terrified me more than being told to advocate for myself. Advocacy was akin to being thrown into the deep end without knowing how to swim; my flailing efforts to stay afloat were critiqued from the sidelines with little guidance but to "do better next time." I was humiliated — not just for failing those I wanted to impress, but for what was becoming increasingly clear: My worth as a disabled woman was measured by my level of independence.

As I grew older, advocacy didn't become easier — it became heavier. The expectation to educate others, demand accessibility, confront discrimination, and prove my worth grew suffocating. Every interaction became a test, an opportunity to either reinforce or shatter culture's idealized image of an independent disabled person. The reputation of the disability

community rested on my shoulders. No one warned me how exhausting it would be, how even on the days when I wanted only to exist, I would still feel the unspoken pressure to advocate. And if I was simply too exhausted? That was the greatest failure of all.

Yet, amid the fatigue, a deep-seated reluctance to ask for help took root. Would accepting help be yet another failure to live up to the standard of independence? “No,” said my sighted friends and family. “Yes,” warned many disability rights activists. I was paralyzed by indecision. As a Christian, I knew the truth that I wasn’t created for self-reliance. God’s grace was sufficient, and through my weaknesses, His power would be made perfect (2 Corinthians 12:9, ESV). There was no need to strive for a pyrrhic prize I’d never be able to reach. Yet, I craved the praise and affirmation the world offered those it deemed worthy.

The expectation to embody self-sufficiency wasn’t just a battle between my understanding of grace and the world’s standards — it was also a competition within the disability community. There was an unspoken race to prove who needed the least help, could adapt the most, and ultimately, was the most independent. To these, the prize of self-worth and peer validation was awarded. In my eyes, they embodied true freedom, living beyond the limits of their disability and achieving a deeper

sense of gratification. My failings were glaring in the face of their triumph, and I began to believe I would never be enough. The burden of independence — the very thing meant to bring freedom and happiness — was crushing me.

But the hope of Christ shines brightest when things look darkest. Jesus said, “Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). In my depression and fatigue, Jesus invited me to fix my gaze on His unchanging love and acceptance. There, He began the work of healing the wounds inflicted by the world’s false promises, replacing them with His grace.

Our priorities and responsibilities shift when Jesus is at the center of our lives. We begin to view the world through His eyes — what He values, we value, and who He loves, we love. This perspective shapes how I respond to the world around me, whether I’m facing discrimination in the workplace or an acquaintance only fixated on what I can and cannot do. My priority changes from fighting for my individual rights and protecting my independence to demonstrating God’s love to those who may not know Him. In discerning whether to engage, I take a moment to consider my witness and ask myself these questions: Am I being loving? What motivates me to speak out, and what do I hope to gain?

Am I angry and seeking revenge, or do I truly hope to inspire repentance and a behavior change? Most importantly, will others see Jesus in me?

However, the reality is that advocacy fatigue is real. We are often asked to explain ourselves, our struggles, or our rights as though we are obligated to educate everyone who asks. The truth is we are not obligated to answer every question or satisfy every curiosity. It's OK to say "no," as I am continually learning; we aren't obligated to justify our "no," either. We have the agency to choose when, where, and how we engage. I'm still learning to set boundaries for myself — boundaries that allow me to preserve my energy and focus on what truly matters. This doesn't mean being dismissive but acknowledging that not every moment is the right time to offer an explanation. Sometimes, it's OK to walk away or say, "I don't have the energy for this conversation right now." Saying "no" isn't a failure; it's an act of self-care and wisdom.

There is wisdom in knowing when to take up the cross of advocacy and when to lay it down. Not every battle is ours to fight, and not every injustice requires our personal involvement. While advocacy for disability rights is essential, and organizations exist to advance these causes, that does not mean every disabled person is called to this fight in the same way.

Being affected by injustice does not obligate us to become its frontline warriors. Some are equipped and called to be public advocates, tirelessly pushing for awareness and change. Others may serve in quieter ways — through individual conversations, prayer, or living out the truth that our worth is not defined by worldly standards of independence or achievement. Recognizing this truth is not an excuse to ignore injustice but an invitation to seek God's will for where and how we engage rather than succumbing to pressure or guilt.

Ultimately, our highest calling is not to prove ourselves or to fix every broken system but to walk in obedience to Christ. He does not measure our worth by our advocacy, our independence, or how much we push against the world's injustices. Instead, He calls us to faithfulness — to love Him, to love others, and to trust that He is sovereign over all things. There is freedom in knowing we do not have to carry every burden or fight every battle. When we surrender our need for control and rest in His perfect plan, we find peace, purpose, and the assurance that our identity is secure in Him alone.

