**Within the Grace of God**

An Address Delivered by Professor Jacobus tenBroek
President, National Federation of the Blind
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It is a privilege of a very special order, and one to which I have long looked forward, to address you here tonight in the unique and wonderful city of San Francisco. For all of us who are native Californians (which means as you know that we have moved at least six months ago from Iowa or Oklahoma) this occasion marks the fulfillment of a cherished ambition; and we feel something of the pardonable pride of hosts who know that their hospitality has been as graciously accepted as it has been warmly given.

But there is something else that is special about the present occasion. Our city and our state are blessed in this year of grace with not one but two history making conventions, each of which is appearing on the local stage for the first time. Our own and that of the Republican Party. There can be no question, of course, which is the more important and far-reaching in its consequences—but let us admit that the Republicans too have an objective of some scope.

During our regular convention sessions today we have had a fairly full review of the work of the National Federation of the Blind. We have seen the accelerated growth of the organization marked by the accession of nine state affiliates in the year since our last National Convention, lifting us from a beginning of seven states in 1940 to a grand total of forty-two states today and with a clear view of affiliates in forty-eight states in the foreseeable future. We have seen an organization with purposes as irrepressible as the aspiration of men to be free, with far-flung activities and accomplishments, with the solid adherence and participation of rank and file members, and with the selfless devotion of an ever-increasing array of able and distinguished leaders. We have seen the action and the forces of action. We have also seen the reaction and the forces of reaction. There is perhaps no stronger testimony to our developing prestige and influence as the nationwide movement and organization of the blind than the scope and intensity of the attacks upon us. These attacks are not new. They have persisted from the very beginning. They have ranged from unspeakable, whispering campaigns against the character and integrity of the leaders of the Federation to public disparagement of its goals and structure. Now, however, the attacks have taken on a new bitterness and violence. They include open avowals of a determination to wipe several of our affiliates out of existence and every step possible has been taken to bring about this result.

Whence come these attacks? What is the motivation behind them? Are they personal? Are they institutional? Are they based on policy differences as to ends as well as to means? What is the pattern of action and reaction for the future? Is such conflict unavoidable? To what degree is reconciliation possible?

It is to an analysis of these problems and to an answer to these questions that I should like to direct your attention tonight.

Let me begin by giving you a purely hypothetical and very fanciful situation. Imagine that somewhere in the world there exists a civilization in which the people without hair—that is the bald—are looked down upon and rigidly set apart from everyone else by virtue of their distinguishing physical characteristic. If you can accept this fantasy for a moment, it is clear that at least two kinds of organization would come into being dedicated to serve the interests of these unfortunate folk. First, I suggest, there would appear a group of non-bald persons drawn together out of sympathy for the sorry condition of this rejected minority: in short, a benevolent society with a charitable purpose and a protective role. At first, all of the members of this society would be volunteers, doing the work on their free time and out of the goodness of their hearts. Later, paid employees would be added who would earn their livelihood out of the work and who would gradually assume a position of dominance. This society would, I believe, have the field pretty much to itself for a rather long time. In the course of years, it would virtually eliminate cruel and unusual punishment of the bald, furnish them many services and finally create enclaves and retreats within which the hairless might escape embarrassing contact with normal society and even find a measure of satisfaction and spiritual reward in the performance of simple tasks not seriously competitive with the ordinary pursuits of the larger community.

The consequence of this good work would, I venture to say, be a regular flow of contributions by the community, an acceptance by the community of the charitable foundation as the authentic interpreter of the needs of those unfortunate and inarticulate souls afflicted with baldness, an increasing veneration for the charitable foundation, and a general endorsement of its principles, and—gradually but irresistibly—the growth of a humanitarian awareness that the bald suffer their condition through no fault of their own and accordingly that they should be sponsored, protected, tolerated, and permitted to practice, under suitable supervision and control, what few uncomplicated trades patient training may reveal them able to perform.

