**The Assimilation of Crisis**

An Address Delivered by  
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Crisis is possibility made manifest. Inherent in crisis is potential change--large or small, positive or negative, welcome or disheartening. Without crisis incremental change can occur, but fundamental alteration in a political system, a structure of belief within a culture, or the functioning of an institution comes only when forces have been so concentrated in opposition to one another that the balances within the social fabric can shift. We call this moment crisis. Crisis is often associated with disaster, but it can also portend positive transformation.

We in the National Federation of the Blind have been facing crises throughout our history. The first of them occurred at the formation of our organization in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, in 1940. We proclaimed to all who would listen, but also to ourselves, that matters involving the blind would change because we would make them change. Before the founding of the National Federation of the Blind, blindness had meant (although there were notable exceptions) inability, immobility, and inferiority. The solution to the problems of the blind was to restore vision. Otherwise, blind people were almost always written off. This was true even though schools for the blind existed, sheltered workshops for the blind had been created, many states had established programs to serve the adult blind, and the Randolph-Sheppard Program to provide vending opportunities for blind people had been brought into being. One bright spot was the growing program to provide books to the blind through the Library of Congress.

Part of the crisis at our beginning was one of confidence, and it was one of our own making. Would we have the internal fortitude to sustain us in the effort to bring others to believe what we said we believed about blindness? Blind people have capacity, and we expect it to be recognized. The problems of blindness can and must be solved, and one of the elements of that solution will be the blind themselves. We intend to take a hand in our own destiny. All of this was part of the founding of the Federation. The presentation of Dr. Jacobus tenBroek, our founder and first President, to the inaugural gathering of the Federation was clear and direct--it left no doubt that the organized blind would speak and act for the blind of the nation.

At the beginning, the National Federation of the Blind was mostly ignored, but we persevered. When it became clear that our organization (and our philosophy) would play an active part in the field of work with the blind, a second crisis occurred. This was a crisis of fear and repression led by a few hidebound administrators of programs for the blind who felt threatened that the blind should seek to speak for themselves. Dr. tenBroek spoke to our convention in 1957 saying, "The National Federation of the Blind stands today an embattled organization. Our motives have been impugned; our purposes reviled; our integrity aspersed; our representative character denied. Plans have been laid, activities undertaken, and concerted actions set in motion for the clear and unmistakable purpose of bringing about our destruction. Nothing less is sought than our extinction as an organization." Despite the concerted action reported by Dr. tenBroek, the Federation survived, and in the long run, it gained strength.

The first crisis confirmed in us the conviction that we could speak and act on our own behalf as the unified voice of the blind. The second crisis made us recognize that we would continue to exist, making our own plans, thinking our own thoughts, expressing our own views, and bringing inspiration to the field of work with the blind regardless of opposition. The crises that would come in the decades to follow would teach us much about the strength that comes from maintaining the independence and self-expression that are essential to the organized blind movement.

These first crises made us know that the possibilities for change are inherent in uncertainty, that we can manage the uncertainties when they come, and that if we intend to achieve altered possibility for us, we must help them come. Living with uncertainty is never easy, but living with the positive guarantee of discrimination and lack of opportunity is worse. We can solve the problems faced by the blind, and we must and will have change. To those who believe that blindness means immobility, inability, and inferiority, we say this: we are on the move; we are equal to the challenges before us; and nothing on earth can hold us back. If change comes through the instigation of crisis, we demand (we insist upon) crisis!

Just as the uncontrolled combustion of hydrocarbons can wreak havoc, so can the unmanaged crisis. We do not seek chaos but only the uncertainty that permits positive alteration of the fundamental belief system in our society. We want our crises to fuel advances for us in much the same way that the energy contained in a rocket engine lifts a payload into space. But make no mistake, despite the uncertainty, despite the risk, and despite the opposition, we will seek the critical points of change. With risk there is always opportunity. Our obligation is to make those opportunities real for blind people everywhere. We will manage the crises that come, and we will use the power they possess to create independence. If we manage uncertainty well, and if we believe in the potential for change that exists, nothing can hold us back, and tomorrow belongs to us!

