**ARE WE EQUAL TO THE CHALLENGE?**

An address delivered by Professor Jacobus tenBroek  
President, National Federation of the Blind  
at the Banquet of the Annual Convention  
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When last we met together in this Golden State--eleven years ago, in that "other California" whose unofficial capital is San Francisco--I delivered another banquet address which I daresay some of our grizzled members still remember. It was entitled "Within the Grace of God." It was frankly a fighting speech--and I'd like for a moment to recall to your minds and memories what the fight was all about.

That 1956 speech was principally concerned with the development of our movement--the organized blind movement--in the United States, and with the relations of that movement with the private voluntary agencies, and combinations of agencies, in the field of work for the blind.

The state of our relations with the agencies, at that turbulent point of our history, can be briefly characterized. It was a state of war. We were in fact the targets of concerted opposition--both nationally and within many of our affiliated states. The purpose of that attack was to break up the organized blind movenrient and return its members to the alienation, dependency and disorganization of the status quo ante bellum--that is, the good old days before the blind were organized.

Among other things, that agency opposition took the form of a verbal campaign directed against the basic premises and pillars of our movement. In editorials, speeches, books and broadsides, authoritative spokesmen for major agencies reminded the blind over and over of their legendary "lacks and losses"--their irremediable dependency, their emotional imbalance, their obvious inequality, their desperate need for professional guidance and custodial care until their dying day--or, alternatively, until that future golden age as one agency director expressed it "when each and every blind person is a living advertisement of his ability and capacity to accept the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship."

Now we are together again in California--eleven years after. How goes the battle today? How do we stand now in relation to the agencies?

Before confronting those questions, let it be understood that our embattled relationship with the agencies is only one phase of a many-sided movement of the blind reaching toward integration, equality, and independence. It goes hand in hand with our struggle to improve life and livelihood through legislative action--national, state and local. It has its counterpart also in the arena of the courtroom, where dramatic struggles against discrimination and exclusion continue to be fought--alternately won and lost and won again. On still another front we are engaged in positive relationships with other groups and associations, in particular those of the disabled, the disadvantaged and the deprived. Our concern must always be with the lame and the halt as well as with the blind! And then there is our own domestic front: the internal order of the Federation, with its constantly renewed challenges of diversity and democracy.

On all these fronts and more, we are called upon to devote our fullest energies and creative efforts toward the discovery of new solutions to changing issues and evolving needs. But in each of these areas, the agencies loom as both a fact of our lives and a factor in our planning. Nor is this a peculiar problem of blind Americans. Elsewhere in the world--everywhere else in the world--much the same tense and tortuous relationship exists. It exists, to be sure, at different stages and in various forms. In many countries of Europe, although rear-guard battles are still being fought, the course of the struggle has long since been determined. The pattern has been one not of extinction of the agencies but of their conquest and assimilation. The blind people of Europe have organized themselves and have taken over the agencies.

In England, on the other hand, almost alone of the principal European nations, the battle continues to rage unabated. There a large national organization of the blind stands on the battle line against and entrenched and powerful agency and its satellites. It is an unequal struggle, though far from one-sided; and the organized blind of Great Britain have no early hope of carrying out the continental pattern. Rather they seek to secure their goals through increasing governmentalization, thereby gradually superseding the voluntary societies by having the government take over their vested interests.

In Canada the story is perhaps the saddest and sorriest of all. In that northern clime an agency colossus bestrides the world of the blind from coast to coast, making free use of company-union tactics wherever any independent sentiment dares to express itslef among the disorganized blind. Only a handful of undaunted spirits remain to hold the banner aloft in the deserted battlefield.

Still a different pattern exists in some European countries, and especially those beyond the Iron Curtain, where large national organizations of the blind exist, apparently dominant in their field. There, for the most part, private agencies and voluntary socities are virtually non-existent but the question remains whether the blind organizations are genuinely self-determined and self-directing or only the passive instruments of governmental policy and action. If the flow of communication is truly from the blind to the government, as well as the other way around, if there is genuine dialogue and not just authoritarian monologue, then in those lands the three-cornered struggle among the blind, the agencies and the government has been resolved into a two-sided partnership. Let us hope that this is indeed the case.

In the United States, meanwhile, the wheel of fortune has not yet turned so far. The private agencies and voluntary societies are very much in evidence, as powerful as they are visible. Are they our collaborators or our calumniators? When the agency official passes by who goes there: friend or foe ?

