Pumping Gas and Reaching for the Fans

by J. Webster Smith

From the Editor: Dr. J.W. Smith is first vice president of the NFB of Ohio and Associate Professor in the School of Communication Studies at Ohio University. In the following story he recounts an important moment in the life of every blind person--the moment when we face the unrelenting fact of blindness. When the individual is secure enough to accept that truth and make it simply a part of who he or she is, not apologizing, not making excuses, but also not waving the fact like a flag, that person is on the high road to maturity and independence. Here is J.W.'s story of discovery and acceptance:

I was born to a typical black family in a predominantly black neighborhood on the south side of Chicago. When I was born, I could see out of only one eye because of glaucoma. At the age of three I had a terrible accident, which caused me to lose the sight in my so-called good eye. I was raised by my grandparents, who had migrated from Memphis, Tennessee, in the mid fifties to the south side of Chicago in search of the promised land--better jobs, better living conditions, and better overall opportunities.

My grandfather Carl and my grandmother Sarah were entrepreneurial in that my grandmother worked as a hairstylist in several large beauty shops on the north side of Chicago, and my grandfather worked usually physically intensive jobs in the trucking and the baking industries. They were two very different people. My grandmother Sarah was a no-nonsense, extremely take-charge individual whose view of her blind grandson was that he could be whatever he wanted to be, and she would do whatever it took to make that possible.

In many ways this was the attitude of my grandfather as well, but his response to me was somewhat more schizophrenic. For example, sometimes he would not allow me to assist him lifting heavy furniture, but other times he walked into my bedroom and, upon seeing me sitting in the dark, said something like, "Why don't you turn on the lights so you can see better in here?" He had honestly forgotten that I could not see. This was a pattern he repeated often in his life.

We are all products of our environment, and as a child my environment was shaped by the attitudes of my grandparents and by my neighborhood as well. And what a neighborhood it was. In my block alone we had lawyers, doctors, bankers, school principals, and Chicago police officers. I remember what a wonderful, safe place that neighborhood was. The sounds and smells were a delight to the senses. As was the case in many Chicago neighborhoods, the houses were so close together that you could almost reach out of your bedroom window and touch the house next door. You could hear almost everything going on in your neighbors' homes, and of course you could smell the delicious aromas wafting from their kitchens. I can still remember those festive summer days: Memorial Day, Fourth of July, and Labor Day with their fragrances of ribs, sweet potato pie, greens, and fried chicken wafting on the warm summer breeze from every house along the street. It was wonderful. You wanted to stop at every home for a taste.

In the sixties every neighborhood of this kind had its own barbershop, where the men would gather and talk about whatever interested them. I was too young at the time to recognize or understand the significance of the barber shop. But my neighborhood included one other gathering place for the men, one other rite-of-passage location: my grandfather's gas station. In 1965 or '66 my grandfather decided to buy a gas station. At the same time my grandmother built and began operating a restaurant. They were both demonstrating their entrepreneurial strength; one was cooking and one was pumping gas and fixing cars.

The gas station was about a block from my home, so I enjoyed walking there, always without a cane, feeling proud of myself. You see, my family's intention was to downplay my blindness. In fact our goal was to make people say, "Oh, I forgot that he was blind." Little did I know how destructive that attitude was to me. I consistently ran around the neighborhood, rode my bike, and did all kinds of things without using a cane or any kind of appropriate alternative skills.

One of my fondest memories is of walking down to my grandfather's gas station, especially on Saturdays, and smelling the gas; I still love that smell. I remember hearing the sound of the tools as my grandfather worked in the body shop, hearing the bell ring when a car drove in, and playing with the candy machine, trying to get more candy than a quarter would dispense.

Sometime around the age of seven I said to my grandfather, "I'd like to help you pump gas some time."

In his usual manner he said, "Let's go and check it out." He took me out to the pump and showed me the dials and the controls and let me feel the gas hose. I would stand there with him as the cars came and went. Those were the days of full-service stations, when he routinely pumped the gas, wiped down the windshield, and checked the oil. Gas was only twenty-seven cents a gallon. My grandfather always had trouble finding help, so I volunteered to work with him.