At the heart of Federation philosophy is the proposition that the problems blind people have can be solved. How do we do it? Begin with a dream of the time when the opportunities we seek are within our grasp. Describe the characteristics of this time, and imagine the differences in public attitudes about blindness, in training programs for the blind, and in the determination of the blind to participate fully in society. Consider what technologies are needed for the advancement of the blind. Discuss the hopes and dreams for the future with others so that they can catch the imaginative spirit and add details to the description. Contemplate what steps must be taken to implement the pattern or parts of it. Find methods to challenge the assumptions that tell us these things are impossible. Hunt the means (both financial and otherwise) to initiate new activities. Invite like-minded sighted people to join with us in an effort to inaugurate new methods of thought. Take a leap of faith to create new programs or new systems or to build the technologies required for easy integration of the blind. These are the elements for the instigation of crisis.

When the crisis occurs, do not lose heart. Face the uncertainty, and press forward until what we have considered in our wildest imaginings comes true. Dream; have faith; build; and share the spirit. This is the National Federation of the Blind!

Last April (only a few months ago), Dr. Raymond Kurzweil, the man who built the first reading machine for the blind and who has been hailed as a restless genius, spoke at a technology conference for technology trainers held at the National Federation of the Blind Jernigan Institute--the first organized activity other than the Grand Opening to occur in our new building. Dr. Kurzweil said that as computers become smaller and more powerful, the capacity they have will be integrated into human systems. He said that our memories will be enhanced by the total recall that is part of computers. He told us that tiny repair systems will be released into our bloodstreams to take steps to improve our medical conditions. He speculated that mechanical information-gathering techniques will supply data to computers, and the information so gathered will be present in our consciousness. He did not say that mechanical vision will be created, but his comments implied that some form of artificial vision will likely be available.

Many blind people are waiting for their vision to be restored. Their approach to blindness is to hope that somebody will find a miracle. When I was a boy, I heard many grownups tell me that medical science might find a cure for my blindness. Maybe so, I thought, but it doesn't look as though it will happen any time soon, so I guess I won't count on it.

As I've thought about it, I haven't changed my mind. I don't have anything against waiting except that it takes so long, and it seems so dull.

In the National Federation of the Blind we do not wait; we plan for tomorrow; and we work to build the programs that will give us the chance to use the talents we possess. If we find ways to enhance our information-gathering techniques or to improve our lives in other respects, we will use them. In the meantime we will use the techniques at hand, and we will work with others to develop new ones, or we will devise them ourselves if we need them. It is not visual acuity or physical prowess or appearance that determines what we are (though these have their place) but the spirit of independence, the determination to make a contribution, and the will to overcome whatever obstacles may exist. The mindset that waits for a miracle is passive, but we are not. We will not have our talents and abilities ignored or forgotten, and if positive change can be had only through crisis, we will instigate the change to precipitate the event. The independence that comes with change must be ours, and we will permit nothing to prevent us from achieving it.

With great opportunity great risk must be expected. We are facing today one of the greatest challenges that has ever existed for us--though no apparent disaster looms in our immediate future. What we do to address this challenge will have an overwhelming impact on our future.

During much of history, blind people have not only been ignored but almost unobserved. Research on blindness has been conducted by somebody else, and we have been the subjects, who were sometimes quantified but rarely questioned. Our views have not been sought because it has often been thought that our intellect, our training, and our experience were irrelevant. Even when one of us invented Braille, the communication system that is used by the blind throughout the world today, the teachers and administrators of programming for the blind resisted. (Some of them are still resisting.) Invented in France by Louis Braille in the 1820's, Braille was not adopted as the reading system for the blind in his own country until after Louis Braille's death in 1852. When Braille was introduced in the United States, officials at the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind, led by Superintendent William Bell Wait, thought that they would improve on the system. They invented New York Point, a dot writing system with a cell two dots high and up to four dots wide. Braille, the invention of the blind, according to the officials at the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind, was not good enough; it had to be "improved" by administrators.

