**Leadership and the Matrix of Power**

An Address Delivered by Marc Maurer

at the Banquet of the Annual Convention   
of the National Federation of the Blind

Louisville, Kentucky  
July 8, 2002

The acquisition of power has often been regarded as base or disreputable. Francis Bacon said, “The desire of power in excess caused the angels to fall; the desire of knowledge in excess caused man to fall.” He went on to assert that “Knowledge itself is power.” Hence, (according to Bacon) man’s search for knowledge is a search for power—which caused him to fall.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his journal, “You shall have joy or you shall have power, said God, you shall not have both.” He also wrote, “Men ... very naturally seek money or power; and power because it is as good as money.” Otto Von Bismarck declared, “He who has his thumb on the purse has the power.”

Such statements purport to illustrate that knowledge, money, and power are equivalent. Some people believe that they are all bad. As Lord Acton, in his famous phrase, said, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

Though this aphorism is oft-repeated, and though it has a deceptively learned ring, can any thinking person truly believe it? Power is essential to freedom. John Dewey said, “Liberty is not just an idea, an abstract principle. It is power, effective power to do specific things.” Cicero said, “Freedom is participation in power.”

The political buzzword of recent time was “empowerment”—creating power within the disenfranchised. If the theories of Acton and the others who mistrust power were true, empowerment would also corrupt. It would be Machiavellian indeed if the hidden agenda of the politicians was to corrupt the innocent.

Power denotes the ability to do what the person, organization, or country wants done at the time and in the way that the entity possessing power wants it done with minimal inconvenience. It is neither morally corrupt nor spiritually invigorating. It is neutral.

However, the process of acquiring power (the method used to get it) and the purposes for which it is used undoubtedly affect the quality of the result. Mao Tse-tung believed that without weapons and force there can be no power in politics. He said, “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.” However, John Quincy Adams said that the basis for political power is fundamentally different from that of weapons of war. “Individual liberty,” he said, “is individual power; and as the power of a community is a mass compounded of individual powers, the nation which enjoys the most freedom must necessarily be, in proportion to its numbers, the most powerful nation.” Malcolm X stated, “Power in defense of freedom is greater than power in behalf of tyranny and oppression.”

Without power there is no freedom. Without freedom there is no independence. And without independence there is virtually no possibility of leading a productive and fulfilling life. Therefore, we must seek power.

What are the essential characteristics of this elusive commodity? What must we do to obtain it? And, once acquired, how can it best be managed?

Gloria Steinem observed, “Power can be taken but not given. The process of the taking is empowerment in itself.” Thus, gaining power cannot be done for somebody else. If an individual or an organization wishes to possess it, that individual or organization must deliberately decide to have it and must act on that decision. This is not to say that a climate cannot be created in which organizations or individuals are encouraged to seek power for themselves. This can be done, and it should be. However, no individual and no group can live the life of another. Those who want power must take it for themselves. As the old expression tells us, each tub must stand on its own bottom.

Power—being the ability to do specific things—demands that those who want to have it acquire ability. There is no alternative—without ability there is no power. Hence, one of the major routes to power is knowledge. For a blind person, learning the skills of blindness helps. Beyond that, gaining mastery of a body of knowledge, which will permit competition with other people, is also of real importance. The possession of knowledge (or for that matter of money) is, however, not enough. There must be something else to ensure that the blind have power.

One element in the matrix of power is the belief by the individual that it is proper for power to reside within that person. This belief might go by the name of “confidence.” Another element is recognition by others of the capacity of the blind person. Without this recognition the power residing within the person (no matter how great) will be rejected as a myth. Can a blind person win the Nobel Prize or serve as the President of the United States? If the answer is “No,” if it is believed that sight is essential to these activities, we have not yet received the recognition we deserve. Call this recognition “public understanding.” With these—with ability, with confidence, and with public understanding—power can exist. However, gaining these elements cannot be accomplished single-handed; there must be cooperative effort. No one person in a group can attain power without others gaining a measure of it also. Therefore, to assure that a colleague gains power, seek to achieve some of your own. Conversely, to increase your own, help a friend. Members of organized groups encourage one another, and they achieve recognition much more rapidly than those without an established support   
network.

