**The Federation at Seventy-Five: The Determination of Value and the Reflection of Hope**

An Address Delivered by
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Value is a broad concept used to measure the worth of a resource, product, service, or a combination of these. Many theories have been offered through the centuries to help explain both the objective and subjective value that people place on things and on each other. The consideration of value began with the ancient philosophers attempting to apply a logical framework. In contrast, the modern investigation, broadly known as value theory, is empirical research that involves concepts from psychology, sociology, and economics. Value is often inherent, and frequently it is changed by outside forces. Likewise, the diminishment of value is often established by compounding forces that have no true relationship to inherent value. Both research and experience have illuminated the fact that value is frequently determined by psychological perception, artificial control, and historical patterns rather than true economic influences that should drive value in the competitive marketplace.

Take, for example, the unique covalent bonding of carbon atoms. Carbon itself is readily available in the environment, being the sixth-most abundant element in the universe. When carbon atoms are under enormous pressure for a significant period of time, the atoms bond with each other to form one of the toughest substances on Earth—the diamond. While diamonds have been praised for centuries, their status as a common commodity having both economic and emotional value is very recent. Until the late nineteenth century, worldwide diamond production was measured only in pounds. The discovery of abundant diamond mines in South Africa quickly flooded the market with tons of the unique gem. The financiers of the mines recognized that these discoveries threatened the perceived value of the gem so they sought to tightly control the flow of diamonds to the market in order to create value through scarcity. In 1888, De Beers Consolidated Mines, Ltd. was established to control the value of diamonds around the world.

Compared to other commodities such as gold, silver, and grain, whose value has fluctuated due to economic pressures, diamonds have steadily increased in market value since the Great Depression. De Beers achieved this stability by controlling demand as well as supply. Beginning in the late 1930s, an aggressive advertising campaign was developed to create an emotional connection to the diamond. Love and commitment became symbolized through the diamond, and it was popularized as the true expression of romantic courtship. It was not long before some measured the depth of love in a relationship by the size of the diamond offered. Educational programs, diamond placements with celebrities, and strategically positioned newspaper articles added value to paid advertising, and the result was an entire generation of lovers who emotionally understood that the diamond was forever. In the 1960s, when new supplies of smaller diamonds from Siberia threatened to diminish the market value, the advertising machinery shifted the messaging from the diamond’s size to strengthening the emotional connection to the other aspects of the gem—color, cut, and clarity. The diamond stands as a symbol of value and a shining example of the interplay between psychology, sociology, and economics in determining value.

As we come to the diamond anniversary banquet of the National Federation of the Blind, I find myself wondering about value, our value, and how it has evolved over time. Sometimes the story is similar to that of the diamond, but sometimes it is distinctly different. As we join together tonight to consider our past and to contemplate our future, we know with certainty how our value is determined and where our hope and energy is restored. For just as the diamond exhibits value, so does the National Federation of the Blind shine with love, hope, and determination as a collective reflection of the value each blind person brings to our movement. Like the individual carbon atoms, under pressure we have bonded together in love and faith to demonstrate to ourselves and to others that we have value—we are the blind, we have come to celebrate, and we will let our value shine. We are the National Federation of the Blind.

Diamonds are created out of individual carbon atoms being placed under intense pressure for a long period of time. Similarly, for nearly all of history prior to the founding of our organization in 1940, blind people faced tremendous suppression of our true value to society. The earliest humans learned that the night—the absence of the ability to see clearly—was something to be feared. Blind people at best were left to be beggars in developing communities. At worst, blind people were left to die or were exterminated outright in order to relieve society of the cost associated with the tragedy of blindness. In the late middle ages, a greater enlightenment prevailed and provisions were made to care for the unfortunate blind through almshouses and other segregated institutions. These provisions were not meant to maximize our potential, provide meaningful training, or bring us into the mainstream of society. Thus, the pressure continued to build, society perpetuated the notion that the blind had little value, and we as blind people came to internalize that misunderstanding.

The establishment of institutions to support the blind helped to consolidate the marketplace for measuring the value of the blind in society. While their original intentions may have been out of kindness, the institutions became dependent on having blind people within their walls and selling the message that the blind had some capacity as long as they were under the right care. Success was not measured by how much value they added to the blind but rather how much value they added to society by taking care of the unfortunate blind so that others would not need to bother. If blind people were successful through their own means rather than the support of a benevolent agency, they were portrayed as amazing and unusual in order to perpetuate the message that the blind are inherently less valuable than the rest of society. While the diamond industry was based on enhanced value, the blindness service industry was based on suppressed value. Diamonds are forever, but the blind are forever in need of help.