Eventually, a great number of charitable organizations would be established in the field of work for the bald. They or some of them would join together in a common association which might well be entitled the American Association of Workers for the Bald. Step by step, upon the published "Proceedings" of their annual meetings, carefully edited to eliminate the views of the outspoken bald, they would aspire to climb to professional status. As a part of their self-assigned roles as interpreters and protectors of the bald, they or some of them, would sooner or later undertake to lay down "criteria" and "standards" for all service programs for the bald to be "a manual of guidance for those responsible for operating the programs. . . ."

These, then, would be the assumptions and the ends to which the charitable organizations for the bald would tirelessly and successfully exert themselves. They would petition the community through both public and private enterprise to support these purposes, and their appeals would dramatize them through a subtle invocation of the sympathetic and compassionate traits of human nature. Sooner or later, some of them, in order to drive competitors out of business, garner favor with the public and to give color of legitimacy to their own methods would issue what they would unabashedly call a code of fundraising ethics.

All this presumably would take much time; but before too many generations had passed I expect that most if not all of these objectives would have come to fruition, and there would appear to be an end to the problem of the bald.

Unfortunately, however, there seem always to be those who persist in questioning established institutions and revered traditions; and in my improbable fable, at some point well along in the story, there would appear a small band of irascible individuals—a little group of willful men—bent on exposing and tearing down the whole laborious and impressive structure of humanitarianism and progress. Incredibly and ironically, these malcontents would emerge from the very ranks of the bald themselves. At first I suspect that they would pass unheard and almost unnoticed; but eventually their numbers would increase and their dissent become too insistent to be easily ignored. What they would be saying, as I make it out, is something like this:

"You have said that we are different because we are bald, and that this difference marks us as inferior. But we do not agree with certain Biblical parables that possession of hair is an index of strength, certainly not that it is a measure either of virtue or of ability. Owing to your prejudice and perhaps your guilt—because you do not like to look upon us—you have barred us from the normal affairs of the community and shunted us aside as if we were pariahs. But we carry no contagion and present no danger, except as you define our condition as unclean and make of our physical defect a stigma. In your misguided benevolence you have taken us off the streets and provided shelters where we might avoid the pitiless gaze of the non-bald and the embarrassment of their contact. But what we wish chiefly is to be back on the streets, with access to all the avenues of ordinary commerce and activity. We do not want your pity, since there need be no occasion for it; and it is not we who suffer embarrassment in company with those whom we deem our fellows and our equals. You have been kind to us, and if we were animals we should perhaps be content with that; but our road to hell has been paved with your good intentions." One of the leaders of the bald doubtless would rise to say: "We do not want compassion, we want understanding; we do not want tolerance, we want acceptance; we do not want charity, we want opportunity; we do not want dependency, we want independence. You have given us much, but you have withheld more; you have withheld those values which we prize above all else, exactly as you do: personal liberty, dignity, privacy, opportunity, and—most of all—equality. But if it is not in your power, or consistent with your premises, to see these things as our goals, be assured that it is within our power and consistent with our self-knowledge to demand them and to press for their attainment. For we know by hard experience what you do not know, or have not wished to recognize: that given the opportunity we are your equals; that as a group we are no better and no worse than you—being in fact a random sample of yourselves. We are your doubles, whether the yardstick be intellectual or physical or psychological or occupational. Our goals, in short, are these: we wish to be liberated, not out of society but into it; we covet independence, not in order to be distinct but in order to be equal. We are aware that these goals, like the humane objectives you have labored so long to accomplish, will require much time and effort and wisdom to bring into being. But the painful truth must be proclaimed that your purposes are not our purposes; we do not share your cherished assumptions of the nature of baldness, and will not endure the handicap you have placed upon it. And so we have formed our own organization, in order to speak for ourselves from the experience which we alone have known and can interpret. We bear no malice and seek no special favors, beyond the right and opportunity to join society as equal partners and members in good standing of the great enterprise that is our nation and our common cause."

