**The Personality of Freedom**

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An essential element of the development of an individual, an organization, or an entire society is its personality-that pattern of traits (emotional, behavioral, temperamental, or intellectual) that gives the entity its unique impact upon the rest of the world. All personalities are a mixture of traits, but at any specific moment, one characteristic will be dominant. What a society or an organization is and what it can accomplish are, in large measure, determined by its personality. However, personalities are not immutable-they are constantly being revised, frequently without anybody's awareness that the alteration is taking place. The change need not occur by happenstance; it can be directed.

Alterations in personality come from within. The ability to vary the personality requires the knowledge that it can be done and the determination that it will be. If an increased respect for human dignity and enhanced opportunities are the objectives, then there must be an openness to all facets of learning-from the multiplication table to the most profound philosophical concepts. Some people argue that it is possible to teach facts but that character cannot be learned. These people believe that a human being is either courageous or not, sensitive or otherwise, gentle or brutal and that trying to obtain character traits that are not already evident within a personality is futile. Such a pessimistic estimation of the human condition is nonsense. Patterns can be changed, and those who truly learn will come to know that decency and fairness make sense, that there is no such thing as cheating and getting away with it, and that generosity and love are necessary for a good life.

It is said of Michael Faraday, the eminent English scientist of the 19th century, that he had greater appreciation of the facts of scientific discovery and took more delight in them than other people because he had a greater depth of understanding than his colleagues. His personality made him aware of wonder. As it is with scientific discovery, so it is with other learning. I am frequently delighted with generosity not only because of the gift but because of the spirit of the giver. I am intrigued with the thought that there is a measure of understanding which I have not yet come to appreciate-there are things to know that we have not yet been able to discover. Dr. Kenneth Jernigan, who became president of the National Federation of the Blind in 1968 and served as its principal leader throughout much of his life, often startled me by his decision making, not so much because of what he did but because of his reason for doing it. What we know is important, but the element that affects our personality more than what we have already learned is what we intend to discover.

So, what knowledge have we gained from the time of the founding of the organized blind movement in 1940, and what is it that we plan to learn? From the innocence of our inexperience each of us has at one time or another accepted an assessment of our capacity which is much more limited than is justified. Yet, we have learned to question such assessments, and we reject them. We have been told in the past (and sometimes it is repeated even today) that blind people fit a certain pattern-that we possess negligible intellect because our opportunities for education are circumscribed and our channels for learning restricted, that we have indifferent physical capacity because so much of physical movement demands vision, that we experience only limited ambition because the full range of human activity is not available to us, and that our psychological makeup gives us a passive personality with a spectrum of emotion that ranges from somnolence to despair. Is that an accurate description of you and me? Not then; not now; not ever! Those who believe such things should be with us in our thousands tonight. They would learn firsthand that we who are members of the organized blind movement are anything but passive.

We reject the portrayal of a former day. We are reshaping our image and creating a personality that is confident, knowledgeable, unwilling to be taken in by other people's misunderstanding of our capacity, possessing freedom of speech and independence of action, and having sufficient aggressiveness to care for ourselves and our blind brothers and sisters. We do not believe that all learning comes from us, but some does. We are prepared to learn from others, but the blind, too, have something to teach, and we intend to share our knowledge. Nobody else can take our experience and plumb the depths of meaning within our lives-we must do that for ourselves, and we must find a way for the truth of what we learn to become recognized within the broader society. We will discover our innate potential; we will demonstrate it to others; we will insist that it be accepted; and we will never rest until it is. We are the voice of the blind-the voice that will never cease until it is heard.

In 1940, when Dr. Jacobus tenBroek, the brilliant blind professor and scholar of constitutional law, brought together along with him a handful of other blind individuals at Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, to form the National Federation of the Blind, the knowledge we possessed about blindness was comparatively slight; but our belief in ourselves was growing; and our hope for the future was irrepressible. Indeed, there was at the beginning little else but hope and belief. Almost one hundred percent of blind people were unemployed. Some sheltered workshops existed, but wages were pitifully low and working conditions dismal. Although the hope of a college education sometimes existed, for most of us it was a distant dream. For the vast majority of blind people a job, a home, and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship were out of reach. The Books for the Blind Program of the Library of Congress had been established in the 1930's, but there was little expectation that blind people would use this resource for studious research. The vending stand program had been initiated, but opportunities were few and the pay meager.

