**The Nature of Independence**

An Address Delivered By Kenneth Jernigan  
At the Annual Convention of the  
National Federation of the Blind  
Dallas, Texas, Tuesday, July 6, 1993

Shortly after last year's convention, I received a number of letters from students at the Louisiana Center for the Blind. It was clear that the letters were written as the result of discussions held at the Center and that, although the apparent topic was independent mobility, the real issue was independence in general, and how blind persons should live and behave. I want to share those letters with you, then tell you how I answered them, and finally say a few things about what I think independence really is. The letters are all dated July 23, 1992. Here is a composite of them:

Dear Dr. Jernigan:

I am a sophomore in high school. Right now, I am in a teenage program that the Louisiana Center for the Blind is sponsoring. It is the STEP program. That means Summer Training and Employment Project. We are allowed to get jobs and make money as well as have classes.

A few weeks ago I attended the national convention. I really enjoyed all your speeches and everything. People noticed that you and Mr. Maurer walked sighted guide sometimes, [I interrupt to call your attention to the almost code-word use of the term “sighted guide.” Not “walking with a sighted guide” or “walking with a sighted person” or “holding the arm of a sighted person,” but “walking sighted guide.” This makes it clear that the concept of “sighted guide” has been the topic of considerable conversation. But back to the letter.] and we thought you all would never walk sighted guide, because you all are so highly involved in the NFB. I never thought sighted guide was OK until then. So why did you all use sighted guide? I know there are many reasons why this might be. We discussed this in one of our talk times and came up with one reason this might be. We know that you all have to be at meetings all the time, and it would be faster if you would use sighted guide. [I interrupt again to call your attention to the use in the following sentences of the depersonalized “it.” Now, back to the letter.] I am sure you don't use it so much that you lose your cane travel skills. I am not trying to say this is wrong. I was just wondering why you do this. Someone brought up that if we, as the people being trained at the moment, were caught using sighted guide, they would fuss at us. And I realize that you are not the one in training, so it is not wrong. We couldn't use sighted guide, because we might want to use it more than the cane if we use too much of it.

Yours truly,

Dear Dr. Jernigan:

During this past convention in North Carolina some of us noticed that you did not walk with a cane. I do not understand this at all. I can understand that you have to be in many places in a short amount of time at the conventions, and that might be the reason you went sighted guide. But I also know that when you came for a tour of the Center, you also went sighted guide. We do not understand this.

We all have our own theories as to why you went sighted guide, but we want to get the correct answer straight from the horse's mouth.

Your fellow Federationist,

That's a very clear-cut letter, and I am pleased to be called that end of the horse. Here is the last one:

Dear Dr. Jernigan:

This year I came to Charlotte to attend my third national convention of the NFB. I am currently a student at the Louisiana Center for the Blind in the STEP program for blind teenagers. This program stresses cane use, Braille literacy, employment readiness, and self-confidence based on achievement. While at the convention I heard from a friend that you were never actually seen using your cane. I discussed this with a group of friends, and it was decided that you most likely had many places to go and had to get to them quickly. This made sense, and the question seemed settled. Then one of the group remembered you using sighted guide during a tour you took of the Center while passing through Ruston on the way to the Dallas convention in 1990. This was such a hectic situation, and the question was no longer settled because the only alternative travel technique anyone noticed you using was sighted guide.

I do not mean this letter to imply any disrespect towards you, the Federation, or its many achievements. If the Federation had not pushed so hard for independence for the blind, I would have no grounds on which to write this letter. It is because of my own personal convictions about independence that I ask why the figurehead of the NFB is not himself using the alternative techniques that his student, Joanne Wilson, has been teaching for nearly ten years in Ruston.

I would prefer to end the letter on a positive note. I realize that you are responsible for the training I am currently receiving, and I am grateful for it. I am not implying that you have no cane skills, because I do not honestly know.