End of quotation—end of fable. Is this fable simply a fanciful story or is it a parable? Some will say, I have no doubt, that I have not presented the case of the blind—that there is no parallel and therefore no parable. For one thing, is it not surely ridiculous to imagine that any civilized society could so baldly misinterpret the character of those who are not blessed with hair on their heads? It may be! But civilized society has always so misinterpreted the character of those who lack sight in their eyes; and on a basis of that misinterpretation has created the handicap of blindness. You and I know that blind people are simply people who cannot see; society believes that they are people shorn of the capacity to live normal, useful, productive lives and that belief has largely tended to make them so.

For another thing, did the fable accurately portray the attitudes of at least some of the agencies for the blind? Are their goals really so different from the goals of the blind themselves? Do they actually arrogate to themselves the roles of interpreter and protector, ascribing to their clients characteristics of abnormality and dependency? To answer these questions and to demonstrate the bona fides of the parable, I shall let some agency leaders speak for themselves in the form of seven recent quotations:

Quotation number one uttered by an agency psychiatrist: "All visible deformities require special study. Blindness is a visible deformity and all blind persons follow a pattern of dependency." That one hardly requires any elucidation to make its meaning plain.

Quotation number two uttered by the author of a well-known volume upon the blind for which the American Association of Workers for the Blind conferred upon him a well-known award: "With many persons, there was an expectation in the establishment of the early schools... that the blind in general would thereby be rendered capable of earning their own support—a view that even at the present is shared in some quarters. It would have been much better if such a hope had never been entertained, or if it had existed in a greatly modified form. A limited acquaintance of a practical nature with the blind as a whole and their capabilities has usually been sufficient to demonstrate the weakness of this conception." That one also speaks adequately for itself.

Quotation number three uttered by a well-known blind agency head: "After he is once trained and placed, the average disabled person can fend for himself. In the case of the blind, it has been found necessary to set up a special state service agency which will supply them not only rehabilitation training but other services for the rest of their lives." The agencies "keep in constant contact with them as long as they live." So the blind are unique among the handicapped in that, no matter how well-adjusted, trained and placed, they require lifelong supervision by the agencies.

Quotation number four uttered by another well-known blind agency head: "The operation of the vending stand program, we feel, necessitates maintaining a close control by the Federal Government through the licensing agency with respect to both equipment and stock, as well as the actual supervision of the operation of each individual stand. It is therefore our belief that the program would fail if the blind stand managers were permitted to operate without control," This is, of course, just the specific application of the general doctrine of the incompetence of the blind expressed in the previous quotation. Blind businessmen are incapable of operating an independent business. The agencies must supervise and control the stock, equipment, and the business operation.

Quotation number five, first sentence of the Code of Ethics (so-called) of the American Association of Workers for the Blind: "The operations of all agencies for the blind entail a high degree of responsibility because of the element of public trusteeship and protection of the blind involved in services to the blind." The use of the word "protection" makes it plain that the trusteeship here referred to is of the same kind as that existing under the United Nations Trusteeship Council—that is, custody and control of underprivileged, backward, and dependent peoples.

Quotation number six uttered by still another well-known blind agency head: "To dance and sing, to play and act, to swim, bowl, and roller skate, to work creatively in clay, wood, aluminum or tin, to make dresses, to join in group readings or discussions, to have entertainments and parties, to engage in many other activities of one's choosing—this is to fill the life of anyone with the things that make life worth living." Are these the things that make life worth living for you? Only the benevolent keeper of an asylum could make this remark—only a person who views blindness as a tragedy which can be somewhat mitigated by little touches of kindness and service to help pass the idle hours but which cannot be overcome. Some of these things may be accessories to a life well filled with other things—a home, a job, and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, for example.