However, Dr. tenBroek and those who joined with him at the beginning of our movement had faith and hope. Without Dr. tenBroek's vivid imagination, the National Federation of the Blind would never have been formed. As soon as we became an organization, we had to learn to speak independently and to believe in our own capacity for self-governance.

The early years were not easy-there were constant challenges to the right of the blind to speak and act in their own best interest. As Dr. tenBroek said, "The career of our movement has not been a tranquil one. It has grown to maturity the hard way. The external pressures have often been unremitting. We have been counseled by well-wishers that all would be well, and we have learned to resist. We have been attacked by agencies and administrators. We have learned to fight back. We have been scolded by guardians and caretakers, and we've learned to talk back. We have cut our eyeteeth on legal and political struggle, sharpened our wits through countless debates, broadened our minds and deepened our voices by incessant contest. Most important of all, however, we have never stopped moving, never stopped battling, never stopped marching toward our goals.

"We who are blind knew in 1940 that if we wished to be free, if we meant to gain those inestimable privileges of participation for which we had so long yearned, then we must organize for purposes of self-expression and collective action."

With these words Dr. tenBroek expressed the spirit of the Federation-that spirit which began as we were founded, has continued as a constant within the movement, and persists at this convention and throughout the Federation today. With this fighting spirit the founders of the Federation commenced the arduous task of learning to build a national organization that could stand on its own and speak on behalf of the blind.

In 1952 (when the Federation was twelve years old), Dr. Kenneth Jernigan became active in the movement at the national level. Dr. tenBroek was a philosopher and a theoretician. Dr. Jernigan, who loved Dr. tenBroek and the philosophy he taught, was a builder and an advocate of political action. He expanded Dr. tenBroek's ideas and gave them substance in practical programs within the Federation. By the time of Dr. tenBroek's death in 1968, Dr. Jernigan had created in Iowa the best known program of rehabilitation for the blind in the United States. He did this by incorporating within it that philosophy he had learned from Dr. tenBroek. For his innovative effort in building programs for the blind, Dr. Jernigan received a presidential citation, and the lives of thousands of blind people were enriched.

Ten years later, in 1978, the Federation secured the National Center for the Blind, a substantial pile of bricks and mortar in what was formerly a rundown section of Baltimore, Maryland. With broken windows, leaks in the roof, antiquated electrical and plumbing systems, and an outdated heating plant, this building required the vivid imagination of Dr. Jernigan to bring its potential into being. Dr. Jernigan gave some of us a tour shortly after the building was acquired. He said, "Here is the conference room; here is the kitchen; this area will be used for the aids and appliances program." There were no interior walls in the areas we were examining; Dr. Jernigan was explaining to us how the building would be-after it had been remodeled. To many of us the whole place seemed like a big, dirty, empty, dreary, cavernous, uninteresting building. However, as was true for the pioneers in 1940, with the inspiration of our leader, Dr. Kenneth Jernigan, we had hope and belief. We needed the space for the programs we were then operating, and we needed even more space for those we would plan to establish. We started the long, arduous task of creating the National Center for the Blind, which is today the nerve center of programming for the blind in our country, the home of the International Braille and Technology Center for the Blind, and the facility in which plans are made to expand educational programs for blind children and to increase the availability of information systems to serve the blind. The National Center for the Blind is a source of pardonable pride for those in the Federation, for we make it what it is. What we know is important, but of even greater significance to our personality is what we hope to discover.

During the 1980's the Federation continued to develop programs at the National Center for the Blind; served as an instrument to bring harmony and cooperation among agencies and organizations in the field of blindness; established rehabilitation centers in Louisiana, Colorado, and Minnesota; created the National Organization of Parents of Blind Children along with Future Reflections the magazine for parents and educators of those children; started Voice of the Diabetic, the largest circulation magazine dealing with blindness in the United States; increased the emphasis on Braille literacy for blind children and adults; and sought methods for financing the programs we had been operating and those that were coming into being.

