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**An Element of Justice**

**An Address Delivered by  
Marc Maurer  
at the Banquet of the Annual Convention  
of the National Federation of the Blind  
Dallas, Texas  
July 6, 2006**

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| Marc Maurer delivers the banquet address. |

One of the eternal questions is "What is justice?" The dictionary tells us that justice is the set of principles which assure that individuals get what they are entitled to receive. Incorporated in the concept is the notion of equality--that all in like circumstances are treated alike. The term also recognizes personal merit or moral turpitude. Those who offer significant service are rewarded; those who cause damage are punished.

Almost 2,500 years ago, Thucydides said, "Our laws secure equal justice for all in their private disputes, and our public opinion welcomes and honors talent in every branch of achievement, not for any sectional reason but on grounds of excellence alone."

The concept of justice is sometimes divided into subcategories: commutative, distributive, retributive, and social. Commutative justice means that a person who, in a business transaction, offers value to somebody else may expect value in return--it is unjust to sell a child an ice cream cone for $500. Distributive justice signifies that all people who are similarly situated have the right to expect equal benefits. Retributive justice declares that those who cause harm to others will be punished for their transgressions. Social justice asseverates that those possessing enormous amounts of property or power are not permitted to use these to abrogate the basic rights of others. Regardless of the subclassification, the idea of justice incorporates fairness, but it also contains the requirement for timeliness and a dynamic element. William Gladstone said, "Justice delayed is justice denied." Benjamin Disraeli said, "Justice is truth in action."

Some of the writers about justice appear to believe that this concept is fixed--that justice in one century or millennium is the same as it is in any other. These thinkers would say, as Plato did, that justice is a form--that we recognize an act as just to the extent that it approaches an immutable ideal. However, the American jurist Learned Hand said, "Justice, I think, is the tolerable accommodation of the conflicting interests of society, and I don't believe there is any royal road to attain such accommodations concretely." If we accept this definition, when the concept of what is tolerable shifts, justice changes. If this thought is extended to its limits, justice becomes merely a reflection of the social measures that have been adopted within society. Because laws reflect the accommodation of conflicted interests, law and justice become synonymous. Under such a formulation the concept of an unjust law is a contradiction. Thomas Hobbes thought that justice is an equivocal concept.

However, justice has been at the heart of civilizing force for thousands of years, and much of the time it has shaped the law. King John, who signed the Magna Carta in 1215, promised in that great document, "To none will we sell, to none deny or delay, right or justice." Thomas Jefferson said that "equal and exact justice to all men, of whatever state or persuasion, religious or political" is one of the elements of our political faith and the touchstone by which we determine those we trust.

One measure of the value of a society is the nature of justice written into its laws, illustrated by its practices, and reflected in its beliefs. A society enhances its concept of justice when it includes the formerly dispossessed within the governing community.

The Constitution of the United States declares that one of the purposes for creating our government is to establish justice. However, in three places the Constitution implicitly recognizes the existence of slavery in the United States. Slavery was not prohibited until 1865, following the end of the Civil War. Incidentally, the Civil War was among the bloodiest ever fought. In its battles millions of people were killed and many others disabled. The name for the disabled from the Civil War era was the invalids. The language of disability has undergone considerable transformation since that time.

The Constitution of the United States says that all people have the right to expect the equal protection of the laws and that no person may be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law. These precepts were written to ensure equality of treatment for all. However, when public officials thought about blindness, the concept of equality seemed to bend.

In the history of judicial decision-making in the United States, blind people have been told that their very presence in public places without a sighted supervisor is evidence of negligence. Apparently some courts have believed that blind people could not be responsible for themselves. Having sighted people to take charge of the blind is necessary, they thought. Dr. Jacobus tenBroek, our founder and first president, challenged this assumption. He drafted the first civil rights act for the blind, the White Cane Law, which has been adopted in well over half of the states. Liberty and equality have become more secure with the adoption of this state legislation, and the concept of justice has changed.