The most powerful individuals have gained their stature and influence by inviting others to participate in the dream they have of change. They also know that generosity enhances rather than diminishes power.

Though the sighted public cannot gain power for the blind—cannot give us freedom—our sighted friends and colleagues can help. Most of the time we encounter enormous goodwill. Our sighted friends want us to gain power because with it we are able both to lead independent lives and to contribute to our society. Power helps us, but it also benefits the broader community. In other words, if our sighted friends and colleagues had known how to do it, it would have been in their best interest to have caused the formation of the National Federation of the Blind.   
  
What does all of this mean for us—for the National Federation of the Blind, for our members, and for those blind people who have not yet become our members? Have we acquired power? Have we identified ways to increase freedom for the blind? How are the activities and efforts of the Federation structured within the matrix? And what are the prospects for us in the years to come?

In 1940, when the Federation came into being, the time and circumstances for the blind were completely different from what they are today. For many of us that time would be completely unrecognizable. Jobs for the blind were not simply hard to come by, they were nonexistent except in sheltered workshops, and these jobs were at the very bottom of the economic hierarchy. Education occurred at schools for the blind for those who could get there, but matriculation at college was severely limited and often unattainable. The Books for the Blind Program in the Library of Congress had come into being during the 1930’s, but the collection of materials available was not great. For many blind people the brightest hope (and for many it was only a hope) was a tiny amount of welfare, which might be received each month.

In this dreary atmosphere, Dr. Jacobus tenBroek, our founding President, and a small group, who dreamed with him that conditions might be changed, formed the National Federation of the Blind at Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Sixteen people were present representing seven states, but there was almost no money to establish programs for the organization, pay for telephone calls or stamps, or purchase office supplies. It would be many, many years before the thought of reimbursement for travel expenses for officers, members of the board, or anybody else could be addressed in any practical way. The Wilkes-Barre newspaper carried reports about the founding of the Federation, but otherwise the organization’s establishment was virtually unnoticed. No influence, no money, no staff, no office space except in the President’s small apartment, no allies in the field of blindness, no recognition by the public at large: this was the National Federation of the Blind at its beginning.

However, there were other characteristics. The delegates who came together at the founding of the organization had knowledge. They knew that blindness had been misunderstood. They had an abiding faith that joint effort could bring opportunity, and they had a shared commitment to each other that nothing would prevent them from seeking the influence needed by the blind to bring independence. They decided that the blind could and would have power.

How does this description compare with the Federation of today? We have grown from a gathering of sixteen delegates from seven states to a convention of some 3,000 delegates representing fifty states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. Representatives from many other countries also come. Although the unemployment rate remains dramatically high, tens of thousands of us have become employed. Through Braille, recordings, speech technology, and the NFB-NEWSLINE®, more information is available to the blind more quickly than ever before in history—hundreds of thousands of pages of it. Thousands of blind people attend college each year, and the National Federation of the Blind assists by conducting the most extensive scholarship program for blind people in the nation.   
  
The organized blind possess an extensive program of services to blind people. We maintain a headquarters at the National Center for the Blind, and we operate a number of other offices throughout the nation. We have established orientation and training programs in several states, and we are providing leadership in rehabilitation programs both directly and through example. We have conducted a capital campaign to erect a new building, the National Research and Training Institute for the Blind, and we are pursuing the talent and resources for completing and operating it. Programs to support harmony and cooperation among agencies and organizations in the blindness field are being conducted with our leadership. The blind of the nation, the rank and file membership of the National Federation of the Blind, created the structure of our organization and control it. Such is the National Federation of the Blind today.

However, there are also other characteristics. We have the knowledge that blindness has often been misunderstood. We have the faith to believe that by working together we can bring independence to the blind. We possess a shared commitment to each other. We have the confidence to know that our future is what we will make it, and we are determined that the blind can and will have power.