The answer today, no less than eleven years ago, must be qualified and doubtful. There are agencies aplenty marching with us, fully attuned to our aspirations and activities, alert to our petitions, admiring of our programs. Doubtless too, their numbers have grown since 1956. But there are also large and powerful agencies abroad in the land, considerable in number and vast in influence, which remain hostile to our movement in thought, in speech, and in action.

And the worst of these, it may well be, is the newest: namely, COMSTAC. For COMSTAC seeks to impose upon the blind not less but more authority and custody than ever before. Under the guise of professionalism, it would perpetuate colonialism. Its philosophy is a throw-back to the age of the silent client, before the revolution in welfare and civil rights which converted the client into an active and vocal partner in the programing and dispensing of services. In its lofty disregard of the organized blind, as the voice of those to be served COMSTAC betrays its bureaucratic bias, that is, its distorted image of the blind client not as a person to be served but as a defective mechanism to be serviced.

Nowhere is the relationship between blind Americans and the social agencies more distressing or scandalizing than in the sheltered work-shops where the relationship is one of pervasive exploitation on the one hand and an elemental struggle for survival on the other. Here the normal dignity of worker-management relations is not to be found; on the contrary, blind shop workers find themselves regarded not as workers but as wards, not as visually disabled simply but as emotionally disturbed as well. They have been denied the status of organized labor, denied the right to strike, denied even the protection of minimum wage standards given as a matter of course to other workers.

The inmates of the St. Louis Lighthouse have been out on strike since last March, in spite of these deprivations-just for the right to sit down and talk with the lighthouse-keepers. Other strikes have broken out across the country as blind shop workers have decided to stand up and speak out. Because of this rebellious spirit, this show of backbone, they are beginning to make progress. But their gains are coming, step by painful step, against the bitter-end opposition of the overseers in what must still be designated the sheltered sweatshops of America.

This condition of cold war between agencies and the organized blind is being waged with particular force and fury within the World Council for the Welfare of the Blind at whose gates the organized blind of nation after nation have come knocking, and have either been turned away or relegated to second-class membership. The American Blind, through the NFB, have battled for years to occupy the seat that is rightfully theirs upon the World Council's executive board and to gain equal representation with the agencies, but have been spurned, insulted and ignored. The effort of the organized blind of Australia to gain a single place in that country's delegation to the World Council, long opposed by the controlling agencies within Australia, has now been blocked by a ruling of the World Council that the organized blind need not be represented at all.

The rationalization for this action and this attitude is contained in a 1964 resolution enacted by the World Council as a compromise to stave off a motion by the NFB. That resolution states that "where in any country there exists a substantial group of blind persons organized into associations and where there are blind persons occupying leading positions in agencies for the blind, adequate provision should be made for their representation in the national delegation." The emphasis is upon blind persons, wherever they may be, and not upon the difference between elective associations of blind people, on the one hand, and professional agencies on the other. The lack of distinction is significant; for it treats alike the roles of the agency professional and the elected representative of a democratic group. If that confusion of roles is honest, it reflects a profound ignorance of democracy; if it is disingenuous, it reflects a shocking contempt for democracy.

What is the difference between the two roles? I have been informed by many ernest persons, all of them agency officials, to be sure, that the difference is negligible, but that what little difference there is favors the agency professional. For if he is blind himself, then does he not know the experience of blindness as well as any elected leader? And since he is a trained professional, does he not know social policies and programs better? And, finally, cannot the professional administrator consult his clients as much as any elective fellow and having spoken with them qualify to speak for them?

These seem plausible arguments on the surface but they convey an astonishing misconception of the democratic process and its meaning. Put aside the fact that there are elected blind leaders who possess at least a modicum of knowledge of the welfare field, and appointed agency officials who possess little. That is beside the real point which is that in a democracy the proper role of the expert and the professional is not to govern, not to rule, but to advise the governors; it is not to make policy decisions but only to implement them. An engineer may tell us how to build a highway; what he cannot do is to make the decision for us whether we should build the highway or whether we should build instead a college, a ball park or a civic center. The sharpest lesson of democracy is that no professional elite or case, administrative or military or scientific, must be permitted to usurp the power of the people and their elected representatives to make the decisions of life and liberty, or of life and death.

That the agencies all too often have failed to subordinate the role of the expert is one thing; that they all too often have misconstrued the proper role of the blind is a second thing. But more important than these mistakes is their persisting refusal to acknowledge and accept the elementary principles of humanity and democracy.