The dreams and efforts of the 1980's laid the foundation for a decade of astonishing progress during the last ten years of the century. In this short span of time, the Federation has established the International Braille and Technology Center for the Blind, produced and distributed over four million Kernel Books (eighteen of them now in circulation, and the nineteenth to be released later this year), conducted four international symposia on technology for the blind, and instituted the Newsline for the Blind� Network and America's Jobline� Network-which provide greater quantities of information to blind people over the telephone than have previously been available in all recorded history. As the decade was nearing its end, we embarked upon what is perhaps the most ambitious effort we have undertaken from the time of our founding-the creation of the National Research and Training Institute for the Blind-a facility that exists today only in imagination, but which will be constructed in the early years of the twenty-first century.

Dr. Jernigan was a builder. He became the director of programs for the blind in Iowa in 1958, which, under his leadership, were recognized as the best in the nation. In 1978, twenty years later, he founded the National Center for the Blind and began the work to put it into shape. Twenty years thereafter, in 1998, within only a few months of his death, he formulated the concept of the National Research and Training Institute for the Blind and had the plans drawn for its construction. Building this facility will demand from us a change in our personality. We must adopt the belief that we can stimulate major financial investment in programs and ideas of our own creation. When we have raised the funding to establish the research institute, we must find a way to attract and stimulate the most imaginative researchers.

Much research is conducted involving blindness. The vast majority of it is centered on locating cures for diseases of the eye. Of the percentage that remains, much is directed toward alleviating the supposedly stressful and dismal condition of those who are blind. Almost no research is conducted in the realms that we find of interest. When the National Research and Training Institute for the Blind has been built, we must put the facility to use. It will not be enough to expand what we are already doing; we must dream of programs that do not exist.

In the mid 1970's, we assisted Dr. Raymond Kurzweil in his work of inventing a reading machine. It was, at that time, so outrageously innovative that most people believed it could not be built. Even we wondered. The electronic scanner, which was a necessary part of the device, is now standard office machinery. Dr. Kurzweil's machine was the first, but today there are a number of reading machines available at a low enough price that many, many blind people can afford them. The invention was helpful for the blind, but it also benefited the larger society. The machines will continue to drop in price and increase in capacity. This change in technical ability occurred within twenty-five years.

What is it that we want to build which, in our wildest imaginings, could be constructed for the blind? What programs can be imagined to offer literacy both for blind adults and for the children who are now in school? What teaching methods can improve mobility for the blind, and how can we inspire increased confidence? How long will it take to devise a personal vehicle that we can operate? What is the best method for persuading the shapers of American thought-filmmakers, university teaching programs, outlets in the news media, and others-to portray blind people in the way we know them to be, rather than as helpless, foolish, or inconsequential? What is the best way to give blind people access to the written word whether it is in print or in electronic form? How can education for blind children be stimulated? These questions arise from our dreams of a brighter tomorrow. We intend to use our institute to answer not only these but dozens of others.

Today, as we raise the funds and make the plans to create the National Research and Training Institute for the Blind, I have heard it said that research should be left to the researchers, that the blind should stick to matters of special interest to the blind-Braille, lessons in the activities of daily living, teaching blind students to operate equipment for the blind, and the like. Research (if it is to be effective) must explore realms that are highly complex, rigorously demanding, and technically innovative. Sometimes it is not so much said as implied. Why do the blind need a research institution? Surely the universities can do it at least as well as or better than the blind can.

To those who believe that we who are blind are incapable of the intellect, the skill, and the dedication to conduct our own research in our own way, I say this: we have the capacity to learn, but we can also teach. We have a resource that none of you possess; we have the experience of tens of thousands of blind people collected in one place and represented by a body of literature, which has produced more independence and self-reliance for the blind than any other. Our point of view will not be yours; our results will not be yours; and our contributions will not be yours. We are prepared to learn, but we also have something to teach. Ours is a vibrant and an aggressive personality.