Little by little I increased my assistance to him until we eventually became a great team. Pieces of tape on the dial helped me to know where to turn it, and a certain number of clicks of the pump indicated that a given number of dollars worth had been purchased. If activity at the station got too loud, the tape also helped me to keep track of the number of clicks. This ensured that I would give customers the right amount of gasoline. I would insert the gas hose into the cars while my grandfather wiped the windshield and checked the oil. I became a regular fixture around that gas station. People in the neighborhood used to talk about the blind boy who pumped gas, and they thought it was outstanding, in fact. Things were going well.

My grandfather always collected the money from the customers so that nobody would be tempted to cheat me. This seemed like a smart thing to do. One day, feeling cocky and self-assured, I decided not to wait for my grandfather to collect the money. While he went into the gas station to check on something, I approached the driver of the car and informed him that his gas purchase totaled three dollars. He handed me a five-dollar bill. I had some one dollar bills in my pocket, so I gave him change for the five, and he drove off. When my grandfather returned, he asked me if the man had paid. Beaming with pride and accomplishment, I said, "Sure." But to my dismay I quickly learned that I had been duped. This man was not a friend from the neighborhood. He said he had given me a five dollar bill when in fact it was only a dollar. I had given him two dollars in change. After that incident my grandfather was hesitant to let me help again. I think it also served as a reminder to him that I was really blind, and, although he often tried to pretend I was not blind, that incident made it crystal clear to both of us that I was. My own confidence was shaken by that incident, and I learned a valuable lesson that day. I also learned something about my grandfather. Sometimes he treated me as if I weren't blind and was proud of that fiction. Other times he would do something painfully obvious to remind me that I was blind.

Throughout my life I have had similar experiences. Eventually I realized that it was respectable to be blind and stopped trying to be someone I was not. I am now married and have a family of my own. My wonderful wife Regina and I have two beautiful daughters, who in many ways remind me of my grandparents.

My older daughter Ebony is no-nonsense, very serious, and in many ways reminds me of my grandmother Sarah. My younger daughter Joshelyn reminds me of my grandfather and the way he watched out for me. Our house has several ceiling fans, which can be operated by a wall switch or a pull chain attached directly to the fan. Often, as I reach for the chain on the fan Joshelyn reminds me, "Watch out, Daddy! You'll cut yourself! You'll hurt yourself because you know you can't see." Her repeated warnings remind me of my days of pumping gas in my grandfather's gas station.

Today it pleases me to say that, as a result of being a member of the National Federation of the Blind, I don't have to pretend that I can see. I don't have to pretend that I am not blind or pretend to be someone I am not. I am blind and very proud of who I am. I can't imagine traveling through life without my cane, and I am not as trusting of others, especially about money transactions, as my gas station experience indicates. Sometimes it takes a humbling experience to bring us to the realization that we don't have all the answers, nor should we try to have them. And furthermore, isn't it interesting the way those little incidents can teach us some big, valuable lessons about life and coexisting with our fellow human beings.

I have now been teaching speech communication at the university level for over twenty years. I have met thousands of students, and in those years of teaching in the classroom I've only had one incident in which I thought that some students attempted to take advantage of my blindness. I addressed the issue immediately, and it has never happened again. After joining the NFB in 1990, I soon realized that I could be myself and that people were people, meaning that they might try to pull the wool over some sighted person's eyes as well as mine. Recently I spent an entire day with my daughter Joshelyn, and it is clear now that she fully understands that, although Daddy is blind, he is quite capable of taking care of himself and her. And, by the way, she no longer frets when I reach to turn off the ceiling fan.

I am not visually impaired; the NFB has taught me that I am blind. So whether it's pumping gas or reaching for the fans, I live my life with confidence. Things will inevitably happen that remind me and those around me that, yes, I'm blind, but that's okay.

[PHOTO/CAPTION: Kevan Worley]