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OPINION. Why Do We Fear the Blind?.

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A FEW

years ago, when I mentioned to a woman I met at a party that I was teaching in a school for the blind, she seemed confused.

'Can I just ask you one question? she said. 'How do you talk to your students?

I explained that the students were blind, not deaf. Raising the palms of her hands at me, as if to stem further misunderstanding, she said: 'Yes, I know they're not deaf. But what I really mean is, how do you actually talk to them?

I knew, because I had been asked this question before by reasonably intelligent people, that the woman didn't know exactly what she meant. All she knew was that in her mind there existed a substantial intellectual barrier between the blind and the sighted. The blind could hear, yes. But could they properly understand?

Throughout history and across cultures the blind have been traduced by a host of mythologies such as this. They have variously been perceived as pitiable idiots incapable of learning, as artful masters of deception or as mystics possessed of supernatural powers. One of the most persistent misconceptions about blindness is that it is a curse from God for misdeeds perpetrated in a past life, which cloaks the blind person in spiritual darkness and makes him not just dangerous but evil.

A majority of my blind students at the International Institute for Social Entrepreneurs in Trivandrum, India, a branch of Braille Without Borders, came from the developing world:

Madagascar, Colombia, Tibet, Liberia, Ghana, Kenya, Nepal and India. One of my students, the 27-year-old Sahr, lost most of his eyesight to measles when he was a child. (Like many children in rural West Africa, Sahr had not been vaccinated.) The residents of Sahr's village were certain that his blindness -- surely the result of witchcraft or immoral actions on his family's part -- would adversely affect the entire village. They surrounded his house and shouted threats and abuse. They confiscated a considerable portion of his parents' land.

Eventually, the elders decreed that Sahr's father must take the child out to the bush, 'where the demons live,' and abandon him there. The parents refused and fled the village with their son.

Many of my students had similar experiences. Marco's parents, devout Colombian Catholics, begged a priest to say a Mass so that their blind infant son would die before his existence brought shame and hardship on their household. The villagers in Kyile's remote Tibetan village insisted that she, her two blind brothers and their blind father should all just commit suicide because they were nothing but a burden to the sighted members of the family. When, as a child in Sierra Leone, James began to see objects upside down because of an ocular disease, the villagers were certain that he was possessed by demons.

In these places, schools for blind children were deemed a preposterous waste of resources and effort. Teachers in regular schools refused to educate them. Sighted children ridiculed them, tricked them, spat at them and threw stones at them. And when they reached working age, no one would hire them. During a visit to the Braille Without Borders training center in Tibet, I met blind children who had been beaten, told they were idiots, locked in rooms for years on end and abandoned by their parents.

These stories, which would have been commonplace in the Dark Ages, took place in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. They are taking place now. Nine out of 10 blind children in the developing world still have no access to education, many for no other reason than that they are blind.

The United States has one of the lowest rates of visual impairment in the world, and yet blindness is still among the most feared physical afflictions.. Even in this country, the blind are perceived as a people apart.

Aversion toward the blind exists for the same reason that most prejudices exist: lack of knowledge. Ignorance is a powerful generator of fear. And fear slides easily into aggression and contempt. Anyone who has not spent more than five minutes with a blind person might be forgiven for believing -- like the woman I met at the party -- that there is an unbridgeable gap between us and them.

For most of us, sight is the primary way we interpret the world.

How can we even begin to conceive of a meaningful connection with a person who cannot see? Before I began living and working among blind people, I, too, wondered this. Whenever I saw a blind person on the street I would stare, transfixed, hoping, out of a vague and visceral discomfort, that I wouldn't have to engage with him. In his 1930 book 'The World of the Blind,' Pierre Villey, a blind French professor of literature, summarized the lurid carnival of prejudices and superstitions about the blind that were passed down the centuries. 'The sighted person judges the blind not for what they are but by the fear blindness inspires. ... The revolt of his sensibility in the face of 'the most atrocious of maladies' fills a sighted person with prejudice and gives rise to a thousand legends. The blind author Georgina Kleege, a lecturer at the University of California at Berkeley, more tersely wrote, 'The blind are either supernatural or subhuman, alien or animal.

WE take our eyesight so much for granted, cling to it so slavishly and are so overwhelmed by its superficial data, that even the most brilliant sighted person can take a stupidly long time to recognize the obvious: There is usually a perfectly healthy, active and normal human mind behind that pair of unseeing eyes.

Christopher Hitchens called blindness 'one of the oldest and most tragic disorders known to man. How horribly excluded and bereft we would feel to lose the world and the way of life that sight brings us. Blindness can happen to any one of us. Myself, I used to be certain I'd rather die than be blind; I could not imagine how I would have the strength to go on in the face of such a loss.

And yet people do. In 1749, the French philosopher Denis Diderot published an essay, 'Letter on the Blind for the Benefit of Those Who See,' in which he described a visit he and a friend made to the house of a blind man, the son of a professor of philosophy at the University of Paris. The blind man was married, had a son, had many acquaintances, was versed in chemistry and botany, could read and write with an alphabet of raised type and made his living distilling liqueurs. Diderot wrote with wonder of the man's 'good solid sense,' of his tidiness, of his 'surprising memory for sounds' and voices, of his ability to tell the weight of any object and the capacity of any vessel just by holding them in his hands, of his ability to dismantle and reassemble small machines, of his musical acuity and of his extreme sensitivity to atmospheric change.

The blind man, perhaps weary of being interrogated by Diderot and his friend as if he were a circus animal, eventually asked them a question of his own. 'I perceive, gentlemen, that you are not blind. You are astonished at what I do, and why not as much at my speaking? More than any of his sensory skills, it was the blind man's self-esteem that surprised Diderot most. 'This blind man,' he wrote, 'values himself as much as, and perhaps more than, we who see.

I've learned from my blind friends and colleagues that blindness doesn't have to remain tragic. For those who can adapt to it, blindness becomes a path to an alternative and equally rich way of living.

One of the many misconceptions about the blind is that they have greater hearing, sense of smell and sense of touch than sighted people. This is not strictly true. Their blindness simply forces them to recognize gifts they always had but had heretofore largely ignored.

A few years ago, I allowed myself to be blindfolded and led through the streets of Lhasa by two blind Tibetan teenage girls, students at Braille Without Borders. The girls had not grown up in the city, and yet they traversed it with ease, without stumbling or getting lost. They had a specific destination in mind, and each time they announced, 'Now we turn left' or 'Now we turn right,' I was compelled to ask them how they knew this.

Their answers startled me, chiefly because the clues they were following -- the sound of many televisions in an electronics shop, the smell of leather in a shoe shop, the feel of cobblestones suddenly underfoot -- though out in the open for anyone to perceive, were virtually hidden from me.

For the first time in my life, I realized how little notice I paid to sounds, to smells, indeed to the entire world that lay beyond my ability to see.

The French writer Jacques Lusseyran, who lost his sight at the age of 8, understood that those of us who have sight are, in some ways, deprived by it. 'In return for all the benefits that sight brings we are forced to give up others whose existence we don't even suspect.

I do not intend to suggest there is something wonderful about blindness. There is only something wonderful about human resilience, adaptability and daring. The blind are no more or less otherworldly, stupid, evil, gloomy, pitiable or deceitful than the rest of us. It is only our ignorance that has cloaked them in these ridiculous garments. When Helen Keller wrote, 'It is more difficult to teach ignorance to think than to teach an intelligent blind man to see the grandeur of Niagara,' she was speaking, obviously, of the uplifting and equalizing value of knowledge.