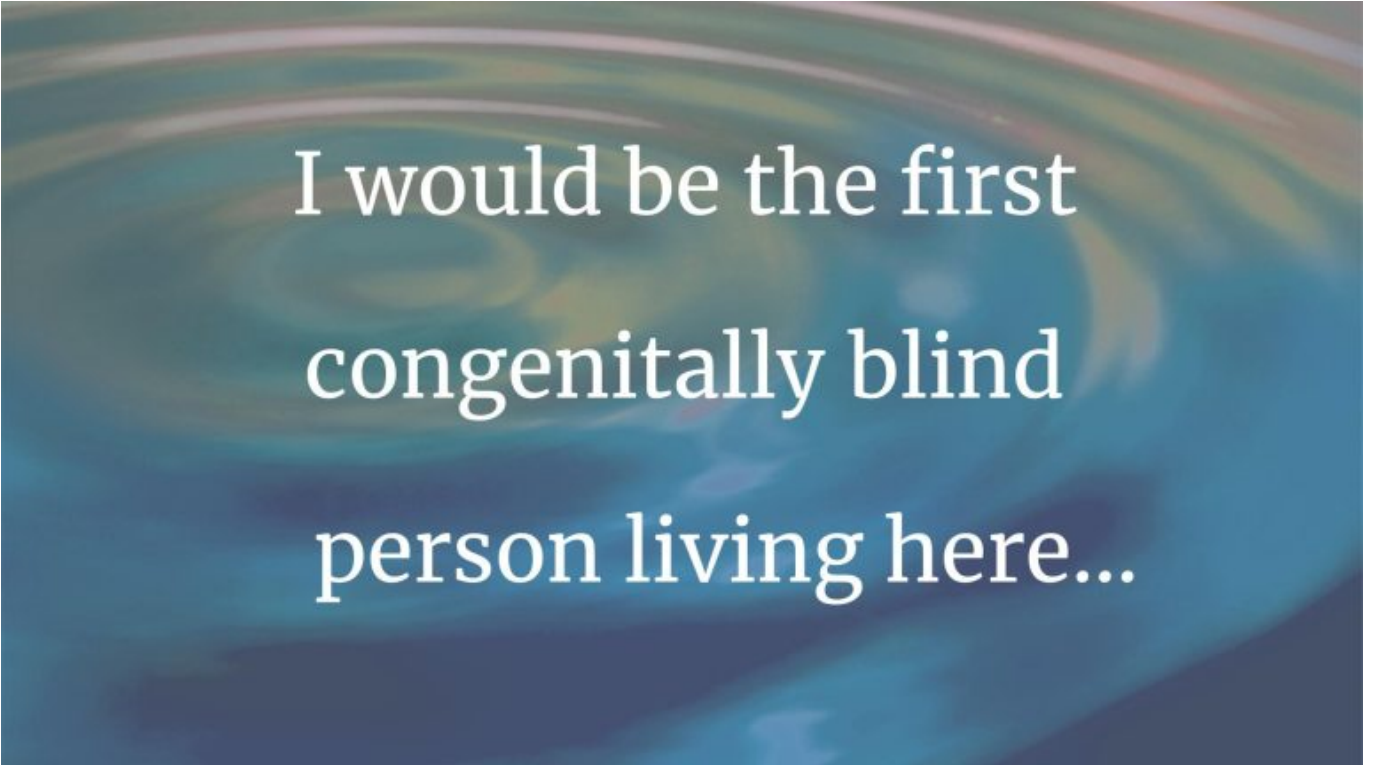


My Castle

Category: Stories

written by Nancy Scott | July 21, 2023



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congenitally blind
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Moving to an independent-living facility requires finding a balance between controlling the things that you can, and accepting help, or changes, with the things that you can't. It also means striking a balance between being part of a more regimented community and being part of the outside world.

I'm nearly seventy, which is young for this move. But my hearing and balance are not what they were. I've had no family for twenty years, having outlived parents, husband and brother. Friends who have helped me in the past are aging into their own disabilities. My apartment of twenty years needed renovations that needed me gone. The timing felt right.

But my transition comes with extra challenges, because I'm congenitally and totally blind.

I chose a small independent-living facility (around fifty residents) that balanced economics with practicality. There was no waiting list when I applied last spring. It's in my town, about ten minutes from friends.