Quotation number seven uttered by still another head of a blind agency: "A job, a home, and the right to be a citizen, will come to the blind in that generation when each and every blind person is a living advertisement of his ability and capacity to accept the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship. Then we professionals will have no problem of interpretation because the blind will no longer need us to speak for them, and we, like primitive segregation, will die away as an instrument which society will include only in its historical records." "A job, a home and the right to be a citizen," are not now either the possessions or the rights of the blind—they will only come to the blind in a future generation! A generation, moreover, which will never come to the sighted since it is one in which "each and every blind person" will live up to some golden rule far beyond the human potential. In that never-to-be-expected age, the leaders of the agencies for the blind will no longer discharge their present function of "interpretation," because the blind will then be able to speak for themselves.

Whatever else can be said about these quotations, no one can say that these agency leaders lack candor. They have stated their views with the utmost explicitness. Moreover, these are not isolated instances of a disappearing attitude, a vestigial remainder of a forgotten era. Such expressions are not confined to those here quoted. Many other statements of the same force and character could be produced and the evidence that the deed has been suited to the word is abundant. At long last, we now know that we must finally lay at rest the pious platitude and the hopeful conjecture that the blind themselves and the agencies for the blind are really all working towards the same objectives and differ only as to means for achieving them. I would that it were so. We are not in agreement as to objectives although we frequently disagree as to means as well.

The frankly avowed purposes and the practices of the agencies tend in the direction of continued segregation along vocational and other lines. The blind would move vigorously in the direction of increasing integration, of orienting, counseling, and training the blind towards competitive occupations and placing them therein, towards a job, a home, and normal community activities and relations. The agencies, by their words and their acts, tend to sanctify and reinforce those semi-conscious stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes which have always plagued the condition of the physically disabled and the socially deprived. We, by our words and acts, would weaken them and gradually blot them out altogether. Their statements assert and their operations presuppose a need for continuous, hovering surveillance of the sightless—in recreation, occupation, and congregation—virtually from cradle to grave. We deny that any such need exists and refute the premise of necessary dependency and incompetence on which it is based. Their philosophy derives from and still reflects the philanthropic outlook and ethical uplift of those 'friendly visitors" of a previous century whose self-appointed mission was to guide their less fortunate neighbors to personal salvation through a combination of material charity and moral edification. We believe that the problems of the blind are at least as much social as personal and that a broad frontal attack on public misconceptions and existing program arrangements for the blind is best calculated to achieve desirable results. We believe, moreover, that it is worthwhile inquiring into the rationale of any activity which takes as its psychological premise the double-barreled dogma that those deprived of sight are deprived also of judgment and common sense, and that therefore what they need above all else is to be adjusted to their inferior station through the wise ministrations of an elite corps of neurosis-free custodians.

The agency leaders say, and apparently believe, that the blind are not entitled to the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship, or to full membership in society betokened by such attributes of normal life as a home and a job. This can only be predicated on the proposition that the blind are not only abnormal and inferior, but they are so abnormal and inferior that they are not even persons. We believe that blind people are precisely as normal as other people are, being in fact a cross-section of the rest of the community in every respect except that they cannot see. But were this not so, their abnormality would not strip them of their personality. The Constitution of the United States declares that all persons born in the United States or naturalized are citizens. There is nothing in the Constitution or in the gloss upon it which says that this section shall not apply to persons who are blind. If born in the United States or naturalized, whether before or after blindness, blind persons are citizens of the United States now and are now, not merely in some future generation, possessed of the right to be citizens and share the privileges, immunities, and responsibilities of that status. Moreover, the bounty of the Constitution extends to all persons, whether citizens or not, rights to freedom, equality, and individuality. As citizens, then, or as persons, who happen to be deprived of one of their physical senses, we claim, under the broad protection of the Constitution, the right to life, personal freedom, personal security; the right to marry, have and rear children, and to maintain a home; and the right, so far as government can assure it, to that fair opportunity to earn a livelihood which will make these other rights possible and significant. We have the right freely to choose our fields of endeavor, unhindered by arbitrary, artificial or man-made impediments. All limitations on our opportunity, all restrictions on us based on irrelevant considerations of physical disability, are in conflict with our Constitutional right of equality and must be removed. Our access to the mainstreams of community life, the aspirations and achievements of each of us, are to be limited only by the skills, energy, talents, and abilities we individually bring to the opportunities equally open to all Americans.