We have been working diligently to change the pattern, and we now intensify the effort. We ask not only that the blind be observed but that we be consulted. We insist that the problems of blindness must be addressed, and not just superficially, and we insist that we be included as an essential element in addressing them. To advance the processes of interaction and exploration, we have created our own institute, named for our beloved President, Dr. Kenneth Jernigan, who was the greatest builder of programs for the blind of the twentieth century. We must be a part of the acquisition of knowledge--not just onlookers; our inventive genius must be a vital element in the planning and in the direction of research on programs and products for the blind. We are outlining the programs of research, of training, and of inventiveness that we think have the greatest potential. However, there are dangers in what we do. One of these is that we the blind will place more faith in the technology than we place in ourselves. Sighted people already ask for the miracle device or the magic system that will make blind people like sighted people.

It is not the technology that creates our ability but our own minds and hearts, and we must not be misled into thinking that the machines are more important than we are. We will use the new technologies and the innovative programs of education, but these will not change our fundamental being. We have already determined what the blind will do, and we will accept no argument that tells us we lack the capacity to be an integrated part of the society in which we live. We are the blind--imaginative, articulate, determined, persistent, and productive. We will not let anybody forget it.

The speed at which technology is advancing has advantages, but it also has its dangers. As knowledge is gained, its relative importance has to be assessed; and when evaluations have been made, it must be assimilated into the social consciousness. Although facts themselves may be neutral, the underlying assumptions that integrate facts into a pattern of knowledge are not. The preconceived stereotypes about the inability and inferiority of the blind may as easily be at the base of new research on blindness as the demonstrable reality that the blind have the same fundamental abilities as anybody else. The speed for gathering facts has increased, but this does not signify that the way these facts are used is any better than it has been in former times. If the assumptions about us are as bad in interpreting today's research as they have sometimes been in the past, the faster we get new conclusions, the more problems we will have.

Beyond all of this, new information will seem better than the older generations of knowledge because it's new. A tendency will exist among some people to accept the newly devised product or the newest theories without critical evaluation. Already blind students are frequently being told that they need not learn Braille or some of the other established alternative techniques for the blind because there are more up-to-date technologies that make these older techniques obsolete. Sometimes we are told that Braille is slow and cumbersome and that the long white cane is less effective than newer electronic travel aids. Using white canes and reading Braille are said to be stigmatizing to the blind--not the liberating experiences we know them to be.

Furthermore, with the development of new programs for the blind, many students on college campuses are taking less initiative in managing their own programs than they did in former times, leaving the scheduling of readers, the acquisition of technology, the procurement of books, and the negotiation with professors to the so-called experts, the administrators who run the programs. These administrators have access to technology, which is both expensive and complex. Students who need this technology must meet the requirements of the administrators. Sometimes the technology is used as a lever to induce the students to fall into line and behave as others demand.

Of course, this is not true in all programs or for all administrators, but it is an observable pattern in some of them. When the administrators tell the readers what to read for the blind, and the bookstore personnel and the technology vendors what to sell to the blind, and the professors how to teach the blind, they run not only the programs to serve the blind but also the blind themselves--they become the custodial caretakers of the blind.

Most assuredly we do not oppose the development of new technology or new training programs for the blind--we are in the midst of such development ourselves, and we often urge others to pursue such endeavors. However, the blind have a responsibility to be a significant part of such development. If blind people are not at the center of designing and promoting programs and products for the blind, these programs and products may help to emphasize negative stereotypical thinking about blindness. This cannot be permitted; we must prevent it. Technology will not be used against us, for we will not let it be. Our objective is always the same, self-sufficiency and independence for the blind. If there is no other way, we will stimulate a crisis.

One other element of the challenge we face is growth. As we diversify our activities, take on additional responsibilities, and increase our staff, we must not alter our focus. Because of our increased real estate and staff some people will think of the National Federation of the Blind as the National Center for the Blind or the National Federation of the Blind Jernigan Institute, but this is not what we are. Our primary goal is to serve as a means for the blind to take concerted collective action. Our policies are set by the blind, and the hopes, the problems, the experiences, and the spirit of individual blind people from throughout our movement must be incorporated into everything we do. We are not creating yet another entity to provide services for the blind; we are the blind building a movement controlled by the blind, directed by the blind, owned by the blind, serving as the collective expression of the blind.

Because the blind run the Federation, we can undertake any activity with equanimity; the good judgment of the rank and file membership will ensure that we stay on the right track. The convention is the supreme authority of the Federation; it is the blind organized from throughout the nation. The convention directs our efforts, determines our policies, and serves as a check and balance system for the officers it elects. This is the fundamental democracy of the National Federation of the Blind.