In the first half of the twentieth century, when public welfare programs were being initiated, some government officials thought that blind people who wanted assistance should not marry. Some blind people were put through sterilization operations, apparently to ensure that they did not produce offspring as defective as themselves. Blind people might have blind children. Even if the children were sighted, their blind parents would not be able to care for them. Both the parents and the children would become wards of the state and a burden to the community. "You just can't trust these blind people to stay away from each other"--this seemed to be the attitude of some of the officials in these programs. Is it any wonder that blind people have often been suspicious of the programs intended to serve them?

Until the mid-1950's blind people were prohibited from applying for federal civil service jobs. To challenge this prohibition, the National Federation of the Blind, under the leadership of Dr. tenBroek, brought suit in federal court on behalf of a blind applicant. To avoid judicial review, the government abolished the position for which the blind person was applying. Because the case was moot, it was dismissed, and the prohibition against all blind applicants remained in effect. However, members of Congress who learned these facts demanded a change. The prohibition was removed for some positions in federal employment.

When Dr. Kenneth Jernigan became president of the Federation in 1968, the organization adopted an increasingly aggressive program to protect the rights of the blind through action in the courts. Protection of individual rights also received further attention in Congress. In 1973 the Rehabilitation Act included several sections intended to protect the rights of disabled Americans. The civil rights laws initially drafted by Dr. Jacobus tenBroek had been expanded to include all disabled Americans. Through the 1970's and 1980's an increasing number of cases appeared in court testing the validity and extent of the protections available to disabled people. In 1985, in the case of Cleburne versus Cleburne Living Center, the Supreme Court applied the principles of equal protection of the laws to disabled Americans.

"Justice is truth in action," Benjamin Disraeli said. It is worthy of note that those who act on their own behalf to receive recognition for the merit they possess are more likely to get the protection they seek and the opportunities they pursue than those who wait passively. Justice is a magnificent principle, but it cannot act on its own. It must have agents to comprehend its demanding doctrine, to appreciate the hidden potential of applying its precepts to circumstances which have not previously been within the ambit of judicial consideration, and to take action to bring about an alteration in the scope of the protection it affords. We are those agents.

We must seek the truth and act upon it. We must never accept half measures, substitutes for reality, or false statements. Some have told us that we who are blind are without ability, but we know better. Others have said that the society in which we live cannot be altered, but through our efforts it is changing every day. We have looked into our hearts, and we know our will. Justice demands action, and we are prepared to meet this requirement. We have chosen the road to equality, and we will never stop marching.   
Justice means equality and the removal of artificial, irrelevant distinctions. But what is an artificial distinction? How can irrelevancy be identified? What is equality?

In August 2004 the National Federation of the Blind inaugurated the first of its Rocket On! Science Academies, an educational class conducted with the support of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to teach blind teenage students about physics, rocketry, electronics, and associated sciences. One of the stated objectives of this class was the launching of a ten-and-a-half-foot sounding rocket from the Wallops Flight Facility. One of the NASA team working with us to put the Science Academy together was Nancy Maynard.

Shortly before the beginning of the class, she noticed that many of the experiments to be conducted by the students involved measuring temperatures and electrical currents. The students would need a multimeter to conduct the tests, preferably a meter that could be operated without vision. A talking multimeter was at that time readily available from the OMEGA Engineering company. Nancy Maynard called OMEGA to order multimeters, but when OMEGA personnel discovered that she was planning to have blind people use them, OMEGA refused to provide the products, saying that these had not been designed for use by the blind.

Since when has this standard become the test for distribution of products? How many of the tools, artifacts, devices, or gadgets now available in the world have been designed for use by the blind? The chairs you are using in this banquet hall: have they been designed for the use of the blind? Is it not dangerous for you who are blind to use them? Is it not reasonable to assume that there is extra liability for those who have provided these items to you without considering the specialized needs of the blind? Or is all of this just a bunch of idiotic poppycock? Such thinking abrogates our right to equal treatment and violates the principles of justice.

