

Selections & Excerpts: *Light On The Horizon*

Thomas: On Recognition

Sometimes you barely get one foot in the door of the hotel before you are recognized. For example, someone walks up to you in Indianapolis and says, "Hello, remember me? We spoke briefly three years ago in Albuquerque." Another source of stress; how can I be in Indianapolis and be expected to remember someone I met in Albuquerque three years ago? I don't even know who I met three *days* ago! I don't even know *where* I was three days ago! You smile politely, nod, shake their hand and ask them how they have been. Then you check in to your room, which is usually adjusted way to cold and which usually lacks shower pressure. The positive side is that the beds are huge, so you can really spread out and get comfy when you go to sleep.

Thomas: On Autographs

I have never liked signing autographs. Or perhaps what I should say is that I have never liked signing a *lot* of autographs. If one or two people come up to me and want an autograph, I am fine with that, even flattered. It is when there is a line a mile long of people wanting my signature that it gets out of hand. No time to talk to anyone. Just sign it and get to the next one to keep people from having to wait too long. Very impersonal. Very cold. I don't like that. I'd rather be warm. It bothers me. Sure there are people that I would rather not talk to at the conference, there are those people for all of us. And for all of us there are people that we would like to get to know much better at a conference. You can't get to know someone when there are a lot of people waiting for you to sign a book.

Thomas: On Conferences

If you are well-known or if you are one of the first to speak, this also makes a difference in how you are perceived at the conference. Regardless of whether you know your stuff or not, you are thought to be the expert by those attending the conference. This means that you will nearly 100% of the time be surrounded. In the case of autism conferences, you are usually surrounded nearly 100% of the time by very pretty ladies. However, if you yourself are a lady, chances are this makes little difference. Either way, you are doing what you traveled to do. You are doing what you are being paid to do. You are doing what you are expected to do. To spend time with the people attending the conferences and to try to help them as best you can and as best your knowledge and tolerance will allow.

Anyone who knows me knows that I try to use this situation to my advantage. My policy is to search the conference early on for someone to "latch onto." This creates a double win situation. They get to spend more time with me and ask more questions and learn more about autism, and I get to spend time with them and they provide stress relief, sometimes without even knowing it. Having someone there to bounce ideas and emotions off of is a great benefit to me at conferences.

I choose my person carefully. Must be female and must be transparent. I need someone completely open and secure with who they are, and someone who is not afraid of a person with autism. (You'd be surprised how many people at autism conferences are afraid of people with autism. It is ironic that this also applies to the speakers in some cases.)

There are times when there is just no one there to latch onto at a conference. When this happens, my talks never go as well as they would otherwise, and people don't get as much out of me as they would otherwise. This is something I truly need to be effective at a conference. I am quite lost emotionally without it.

Thomas: On Sleep

I have a sound machine that I bought the first time I was in Hawaii. It has ten sounds (things like rain, ocean, brook, and of course the heartbeat, which is one of my favorites) and an optional timer. This too helps me sleep. Sometimes there is not enough sensory input. The sound machine adds a soft, auditory input that calms the sensory system. I have heard stories from other parents who have these machines in their child's room with good results. The secret to a good night's sleep is getting the volume adjusted perfectly, which varies for each sound.

There are other things I do to help me sleep. I sometimes take Melatonin before bed. I suspect that since it is relatively new at the time of this writing, further research will probably find it to be cancerous or to have some other undesirable side effect. We already know it delays puberty when taken by children. But the thought has often occurred to me that perhaps it is not how long you live that matters, it is the quality of life that counts.

I have a fan that sits across the room and blows air gently and silently in my direction. Sometimes my body is too sensitive to the air to use it, but I use it when I can.

I have an electric blanket that is always on the bed and is always plugged in. I find heat to be very soothing. Sometimes I turn it on, even in the Summer. Usually level II or III or so. Just enough to feel the heat without sweating.

Unless I am out of it in the fridge, I drink 8 ounces of Ensure before going to bed. Preferably the chocolate persuasion. Having vitamins and minerals processing in your body while you sleep is a very good thing to be doing.

Getting to sleep and staying asleep have never been easy for me. I need ten to twelve hours of sleep a night or I am totally lost and by thoughts are foggy the entire day.