There was no hope of changing the determination of the value of the blind until we, the blind of this nation, chose to build a new model. A diamond is an extremely tough substance that requires special tools to be cut. The job of cutting is much easier and exponentially more effective when another diamond is used to do the work. As blind people in the United States of America began to explore the value we could offer, we found fault in the limits that had been placed upon us. Blind people found opportunities to come together with other blind people and they established state-based organizations where the blind first began to understand the power of collective action. In the state of California, Dr. Newell Perry was the chief diamond cutter who gave shape to the first leaders of the organized blind movement. Dr. Perry, a teacher by instinct and mathematician by training, knew from his own difficult experience the tremendous struggle a blind person must endure in order to demonstrate true value. He dedicated his life to helping the blind of the next generation learn that value was not measured by the degree of vision in their eyes, but rather by the degree of determination, education, and heart they possessed. Among the rough diamonds that Dr. Perry cut was Jacobus tenBroek, who called on the blind of this nation to establish a vehicle for collective action—the National Federation of the Blind.

The birth of our organization in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, in November of 1940 was a turning point in the value of the blind throughout the world. In his address to that first gathering of Federationists, Dr. Jacobus tenBroek, the twenty-nine-year-old junior instructor at the University of Chicago Law School, and first long-term President of our organization, said in part:

Individually, we are scattered, ineffective and inarticulate, subject alike to the oppression of the social worker and the arrogance of the governmental administrator. Collectively, we are the masters of our own future and the successful guardian of our own common interests. Let one speak in the name of many who are prepared to act in his support, let the democratically elected blind representatives of the blind act as spokesmen for all, let the machinery be created to unify the action and concentrate the energies of the blind of the nation. The inherent justice of our cause and the good will of the public will do the rest.

The first phase of our movement was to convince each other that we had value and that, together, we could expand that value. Our first challenge was to bring together enough blind people who believed in their inherent value that we could mobilize the tools of our new organization. Our early leaders sacrificed what little they had in the way of money and gave generously of their time to find blind people, one by one, and to share what we had found. Our coming together reflected our hope for the future; our steady success strengthened our determination; and our increased understanding of what we could do, individually and collectively, began to raise our expectations and to accelerate the pace of progress.

In those early days our primary national initiative was to secure a basic level of public investment in our value by ensuring that the implementation of the federal social security program did not disadvantage blind people. While gaining a basic level of support took a lot of time, energy, and what few resources we had, the Federation was not satisfied to wait until one problem was solved before working on the next. A review of notes from the first conventions of the organization reveals discussions of ways to bring effective rehabilitation programs to states and of new ideas for aggressive outreach to help the blind secure meaningful employment. Dr. tenBroek, like his mentor, was passionate about teaching other blind people about their inherent value, but he was equally as energetic and articulate in communicating the Federation’s message to the general public—using both written and oral media to change the understanding of blindness in our society.

Shortly after the blind of our nation united in recognition of our value, we began to feel the urgent desire to grow and cultivate that value in the second phase of our movement. While the work of the first phase continued, the second phase was marked by more aggressive efforts to get the blind into meaningful employment and to showcase our value through innovative training programs and meaningful public policies that were based on our philosophy. It was in this creative and disruptive time that the established agencies for the blind, that had for decades controlled our value and determined our direction, began to take us seriously and pushed back.

The agencies for the blind had controlled both the demand and the supply for our talents, but our organization challenged the entire premise on which the agencies built their value. For today’s generation of blind people, it is hard to imagine the dramatic influence of the agencies and the deep resentment for the Federation that characterized the environment for blind people across the country in the 1950s. For our brothers and sisters who faced the conditions at that time, the pressure was overwhelming. In 1957 the struggle had become so fierce that the Federation caused John F. Kennedy, then the junior senator from Massachusetts, to introduce a bill to protect the right of the blind to act collectively in our own best interest. That the protection of this very fundamental right would be a priority of the blind of America speaks to how powerful the agencies were and how little the blind were valued in many parts of our nation.

We faced struggles in the late fifties that challenged our toughness and commitment. At the beginning, we were a small corps of blind people seeking to build value for each other. Two short decades later, we were a powerful movement that a small group, emboldened by the agencies, desired to control for their own self-interests. This period of instability—sometimes referred to as the civil war—helped solidify our organizational values and deepen our commitment to securing an authentic organization of the blind. From the perspective of seventy-five years, the period of internal struggle within the Federation is relatively small. Yet the core values that we strengthened at that time—democracy, collective action, respect, full participation, love for one another, and a commitment to sharing our resources—have contributed significantly to the fifty-plus years of our movement since that time. We have established stability, which has fed growth, which has created a base of power from which we can demonstrate our value to society. We are the blind and we intend to let our value shine.