In outrage at the behavior of OMEGA company officials, I, in my capacity as president of the National Federation of the Blind, ordered multimeters to be used by blind people in conducting scientific experiments. If the company refused to sell them, I was planning to learn whether the nondiscrimination laws in the United States were adequate to protect our right to purchase these products. To my satisfaction the OMEGA company sent the multimeters. I thought the incident was closed.

However, OMEGA company officials had apparently not changed their minds. When we decided to buy more of the multimeters, the company took them off the market. It said that, if blind people were going to buy them, OMEGA would not sell them to anybody. Although discriminatory intent is plain, the blind are not being singled out, we are told. Everybody is being treated the same way. Nobody gets the product; antidiscrimination legislation does not apply, the lawyers told me. However, if blind people had not sought to purchase OMEGA products, the decision to stop sales of the multimeters would never have been made. Is this equal treatment? Does such behavior promote justice?

I thought about stealing OMEGA's design and having its multimeter manufactured. However, the patent on the multimeter runs out in a short time. The National Federation of the Blind will cause multimeters to be built, which will provide as much information as the OMEGA product, and we will see that blind scientists, engineers, and students get the tools they need. We who are blind have been told repeatedly throughout most of recorded history that complex study is a realm of intellectual pursuit that is not available to us. However, we know more about our abilities than anybody else, and we intend to take action to see that they are recognized. The prejudice and misunderstanding of the people who run the OMEGA company cannot stop us. Nothing can keep us from studying what we want to know. We have looked into our hearts, and we know our will. Justice demands action, and we are prepared to meet this requirement. We have chosen the road to equality, and we will never stop marching.

It will come as no surprise that not all judges have a thorough appreciation of blindness. It will also be no surprise to learn that not all blind people represent blindness in a fair and reasonable way.

A report from the *New York Law Journal* of December 2, 2002, tells us that a blind lawyer contended that the rules of court should be altered for him because of blindness. Apparently this lawyer had received a favorable decision in a New York court for his client. He was directed to submit a proposed judgment within sixty days of the date of the decision. He failed to submit the proposed judgment, and his opponent moved to have the decision dismissed because it had been abandoned.

The blind lawyer said that he could not have gotten the proposed judgment to the court within sixty days because he was blind (apparently his secretary had departed), and he asked for a reasonable accommodation pursuant to the Americans with Disabilities Act. He said that he had been granted four days to take the bar exam in New York when the customary time is two and that state and federal courts routinely grant him twice as much time to respond to motions as is available to sighted lawyers. The New York court accepted the argument that blind lawyers are slower than sighted lawyers and granted more time for this lawyer to file his proposed judgment.

Now let me be clear about what I am saying regarding reasonable accommodations. Sometimes I believe that more time is necessary for a blind person to perform a task than is needed for a sighted person. I believe that this is especially true when the method involved in doing the task is based largely upon sight. For example, many times examinations include diagrams. It takes time to comprehend the nuances of a diagram by having it described. Sometimes a chart is used. It takes time to translate the information on the chart into a form usable by the blind. Then circumstances involving live readers sometimes demand time that would not be used if the material could be read directly. All of these circumstances justify additional time for performing certain tasks.

However, in this case the lawyer argued that blind people are always slower than the sighted. He had sixty days to file a document with the court. His argument is that he could not meet the same standards required of the sighted because of his blindness.

Does this lawyer's blindness cause his mind to work more slowly than those of the sighted? Does it take him longer to eat his dinner? When he decides to kiss his girlfriend, does it take him longer to find her mouth than it would take other people? To argue that all blind people always need more time to do everything than the sighted require is not merely ridiculous but a disingenuous effort to mislead. We who are blind must not represent blindness as a destructive alteration of our fundamental capacity and personality but as the characteristic it is. We must not whine and complain but plan and compete. If we expect equality, we must demonstrate that we deserve it. And make no mistake, we expect equality.