Sincerely,

These are straightforward letters, seriously written. They raise fundamental questions, questions that deserve a reasoned answer. Here is the expanded substance of what I wrote:

Baltimore, Maryland  
July 29, 1992

Under date of July 23, 1992, the three of you wrote to ask me why I didn't travel alone with a cane during the national convention in Charlotte and why on a visit to the Louisiana Center in 1990 I took a sighted person's arm instead of walking alone with a cane. I appreciate your letters and will tell you why I do what I do.

In the first place let us assume that I didn't have any cane travel skills at all. This might be comparable to the situation of a parent who had no education but dreamed of an education for his or her child. That parent might preach the value of education and might work to send the child to high school and then to college. The parent might, though personally uneducated, feel tremendous satisfaction at the learning and accomplishment which his or her effort had made possible. In such circumstances what attitude should the child have toward the parent? The child might be critical of the parent for his or her poor grammar and lack of education and might even be ashamed to associate with the parent—or the child might feel gratitude for the sacrifice and the work that had made the education possible.

This is not an apt analogy since I have perfectly good cane skills, but it has elements of truth about it. When I was a child, there were no orientation centers or mobility training. The only canes available were the short heavy wooden type, and we youngsters associated carrying a cane with begging, shuffling along, and being helpless.

It was not until I finished college and had taught for four years in Tennessee that I first carried a cane. It was made of wood and had a crook handle. I might also say that it was longer than most of those in vogue at the time, forty inches. I started using it in 1953, just before going to California to work at the newly established state orientation center for the blind. The Center had been in operation for only a few months and had enrolled only four or five students by the time of my arrival.

In those days the California Center was using 42-inch aluminum canes. They were a tremendous improvement over the 40-inch wooden cane I had been carrying, and I immediately adopted the new model. Even so, it seemed that something better was needed. I worked with the person who had been employed as the travel teacher, and we experimented with different techniques and canes.

In the mid-1950s the solid fiberglass cane was developed. It was first made by a blind man in Kansas, but we at the California center popularized it and brought it into general use. We also worked to improve the tip. Our students received intensive training, those with any sight using blindfolds (or, as we called them, sleep shades), and our students and graduates were identifiable in any group of blind persons because of their competence and ease in travel. Since they had enjoyed the benefit of our study and experimentation, as well as intensive instruction and the time to practice, many of them probably became better travelers than I—and I felt pride and satisfaction in the fact. We were advancing on the road to freedom and independence.

In 1958 I went to Iowa as director of the state commission for the blind, and I carried with me the experience and knowledge I had acquired in California plus a 48-inch fiberglass cane and a head full of new ideas and hopes for the future. I hired a young sighted man who had no experience at all with blindness and spent several days giving him preliminary instruction in mobility, using blind techniques. First I had him follow me all over Des Moines, watching me use the cane while crossing streets and going to various places. Then, he put on sleep shades, and I worked with him to learn basic skills. Next I sent him to California for three or four weeks to gain further experience and to compare what I had taught him with what the California Center was doing. Finally he came back to Des Moines, and I spent several more weeks working with him until (though sighted) he could (under blindfold) go anywhere he wanted safely and comfortably using a cane.

During all of that time I worked with him on attitudes, for unless one believes that he or she is capable of independence as a blind person, independence in travel (as in other areas) is not truly achievable. This travel instructor's name is Jim Witte, and he developed into one of the best I have ever known.

Iowa students rapidly became the envy of the nation. You could single them out in any group because of their bearing, their confidence, and their skill in travel. As had been the case in California, some of them undoubtedly traveled better than I, and I felt a deep sense of fulfillment in the fact. Joanne Wilson (the director of your own Louisiana Center) was one of those students, and I am sure she has told you how it was at the Iowa Center—how students were treated, what was expected of them, the relationship between staff and students, our dreams for the future, and how we set about accomplishing those dreams. Arlene Hill (one of your teachers) was also an Iowa student. Both Joanne and Arlene are living examples of what we taught and how it worked. So are President Maurer, Mrs. Maurer, Peggy Pinder, Ramona Walhof, Jim Gashel, Jim Omvig, and at least fifty others in this audience.