Our comprehension of blindness is not shared by everybody. There are still some who look upon blindness as an unmitigated tragedy and a clear indication of inferiority. Sometimes this misbegotten attitude may be found among the very people who hold themselves out as providing service to the blind.

Consider, for example, the Maryland Society for Sight, a nonprofit organization composed largely of eye doctors. The Society is dedicated to promoting proper eye care and service to the blind. In a 1998 letter seeking contributions from the public, this society made a number of statements about the blind. Here, in part, is what the letter says:

Close your eyes and imagine not being able to see the sky, the face of a loved one, or a beautiful sunset. Imagine the panic and hopelessness you would feel if you were told you were going blind! Blindness afflicts 3 percent of adults and 5 percent of the children in Maryland. The good news is that over 50 percent of all blindness can be prevented if people know the proper precautions to take.

[I interrupt to remind you that statistics published in the last few years by Johns Hopkins University indicate that the incidence of blindness in the United States is well under 1 percent. I don’t know where the Maryland Society for Sight got its numbers. One might even suspect them of padding the statistics to beef up the importance of their solicitations, but back to the letter.]

The Maryland Society for Sight [continues the solicitation] has been working to prevent blindness and preserve sight for all Marylanders since 1909. And we need your help to continue this vital work. With your help, we can …

* Provide free eye examinations and glasses to the homeless. A pair of glasses can often mean the difference between living on the streets and having a job and functioning in society.
* Provide the blind and visually impaired with volunteers to come into their homes and help make their lives a little easier.

Please send in a contribution today and help us to give the gift of sight to so many Marylanders.

These are the words of the Maryland Society for Sight, which does thousands of vision screenings each year for school children, for adults, and for the homeless. Sight is, of course, a valuable asset, and we applaud the efforts of the Maryland Society to help people maintain or recover it. If they had only left out the dramatic language about the hopelessness of the blind, we would have no complaint to make. However, what they say about us creates a false impression. The Society preys on the fear of blindness to raise money, and they create hardship for the blind in doing so. Their letter says that they provide volunteers to come into the homes of the blind to make our “lives a little easier.” What does such a statement imply—that our lives are hard because of blindness and that we need them to bring us a little comfort? Why don’t we volunteer to go into their homes to make their lives a little easier? Perhaps we could provide comfort to them. After all, we have certainly had plenty of people offering it to us; we should know how to reciprocate.

I don’t know about you, but I am thoroughly tired of having other people tell me that my life is miserable because I can’t see the face of a loved one or the sunset. Although the sunset is undoubtedly worth seeing, its importance has been vastly overemphasized. I have noticed that most sighted people do not interrupt their evening activities to go look at it. If I had to guess, I suspect that the average sighted person would much rather watch television.

The visual image of a loved one’s face is clearly more important than the vision of the sunset, but even here the emphasis is misplaced. I ask you, is it the visual image of the face or the love that is more important? Blind people have as much capacity for love as anybody else, and we can find ways to express it whether we are able to see the faces of the ones we love or not. Many of us possess the deepest, fiercest, most abiding love that exists anywhere in the world. Our blindness changes this not at all.

The image conveyed by this letter is one of hopelessness, but we are here to challenge it, and we know how to speak on our own behalf. Blindness has often been misunderstood, but we are determined that thismisunderstanding will change to comprehension. Their letter suggests that we are helpless, but we are not. To the contrary, we have decided that the blind must and will have power.

Researchers, with self-proclaimed objectivity, tell us that they have discovered connections between blindness and other characteristics in virtually endless variation. A newspaper account in the *Fairfax/Arlington Journal* dated December 11, 1997, reported that two professors, Dr. Joel Zaba and Roger Johnson, have conducted a study establishing a link between vision loss and behavioral problems. One of the subjects of their research began to lose vision and, as the reporter says, started pulling pranks such as running through the halls of his school in his boxer shorts. Officials at the school referred him to a behavioral optometrist. When the boy’s vision was restored, they say, his behavior and his marks improved.