Knowing our value and finding innovative methods for cultivating that value is not enough to succeed when the marketplace creates an unequal environment for our participation. Thus, the third phase of our movement—the struggle for civil rights—can be thought of as the work to ensure our value is fairly tested in the marketplace. During this phase of our movement, we took to the streets to tell all who would listen that "we know who we are and we will never go back." We joined our second great President, Kenneth Jernigan, as he invited us to join him on the barricades to fight for our equality. Dr. Jernigan, a courageous and thoughtful man, personally helped raise a generation of leaders by instilling our philosophy into the blindness training programs in the state of Iowa, which became a model for the nation as well as the rest of the world. As more blind people learned of our movement and the value we were cultivating, our ranks grew. While we fought against the pressures, we built new connections, shared with each other, and discovered new opportunities. We were diamonds cutting diamonds, and we reflected a message of hope.

Within our struggle for civil rights, a generation of Federationists grew up together. Bonds were formed on the picket lines and during organizing trips to new states. As our scope and influence grew, we strengthened the understanding that the critical element in our organizational success is that the work is personal to each of us. In his first recorded Presidential Release in November 1973, President Jernigan made it clear that he hoped that providing information in recorded rather than written form would not only accelerate the pace of communication within the organization but also convey more of the personal feelings and commitment that were reflected when Federationists got together. It is not surprising that the most confrontational time of our struggle for civil rights was also one of the most dramatic periods of bonding together. The organization that was established by the blind of President tenBroek’s generation, and that was cultivated by the second generation under President Jernigan, developed the characteristic of being as much a family as it was a powerful member- and mission-driven organization.

As we came into the third generation of the Federation, one forever marked by the character, strength, and caring of the Federation’s next and longest-serving President, Marc Maurer, we did not lose any of the momentum we had built. The need still existed to teach each other about our inherent value, to push back on society’s attempt to limit our value through messages of low expectations, and to find new ways to exercise that value. Although more possibility for collaboration with agencies for the blind existed, the need to eliminate the barriers preventing us from equality of opportunity in society felt as urgent as ever. Under the proactive leadership of President Maurer, the true diversity and reach of the Federation began to flourish. The expansion of our scholarship program; the establishment of our model training centers in Louisiana, Colorado, and Minnesota; the growth of our programs in employment, education, and technology; the increased reach of our public education; the improved effectiveness of our legislative and policy advocacy; and the execution of a bold litigation strategy were the result of a growing corps of leaders who, like their mentors, sacrificed to further cultivate value.

As the personal bonds began to be formed less on the picket lines and more in the board rooms, our President responded with an aggressive program of leadership development across the Federation. Diamonds need to be cut by diamonds, and care and planning must take place. Under President Maurer, as many as a thousand leaders have received direct mentoring and guidance from the Federation’s chief executive, not to mention the tens of thousands who continue to benefit from his writings and innovative ideas as they are reflected around the world. Our President opened his family to us, and we continued to challenge our own thinking as he challenged his. The Federation is personal. Rarely do organizations with the reach and depth of the Federation have chief executives with engagement throughout their organization. The Federation is built on a bond that we, the blind, are in this together and that the cultivation of our value demands our knowing each other, sharing with each other, and pushing each other to test the limits of our value.

It is this last element—testing the limits of our value—that has characterized the next and current phase of our movement. We have come together to determine our value and to reflect our hope; we have pushed against the institutional and social pressures that suppressed our value; we have cultivated value and put it to work; and we have implemented an aggressive program to eliminate the barriers that prevent us from giving our full value. While this is a great start, our work is not done. We have not reached the limits of our value. Are we inherently limited by blindness, or can we continue to expand the horizons? Have we discovered all of the barriers that stand in our way, or are there still real and perceived obstacles preventing us from showing our full potential? Are we as blind people doing our part to maximize that value, or do we continue to fall into the limits of low expectations? Or to say it another way, are we truly living the lives we want and letting our value shine?