It was in Iowa that we developed the hollow fiberglass cane. It was an improvement over the solid cane, lighter and more flexible. We also gradually began to use longer and longer canes. They enabled us to walk faster without diminishing either safety or grace. As I have already told you, I started with a 40-inch wooden cane. Then I went to 42-inch aluminum—and after that to solid fiberglass, then to hollow fiberglass, and (three or four years ago) to hollow carbon fiber. As to length, I went from 40 inches 42, then to 45, 48, 49, 51, 53, 55, and 57. At present I use a 59-inch cane. It seems about right to me for my height and speed of travel. Will I ever use a still longer cane? I don't know—but at this stage I don't think so. Obviously there comes a time when a longer cane is a disadvantage instead of a help.

I've told you all of this so that you may understand something of my background and approach to independence in travel, and independence in general. The doctors who established the medical schools a hundred years ago were (with notable exceptions) not generally as competent and skilled as the doctors they trained, for they did not have the benefit of the kind of concentrated teaching they themselves were providing. Obviously they could not stand on their own shoulders. Through their students they extended their dreams into the future, building possibilities that they themselves had not known and could never hope to realize.

So it is with me in relation to you. You are the third generation of our mobility trainees, having the benefit of what I have learned and also of what Joanne and the other Iowa graduates have learned. Unless you make advances over what we have done, you will, in a very real sense, fail to keep faith with those who have gone before you and those who will follow. In this context I would expect and hope that some of you will become better travelers (and, perhaps, better philosophers and teachers) than I, and if you do, I will take joy in it.

Having said all of this, let me come back to my own travel skills. During the 1950s I traveled completely alone on a constant basis throughout this entire country, going to almost every state and dealing with almost every kind of environment—urban area, city bus, taxi, complicated street crossing, rural setting, hired private car, country road, and almost anything else you can imagine. During late December and early January of 1956 and 1957, for example, I traveled alone to fourteen states in eleven days, writing testimony for the NFB's Right to Organize bill. It was no big deal, and not something I thought about very much. It was simply a job that had to be done, and the travel was incidental and taken for granted. I have taught travel instructors and have developed new techniques and canes. I travel whenever and wherever I want to go in the most convenient way to get there—and sometimes that means alone, using a cane.

Once when I was in Iowa, students observed that I walked to a barber shop one day with another staff member, and they raised with me some of the same questions you have raised. That afternoon in our business class (you may call it by some other name—philosophy or something else) I dealt with the matter. I told the students some of the things I have told you, and then I went on to say something like this:

“Although what I have told you should mean that even if I couldn't travel with much skill at all I might still not merit your criticism, we don't need to leave it at that. Follow me. We are going to take a walk through downtown traffic—and see that you keep up.”

I took the lead, and we walked for eight or ten blocks at a fast clip. When we got back to the classroom, I didn't need to tell them what kind of travel skills I had. They knew.

Then, we talked about why I had walked to the barber shop with another staff member. In that particular instance I had matters to discuss, and I felt I couldn't afford the luxury of doing nothing while going for a hair cut. As a matter of fact, in those days I often made a practice of taking my secretary with me to the barber shop and dictating letters while getting my hair cut. Of course, I could have made a point of walking alone each time just to make a visible demonstration of my independence, but somehow I think that such insecurity might have made the opposite point and would certainly have been counterproductive.

In the Iowa days I was not only director of the state Commission for the Blind but also first vice president and then president of the National Federation of the Blind. Both were full-time jobs, requiring me to use to best advantage every waking minute.