Rhianna McGregor Hajzer is a Christian by grace, blind by design, and a writer by passion. She writes from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada.

What Is Freedom?

by Tammy Darling



If I were to ask you, "What is freedom?" how would you answer? Freedom is often defined as the ability to do "what one wants, when one wants, and how one wants to do it."

Freedom is so much more than that. In fact, freedom is not that at all. Perhaps we don't feel we have the freedom we innately desire because our definition of freedom is so limited.

To be free in the 1828 edition of *Noah Webster's Dictionary of the English Language* means this: "not enslaved; to remove from a thing any encumbrance or obstruction; to rescue or release; guiltless; innocent; gratuitous; ready; eager; to disentangle." These are just some of the many definitions included in this dictionary edition. They are, however, some of the most important.

The apostle Paul has this to say about freedom: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. ... You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another in love" (Galatians 5:1, 13, NIV).

Peter Marshall, former chaplain of the United States Senate, asserted, "May we think of freedom, not as the right to do as we please, but as the opportunity to do what is right." Indeed.

I asked myself one day, “What is freedom?” Here are some of the answers that came to me:

1. Freedom is being who you were created to be. I’m an

introvert by design, which doesn’t sit well with many people. I’ve been told over the years that I should be more this or less that. For years, I listened to them, putting on whatever mask I needed to play the role asked of me. Perhaps there’s a reason I never took a drama class in high school; I already had enough roles to play.

In time, I learned about who God said I was. I longed to live in accordance with what my Creator said about me. Chosen. Accepted. Masterpiece. Beloved. Peculiar. Set apart. And so much more. But did you catch those last two? I have the freedom to be peculiar and set apart. Ha!

There’s freedom in being who God created you to be — your beautiful, quirky, unique self. Anything else leads to bondage. If you want to experience true freedom, just be yourself. And know that being yourself is enough; you cannot be more you than you already are. And that is a beautiful thing.

There’s freedom in being who God created you to be — your beautiful, quirky, unique self. Anything else leads to bondage.

Being a loving, helpful, and generous person is excellent, but there needs to be a healthy balance.

2. Freedom is living above your circumstances. Lately, I've had stress upon stress piled upon my shoulders. One hot afternoon, tempers flared, and I ended up in a spat with

my husband. Frankly, we were both super-stressed. What began as a minor argument ended with us not speaking to one another until the next day. Church day. We had to talk to one another; otherwise, who knows how long the silence might have lingered.

I felt like a hostage in my own home. Joy was MIA. Peace was, too. As was sleep. I could go on and on, but you get the idea. You may have some experience on the circumstance battlefield yourself.

But here's the thing: I'm not to live by my feelings, tossed about by the winds and waves of life's circumstances (see Ephesians 4:14). Instead, I can rise above my circumstances when walking in the Spirit and not the flesh. I can soar like an eagle when my perspective aligns with God's (see Isaiah 40:31). You can, too. In His eyes, it's all good; if it's not good yet, He's not finished yet because Romans 8:28 says that He works all things for the good of those who love Him. That's all we need to know

to consistently live above our circumstances.

3. Freedom is truth: I never would have imagined a day when I would have seen the extent and consequences of the lies people believe. Satan, who comes only to steal, kill, and destroy (see John 10:10), works his wiles by lying. It's all he can do, yet so many fall for it.

I'm not exempt. I've believed the enemy's lies. Bought them hook, line, and sinker and paid the price. But Jesus taught, "If you hold to My teaching, you are really My disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32).

Freedom is ours when we live in truth. Not the world's truth. Not our own preferred version of truth. God's truth. "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me," said Jesus (John 14:6). Jesus made the path to freedom clear; all we must do is believe Him.

4. Freedom is the ability to say "no." How often have you felt constrained by the sheer number of things you need to do? How many things can be on your plate before the plate itself breaks? How heavy is the ball and chain you're carrying?

Being a loving, helpful, and generous person is excellent, but there needs to be a healthy

I have never been freer than when I do things God's way. God sees the big picture; I only see in part.

balance. Maybe you take on too much because you feel obligated or are trying to be accepted. Hint: You are already accepted by the only One who counts; I had to learn this.

Saying "no" is a gift. That's right, a gift. Burning the candle at both ends will only leave you in the dark. As I've gotten older and wiser, I've realized, embraced, and even accepted that it's OK to say "no," enjoy some personal downtime, and live in the freedom Christ sacrificed His life for. I don't have to be all — and do all, for all. There's freedom in allowing yourself to say "no."