It is in this current phase of exploration that I have come to know our movement. Almost twenty years ago, I first came into our convention hall and felt the lift of spirit, the charged determination, and the reflection of hope that I had not experienced anywhere else. It is in this setting—a place we have created for each other—that I came to understand how I had put limits on my value, how the outside forces had artificially limited that value, and how we could mobilize the tools to change the determination of our value. I was shaped by leaders of the Federation and by the work in my home community on local, state, and national priorities of the blind. I have found that the more value I put into the work of our movement, the more value I cultivate in my own life through my enhanced understanding of blindness—what it is and what it is not. I continue to be sharpened by my active participation in the Federation. For me, as I am confident is true for you, this movement has always been personal—and that is why I am a Federationist.

We now find ourselves in our seventy-fifth year. Although our movement has been tremendously successful, we do not yet have equality in the marketplace. Equally as important, some of us—maybe those who are here for the first time or those blind people we have not yet found—are still uncertain about our own value. Others of us, including me, have received some of the best mentoring of any generation of blind people in history. The question for us is will we settle for the value we have derived from those who came before us or will we continue to take the risks, make the sacrifices, and test the limits to further increase our value. I am prepared to take those risks, make those sacrifices, and test those limits. Are you prepared to make our value shine?

It is said that a rough diamond is pure risk and pure potential. The rough diamond by itself has value but if expertly cut, the true beauty is able to show and the gem’s value is significantly increased in the marketplace. Yet, in the cutting, value can be lost, mistakes can be made, and the result can be failure. In the absence of trying, there is no risk, but the potential is limited. However, the risk turns into value when the cutting is done by a caring and knowledgeable craftsman.

It is also said that diamonds are a girl’s best friend. I will let you draw your own parallels between that statement and the value provided by a soulmate who happens to be blind. I have been blessed in my life to find a partner who is a true diamond—my wife Melissa—and we have been fortunate to have three beautiful children who have grown up in the Federation. Our youngest daughter, Elizabeth, is three years old and she is blind. A couple of months ago, the local school district convened a meeting to talk about what type of services Elizabeth might receive. They explained that because she does not currently have any deficits due to her blindness that she may not be eligible to receive blindness-related services under an individualized education program. Does this mean that her value is so high that they believe they cannot enhance her education any further? No, in fact, the entire premise of “special education” is an attempt to add value to those perceived as having less value than their peers. Without an IEP, the school district would likely not provide an educational environment that is authentic to Elizabeth—for example including Braille—until she has suffered long enough under pressure to develop deficits compared to her sighted peers. Once the self-fulfilling pattern of low expectations has been allowed to unfold as designed, then and only then, might the district provide those specialized services needed to bring value to this unfortunate child. Elizabeth’s story is not rare. Hundreds of blind children and their families face this struggle every year under the pressure of special education programs that suppress rather than enhance the value these children have to offer.

The same is true in other areas of our society. Our universities go to great lengths to show us that they are excellent places to add value to our lives. Yet, the average blind person faces barriers at every turn. Inaccessible college applications, broken financial aid systems, barrier-filled course selection and registration programs, second-class student housing information, unmanageable learning management platforms, difficult library databases, incomplete electronic books, and segregated course collaboration tools all limit the talents of blind learners rather than unlock their potential and fuel their quest for knowledge. The university administrators say they have done the best they can, but the evidence demonstrates otherwise. We know that the blind have value and that these systems can and should be built to maximize the value of all students, not just those who generally access information with their eyes. Education should be about the cultivation of knowledge rather than the perpetuation of low expectations.

Similarly, some rehabilitation agencies fight against blind students pursuing quality adjustment-to-blindness training by offering a second-rate and less expensive substitute. The personnel in those same agencies throw up their hands when blind people say they want to be an engineer, a scientist, or a medical professional. These careers add value to our society and the agency personnel have learned the traditional message that blind people have little value to offer. The inconsistency cannot be resolved in their own minds, especially when their agency adopts policies to put distance between the counselors and the blind clients they are there to serve.

Then there are the employers who struggle to find committed and qualified workers to carry out their business. They might want to hire people who are blind, but the value is hidden by the market. The traditional employers of the disabled, especially those hiding behind their nonprofit status, continue to spin the narrative about how the blind do not create as much value as others, and therefore they must be paid less than the minimum wage offered to the rest of society. The story always reaches the same climax, “Do not worry,” they say, “because if you do not hire these people we have plenty of good will to offer them.” Our great nation, built on equality and opportunity, has for more than seventy-five years resigned itself to the notion that the blind have less value than others; and our government has institutionalized this in the form of unequal work for unequal pay.

