

Introduction

FOR OVER A DECADE, I have had the privilege of sharing my life with a guide dog, a Golden Retriever-yellow Labrador named Teela. During this period, the relationship between us has changed both of our lives. This is a book about being led by a dog to new places in the world and new places in myself, a book about facing life's challenges outwardly and within, and about reading those clues—those deeply felt signals—that can help guide the way. It is also, more broadly, about the importance of intimate connection in human-animal relationships, academic work, and personal life. It is about the company we keep, about companionship, guidance, interdependence, and love.

In these stories, I describe how my relationship with Teela has had far-reaching effects—influencing not only my abilities to navigate the world while blind, but my writing, my teaching, and my sense of self. I explore my inner emotions as I walk with her, no longer facing the world alone but accompanied by her spirited presence, and I examine other intimate relationships in my life that have been enriched and supported by our bond. Yet these reflections are more than strictly personal. Throughout, I draw insights from my experiences that I hope may prove helpful to others—guide dog and service dog users, individuals with pets or those who also share their lives with animals, and readers interested in issues of intimacy and interconnectedness more generally. For, as these stories suggest, a

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relationship with a guide dog has much in common with other intimate connections, and the search for self that it encourages is akin to other individual quests for competence, comfort, and self-worth.

In my previous book, *Traveling Blind: Adventures in Vision with a Guide Dog by My Side*, I explored my first two years with Teela as we traveled city streets and country byways and as I learned to perceive the world in new ways. As I wrestled with dilemmas of self-acceptance and dealt with how I was perceived by others, I grew to appreciate my own particular ways of seeing, even if limited, and to value my blindness as well as my sight. In that book, our relationship was just beginning to form. *Come, Let Me Guide You* extends the narrative as I follow Teela through the entire ten-year span of our working life together. Here I describe how the intimacy between us developed in intensity and naturalness over time and how, as Teela led me around external obstacles, she was also leading me around inner ones, enabling me to confront life's complexities with a newfound freedom. The book chronicles the exhilaration of our early years, the deepening of our relationship during our middle period, and the enduring intimacy of our bond. The chapters are organized in topical groupings pertinent to our journey. At the end of each, I give the date it was originally written to help the reader navigate the chronology.

Part I, "Sharing the Road," provides a detailed account of what life has been like for us over the years—beginning with Teela's older age as I face the prospect of her imminent retirement. I then look back on our earlier times, exploring significant moments from when she was young. In walking with her, I discover new pleasures, adapting my life to hers as she does to mine. I learn to read her signals as she guides me and to reflect on my own inner responses—the feelings of profound gratitude and joy she raises in me. These chapters convey Teela's lively yet deferential temperament. At one moment, she will seem to be a "party girl"—eager to play and have a good time—and, at the next, she is my "dutiful guide"—stopping at curbs,

leading me around dangers and through dark or difficult times, turning toward me often to make sure I am still following her. Her outgoing personality clearly complements my more introverted nature and enhances my abilities both to contribute to others and to face challenges within myself.

In Part II, “Searching for Sight,” I focus on my blindness and my struggles for sight, which continue to be a challenge for me even with Teela’s guidance. Here I share with the reader the experience of facing javelinas in the Chiricahua mountains of Arizona, seeking to protect my curious guide dog from small tusked animals I cannot see; the adventure of going shopping for a camera with Teela by my side as I try to use this equipment for the sighted to reach beyond the limits of my blindness; and our travels in the New Mexico desert, where I confront the peculiar fact that although I can look up and see large white clouds in a bright blue sky, I cannot see the ground at my feet and I often fear that I will stumble and fall even as Teela guides me. In this section, traveling with Teela provides entrée into a broader discussion of dilemmas of vision and blindness.

In Part III, “Weathering Life’s Losses,” I draw from our middle years, branching out to examine other intimate relationships in my life that, like my tie with Teela, have prompted insight and self-reflection. In these stories, Teela is often an invisible partner, but her companionship is vital to my equilibrium—as I visit my mother’s bedside in the days before she died; as I stand in a distant cemetery, thinking back on my life with this challenging woman who raised me; when I visit my sister to go through my mother’s jewelry; and then as I wear my mother’s silver Navajo bracelet to remind me of positive qualities she has passed down to me. Teela’s importance to my inner life is further explained in the subsequent chapter as I confront the loss of a psychotherapist who guided me emotionally for eighteen years. I remember how, as I walked to my therapist’s memorial service, probing ahead of me with my white

cane, I imagined having a golden dog who would carry her spirit and be always by my side. Not long afterward, I got Teela, who soon became an extension of that important bond. In a concluding chapter, I describe how having Teela with me, and thus always the possibility of our taking off on an energetic walk, has imbued my life with a sense of openness to adventure that has helped me through the self-doubt that followed upon these two intimate losses.