The popular myth is that inventing technology is good, and inventing technology to help the blind is even better. However, consider the results when the inventor is completely without information about the blind people for whom the invention is intended. An article entitled "Good Vibrations: Shoe Helps Blind to Walk," written by Susan McMahon, a staff member for *The Sun*, a newspaper from Lowell, Massachusetts, has been circulated around the Internet and published in various places within the last year and a half. This article describes the project of an engineering student to create a mechanical travel aid for the blind--specifically, shoes for the blind that incorporate vibrating motors. Do these motors help the blind walk faster or jump higher? No, their objective is more limited. The motors vibrate when the shoes get near something that the wearer might bump into. These special shoes for the blind were invented so that blind people would no longer need to carry white canes. Some of what the article tells us is so bizarre that it is hard to believe, but let the article speak for itself. Here are excerpts from the text:

The shoes look innocuous enough, black with wires and gadgets glued and Velcroed across the faces.  
But put them on, and walk around, and suddenly the walls of the shoes begin to shake. Get a little closer to that couch, and they shake faster. Move around, and the vibrations move to different parts of the shoe.  
Designed [the article continues] by recent UMass Lowell graduate Richard Namay Castle as a way to assist blind people, the shoes work by transferring objects from a visual plane to a vibrating one.  
The infrared sensors can detect things from a meter away.  
The model is only a prototype, but Castle hopes to find a possible buyer and then develop more sophisticated shoes. For a blind person, the new and improved shoes could provide a way to get around without a walking stick or seeing-eye dog.  
Then, rather than using a cane around the house, a blind person could rely on the shoes to tell him where a doorway or the coffee table is located.  
If the prototype moves to the final stages, [the article continues] Castle hopes to create some kind of sensor that would detect when the wearer is walking down stairs.  
Currently, drops in elevation are not registered on the shoes. [Although they may be registered on the blind person, especially if they happen unexpectedly. I admit I added this last bit myself.]

These are excerpts from the article about the inventor of the special shoes for the blind. The images portrayed give a whole new meaning to the expression “shaking in your shoes.”

But I think this inventor has only scratched the surface. What might blind people learn from expanding this technology to other items of clothing and to other parts of the body? The vibrating hat, the vibrating shirt, the vibrating pair of trousers might all be employed. In an information-rich environment, the blind person might jiggle all over, wearing the innovative vibrosuit for the blind. Vibromotors could transmit information by Morse code or in combinations of Braille dots on this or that part of the anatomy. And just imagine, if a blind person were looking for a chair and one came into the immediate vicinity, there could be a special vibration to guide the blind person to the correct location--right in the seat of the pants. When the vibration is strong enough and centered, sit down.

What a ridiculous bunch of nonsense! Has this engineer met any blind people? Has he formed the opinion that we don't already know where the couch and the coffee table are in our own houses? Does he think we are idiots?

The vibrating instrument that gives data to us is not new; many of them provide valuable information. However, putting vibromotors into our shoes so that we can find the couch is beyond the mine-run of nutso ideas that blind people often have to face. If we depend on inventors like Richard Namay Castle, the future for us is bleak indeed. But of course, we will not depend on him or his uninformed ilk. We will reject his research and his peculiar summation of our incapacity. Beyond that, we will tell him in no uncertain terms that he must not foist upon us his ignorance or prejudice. We need new technologies, but not vibrating shoes. We have already found the couch, and we are now looking for something else--something like business success, political capacity, or high adventure. Our aspirations are much expanded beyond the vibrating shoe and beyond the environment in which it is depicted. We will not let the engineers tell us that our lives are circumscribed, that our mobility is limited to the couch and coffee table, or that we need them to help us learn to walk down stairs. We expect to be observed but also to be consulted, and if we are not, we will precipitate a crisis.