On the subject of special treatment and equality: sometimes we should demand special treatment; sometimes we should request it; sometimes we should accept it even when it has not been sought; and sometimes we should refuse it. Many specialized programs for the blind exist. Such programs are valuable to the extent that they stimulate independence or promote equal opportunity. Blind people need information to participate in our society. We should demand to have it. No possibility exists for us to have equality of opportunity unless we can expect the same range of information that others have available. However, equality of opportunity does not require some of the other benefits blind people routinely receive.

For an illustration of the concepts involved, consider the income tax. Some blind taxpayers (those who take the standard deduction) receive a benefit because of blindness. The cash value of the benefit depends on the tax rate, but its maximum value is less than $500. How much do the blind pay for that few hundred dollars? Each year tens of millions of income tax documents are distributed throughout the nation, and commentators talk about the advantages of specialized groups. Blindness is depicted as a reason for needing specialized consideration, and the inability of blind people to participate in the activities of our communities is often one element of the presentation. The cost in social acceptance is high, and the money blind people receive is a tiny element of the wealth we possess. We the blind pay an exorbitant amount for the few dollars we get.

This kind of analysis can be used to determine the benefit of every program dealing with blindness. Does a specialized service or a specialized program justify its existence by the good that it produces? Does it stimulate independence or increase equality of opportunity? Does it pay for itself? If so, it is worth having. If not, then not. In the case of the New York lawyer, the special request fails the test. One of the disadvantages associated with the request for special treatment is that blind people are depicted in court and in public statements as slow, incompetent, and inferior. The cost is too great to justify the requested alteration.

I am pleased to say that not all judges permit themselves to be bamboozled by the nonsensical arguments offered by some misguided blind people. An Associated Press article from August 31, 1995, carries the narrative of a former blind employee of the United States Forest Service. A number of pieces of property owned by the United States government were at this employee's home. When he was charged with taking them, he offered the defense that he couldn't be held responsible because "he was so blind he couldn't see how much government property he had stolen." The property that he had failed to notice included tent straps, ready-to-eat meals, furniture, and a generator. Both the judge and the jury rejected the foolishness. In this case justice was served.

In 1990 the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was adopted. Although discrimination on the basis of disability had previously been prohibited in many parts of our society prior to its adoption, the ADA broadened the scope of antidiscrimination protection.

In 2003 a Washington-based entity known as the Northwest Americans with Disabilities Act and Information Technology Center (ADA & IT Center), which was funded by the United States Department of Education, issued a job announcement to fill a vacancy for the position of ADA program manager. The position description lists nine items under the title "Job Duties and Responsibilities." These include such matters as: to "plan and provide training and educational outreach activities on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and education-based accessible Information Technology (IT)," and to "monitor key state and local legislative and/or judicial activities which may have implications on ADA and accessible IT compliance." The position description contains the declaration that this agency is an equal opportunity employer that encourages the disabled to apply, and it offers to provide the job announcement in alternative formats. Although the alternative formats are not specified, one of the alternatives is probably Braille. However, the job announcement also requires that any applicant must have a valid driver's license.

Apparently the personnel at this agency believe that a valid driver's license is a bona fide occupational qualification for anybody to provide information about the Americans with Disabilities Act to the uninformed. And these are the people who are the experts on the law. Did the experts from the ADA & IT Center consult with the experts at the Department of Education when drafting their position description? Did the experts at the Department of Education review the document? Did they give it their approval? Did they give tacit support to the principle that the blind should be kept out of the labor force at least to the extent of advising others about the law? Who can say? Given the track record of the Department of Education within the last two years, such suppositions are not implausible. But, back to the ADA & IT Center.

If this idiocy weren't so serious, it would be positively funny. However, this kind of shallow logic is used to bedevil the lives of the blind in many places throughout our nation, and it must stop. After all, it is prohibited by the Americans with Disabilities Act. Either the officials of the ADA & IT Center will come to recognize the mistake they have made, or we will provide them with education. We have looked into our hearts, and we know our will. Justice demands action, and we are prepared to meet this requirement. We have chosen the road to equality, and we will never stop marching.