In Part IV, “Seeking Connection,” I explain my “intimate narrative” approach to ethnography and discuss the influence of my relationship with Teela on my academic work. I describe how she has figured in my research and writing much as she has in my personal life—an external presence that has enabled me to explore my sense of myself and to become more at home in the world. In the subsequent chapter, I draw from my experiences teaching a life-altering course on women and disabilities at Stanford University, where Teela lay under the seminar table, contributing to the comfort of the classroom and to my confidence as a teacher. It was in that course, the first year I taught it, that a student had appeared with a guide dog, making me wish the same for myself, although at that time I was only starting to use a white cane.

The connections between past and present merge in the concluding chapter as I describe my joy and Teela’s playful cooperation when I receive a new guide dog named Fresco and as both Teela and I seek to get to know him and to school him in our ways. As I walk with Fresco, I keep Teela always in my mind, guiding me on how to be in the world, how to share my pleasures and face new experiences with confidence. I miss her and yet I am determined not to leave her behind. The themes of the book concerning intimacy, self-reflection, and needs for external support for inner identity echo through this last chapter on life with two guide dogs—one retired but still leading me in spirit, and the other newly guiding me, causing me, as Teela did, to reflect on my inner life as well as on the outer paths we explore.

Because each of these stories was written with a different main focal point—each examining a different type of intimate experience—Teela’s presence is central and explicit in some of them, while in others, it is often implicit. She is an invisible companion by my side, as guide dogs typically are for their users, yet she is no less important when unseen. A second often invisible presence in these pages is that of Hannah, my human partner for the past thirty-four years, who welcomed Teela into our life and who has helped care for and guide both of us. Her loving companionship has deeply informed the openness and honesty of these stories.

Come, Let Me Guide You extends the personal approach of my prior studies, beginning with *Social Science and the Self: Personal Essays on an Art Form* (1991), in which I argued for a more full use of the subjectivity of an observer in social research. Over time, my ethnographic narratives have become increasingly intimate, and *Come, Let Me Guide You* takes a step forward in this approach by speaking emotionally and from the heart. At the same time, the book is intended as a contribution to the academic field of human-animal studies, offering insights about human-animal communication and a detailed exploration of changes that occur over the life span of a working pair. It is further intended as a contribution to disability studies, feminist studies, and sociological methodology, elaborating understandings of personal identity and expanding possibilities for representation through the use of personal narrative. Its place in the literature of each of these fields is detailed in the Bibliographic Notes.

This book was written during 2008–2014, over a period of nearly six years when I was increasingly, though gradually, losing my eyesight to a condition called “birdshot retinopathy.” This is an autoimmune disease that has caused inflammation and scarring on my retina and that I have had since 1996. It has resulted in blind areas throughout my central and peripheral vision, increased darkness, blurring, color loss, distortion, lack of depth perception, and

inability to see fine lines and details. Often I will see the shape of something directly in front of me, but I will miss an object one inch to the side. I am constantly trying to figure out what I see, because I see it only partially, and soon it may disappear. Mine is an irregular type of vision, a spotty blindness that comes and goes, sometimes fading into the background, sometimes calling my attention to it, such as when I stumble or fall or hit my head on an open door because I do not see it, or when I lose my way, even in a familiar area, because the shapes and forms around me seem indistinct, the paths between them unclear.

Yet amidst all the uncertainty of what I see and seek to know, there has been, for the past ten years, a large golden dog by my side, usually a few steps ahead guiding me into the future. Far more than an aid to my blindness, she has been an aid to my sense of self—providing me with an external footing, a third leg on the tripod, a self outside myself to whom others say, “What a beautiful dog,” or, “Tell me her name,” so that when with her, I walk through the world far less anonymously than I ever expected to be and with a sureness and sense of pride that I would not have on my own. A further benefit of life with Teela has been that she has always loved to play. For ten years, I have carried a floppy Frisbee in my backpack that comes out when we are on a college campus, or visiting my mother, or at home but in need of exercise or escape. I toss it to Teela and she returns it to me, bounding off and coming back with great glee—her spirit, her openness to adventure and joy, enhancing and causing reflection on my own. In these stories, I attempt to convey a sense of our relationship and how the intimacy it has provided for me has been intertwined with so many other aspects of my life. I hope that my insights and sharing of experiences may prove fruitful for the reader, encouraging a sense of new direction or knowledge, or simply a familiarity with what life has been like for me. Come, let me guide you.