In creating the research institute, we make a leap of faith. Is there a fundamental reason that the unemployment rate for the blind should hover in the neighborhood of seventy percent? We say emphatically, no! Is there some kind of a physical limitation that keeps the Braille literacy rate for blind children in the neighborhood of ten percent? The answer is equally emphatic and exactly the same, no!

A new direction must be found. We, the organized blind of the United States, have decided that we will find it. This determination has become an element of our personality. We are the voice of the blind-the voice that will never cease until it is heard.

Is there really a need for a different kind of research and a new institution to study the problems of blindness? If you doubt the urgency, consider this.

*The M.D.'s Wellness Journal* from the Whitaker Wellness Institute, winter 2000 edition, carries an article entitled "Save your vision NOW!" Some excerpts from this article are instructive. They say: "It's true-we're all slowly going blind. The miraculous transformation of light into nerve impulses, which your brain sees as color, shape, and depth, eventually wears out your eye. It is called age-related macular degeneration (AMD). . . .While this condition is universal to everyone, it's one of the most terrifying threats to your health, independence, and enjoyment of life as you age."

(I interrupt to ask whether blindness necessarily must be terrifying. If it is not correctly understood, it certainly can be. However, with thorough understanding and proper training the "terrifying threat" can be reduced to a physical nuisance. Furthermore, have we who are blind lost our independence or the capacity for the enjoyment of life? But, back to the article.)

It continues: "Without your vision, you can't drive, you can't work, you can't read, you can't see your grandchildren or a movie. You can't easily travel, shop for yourself, or remain independent. For heaven's sake, you can hardly walk into the next room or around the block without difficulty!"

(Once again I interrupt. Although those who are newly blinded are sometimes quite timid in asserting independence, is this description at all accurate for the blind? Do we work, read, shop, walk around the block, or attend the theater? Of course, we do all of these things and many others. But there is more of the article.)

"While you can't stop this process, [it continues] you can surely and dramatically slow it down, so that you keep your vision in reasonable shape for as long as you live. . . . Numerous studies have shown certain antioxidants protect your retina from free radical damage. . . . The gentle herb which dramatically improves vision. . . was discovered by World War II British pilots who ate it and reported much better night vision! Works by improving blood flow to your eyes."

These statements come from the *M.D.'s Wellness Journal*. They do not specify the gentle herb that so dramatically increases night vision, but other reports I have gathered tell me that it is a nutrient in the unpretentious, humble carrot. How many blind children have been told to eat their carrots because they are good for the eyes? For all I know, it may be true, but the story did not start with science. It began with deception and trickery.

It is said that during World War II the British invented the first radar. With this device, operators could see enemy airplanes in the midst of clouds and fog or even in the dark. Unless the Germans were led to believe that a program to enhance the vision of British pilots had been instituted, they would inevitably come to the conclusion that a technological development, such as radar, had been discovered. British intelligence knew it was important to prevent the Germans from seeking to discover new scientific apparatus. Radar gave the British airforce a distinct advantage over the Luftwaffe.

Those in British intelligence made it appear that they inadvertently permitted German spies to discover that the British airforce had embarked upon a campaign to feed massive quantities of carrots to the pilots because, they said, this diet dramatically increased their night vision. It was all done in an effort to mislead the Germans to prevent them from learning that a scientific breakthrough had been achieved. Although carrots are undoubtedly good for you, I can report that I have consumed substantial quantities without producing a noticeable difference in the quality of my vision.

Whitaker's journal exaggerates beyond all reason the limitations of becoming blind. In most cases blindness is not an advantage, but Dr. Whitaker's description is out of proportion. He says blind people can't work, can't read, can't travel easily, can't shop unaided, can't remain independent, and can't walk around the block or into the next room without difficulty. Every single one of these assertions is a lie! Yet they are dressed-up to make it appear as if they are part of scientific research. They are issued by a health institute and written by a doctor. There are two of his many statements that have an element of truth. Those of us who are blind can't see our grandchildren in the same way that sighted people do, and we can't drive an automobile. However, coming to know our grandchildren, caring for them, nurturing them, loving them, taking them to the zoo, and having the other experiences that grandparents find so dear are part of daily activity for the blind.

Then, there is driving. Blind people do not drive cars. However, with a little planning and ingenuity, we are mobile.