The blind have a right to live in the world. That right is as deep as human nature; as pervasive as the need for social existence; as ubiquitous as the human race; as invincible as the human spirit. As their souls are their own, so their destiny must be their own. Their salvation or failure lies within their own choice and responsibility. That choice cannot be precluded or prejudged; those lives cannot be predetermined or controlled.

In a democracy the blind have a right to share in the fruits and obligations of the community. They have a right to participate in the decisions that affect their lives and fortunes. And beneath and beyond these democratic rights there is a further one: the right to organize for collective self-expression, and to be represented through their own associations. This, if it does not go without saying, surely goes without disputing.

But no: that basic and bedrock right is challenged directly by many agencies--no less today than a decade ago. Not only by their actions, but by their words, do they stand condemned of throwing stumbling blocks in the path of the blind. I call to your attention an editorial published last September in the Matilda Ziegler Magazine, written by its managing editor, Howard M. Liechty, who is also the longtime managing editor of the New Outlook for the Blind, the official journal of the American Federation.

Editor Liechty's editorial is a straightforward, unequivocal, and sweeping attack upon the notion of equality as having any present application to the blind, and also upon the effort to move toward equality by organized action and legislative reform. "Any attempt to force social equality," writes Editor Liechty, "would mean legislating it, and any thinking man must know that you cannot legislate such a thing of the heart, and force men to accept their fellow men as social equals." And he goes on to quote with favor the words of a former Supreme Court Justice, Charles E. Whittaker, to the effect that no minority group has ever achieved acceptance in America until, "by long years of exemplary conduct, a majority of its members have earned the respect and liking of the people generally."

Well, there you have it. To Editor Liechty today, as to his colleagues a decade ago, the hope of the blind for such peculiar values as full citizenship, individual rights, social acceptance, and human dignity, must continue to be a hope deferred. If anyone should ask how long, oh lords, how long must we be kept waiting, the answer comes back: until by exemplary conduct you have proved your worthiness--all of you together, and each one of you individually.

This requirement so righteously imposed upon the blind, this test of exemplary conduct or good behavior, has a strangely familiar ring. It is the echo of the ancient poor law, that separate and unequal body of legal demands and strictures enforced upon the poor, the indigent, and the disabled as the precondition of eligibility for public aid. In scarcely diluted form, these requirements of exemplary conduct are now to be the conditions of eligibility for citizenship itself, not for others, but only for the blind.

To assert, as Editor Liechty does, that the rights of equal opportunity, of equal treatment, and equal access, of participation and expression, cannot be legislatively secured and judicially enforced is to fly in the face of our entire constitutional and political history. It is also to disregard the not inconsiderable history of the organized blind movement from the Kletzing case to the Model White Cane Law.

Of course we cannot be required to love one another; but we can be prevented from expressing our hates, our superstitions and our prejudices in terms of public law and social policy. We cannot require the sighted to embrace the blind as brothers; but we can stop them from placing obstacles in their path.

We need not suppose that the end of discrimination against the blind will bring an automatic end to prejudice; but we can choose to be guided by the sense of justice, the voice of reason, the commitment to equality and the passion for freedom which together make up the ancestral faith of American democracy.

Why is it always the defenders of injustice and inequality who cry out against the use of force to bring about change? For it is force they are themselves defending: the force of habit, the force of custom, the force of poor laws and of corrupt institutions. Against this combination of forces there must be brought another and opposing set of forces: the force of conviction, the force of aroused public opinion, the force of responsible government, the force of law.

And why is it, finally, that the means test of "exemplary conduct" always fall upon the victims of oppression, exclusion and discrimination rather than upon the perpetrators? Whose conduct is it that most needs to be challenged and examined? Who is it that should be placed on trial in this case? Is it the blind or is it the men of short vision and little faith, the obsolete custodians of the lighthouse and the sheltered shop, who seek to defend their vested interest by subsidizing the ghost of the helpless blind man?

Through all the years and decades of our existence as an organized movement, for all our splendid success in gaining allies and winning public support, we have faced the persistent opposition of those whom we may call the "hard-core" custodians. The main thrust of their attack upon us has always been that blind people are not ready for equality--not prepared for the burden of freedom--not strong enough to stand upright and walk alone down the main streets of society.

To this denial of equality by the agencies, the organized blind reply: we are not only equal to you--we are equal to your challenge.

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