Our experience tells us that blind people possess the normal range of wants and wishes, faults and foibles, aptitudes and abilities that others have. In our spoken and written language, we try to describe blind people as they are, not as others think us to be or want us to be. Because language is the observable expression of thought, we have objected to simple-minded, pejorative, one-dimensional descriptions of the blind. We want to be depicted not through the single characteristic of blindness but as the multi-faceted interesting human beings we are. Are some blind people malevolent, parsimonious, duplicitous, avaricious, or indolent? Yes, but most of us are not. Some of us are also benevolent, generous, honest, charitable, and diligent. Some of us even possess prestidigitive powers with a capacity for feats of dexterous legerdemain. The reason we object to many of the descriptions of the blind of the past is that the authors describe their blind characters in terms of one primary characteristic alone--blindness.

In a misguided attempt to be politically correct (the politically correct would say fair and just) the supervisors of language appear to be attempting to eliminate the blind from literature. Because we quite evidently exist, this attempt will undoubtedly fail; but the effort to keep us out of the books will cause argument, confrontation, frustration, annoyance, and to speak directly, anger. A book entitled *The Language Police* by Diane Ravitch published in 2003 declares that certain words may not be used in textbooks intended for sale to public schools. With considerable insight the author points out certain dangerous trends in the publishing business. It is not only swear words that are forbidden but also terms that might have been used in connection with people with disabilities (not the disabled, but people with disabilities). "The blind" may not be used at all. Instead, the euphemism "people who are blind" is to be substituted.

The list of disability-related terms, which contains thirty-one items, includes: helpless, passive, dependent, naive, segregated from mainstream society, victims, objects of pity or curiosity, sinister characters, saintly, laughable, endowed with magic powers, unproductive, sharing common needs or problems, burden to others, heroic, inspirational, invalids, patients, bitter, and sickly. These are some of the things (according to the language supervisors in the publishing houses) that cannot be said about the blind; so what can we say? If we are not passive, are we aggressive? If we are not naive, are we sophisticated, wise, or sly? The list tells us that we are neither sinister nor saintly, leaving the impression that we are neither good nor bad but possessing only some nondescript character in between.

That the editors of textbooks have created such a list implies that they believe authors and teachers will use these forbidden terms about the blind, and that (in the view of some) we really are helpless, passive, naive, and the like. The list also suggests that textbooks must be sanitized so that the tender impressionable minds of children are not twisted or injured by descriptions of the blind or assertions about the blind. But we protest. We are not trying to be kept out of society but included within it. We do not want blindness or blind people eliminated from the textbooks; we want them described in fluent detail. We do not want blindness hidden in a closet but brought into the open for all to observe. Perhaps we should insist that the word "editor" be removed from the language. We could sanitize the books by eliminating any reference to editors. Instead use the term "people with editing." Then we could write into the textbooks that people with editing are not helpless or naive or passive. If this is the way they would like to treat us, let us try it on them.

We will not have the blind categorized in a way different from everybody else and treated as if we were pariahs subject only to ostracism. We will not be forced to abide by special rules that insist we be depicted in a nondescript way. We will not have blindness or the blind expunged from the language.

This list of special rules implies that others believe there is shame in being blind. We feel no shame, and we will not let others force their misguided understanding and the shame they feel upon us. We will tell it like it is, and we will glory in the energy, the vibrant character, and the multi-dimensional spirit that we have. If we must, we will write our own books, demonstrating that the blind are as much a part of our cultural experience as anybody else. We will be observed as we are. But this is not enough, we will also be consulted about the way we are portrayed. We will do this in peace and harmony if we can--but we will do it. If necessary, we will precipitate a crisis.

In the course of the work that I have done in the National Federation of the Blind, I have been in the homes of many thousands of blind people--often at the kitchen table. Blind people from throughout the nation have told me about their lives and shared their hopes and dreams for a brighter future. They have also described the obstacles they have sought to overcome and the privations they have faced. Often our work is intensely personal, fraught with frustration, intermixed with trials, and occasionally adorned with triumph. Some of our effort is directed toward technical matters, but much of the time we are working to instill an attitude of hope, of belief, of exploration. We distribute canes, encourage the learning of Braille, and discuss high-tech systems for getting at information. But we also concentrate on helping people to understand that there is something for us, and with the proper training and the right spirit, we can get it. Can blind people obtain an education, establish homes, attract spouses, and raise families? Can blind people find employment, participate in social events, engage in political activities, and contribute in other ways to our society? Our answer to these questions has always been, and remains today, an emphatic and unequivocal yes. I myself have been in the midst of our activities, and I have worked to bring hope and faith to others. In the bringing of these, I have reinforced my own hope and faith. The Federation is intensely personal not only for others but also for me.