Many people think driving is of the utmost importance. Take my son, David, who is sixteen, for example. He is sighted, and he believes that driving a car offers him not only independence of movement but status among his peers as well. He has persuaded me to buy a car for him to drive. I even ride in it occasionally if he doesn't have it off somewhere inaccessible to me.

He probably would not believe me if I told him, but I am more mobile than he is even though I am unable personally to drive an automobile. Most of the time I get where I want to go with minimal inconvenience to me and to others. This is the test of mobility. I am older and more experienced than my son, and I have more ready cash available to me. Even though he drives the car, I exercise more freedom of movement than he does.

Dr. Whitaker was not researching blindness, but a cure for a disease of the eye. In doing so, he portrayed the prospects for the blind as nothing less than tragic. His portrayal comes from a former time, and it is without understanding and without depth. We reject it. We will not permit misunderstanding and false information to determine our future. We will challenge the dismal summation of the doctor and replace it with an image of competence and success. We are the voice of the blind-the voice that will never cease until it is heard.

As Federation members know, the primary problem blind people face is one of misunderstanding. The misunderstanding comes in different guises. Sometimes our methods for doing things are not comprehended; sometimes our capacity for performance is not appreciated; and sometimes the misperception involves the importance of our doing anything at all. The loss of eyesight requires blind people to use alternative techniques to do the same things sighted people do with vision. Some modifications to the environment are necessary to permit blind people to compete successfully. This is especially true in handling information, which is frequently presented visually.

One of the major providers of information is America Online (AOL). Officials of this company have said that their product is unique and beneficial. However, they have systematically refused to consider building the AOL system in a way that would permit the blind to get at the information. Why? Some people would argue that they have never thought about the question. But of course, they have had every opportunity to think about it. Blind people have complained about the inaccessibility of AOL for years. The attitude of AOL seems to have been that the blind do not have enough to contribute to AOL or to society as a whole to make an alteration in their system worth serious thought. Most of the time, when the matter has been raised, they have told us to wait, or to seek access to their information through somebody else's technology, or to get our knowledge from another provider, or to forget it. AOL officials are not against the blind; they just don't think we are worth the time and effort it would take to give us the same access that other people have. To AOL the blind are objects of charity-not customers, people for whom things are done-not contributors, in a word-inconsequential.

When we the blind had been forced to conclude by the actions and attitude of AOL officials that their perception would not change, we took measures to protect our own interests and secure our future-we brought suit against them in the federal court. They may believe that the blind are inconsequential, but we do not share this opinion, and we also have something to teach.

Compare this attitude to one exhibited by a man in Montana, Pat Schildt, who has decided to do something for us-he has designed a special toilet for the blind. I confess that this one took me by surprise. Blind people do not have a different physical form from the sighted. What could possibly be done, I wondered, to make a toilet more effective or easier to use for the blind? I speculated that Mr. Schildt may have thought blind men would be unable to aim for the proper spot. Perhaps, I thought, he had devised a funnel attachment which would make the aiming unnecessary. However, this is not the case.

An article which appeared in the Tuesday, April 25, 2000, edition of the *Missoulian*, describes the genesis of this product as follows: "[Pat] Schildt realized that people with disabilities, particularly people with limited vision or no vision, often were frustrated by having to hunt for the most basic things-like toilet paper dispensers."

Schildt said, "They [blind people] don't know if the seat is wet or if it's dirty, if there is toilet paper or where it is-or, if it is there, how to get it out of its container." Schildt's solution, which he has named the Hygienic Toilet for the Blind and Physically Challenged, is a stainless steel toilet with covered toilet paper dispensers attached to each side of the bowl. I kid you not, you can read it in the paper.

Why do people come up with such crazy ideas? Why do information providers refuse to consider including the blind? The answer is simple. They do not believe blind people are in the same class with the rest of humanity. They think that being blind sets us apart from others, that we are different, unable to make substantial contributions, unimportant. The attitude is not one deliberately to belittle the blind. It would be better for us if it were. Rather, it is to assign blind people to a role so insignificant that our problems are never considered, our presence is never desired, our contributions never sought, and our abilities never observed. However, this attitude, although at one time almost all-pervasive, is waning, and those who hold it are fewer than they once were. What has occurred to cause this transformation? How has the personality shift come into being? It is through the efforts of the organized blind movement-through the activities and spirit of the National Federation of the Blind. In the past, we were the unheard minority, but that must and will change. We are the voice of the blind-the voice that speaks with an insistent cadence-the voice that will never cease until it is heard.