I was up before 6:00 to go to the gym with the men students; I wrote over a hundred letters a week; I entertained legislators and other civic leaders an average of two or three nights a week to gain support for our program; I traveled throughout the state to make speeches; and I spent long hours working individually with students. Besides that, I handled the administrative details of the Commission and the NFB on a daily basis. At the same time I was doing organizing in other states and dealing with problems brought to me by Federationists throughout the country.

In that context it would have been a bad use of my time (and both Federationists and Iowa students and staff would have thought so) for me to spend much of my day walking down the street to make a visible show of my independent travel skills. I traveled alone when I needed to, and I gave demonstrations to students, legislators, and others when I needed to do that—but I never did either to convince myself or to establish in my own mind the fact of my capacity or independence. It didn't seem necessary.

So what about the NFB convention in Charlotte? I was in charge of convention organization and arrangements, and there were a thousand details to handle. There were four hotels and a convention center, each with its own staff and each requiring separate handling and a myriad of decisions. Sometimes I had not only one but two or three people with me as I went from place to place, talking about what had to be done and sending this person here and that person yonder.

Even so, I might (you may say) have refused to take the arm of one of the persons with me and used my cane to walk alone. But for what reason? When a blind person is walking through a crowd or down a street with somebody else and trying to carry on a meaningful conversation, it is easier to take the other person's arm. This is true even if you are the best traveler in the world and even if both of you are blind.

In fact, I contend that there are times when refusing to take an arm that is offered may constitute the very opposite of independence. If, for instance, you are a blind person accompanying a sighted person through a busy restaurant closely packed with tables and chairs, do you create a better image of independence by trying to get through the maze alone, with the sighted person going in front and constantly calling back, “This way! This way!” or by simply taking the sighted person's arm and going to the table? What is better about following a voice than following an arm? From what I have said, I presume it is clear which method I favor. Of course, if no arm is conveniently available, you should be prepared to use another method, regardless of how crowded the restaurant or how labyrinthine the path. In either case you should do it without losing your cool.

But back to the convention. When you are trying to get through crowds quickly to go from meeting to meeting, and possibly also trying to find different people in those crowds in a hurry, the efficiency of sighted assistance multiplies. Incidentally, even if I were sighted and doing the things I do at national conventions, I would want two or three persons with me—to look for people in crowds, to send for this and that, and to talk and advise with.

As an example, consider what happened at last year's convention with respect to Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander. He has normal eyesight and is in every other way, so far as I know, able-bodied and energetic. I am sure that he can drive a car and walk vigorously. Yet, he sent an assistant to Charlotte a day in advance of his arrival. The assistant scouted out the convention and then went to the airport to meet the Secretary. The assistant drove the car from the airport to the convention, accompanied the Secretary into the meeting hall, went with him to the platform, met him at the edge of the platform when he finished speaking, and drove him back to the airport. If the Secretary had been blind, I wonder if somebody would have said, “Just look! He's not independent. He has to have a sighted person with him at all times, accompanying him everywhere he goes and driving his car.”

Since I am not a student trying to learn to travel independently or to establish within my own mind that I can compete on terms of equality with others, and since I can and do travel by myself when that is most convenient, I feel no particular obligation to make a demonstration when it is more efficient to do otherwise. If I were a student, I should and would behave differently. As an example, I think a student should always use a rigid (not a collapsible) cane. But I generally use one that is collapsible. Why? Students often are uncomfortable with canes, and if they are allowed to use those that fold or telescope, they may tend to hide or conceal them because they think (even if subconsciously) that it will make them look less conspicuous. I have carried a cane for so long that I would feel naked without it, and I always carry one whether I am with somebody or not. Because they were so rickety, I refused to carry a collapsible cane until we developed the telescoping carbon fiber model. I pull it to such a tight fit that it doesn't collapse as I use it, and I almost never collapse it unless I'm in close quarters. Again, it is a convenience, and my sense of independence is not so brittle that I think I have to carry the rigid cane to prove to myself or others that I am not ashamed to be seen with it or uncomfortable about blindness.