Finally, we claim as our birthright, as our Constitutional guarantee and as an indivestible aspect of our nature the fundamental human right of self-expression, the right to speak for ourselves individually and collectively. Inseparably connected with this right is the right of common association. The principle of self-organization means self-guidance and self-control. To say that the blind can, should, and do lead the blind is only to say that they are their own counselors, that they stand on their own feet. In the control of their own lives, in the responsibility for their own programs, in the organized and consistent pursuit of objectives of their own choosing—in these alone lies the hope of the blind for economic independence, social integration, and emotional security.

You may think that what I have said exaggerates the error and the danger to be expected from those whose only interest is to serve the welfare of the blind. I think it does not. No one could ask, it is true, for any more conscientious and devoted public servants than those who serve in the rank and file of the agencies for the blind, public and private. The leaders of many agencies, too, must be given commendation for enlightened policies and worthwhile programs. No one can doubt either that the agencies when so manned and so led may be of immense and constructive assistance in a multitude of ways, during the onward movement of the blind into full membership in society. As to some of the agencies not headed by leaders of the character just described, credit must be given for sincerity and good intentions. This, however, but serves to raise the question whether, in social terms, sincere and upright folly is better or worse than knavery. This discussion I forbear to enter.

What should the posture of the National Federation of the Blind be in the midst of these attacks and struggles? As the possessors of power, we must exercise it responsibly, impersonally, and with self-restraint. As a people's movement, we cannot allow others to deflect us from our course. We must apply our power and influence to achieve our legitimate goals. To this end, we must all exert ourselves to the utmost. Our opponents have history and outmoded concepts on their side. We have democracy and the future on ours. For the sake of those who are now blind and those who hereafter will be blind—and for the sake of society at large—we cannot fail. If the National Federation of the Blind continues to be representative in its character, democratic in its procedures, open in its purposes, and loyal in its commitments—so long, that is, as the faith of the blind does not become blind faith—we have nothing to fear, no cause for apology and only achievement to look forward to. We may carry our program to the public with confidence and conviction—choosing the means of our expression with proper care but without calculation, and appearing before the jury of all our peers not as salesmen but as spokesmen, not as hucksters but as petitioners for simple justice and the redress of unmerited grievances. We will have no need to substitute the advertisement for the article itself, nor to prefer a dramatic act to an undramatic fact. If this is group pressure, it is group pressure in the right direction. If this involves playing politics, it is a game as old as democracy, with the stakes as high as human aspiration.

In the Sixteenth Century, John Bradford made a famous remark which has ever since been held up to us as a model of Christian humility and correct charity and which you saw reflected in the agency quotations I presented. Seeing a beggar in his rags creeping along a wall through a flash of lightning in a stormy night Bradford said: "But for the Grace of God, there go I." Compassion was shown; pity was shown; charity was shown; humility was shown; there was even an acknowledgement that the relative positions of the two could and might have been switched. Yet despite the compassion, despite the pity, despite the charity, despite the humility, how insufferably arrogant! There was still an unbridgeable gulf between Bradford and the beggar. They were not one but two. Whatever might have been, Bradford thought himself Bradford and the beggar a beggar—one high, the other low; one wise, the other misguided; one strong, the other weak; one virtuous, the other depraved.

We do not and cannot take the Bradford approach. It is not just that beggary is the badge of our past and is still all too often the present symbol of social attitudes towards us; although that is at least part of it. But in the broader sense, we are that beggar and he is each of us. We are made in the same image and out of the same ingredients. We have the same weaknesses and strengths, the same feelings, emotions, and drives; and we are the product of the same social, economic, and other environmental forces. How much more consonant with the facts of individual and social life, how much more a part of a true humanity, to say instead: "There, within the Grace of God, do go I."

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