The public misconceptions about blindness are not confined to the sighted. Blind people, being a part of the public, also share them. When these misconceptions are repeated by the blind, they have the appearance of substance even when there is none.

An article which appeared in *The Washington Post* on June 9, 2000, depicts a stark, tragic, unrelenting world of misery as described by a man who became blind within the last few years. Entitled "A World Darkened by Despair," this article says in part, "I was walking to my car the other day [says the reporter, Courtland Milloy] when a blind man named John Sterling called out, 'Am I on Third Street?' He was indeed. Right smack dab in the middle of it, with traffic bearing down on him. The least I could do was offer him a ride home, which he gladly accepted. Turns out that Sterling needed somebody to talk to almost as much as he needed to get out of the street. In fact, he confessed, he sometimes deliberately walks in the streets-either to get attention from sympathetic passersby or in hopes of actually getting hit by a vehicle. 'Being blind is so boring,' he told me. 'Sometimes, you just get tired of waking up to face the same old thing-nothing-every day. Sometimes, I just want to walk right out in front of a bus and end it all.'"

[Or, get a free ride home with a passing newspaper reporter along with a dollop of sympathetic press. I confess that this last thought was not in *The Washington Post*, but it does seem to come to mind. What a distorted and dismal picture. Blindness, according to Sterling, offers no hope. Life itself may not be worth living for the blind, he tells us, and he tells us in The Washington Post. But we are not through with this news feature.]

"Sterling insisted [continues the article] that he needs a job, anything to do besides sleep all day. And he is not alone. About 20,000 blind people live in the Washington area, and, despite the booming economy and low unemployment rate, 70 percent of working-age blind people are without jobs. 'There are a lot of blind people in our area, but how many do you see?' Sterling asked. 'That's because they stay indoors all day, mostly sleeping or talking on the telephone, trying to keep from feeling that nobody cares,' he said."

[I interrupt this article to point out that the people who should care the most about the blind are the blind themselves. Somebody else cannot achieve independence for us. Somebody else cannot win our freedom. We must gain these things through our own efforts or be without them. Do our sighted friends and neighbors care? Of course, they do. Growing numbers are joining with us in the effort to bring self-reliance to the blind, and we are glad to welcome them. But charting the course of our lives is not their responsibility; it is ours. However, there is still more in *The Washington Post*.]

"About a year ago, [continues the article] Sterling completed an eight-month mobility training course for the blind. But he still bumps into fences and parked cars, stumbles along cracked sidewalks and occasionally falls. 'Basically, I paid $4,000 to learn how to tap the ground with this stick,' he said. 'See, with this stick, I go zigzagging all over the place. I walk twice as long to get half as far.'"

Such are excerpts from the article that appeared in *The Washington Post*, and one wonders how to respond. Sterling's description of his experience and the despair he feels may be his honest appraisal, but the assessment is not accurate. There are blind people who have given up, but the great majority have not. There are those who have accepted the assertion that blindness means the end of productive living, but most of us know that this is wrong. The educational programs of the Federation are having an impact, and employment opportunities for the blind are expanding. Sterling has caused his description to be printed in the paper, and his view of blindness will help create the disadvantages and erect the barriers that the rest of us must confront. However, his voice is not the only one. We have also learned to speak, and we have an abiding hope and faith. Blindness need not be tragic, and we will not permit this description to go unchallenged. We are the voice of the blind-the voice that speaks with an insistent cadence-the voice that will never cease until it is heard.