The chronicle of the history of the blind demonstrates that blind people have been a part of the medical profession for almost a hundred years. An unpublished manuscript in the records of the Jacobus tenBroek Library at the National Federation of the Blind Jernigan Institute confirms other reports of a blind heart specialist who practiced medicine in Chicago before the First World War. A number of blind doctors are currently in medical practice, some of them having earned their medical degrees as blind people. Dr. Stanley Wainapel of New York, Dr. Mark Stracks of Pennsylvania, and a number of others are currently providing medical treatment to their patients.   
However, when a blind person applied to Case Western Reserve medical school a number of years ago, she was rejected because of blindness. In the ensuing court battle, the judges said that they would not challenge the decision of Case Western Reserve regarding the requirements for an applicant who sought to study medicine. The blind student did not get the opportunity to demonstrate her ability in this field because of prejudice and discriminatory treatment.

However, when another blind person sought to enter nursing school at Nassau Community College in 2004, and when she was refused admission because of her blindness, she fought back with the help of the Federation, and she was granted the opportunity to study nursing. During the course of the argument about her admission, school officials, legal experts, medical professionals, and members of the public speculated about the basic talent possessed by the blind.

I received a number of letters telling me that my conduct was irresponsible. To insist that blind people should study and practice medicine at any level is to endanger the patients, they said. To persist with support of the blind applicant after the obvious danger had been delineated is a positive disservice both to the community as a whole and to all blind people, I was told.

If blind doctors and nurses are permitted to practice medicine, will they know the limits of their abilities, and will they practice only within those areas in which they are competent? Is it reasonable to believe that some of the practices within the medical field require sight? If it is, will blind people who have the license to engage in medical practice avoid such areas? These are questions that I faced as we planned to support the blind applicant seeking nurse's training.

As I pondered these questions, and as I did my best to respond to those who posed them, it occurred to me that within them is a fallacy. Are all sighted medical professionals qualified to engage in all areas of medical practice? Do we ask them if they will have the sense to limit themselves only to their areas of competence?

Nursing school is intended to teach the skills required for nursing. The tests to acquire a license to practice nursing are intended to assure that those who pass them have the ability to engage in the profession. Either the nursing schools know what they are doing, or they don't. Either the medical boards understand and fulfill their mission, or they don't. Sight, or the lack of it, is not the test of ability. People with the keenest sight are not necessarily the best doctors. Perhaps those with the keenest insight are.

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| The banquet crowd and part of the dais |

When I need medical attention, do I want a blind person to serve as my doctor or my nurse? The answer to that question depends on the skill possessed by the doctor or nurse. If the blind person has the ability to give me what I need, the answer is yes. Justice demands recognition of personal merit. We possess such merit--or some of us do, and we expect such recognition.

In the work that we do in the National Federation of the Blind, we believe that exploration of all areas involving blindness is essential. Do the minds of blind people work differently from those of the sighted? We believe that the answer is fundamentally no, although the sensory inputs we get are not entirely the same as those received by the sighted.

More than eighty years ago Thomas Edison argued that 80 percent of all we know we learn through our eyes. At the time he was trying to sell his newly invented movie projectors to the public schools. The sales weren't going very well. Consequently he devised his argument in an attempt to persuade school officials to pony up.

A number of administrators of programs for the blind have taken Edison's comment out of context. They have argued that blind people cannot be expected to possess the same quantity of information that sighted people have because we can only get at 20 percent of the available material, being deprived of the 80 percent that supposedly comes through the eyes. However, we somehow seem to get at the information that others have. Consequently, although some people may get 80 percent of what they learn through their eyes, other people find alternate routes for receiving much of the same information.