If that were not painful enough, when we seek to make the world better by giving our energy, our time, and our love to our families and to our children, we are told we do not supply enough value. After seventy-five years of progress, blind mothers, blind fathers, and sometimes even blind grandparents are told by social service agencies and by the courts that there is just too much risk in having a child in their custody. Has the measure of love ever been related to the distance one can see? Has the strength of commitment ever been dependent on the field of vision? Does the quality of care diminish when blindness comes? From the bottom of our hearts, the clear answer to these outdated questions is no.

Unlike diamonds, which are a commodity under the control of a consortium, we own the rights to our future, and we intend to let our value shine. We, the members of this organization, are the single most powerful force in determining the value of our participation in the marketplace. That is a tremendous risk and a tremendous opportunity. If we stop where we are—settling for the progress we have made—we will most certainly lose the value we have gained and fail to realize our potential. But we will not stop, we will not settle, the future will be ours.

Our history over the past seventy-five years gives us the tools we need to march confidently into the future. With this foundation we will build a future where blind children will have their skills and abilities fairly tested. Through our work, the testing agencies will eliminate inaccessible testing instruments that place artificial limits on our youth, and we will establish dynamic education programs that enhance the value these young people possess. We will build a future where a newly blind woman in the prime of her working years can get access to timely and quality training that allows her to continue in her chosen profession. Through our work, we will raise expectations among rehabilitation professionals, provide greater leadership in the programs to train these professionals, and strengthen the connections between the professionals and the powerful information network that is the National Federation of the Blind. We will build a future where the blind can travel independently to any destination they choose with a spring of hope in their step. Through our work, we will establish new and dynamic ways to teach the members of the general public that blindness is not the characteristic that defines us and that unwanted grabbing and unsolicited interventions diminish rather than enhance the value of our interactions in society. We will build a future where the blind may choose not to walk but rather to pilot their own vehicle independently. Through our work, the blind will be included in the early development of new transportation systems, and our perspective will add value to the general evolution of transportation for all. We will build a future where a blind father will be deemed a suitable guardian for his children based only on his plans to provide for his family, his demonstrated ability to care for those around him, and his heartfelt expressions of love and support. Through our work, social service agencies will find high value in the tools and techniques that blind parents use to care for their loved ones daily, and the judges will make custody decisions with the understanding that blindness does not hold us back. We will build a future where we spend more time talking about innovation than inequality. We will build a future where you and I belong, where we add value, and where we achieve great things. We will only build a future that will match our dreams if we continue to build the National Federation of the Blind.

A new framework for determining value exists and it is strengthened as we live the lives we want. We have learned about our value and we have bonded together to share that value. Although the pressure continues, we have toughened our resolve, we reflect the hope of our experience, and we have broken down many of the barriers in the marketplace. We have not yet found the limits of our value and we intend to continue to explore our potential. We are diamonds, cut by generations of diamonds, and we have taken up the tools to cultivate our value. For too long our value has been suppressed and we cannot take the pressure anymore. For Elizabeth; for the blind students struggling to overcome artificial barriers in their universities; for the blind people facing the low expectations of misguided rehabilitation professionals; for the blind workers whose value is being exploited by outdated employers; for the blind caregivers whose hearts are trampled by misconceptions; for the newly blind who have not yet discovered their value; and for us, all of us, the blind, bonded together in faith, we will determine our value, live our value, and continue to expand the limits of that value through the unstoppable engine of hope that is the National Federation of the Blind.

President tenBroek described the unique element of our organization very powerfully when he noted that our organization is built on a faith that can move mountains and mount movements. For Dr. tenBroek, it was personal. And so it has been for each of us who come to contribute to this organization. I find it extremely humbling to stand at this diamond anniversary and to consider how we continue to build value for the next twenty-five years. The rough diamond, by itself, is pure risk and pure potential. With the right care, skilled polishing, and enhancement of a complementary setting, the diamond’s beauty can shine and the risk is turned into great value. We have taught each other that we are all diamonds. We have given each other the tools to unlock our value and to reflect the spirit of hope we experience in the Federation. The diamonds that have made us what we are have enriched our value. It is now left to us to carry that value into the future and to enhance it in a way that even we cannot imagine today. Tonight, I invite you to share with me in celebrating our accomplishments by recommitting ourselves to the bond that we hold together in our organization and to take up the tools to cut a bright future.

My brothers and my sisters, we are the blind and we have bonded together. We have built a legacy of hope and determination. We work today with love and commitment. And we welcome tomorrow with faith and imagination. We have learned our value and we will not give it back; we have taught each other to explore the limits and we have not found the boundaries; we have cultivated the power of our collective action and we will not release the bond of hope. Let us go shine our value. Let us go live the lives we want. And let us go build the Federation.