When I was teaching orientation classes in California and Iowa, I often said to those in attendance that students at a center tend to go through three stages: fear and insecurity, rebellious independence, and normal independence—FI, RI, and NI. During fear and insecurity one tends to be ultra cautious and afraid of everything, even if at times putting on a good front. During rebellious independence one tends to be overly touchy, resenting anybody who attempts to offer him or her any kind of assistance at all, even when the assistance is appropriate and needed. In the rebellious independence stage one is likely to be a pain in the neck, both to himself or herself and others—but this is a necessary step on the road from fear and insecurity to normal independence. Unfortunately some people never get beyond it.

Hopefully one will eventually arrive at the stage of normal independence, with relatively little need constantly to prove either to oneself or others that one is capable of independence and first-class citizenship. This means maturity in dealing with condescending treatment, and it also means flexibility in accepting or rejecting offers of assistance, kindness, or generosity. Sometimes such things should be graciously or silently taken, sometimes endured, and sometimes rejected out of hand—but the reason should never be because you doubt your own worth, have inner feelings of insecurity, or wonder whether you are inferior because of blindness.

Normal independence also means not rationalizing your fear or inability by saying that you are just doing what is convenient and efficient and that you don't feel the need to prove something when in reality you are just covering up the fact that you are as helpless as a baby—and it means not going so far the other way and being so touchy about your so-called independence that nobody can stand to be around you. It means getting to the place where you are comfortable enough with yourself and secure enough with your own inner feelings that you don't have to spend much time bothering about the matter one way or another. It means reducing blindness to the level of a mere inconvenience and making it just one more of your everyday characteristics—a characteristic with which you must deal just as you do with how strong you are, how old you are, how smart you are, how personable you are, and how much money you have. These are the goals, and probably none of us ever achieves all of them all of the time. Nevertheless, we are making tremendous progress—and we are farther along the road now than we have ever been.

I am pleased that you wrote me, and I am especially pleased that you are able to receive training at the Louisiana Center. It is grounded in Federation philosophy, and it is one of the best. You are getting the chance while you are young to learn what blindness is really like, and what it isn't like. You have the opportunity to profit from the collective experience of all of us— the things we tried that didn't work, and those that did. On the foundation of love and organizational structure which we have established, you can make for yourselves better opportunities than we have ever known—and I pray that you will. The future is in the hands of your generation, and I hope you will dream and work and build wisely and well.

Sincerely,  
Kenneth Jernigan

That is what I wrote, and there have been a number of subsequent developments. One person, hearing these letters, said, “I can see your point, but don't you think you should try to be a role model?”

To which I replied, “I thought that was what I was doing.”

Then, there was the letter I got about a month ago from a person who attended a seminar at the National Center for the Blind last Christmas. She said in part:

The discussion about the letter from the students at the Louisiana Center for the Blind has stuck with me and helped me in two ways. I no longer feel the deep embarrassment I had been experiencing about being unable to read Braille and having less-than-perfect travel skills. I remain painfully aware that I could be much more efficient than I am, particularly if I could read and write Braille, but I no longer feel that I am less worthy because of the lack. And, by the way, I hope to take care of my deficiencies in that area soon.

The discussion also helped me better to appreciate and respect my dad, who was blinded by an on-the-job accident when he was 26. After he became blind, he went to law school, and I have always admired his relatively quick adjustment to blindness. On the other hand, I have always felt somewhat embarrassed that when traveling he uses a sighted guide the majority of the time. (For instance, I was horrified and disbelieving when I heard my dad flew to Alaska by himself to go fishing without his guide dog or a white cane!) He has a guide dog but only used him when he was going to work. I have never seen him use a white cane although I have just learned that he used one while in his office at work. However, the seminar discussion helped me to understand that everyone's situation differs and that the opportunities available are not uniform. My dad has accomplished a lot: He was an administrative law judge until he retired last month; he is an avid fisherman; and he is as pro-Braille as anybody I have ever met.