At the University of Wisconsin experimental research has occurred that transmits visual stimuli to blind subjects through the tongue. I know this sounds crazy, and it might be. However, if the optic nerve is unavailable for such transmission, some other sensory path must be employed. An Associated Press story of April 25, 2006, gives additional credibility to the argument that sensory input through the tongue may be useful for more than taste. This, in part, is what it says:

In their quest to create the super warrior of the future, some military researchers aren't focusing on organs like muscles or hearts. They're looking at tongues. By routing signals from helmet-mounted cameras, sonar and other equipment through the tongue to the brain, they hope to give elite soldiers superhuman senses similar to owls, snakes, and fish.

Researchers at the Florida Institute for Human and Machine Cognition envision their work giving Army Rangers 360-degree unobstructed vision at night and allowing Navy SEALs to sense sonar in their heads while maintaining normal vision underwater--turning sci-fi into reality.

The device [to transmit the information through the tongue, the article continues] known as "BrainPort�," was pioneered more than thirty years ago by Dr. Paul Bach-y-Rita, a University of Wisconsin neuroscientist.

In testing, blind people found doorways, noticed people walking in front of them, and caught balls.

These are some of the words in the report from the Associated Press. The report may be nuts, but it may have elements of research within it that are worth knowing. Have we explored all the ways for blind people to gather information? I believe we have not. Braille was invented less than two hundred years ago, and we have not even done sufficient research to determine the best way to teach it. The standard we apply to experimentation is a simple but demanding one. Do the proposed experiments make sense, do they have the potential to produce results that enhance opportunity for the blind, do they incorporate the experiences of blind people within them? In other words, do the ideas incorporated in the experiments work? If they do, the experimentation is valid. If they do not, the experimentation must be discarded. We will not always know before experiments are conducted whether they will produce successful results. Such is the nature of experimentation. However, if the hypotheses are based in reality, this is sufficient.

I cannot leave the tongue experiments without adding one more thought. My tongue already has a number of uses, and I value the wiggly little thing for what it can do. I would not want to lose the delight that it offers in the process of exploring alternative sources of knowledge. This too must be considered in the research ahead.

Some years ago a letter came to the National Federation of the Blind from a man who says that he is a counselor, a therapist, and a pastor (retired). He wanted to talk to the president of the National Federation of the Blind of Washington, Mike Freeman, about an idea for rehabilitating violent criminals. The death penalty does not deter violent crime, the counselor said, and programs of reform don't work. His solution is to blind all three-time repeat offenders because blind people don't commit crimes. His program of rehabilitation would create, according to him, "terror and life in the dark."

The plan of this counselor would require a prison term for a first offense, removal of one eye and a prison term for the second offense, and removal of the other eye for the third offense. Prison would not be necessary for the third-time offender because blind people don't commit crimes. Even if they wanted to commit them, they can't because they are blind. Some vocational rehabilitation would be offered after the criminals had been blinded. The counselor recommends teaching the blinded criminals how to ride the bus. Then they could go to the grocery store, find the police station [why would they want to?], or get to the welfare office. Welfare is expensive, he says, but cheaper than prison.

The letter from this self-proclaimed counselor might be dismissed as the ravings of a lunatic. However, it is not the first of its kind that I have read. Blindness as punishment is a theme at least as old as the ancient Greek tragedy written by Sophocles.

The image of blindness created by such thoughts would stigmatize and enslave all blind people. What a picture of justice! The blind would become the criminal class, the corrupt, the violent, the outcasts, the dregs of society. Though the implementation of this proposal would never get serious consideration, the thought processes in devising it exemplify a kind of outlandish prejudice against the blind that is almost beyond belief. To this method of thought and to all of the irrational iterations of prejudice that constitute its structure we say no, not now, not ever! Justice demands recognition of personal merit, and we insist that ours be known. If necessary we will form a line of battle and take to the streets to fight for our right to participate fully in our society on the basis of equality. We have looked into our hearts, and we know our will. Justice demands action, and we are prepared to meet this requirement. We have chosen the road to equality, and we will never stop marching.