This boy was not the only one to be studied. In a survey of eighty-one students in a school for at-risk pupils, Zaba and Johnson found that 97 percent of students with behavioral problems had vision difficulties. The conclusion they reached is that vision loss and behavioral problems are linked.

On the other hand, other researchers tell us that blind people think faster than the sighted. Here are excerpts from the report:

Blind people can pick out the meaning of a spoken sentence more quickly than sighted folks. The finding adds weight to the notion that blind people can hear better than others, their hearing compensating for the loss of their sight.

“They process language faster than sighted people,” says Brigitte Roder from the University of Marburg, Germany, who discovered the effect with her colleagues at the University of Oregon in Eugene. She says it may explain why some blind people are so fast at reading books recorded onto tape. “I have a blind student who is speeding up all his tapes,” she says. Yet he has no problem understanding the words.

A brain wave pattern that indicates when semantics are being analysed, known as the N400 signal, was observed in sighted people about 150 milliseconds after the [test] sentence ended. In blind volunteers, the pattern was seen in just half that time.  
  
The researchers also found that in blind subjects, areas at the back of the brain normally devoted to sight were taken over in part by auditory information-processing. Roder isn’t certain, but she suspects this might be partly responsible for speeding up blind people’s ability to process language.

There you have it. Researchers indicate that vision loss and behavioral problems are connected. They also tell us that we hear better and think faster than the sighted. How many blind people have they met? It may be that blind people are smarter and less stable than the sighted, but my observation conducted over a period of more than thirty years does not make me think so. Of course, the study I have conducted was not accompanied with scholarly papers, expensive calculation systems, or university grants; but it was more extensive than theirs.

We are building a research institute which will incorporate the experiences of blind people in the scientific process. This should help give research about blindness a grounding in reality. We are not against competent research competently performed. We are opposed to research which begins with unfounded assumptions and uses them to reach unsupportable conclusions. Knowledge is power, and we are seeking to expand the realm of knowledge possessed by the blind. We will undoubtedly study the nature of blindness itself, but this study must incorporate the daily experiences of blind people if it is to be relevant or cogent. When we have reached sound conclusions, we will provide the information to others because public recognition of what we are helps us achieve acceptance and understanding. To these we will add the confidence of our own capacity to learn and teach. For we in the National Federation of the Blind intend to have power.

Some blind people try to take advantage of their blindness. Equal access to information is important for the blind, but this principle should not be twisted and misused to bamboozle the sighted. Here are portions of a letter from a nightclub owner in England to the director of Environment and Housing of the Brighton and Hove City Council, the regulatory body determining conditions and standards for nightclubs in the area. Before examining its contents, I wish to point out (even if this seems to be belaboring the obvious) that sight and touch are not the same. There are times when one may be substituted for the other, and there are also times when it is inappropriate to do so. Some of the language of the letter has been modified for the sake of propriety. This, in part, is what it says:

Dear Sir:

As you are aware, we are presently the only club in Sussex to hold a Public Entertainment License specific to striptease, and that license quite correctly prohibits physical contact between a customer and a dancer, other than the placing of notes in a dancer’s garter. I write to seek your opinion as to whether you would consider a variation to this condition for registered blind persons.

Two young men, who happen to be blind, visited the club as part of a very pleasant group of gentlemen enjoying a traditional stag evening. We made arrangements for their visit appropriate to their special needs. We read the club rules to them and designated a staff member to each to assist them entering, moving around the club, and leaving. Finally, we made the dancers aware of their disability but otherwise asked the dancers to treat them quite normally.   
  
Both blind gentlemen enjoyed a number of tableside dances. They said they sensed the proximity of the dancers and in particular enjoyed the smell of feminine perfume. They asked some dancers politely (but seriously) if there were any circumstances in which they could touch, and the dancers refused them.

They pursued their request with me, their point being that, given their disability, controlled touching ought to be permitted for registered blind persons.