That is what the seminarian wrote me, and her letter makes a point. It is simply this: We absolutely must not become so rigid and dogmatic about the means and precise details of achieving independence that we make ourselves and everybody else around us miserable. Down that road lies bigotry, as well as the loss of any real independence or true normality.

Usually when I go to bed at night, I read myself to sleep with a recorded book. A few months ago somebody took me to task for this. The person said something to this effect: “You should not read recorded books. You should use Braille. After all, the Federation advocates Braille literacy, and if you use tapes and talking books, you decrease the circulation of Braille from the libraries, and you also set a bad example. What kind of statement are you making? What kind of image are you creating? You have an obligation to serve as a role model.”

I didn't argue with the person. It wouldn't have done any good. Yes, I use Braille; and as you know, I find it helpful. More than that. My life would be poorer without it. But Braille is a means. It is a vehicle, not an article of faith. I am conscious of the fact that I have an obligation to be a role model, and I do the best I can to meet the requirement. But the kind of role model I want to be (for anybody who cares to see me that way) is that of a competent, well-balanced human being, not a caricature. The fact that I don't want to die of thirst doesn't mean that I want to drown.

What is independence? I would define it this way. With respect to reading, it means getting the information you want with a minimum amount of inconvenience and expense. For me that means Braille, but it also means using live readers, recordings, and (despite my limited competence in that area) a certain amount of work with computers. For somebody else the combination may be different, but any active blind person who lacks skill in Braille will be limited—not necessarily unable to compete but definitely limited.

As to travel, independence is the ability to go where you want when you want without inconvenience to yourself or others. Probably none of us (blind or sighted) ever fully achieves that goal all of the time—and almost all of us achieve at least some of it some of the time. Usually we are on a continuum.

If I could not travel by myself without discomfort or great expense, there are times when it would be a real problem. What about the trip I made to Kansas City in May of this year to meet with local Federationists and speak at a JOB seminar? My wife had other things to do, and it would have been inconvenient to take somebody else. I went alone. Did I have any assistance during the trip? Yes. At times—when it was convenient for me and not inconvenient to others.

What about the time last month when I was called for jury duty? It would have been very difficult for a guide to have accompanied me to the jury box or the jury room—so, of course, I went by myself. Does that mean that nobody showed me where the jury box was or gave other assistance? No. It means that I went where I needed to go without inconvenience to me or those around me. That is what I call independence.

Just as with the sighted, there are times when you as a blind person want privacy—want to go somewhere (to see a boyfriend or girlfriend, for instance) without being accompanied by your daily associates, want to buy a present for a friend or a loved one, or just feel like following a whim. In such cases a dog or a cane is helpful. On the other hand, there are times when the assistance of a sighted person is extremely beneficial. Taken by itself, the use or lack of use of a sighted guide has very little, if anything at all, to do with real independence. In fact, the whole notion of independence (not just in mobility but also in everything else) involves the concept of doing what you want when you want, and doing it without paying such a heavy price (either monetarily or otherwise) that the thing is hardly worth having once you get it or do it.

In conclusion, I say to each member of this organization: Hold your head high in the joy of accomplishment and the pride of independence—but not because of dog or cane or human arm, and not because of your ability to read Braille or use a computer. These are the trappings of independence, not the substance of it. They should be learned, and used when needed—but they should be regarded only as means, not ends. Our independence comes from within. A slave can have keen eyesight, excellent mobility, and superb reading skills—and still be a slave. We are achieving freedom and independence in the only way that really counts—in rising self-respect, growing self-confidence, and the will and the ability to make choices. Above all, independence means choices, and the power to make those choices stick. We are getting that power, and we intend to have more of it. That is why we have organized. That is why we have the National Federation of the Blind. We know where we are going, and we know how to get there. Let anybody who doubts it put us to the test. My brothers and my sisters, the future is ours! Let us meet it with joy; let us meet it with hope; and (most important of all) let us meet it together!