Within the last year I have met with a totally blind man more than seventy years old who comes from a rural community. During most of his life he has been under the supervision of one or another of his family members. They fed him; they clothed him; they gave him a radio. A few decades ago somebody decided that he might enjoy a guitar, and they gave him that. He did not receive a quality education; he did not get rehabilitation training; he did not explore the farms and fields or the woods and streams near his house. Most of the time he was shut in his room with the radio and the guitar. Whenever his guardian wanted to leave her home, she told him to stay in his room. He has been listening to the radio and playing the guitar for more than half a century. Occasionally he was given the chance to play his music for a picnic or a family gathering.

A couple of years ago this blind man got out of the house with his guitar, and somebody heard him play. He knows how to handle the instrument, and he can sing. He became a part of a band, and he plays in public venues from time to time. He may be able to get away from the custody he has known, at least in part.

This blind man has spent seven decades in his room. He knows his own voice, the intricate notes of his guitar, and the tones on the radio. He has no conception of the breadth and scope of the remainder of existence, and he is unlikely ever to achieve the level of independence that many of us take for granted. Justice delayed is justice denied, and for him the morning and evening of opportunity have likely come and gone. The recognition of personal worth came too late, and the mechanism that might have changed the future for him, the organized blind movement, learned of his plight when much of the time to alter the pattern of his future had passed.

However, we will not stop trying. Our commitment is unalterable; our hope is unshakable; our energy is unflagging. If we can help even at this late hour, we will do what we can to bring independence to this man, for we never give up--we never quit in our effort to shape the pattern of justice.

From ancient times to our own period of history, justice has symbolized truth, fairness, equality. Recognition of individual talent is a fundamental element of justice, and unless those who possess the talent are willing to demonstrate its value and fight for its recognition, the justice of a society will remain stagnant. For this reason those of us who possess capacity have a solemn obligation. We must use our talent, and we must insist that others recognize it. In the performance of this duty, we expand the scope of the protection that justice offers to everybody, and we improve the culture that is the basis for our society.

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| The ovation following the banquet address |

In 1940, Dr. Jacobus tenBroek and a handful of others brought the National Federation of the Blind into being. Part of the reason for the creation of the Federation is to ensure that justice will be ours, not as an act of benevolence, but as a recognition of the talent we have, of the equality we deserve--justice, as a matter of right. In 1968 Dr. Kenneth Jernigan became our president. One of the most dynamic leaders that the blind have known, Dr. Jernigan stated our purpose in words that echoed the sentiments of Dr. tenBroek. "We want freedom--jobs, homes, the chance to succeed or fail on our own merit, access to places of public accommodation, interdependence with our neighbors, and full participation in society."

As we come together at this convention in our thousands from every part of the nation, from every economic segment of society, and from every avenue of endeavor, our fundamental being has not changed and our purpose remains unaltered. We want the recognition that we deserve--all of us, all of the time, in every realm of endeavor, without stint or compromise.

Those of us who are blind have waited a long time to receive an accurate assessment of what we are, but the waiting is at an end. Our lives have been subject to the misapplication of the principles of justice for almost as long as all of recorded history, but the toleration of that misapplication is no more. The time has come to act, and act we will.

Some have wondered if those of us who come from such different backgrounds could be called a movement--if we really are the organized blind. To those who express such doubts, we say this: some of us are employed, others are not; some of us have college degrees, others do not; some of us earn substantial incomes, others do not; some of us have achieved recognition in our communities, others have not; some of us have training in the techniques used by the blind, others do not. Though the distinctions are many, they matter not at all. We are the blind, the agents of justice, and we are on the move.

We seek the truth; we accept no half measures--no substitutes for reality. We cannot be hoodwinked or diverted from our goal, and we expect to be recognized as the equal human beings we are. We have looked into our hearts, and we know our will. Justice demands action, and we are prepared to meet the challenge. We have chosen the road to equality, and we will never stop marching. The freedom that we seek will be ours. Our intellect demands it, our spirit assures it, and our lives proclaim it. Join me, and we will make it come true!

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