I would be the first congenitally blind person living here. Before moving in, I talked with the facility's administrators about strategies—how to use stairs independently, dealing with open spaces like the activity room, handling the serving of food, and how to ensure that staff didn't move things in my private space.

Over the course of three days, a friend spent time walking me through the building, following the same path so that I could learn to navigate it solo,

using my cane. I brought my digital recorder so that I could take notes on landmarks and obstacles.

Due to a sinus condition and natural hearing loss due to aging, it was the first time I'd ever had to navigate without using my echolocation hearing—a focus on sounds around me that has always allowed me to detect and avoid such things as large objects and walls.

I now live on the same floor as the dining room. Most of my fellow residents need assisted-living services, and their awareness of my blindness varies. A staff person guides me through the dining room to avoid wheelchairs, walkers and med carts as we wend our way to a table for five, where I have my assigned seat.

Of the five of us at the table, I'm the one with the big voice that can be heard. I also have the better memory. Carol passes me the sugar, salt and napkins. Viola has been here several months longer than the rest of us, although none of our table has been here a year. Maryann and Joan are the newest residents.

Maryann lives across the hall from me. She and I are the only two out of the five of us who can independently walk; she uses a walker.

One evening after dinner, she said, "Want to hitch a ride back home?"

I laughed and said yes. She had watched the staff assist me, using sighted-guide technique, so she knew what to do. Soon, walking back from meals together became our routine.

"Here's your door," Maryann would say. Then her imagination gradually came into play, and she bestowed a new name each time we walked back.

My "door" became my "abode," and then my "castle."

One day, though, it got unexpectedly demoted to "cabin."

"Castle is better," I decided.

"Okay," Maryann agreed. "You can have a castle all the time."

My castle houses a dozen pieces of furniture. I brought my 100-year-old piano stool that my mother bought for \$4 at a Vermont auction, back in the 1960s. My big book cabinet that holds all the Braille (including my published writing) is here, along with my five-drawer filing cabinet. My three-drawer cherrywood cabinet fits, too.

The bedroom furniture, provided by the facility, matches nicely. The bed is smaller than my previous bed, and the dresser is very tall. The nightstand has a large top and three drawers.

My recliner has been my creative space for almost twenty years. My movers (who specialize in moving seniors) found a perfect little desk where I can Braille my final drafts. They also packed and unpacked everything and

determined the wonderful furniture placements that work well for me.

Recently, walking back from lunch, I mentioned to Maryann that I'd asked the housekeeper, Clara, to dust the castle. Clara has a long dusting pole to reach things like my TV, which is mounted above the dresser.

"If you have a castle, you should surely have someone to dust it," Maryann agreed.

"You can have a castle, too," I suggested.

"I want a house down the shore," said Maryann, waxing wistful. "Somewhere where you could see the ocean."

Last week's banter was about my butler not answering the door.

"Maybe he's polishing the silver," I offered.

"Or maybe he's out *selling* the silver," Maryann mused.

We know little about who our fellow residents are or where they've been. Questions about the past can be full of sad traps and tricky not-remembering. But we can influence where we are in the here and now. Courage and joy can be forged anywhere—in castles in the air, or on imaginary beachfront property.

I have downsized and budgeted for years. I have had the advantage of choosing this setting, rather than being forced into it. My current living situation is the safest option, given my family genetics and future horizons.

Having experienced a long-term disability allows me a different perspective. I'm not angry about my disability, although I feel a bit apprehensive about potential future disabilities. I understand that I may need additional alternative techniques and compromises to accommodate these, if they happen.

But there are definitely benefits in the here and now: No more schlepping laundry and groceries. No more shoveling the heat pump clear. No cooking; no dishes. Some cleaning help. And funny conversation when everyone is having a good day.

Tonight's dinner begins with seafood bisque. When the server asks what I'd like to drink, I say, "Apple juice, please."

"You should have told her a shot and a beer," Joan quips.

I have fresh towels. There are fuzzy blankets on my bed and recliner. I have Christmas bells and wind chimes on my doors, in part to keep track of my sighted people. There is a scent diffuser (shaped like a castle, coincidentally) to change my mood. And I have a summoning pendant that connects me to the building staff if I need help or can't open the window or read the thermostat.

What more could a castle-owner want?