Every year we receive many thousands of letters from blind people. Some of these tell of the tragedy that misunderstanding and lack of information cause. Here are parts of one such communication. The language is stark. The exclusion is total. The injuries to the spirit of this blind person are still raw. This is what she says:

"Let me tell you what Magoo and related things did to me. I remember, with agonizing clarity, the pain, humiliation, suffering, and fear-yes, fear of my childhood. I was called 'Blinky,' 'Missus Magoo,' 'Four Eyes,' and other hurtful names. I know the sound of hatred. I remember what the rocks felt like as they hit my face. I remember the taste of my own blood. I remember that at each new school, the first thing I did was search for hiding places! My favorite school was the one that had a coal chute. When the bell went, I would dash for the hiding place trying to get there before the bullies could grab me.

"Since this was the Fifties and Sixties, the heyday of Magoo and long before sensitivity issues, there was no recourse. Teachers and principals would tell me 'Just stop annoying the bullies,' or 'Ignore them.' Let me ask you. . . how do you ignore a circle of children, standing around you while you feel around on the ground to find your glasses, which are under the foot of one of the biggest kids? How do you pretend not to be bleeding?

"I now know that the reason my grades were so poor was that I could not concentrate on learning. I was in a war zone.

"My ability to work is damaged due to faulty learning."

The woman who wrote this letter was hurt physically by the rocks, but what bruised and twisted her spirit was the constant apprehension-the fear that she was alone and friendless in a hostile world. She did not know of the National Federation of the Blind, and we did not know of her. In the 1960's we were smaller and less powerful than we are today, but we would have offered support and comfort. We cannot change the past, but we are absolutely committed to a brighter future. Frequently, children (especially blind children) do not possess the experience or training to protect themselves. Blindness is a particularly visible characteristic which is sometimes employed to divide blind people from the rest of the group. Often the only reasonable alternative available to a blind person is seeking assistance from others to establish a secure environment-to shift the emphasis away from fear and toward the exercise of independent choices. We know that blind children are vulnerable, and we will take steps to protect them. Because there is strength in numbers, because the power to belittle the blind diminishes when we face it together, we have formed our vehicle for collective action-we have established the National Federation of the Blind.

We, the organized blind movement, have decided to alter our personality so that the role of insignificance that was once assigned to the blind is swept away and replaced with a character that is bold, assertive, self-confident, joyous, and successful. To do this, we must change ourselves. We must believe that the alteration can occur, and we must insist that it come into being. It is your responsibility and mine. Will we succeed? Will we set the standard for pioneering a new image of blindness? Will we find a way to build for the blind of this generation and the next programs that do not yet exist? You know the answer as well as I-you know the spirit of the Federation-you know our absolute, unshakable, unbendable determination to achieve first-class citizenship within society. The personality of freedom cannot be brought into being by a single human being, by a handful, or even by a multitude; it must be shaped by the entire movement-it must be created by you and me. I will not ask of you what I myself am not willing to give, but I will not hesitate to ask. Our movement needs all the best within us-our imagination, our love, our dedication, our shared commitment, our belief in ourselves and each other.

The mechanisms of our movement change, but the fundamental purpose remains the same. Sometimes we achieve our objectives through letter-writing campaigns, sometimes by marching in the streets, sometimes by confrontations, sometimes by educational symposia, sometimes by creating a literature of hope and belief, sometimes through actions in the courts, and sometimes by designing our own research facility. However, though the method may shift, the objective does not-it is the complete, unhampered, total independence of the blind. In this year of new beginnings, as the 1900's cease to be, we look to the future and wonder what the decades ahead will bring. The specific details may be obscure, but the direction is abundantly clear. The future belongs to us.

The doctors can tell us that we cannot live independently; the computer specialists can deny us access to information; the inventors can assert that we are unable to find the toilet paper; and the newspapers can print that some of us think it would be better for us to jump in front of a bus. In the long run, such arguments are of no significance. They cannot stop us, for we will not let them. We will form our personality to fit our own image, and we will keep on marching-never quitting, keep on battling-never stopping, keep on living our independence-never altering our irrepressible spirit. Whatever the challenges, we will meet them. Whatever the obstacles, we will surmount them. Whatever the costs, we will pay them. We will not be ignored or stifled or intimidated-and we will prevail. This is our determination; this is our personality; this is the National Federation of the Blind! Come, join me, and we will make it come true!

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