5. Freedom is dependence on God: The fact that true freedom relies on dependence on another seems to be a paradox. It's when we live it that we prove its certainty.

I have never been freer than when I do things God's way. God sees the big picture; I only see in part. I'm holding that puzzle piece, clueless about where it fits into my life; God knows precisely how and where it fits.

Here's what Jesus had to say on the matter: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in Me and I in you, you will bear much

fruit; apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Freedom comes with abiding; the paradox now makes perfect sense.

Freedom lies in embracing the fact that we need God. Going our own way, doing our own thing — that’s not freedom, that’s bondage. With God, we not only experience genuine freedom, but we can also do what is otherwise impossible to do without Him.

It would take an extensive book to cover what it means to be free, but this is a start. Now, back to Noah Webster’s definition of being free: In 1808, Webster became a born-again Christian after falling to his knees and confessing his sins. Webster declared what it meant to be free 20 years later. His dictionary incorporated his newfound understanding of freedom: “Not enslaved, to rescue or release, to remove from a thing an encumbrance or obstruction, guiltless, innocent, gratuitous, ready, eager.” These are the words that comprise only the tip of what true freedom is.

Take some time in the coming days to ponder what freedom really is.

Tammy Darling is the author of 1,500 published articles and three books. She writes from her home in rural Pennsylvania.

Independence

by Richard Clark Jr.

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty
by which Christ has made us free”
(Galatians 5:1, NKJV).

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| ☐ Abstemious | ☐ Overcoming |
| ☐ Assured | ☐ Plucky |
| ☐ Autonomous | ☐ Redeemed |
| ☐ Confident | ☐ Release |
| ☐ Conquering | ☐ Resilient |
| ☐ Courageous | ☐ Resolute |
| ☐ Dauntless | ☐ Resourceful |
| ☐ Deliverance | ☐ Rugged |
| ☐ Determined | ☐ Separate |
| ☐ Disencumbered | ☐ Stalwart |
| ☐ Disentangled | ☐ Sufficient |
| ☐ Enterprising | ☐ Sustaining |
| ☐ Extricated | ☐ Temperate |
| ☐ Freedom | ☐ Tenacious |
| ☐ Governing | ☐ Toughened |
| ☐ Impartial | ☐ Undeterred |
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| ☐ Intrepid | ☐ Valiant |
| ☐ Liberty | |

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All He Handed Down

by Tina Neeley



It was the whistle that woke her — not the train as it made its midnight pass through Coldwell, Tennessee, but the January wind through the cracks between the wallboards of the old house.

She slipped out of bed and over to the girls, four of them, and pulled the old quilt tighter around them, tucking it under their feather bed. Only a couple of steps away was the makeshift bassinet. The snow settled around the room's baseboards as winter's icy fingers reached for him. *No, this time would be different.* She could feel it.

She'd had little time to grieve the others. One after another, hope rose only to kick the breath out of her as she watched them take their last. The answer had been there all along, in their barn lot. Babies lost because her milk lacked the nutrition they needed for life when the milk from their goats could have saved them. Thank God they understood it now.

She willed this one to make it. A boy at last. She was starting to give herself permission to dream about his future. This baby's future would become part of my past — a legacy of quiet strength, vision, and a fierce sense of independence.



That baby boy was my Papa Zeke. If he could imagine it, he could build it. Did he imagine a life forged with grit and steel, battles fought on foreign soil and quietly waged on the home front?

Papa Zeke was a quiet man, my daddy's daddy.

He saw things he didn't talk about — a soldier drowned in paratrooper training before he could reach him; a nephew swallowed by the depths of a nearby lake, only to be released from the water's undergrowth weeks later; enemy soldiers killed for the sake of saving his country, at his hands and at the hands of those who served beside him.

Before my time, his life was a journey. Papa Zeke left home at 16, finding work and adventure in President Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration. Marriage to my grandmother, Mary, and a growing family began to bring his future into focus even before his WWII military service ended.

With a post-war oversaturated job market and a wife and three boys to provide for, they moved where Papa Zeke found work — first, back home in Shelbyville, Tennessee, and later to South Carolina. But a three-year stint in Michigan sparked what became my grandfather's vocation. Spot welding on the auto manufacturing lines in Detroit led him to gas pipeline welding on his way back home to Tennessee.

How often did I see him with the flint striker in one hand and the torch in the other? With a nod, the welding hood fell forward, and the flame lit. Soon, sparks flew as the heat shaped and connected steel, forging something new from what was.