Such is the letter written by the nightclub owner. Is this somebody’s idea of a joke? What an insufferable flimflam! There is a time and a place for touching, and from what I have been able to discover, blind people are as good at it as anybody else. But we should not tolerate using blindness as an excuse to take liberties. That practice will be as damaging to us as the failure of others to recognize the right we have to inclusion in society’s activities. Ours is a serious struggle—as serious as the right of the blind to be free. We must not permit the licentious interest coupled with the language of equality to mislead, and we must oppose those who would take advantage of others. If we fail to set the correct standard, somebody else will impose one upon us, and we will lose the capacity to determine the future for ourselves. The misuse of power begins by eroding it and eventually eliminates it. This commodity is too precious to be wasted or belittled or dissipated. It must be treated with respect, or it will be gone. Power implies trust, and we will not fail in our duty to exercise it with reason and decorum.

A newspaper article published in the *Roanoke Times* depicts the life of a person who has recently become blind and who has been fooled by the popular mythology about his blindness. The article begins with the headline “Teacher accepts loss of sightwithout bitterness.” Although the headline is intended to be upbeat, the language of the article demonstrates phenomenal misunderstanding. Here is part of what it says:

Phil Boyd has learned to use the human voice and touch to help him see the world.  
  
During the past year, he has come to accept his blindness without bitterness. But some of his friends have found it more difficult. Boyd was eating dinner recently at a Roanoke restaurant when a friend, whom he had not seen in years, came over to his table. The friend asked him how things were going at Craig County High School, where he [Boyd] taught English and drama for ten years.

“I told him I had to retire because I went blind,” Boyd said.

[I interrupt to say that accepting blindness without bitterness is an excellent first step. Anger, frustration, a sense of loss, sometimes the desire to strike out at the world: all of these are a part of becoming blind for many people. To accept the blindness without being twisted by it is the beginning of building for the future. But this former teacher has accepted more than blindness. In the name of facing reality, he has accepted the loss of employment. Are there blind teachers? There are hundreds of them—perhaps thousands. The article reports that the teacher and his neighbors have internalized, without knowing they have done it, the false image of the helpless blind person, and by so doing they have made this stereotype real. Even the reporter who gives us the information is unaware that the story he is telling is tragic; he thinks it’s upbeat. Here is further text from the *Roanoke Times*:]

But Boyd, who lost his vision in the late summer of 2000 because of a rare eye disease, has remained upbeat, adjusting to life without sight.

“I’ve been depressed only two or three times,” he said. “My family, the students and staff at Craig County High, and the people of Craig County have been so supportive. They keep me so busy I can’t feel sorry for myself.”

[I interrupt once more to wonder with you what they have been asking him to do that keeps him so busy? But the article tells us.]

Boyd was the speaker [the article continues] at the school’s commencement in June. He attends football, basketball, and volleyball games at the school frequently. Students and friends describe the action for him.

He stays in touch with the students by e-mail, using a software program that reads information from the computer screen and converts it into speech. He has learned to type so he can answer e-mails.

Boyd has taken trips with his family to Busch Gardens and Las Vegas, and he had roles in two theatrical productions. He played a corpse in the Showtimers’ production of “Lucky Stiff” and was a taxi driver in a play by the Gamut theater group in Roanoke.

Boyd goes to the Central YMCA in Roanoke five or six days a week to work out. He enjoys “The West Wing” and other television shows.

He helps with household chores and washes the dishes after the family’s meals because he can feel them, but he can’t cook because he can’t recognize the foods.

Recently, he has been trying out a “Jordy” low vision enhancement system, but he doubts it will help him.

This is the description in the *Roanoke Times* of a blind person held out to the community as an example of proper mental attitude. He is fifty years old with the prospect of living for at least twenty more. He exercises, attends the ball games, watches television, does the dishes, appears in a play now and then in which he may be called upon to assume the role of a corpse, and hopes to find some technological device to restore his sight.