As you know, my wife Patricia and I are both blind, and we have been blind all of our lives. In 1984, our first child, David Maurer, was born. A significant part of our lives has been devoted to the raising of David and of his sister Dianna, who was born three years later. The children have been a great joy to us and, of course, from time to time a trial.

In January of 2004, Patricia and I faced a living nightmare that parents everywhere hope will never happen to them. At about five in the morning, a neighbor knocked on our door to tell us that David was in the hospital--that he had been severely injured in an automobile accident. We went immediately to the hospital, not knowing what we would find. David was unconscious, but he was alive. We asked the doctors if we could see him, and we prayed. Then came hours (that turned into days) of waiting, hoping, questioning, and more waiting. David was severely injured, but we did not know the extent of the damage. We knew his jaw was broken, but we did not know if there was injury to his nerves or his spinal column or his brain.

Eventually, we learned that David would not only survive but that his mind would be all right, and that he would be able to move all of his limbs--even his fingers and toes. We could help him to return to the kind of active productive life that he had known before the accident. We are still in the process of the medical reconstruction, but David is coming along.

Inevitably when such things occur, the questions arise. What might have been done to prevent the injury, to avoid the accident? What was the failure that led to the damage? In the hours that I spent in the hospital, I have had much time to think about what we have done and what we have shared with each other. The overwhelming impression from those times is one of love and caring and support. No life can be lived without adversity. What is needed is the strength to face it. Our colleagues and our friends in the Federation have helped us to find that strength.

Inherent in the recommendation that blind people (or anybody else for that matter) live full and productive lives is the reality that something may happen to disturb the tranquility of those lives. However, without the risk there can be no joy. You have helped us face the risk, and we share much joy. I thank God for preserving David's life, and I thank God for something else. If He had not given me the opportunity to be in the Federation, I might not have had the courage to believe that a family could be mine and that I could share the responsibility for raising children. It is a great gift, and I am immensely blessed.

As we gather tonight in our thousands at this banquet, the prospects before us are enormously bright. We have a monumental challenge to meet, but nobody is better suited for it than we are. Knowledge gained is useless unless it is put to work. This concept demands that it be assimilated into the thought processes of the culture. Although the speed at which knowledge is being gained today is extremely high, the assimilation of this knowledge has not kept pace, at least it has not for the blind. We ourselves must learn what we can and serve as the agent for assimilation of knowledge about blindness.

Some blind people are still waiting for their sight to be restored; some inventors are still creating oddball gadgets like shaking shoes they tell us we need; and some editors are trying to prevent the blind as an organized group from being recognized in textbooks. But most of the blind are active; most of the inventors are listening; and an increasing number of the editors are getting the message that the blind will not be segregated. Our experience has taught us that we have talent and the capacity to give. We must now help others to assimilate this knowledge--we must teach them what we know.

Part of our responsibility now incorporates the development of research and training programs. We intend not only to be observed but also to be consulted, and we must be prepared to show the teachers what we have learned. This too is part of our task as the agent for assimilation.

As we take these steps, we will meet uncertainties and take risks. If we do our work well, along with the uncertainties will come positive alterations and along with the risks will come enhanced opportunities for the blind. Nobody else can meet this challenge--nobody else has the personal interest, the talent, or the will. If we fail, the blind will drift back into obscurity. But we will not fail; we are on the move, and we will not turn back. We are filled with a fighting spirit; we will not waver or equivocate; we have the imagination, the perseverance, the strength, and the guts to take whatever action is necessary for freedom. When the challenges come, we will meet them. When the obstacles arise, we will surmount them. We have kept faith with our blind brothers and sisters of the Federation throughout the decades, and we have an unquenchable determination to bring equality, self-esteem, and independence to the blind of this generation and the next. Change will come because we will make it come--slowly through negotiation or quickly through crisis--but it will come. This is our decision, this is our commitment, this is our declaration. Join me, and we will make it come true!

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