The summer before I turned 16, Papa Zeke gave me my first job. He paid me to be the secretary in his welding shop. He tried to teach me to calculate steel costs and read the blueprints on his drafting board, but it went over my head. Three things I did well kept me on the payroll: answering the phone, filing, and sharing lunch with him. These lunches shifted from daily to weekly when I married and began my career in a local law office.

During this time together, I started to see my Papa Zeke in a new light and long for his stories. Before then, I only saw what was right in front of me. Short-sightedness is nothing new for me. Glasses since the third grade marked my vision as part of my identity. Decades later, myopic degeneration changed how I saw the world. Dementia would change how my grandfather saw his.

The family quilt would forever connect our stories. Papa Zeke handed it off to me one day at the end of our lunchtime.

“You’re the only one that cares anything about this stuff — here,” he said, shoving the old

patchwork spread toward me.

I really did care, but not about heirlooms. I never knew us to have any. I cared about his story. Our story. By this time, dementia was slowly closing the door to the vault of these sepia memories. I wanted to reach inside that vault and rescue what mattered most — the essence of him.

I thought I could understand more about him if I could learn the quilt's story. Instead, it started teaching me about myself, what I felt I needed to hold together — and what I had to let go. I didn't realize how much of my identity hinged on doing things for myself until I couldn't. I'd always associated independence with strength. In the shadows of my declining vision, I began to understand that sometimes strength looks like surrender.

More than a decade after my grandfather passed, I found myself asking God for sight — not metaphorically, not in the poetic sense of seeking direction, but in the raw, physical reality of my degenerative condition. It crept in quietly, eroding my vision just enough to demand my attention and threaten the life I thought I'd crafted so independently.

I prayed for sight, but I hardly had the strength or the faith to be fully transparent and believe in total restoration. "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24, NKJV).

It wasn't just my eyesight that was slipping. My independence was, it felt, slinking away. I remember fumbling with something — plugging in my cell phone charger, I think — and brushing off the offer of help with a quick, pride-laced "I've got it." But I didn't have it. Not really.

More and more, I didn't really have it at all. So, I sat alone at my pity party, considering navigating life in darkness, considering ways I could hold onto a normal way of life.

In the quiet that followed, God showed up. He didn't lecture me. He gently reminded me, "I never asked you to do this alone. You don't have a vision problem, child of Mine. You have a pride problem." And, like Papa Zeke's old quilt, life's stitches loosened with time, but something in it held firm.

Years after my grandfather gave the quilt to me, I looked closer at the pattern — triangles rising and falling across squares of feed sack and faded cloth. There was a rhythm to it, like wings in flight. I looked for the name of this pattern in a quilting book and online.



Descriptions varied, but the feeling stayed with me, unsettling at first.

I imagined birds of prey — hawks, buzzards, or vultures — circling what was weak or fading, spying on the vulnerable. It reminded me of what dementia had taken from my grandfather, what my diagnosis threatened to take from me. But over time, I saw something else. These figurative birds weren't always hunting. Sometimes, they were watching, protecting, hovering — not to strike, but to stay, to bear witness.

The quilt wasn't just something he handed down. In my mind's eye, it transformed into a map of where I'd been and who had gone before me. Each triangle, worn spot, and fabric choice told a story. Some stretched back to the cold wind that seeped through the cracks of the old house at Coldwell. Others leaned toward the heat of a welder's flame or my fumbling hands trying to sew in low light. There was a thread of Papa Zeke in every block, and now, a thread of me. He taught me to stand on my own. God taught me I never stand alone. "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand" (Isaiah 41:10).

There's an independence that comes from pride — a white-knuckled grip on the illusion of control. In contrast, there's an independence that

comes from peace — knowing that the Light of Jesus walks with you, even when your eyes can't see the way.

On the harder days, when the light shifts and the world around me is distorted, I don't reach for the quilt. It's fragile now, tucked safely away, but I see it. I can always see it. Even with spotty vision, the quilt is vivid: the colors, stitches, and pattern of triangles rising like wings. I see it in my mind's eye like I see my grandfather.



Papa Zeke gave me the quilt — but what he really handed down was a steadiness in the storm, strength without words, and love that never had to announce itself to be known. The quilt still holds stories I'll never fully unlock — his and mine, stitched together in the quiet places where words fall short, but memory holds on.

I used to think independence meant not needing help. Now I know it means walking forward even when I do. Because I am not alone. I never was. And I never will be.

Tina Neeley is an inspirational feature story writer from Shelbyville, Tennessee, who looks for the extraordinary in ordinary things, believing her myopic degeneration is a gift that inspires these closer looks.

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