All of these activities are worthwhile, but they are peripheral. A job, the tasks of caring for a home, the responsibilities of citizenship—these are the things that give life its purpose. This blind teacher has accepted his initial assumption that he is unable to work, unable to cook, unable to engage in demanding productive enterprises. Twenty years is a long time to fill the idle hours. What he needs is power—the kind that comes from knowledge. With training he could cook and teach and take charge of his life, making of it whatever he wants it to be.  
  
Perhaps a little anger would have been better after all—enough to stimulate the man to say, “My mind is active and alert, I shall learn the skills required for a blind person to work, and I will be recognized for the talent I possess.” He might have had the good fortune to join other like-minded individuals, those in the National Federation of the Blind, who would help him to tell the public at large, the school administrators, and the officials in the locality that his ability is composed of knowledge and the capacity to use it and that this ability must be recognized. If he had come to believe in himself, he could have joined with the blind of the country in our determination that we will do what we must do to gain the power for self-determination.

We receive many thousands of letters each year. Not long ago one came from a blind man in the Midwest who was considering seeking assistance from us in obtaining employment. Helping people find jobs is one of the highest priorities of the Federation, and we put a lot of effort into it. Some blind people are prepared to enter the job market, but a number of others need training in the techniques used by the blind to conduct daily activities or to handle specific employment skills. The blind man in question is in this latter category. Here, in part, is what his letter says:

Thanks so much for calling me regarding the possibility of receiving training for employment. I have been trying to crystallize my thinking about returning to employment, so I hope you will bear with me. In this letter I am trying to analyze the questions you asked.

You wanted to know [continues the letter] whether my state vocational rehabilitation agency would sponsor me for further training. Since I’ve been long unemployed and have not had contact with my rehabilitation counselor in almost five years, I suppose that my case is, to say the least, inactive. I shall see if it can be reactivated in order to explore this new possibility.

[In these few words the author of the letter expresses a viewpoint that tells us much. The rehabilitation program in his state has apparently written him off. There has been no contact for five years—five years of waiting, of wondering, and of diminishing hope. Nevertheless, the blind man is not angry. He wants to be able to reactivate his case so that he may seek an opportunity. But there is more to the letter.]

You asked [it continues] whether I am willing to take additional training. Assuming I can get sponsorship from the rehabilitation program, I would be more than willing. I do not have formal computer training; however, I have a Braille ‘n Speak [a small Braille-based computer note-taker], a printer, and a disk drive, which I use all the time. This technology is most liberating for me. It is the best equipment I have ever owned. From working with it, I’ve learned a great deal though I realize that in this field there is always something new to learn. I am willing to do whatever it takes to gain the knowledge and skill which will lead to my eventual reentry into the job market.

[In this portion of the letter the man demonstrates an interest in computers and a willingness to learn more about them. His experience with the Braille ‘n Speak is for him liberating, and he is willing to do whatever it takes to learn more so that he may become employed. He is not just interested—he is enthusiastic. Why is he not already employed? His letter lets us glimpse a portion of the frustration that has been a continual part of this man’s life.]

You have also asked me [continues the letter] if I am willing to move to a job if a successful placement can be found. My first reaction was one of worry and concern. I don’t know if I could just up and move like that. I have a family—a wife who is employed and who would be searching for another job and a daughter in school. There is also the mortgage. Many people would say that I shouldn’t try to return to work. The risks are too great; the possibility of failure is too high. They would say that I should be happy to sit back, read library books, and collect Social Security. But frankly, while I enjoy reading very much, I want to do more with the remainder of my days than that.

In my life and work experience, I’ve been told “No” so many times that by now it’s simply become another challenge to me. My feeling is that there is a purpose in all that I endeavor to do. If one thing doesn’t work out, something else will. I’ve never been one to give up on myself. I believe that sometimes “No” simply means that there’s another way which we haven’t tried yet.

My family is a high priority, [continues the letter] but at the same time, I’d like to be able to send my daughter to college. A job would make it possible. I’ve promised my daughter that we will not make such a move unless it involves positive changes for all of us. In that spirit I’d be willing to move if we can find a successful job placement.

These are the words of a blind father wondering whether there is opportunity for him. They are not angry words or bitter, but he has some hesitation—some doubt. His letter is thoughtful and articulate, demonstrating that it was composed by a man with a competent mind even if he has not had adequate training. He believes in supporting his loved ones, and he hopes to find a way for his daughter to attend college. However, he has been out of work for a long, long time, and he wonders if there is really a job for him.

I understand this man, for I have a family of my own—a wife, a son, and a daughter. My son will be attending college in the fall, and I very much want my daughter to get a college education when she is finished with high school. I want her to have all of the advantages that loving parents and a good education can provide.

Is it too late for this man, whose patterns of living have been set for so many years? That depends on his spirit and ours. Can we muster the strength to continue to provide encouragement? Can he muster the confidence to continue to pursue the dream? If each of us does our part, I believe that there can be no doubt about the outcome. He tells us that he does not give up, and we believe him. Consequently, the future is bright, for we are of the same mind. We never quit until we succeed. We have the knowledge about our abilities; we have the faith to trust one another; and we have the commitment to work together until we have changed forever the prospects for us all. We are determined that the blind can and will have power.

There are other things that might be said of the nature of power. One of these is that it must be exercised to be maintained and strengthened, and that the exercise of power requires leadership. To the extent that an individual or an organization exercises leadership, the power of the individual or the organization is enhanced. This leads to the question, what is required for leadership? Many characteristics are helpful—energy, imagination, enthusiasm, the capacity to empathize with others, the ability to communicate, and facility with interpersonal relationships. However, one prime element has more significance than all of these. That one characteristic is love—the willingness to care for high ideals and our fellow human beings, the willingness to look beyond the shortcomings and foibles of others to the value that each represents, the willingness to wish good for those who do not wish us good, and the willingness to recognize that generosity is its own reward. An organization which incorporates in its governance the quality of love multiplies its power. Of course, no pretense will do; it must be real. And love freely given is at least as demanding as any other taskmaster.

Dr. Jacobus tenBroek led the Federation from the time of its founding in 1940 when the organization had almost no resources. By the time of his death in 1968, it had gained dramatically in influence and power. Dr. Kenneth Jernigan became its President in 1968 and gave it his leadership until his death in 1998. The influence of the Federation expanded dramatically under his direction stimulating growth in all parts of the blindness field. How did they do it? Each of them possessed an indomitable spirit, a driving will, and an unquenchable belief in the potential of the future. But each of them also possessed a deep and abiding love.

Now, the Federation is in our hands. The eye doctors tell us that our lives are hopeless and that we need their volunteers to make our lot a little easier. The researchers say that our vision loss is linked to behavioral disorders and that we hear better and think faster than the sighted. Newspaper reporters suggest that we should accept unemployment without bitterness as an example of positive thinking and that we can’t cook because we can’t recognize the food. Sometimes the rehabilitation counselors write us off. Nevertheless, despite all of the put-downs, despite all of the lack of understanding, despite all of the failures of the rehabilitation system, we are not disheartened or discouraged.

Though there are those who misunderstand, there are many more who comprehend us and stand with us in the battle. Though there are those who belittle us, there are many more who reject this thinking and speak the language of equality that we have written. Though there are those who would ignore us, our voice is increasing every day and our influence spreading throughout the land so that they cannot help but hear.

We know our strength, and we know what we must do to bring full equality to the blind. We must be willing to work with every ounce of good that is in us; we must be willing to sacrifice for that which we know is right; we must be prepared to meet the challenges wherever and whenever they arise; and we must never interrupt our march to freedom. This is our obligation; this is our opportunity; this is our commitment. We have the power composed of ability, confidence, public understanding, and love; and we will not fail. Tomorrow is ours, for we will never rest until it is. Come, join me, and we will make it come true!

*E-mail:* [*webmaster@nfb.org*](mailto:webmaster@nfb.org) *Posted: October 2, 2002*