

**Blindness: Of Visions and Vultures**

An Address Delivered By Kenneth Jernigan
President, National Federation of the Blind
At the Banquet of the Annual Convention
Los Angeles, July 8, 1976

Behold a king took forth his three sons to judge their fitness to govern the kingdom, and they stopped by a field, where a vulture sat in the branches of a dead tree. And the king said to the oldest son, "Shoot—but first tell me what you see."

And the son replied: "I see the earth and the grass and the sky . . ."

And the king said, "Stop! Enough!" and he said to the next son, "Shoot—but first tell me what you see."

And the son replied, "I see the ground and a dead tree with a vulture sitting in the branches . ."

And the king said, "Stop! Enough!" and he said to his youngest son, "Shoot—but first tell me what you see."

And the young man replied, his gaze never wavering, "I see the place where the wings join the body." And the shaft went straight—and the vulture fell.

Yes, a fable. But also a moral—a reminder—a commitment.

Last year on July 1st (ironically, the very day of the opening of our convention) the news commentator Paul Harvey made a national radio broadcast. Entitled "Not All Equal," it said:

"When are we going to stop deluding ourselves about 'equality'? A pitiful problem has developed where our Federal and state governments try to enforce equal job opportunities for the handicapped. Of course it can't be done. Frequently the handicapped are turned down for jobs without being told why. The why may involve higher insurance rates, or installation of special signals for the deaf or blind.

"Let me confide," he continued, "that politicians and the news media—where a concern is humanitarian—rarely dare speak out against the poor, the deprived, the unlovely, or the imperfect. However impractical the pretense—these thought leaders must continue to pretend that we are all equal. When, in fact, of course, no two of us are.

Harvey rested his case with a quotation from the British author C. S. Lewis:

"No man who says, 'I'm as good as you are' believes it. He wouldn't say it if he did. The St. Bernard never says it to the toy dog, nor the scholar to the dunce, nor the employable to the bum, nor the pretty woman to the plain. The claim to equality is made only by those who feel themselves to be in some way inferior. What it expresses is precisely the itching, smarting, writhing awareness of an inferiority which the patient refuses to accept."

So declared Paul Harvey, and the network carried his message to millions. If the problem we confront comes not from misconceptions and discrimination but from the very nature of our condition—from our blindness—then we should not fight it but face it. It will do us no good to complain or whimper, nor will it help to be bitter. Facts are facts, and they should be dealt with as such—straightforward and to the point.

If the Harvey thesis is right, we have made a tragic mistake in organizing at all. From a handful in 1940, the National Federation of the Blind has grown to its present size of more than fifty thousand members. The reason for the growth is simple. It is our philosophy, and what that philosophy promises. The Federation is based on the proposition that the principal problem of blindness is not the blindness itself but the mistaken notions and ideas about blindness which are held by the general public. We of the Federation believe that the blind (being part of the broader culture) tend to see themselves as others see them. Accepting the mistaken public attitudes, we help those attitudes become reality. Moreover, we believe that the governmental and private service agencies are also victims of the same misconceptions and stereotypes and that they make their voluminous studies, plan their programs, and custodialize their clients, not (as they claim) from professional expertise and knowledge but from ignorance and prejudice, absorbed from the general culture. Finally, we believe that when we as blind people accept the second-class role assigned to us by the agencies and the public, we do it because of social conditioning, not because of correct information or necessity. We do it because of fable, not fact.

This is what the National Federation of the Blind is all about. It is why we organized. It is why we continue. It explains our actions and our behavior—why we intend to speak for ourselves, why we demand a voice in the programs affecting us, and why we insist that only persons chosen by us presume to speak for us. Others cannot do it—even if they are employees or administrators of agencies, even if they claim to be professional experts, and (for that matter) even if they are blind. We speak for ourselves; we do it with our own voice; and we will permit no one else to do it for us. We have always said (and we say today) that we are able to work with the sighted, play with the sighted, and live with the sighted on terms of full equality; and the sighted are capable of accepting us as equals and partners.

Yet, if the Paul Harvey thesis is true, our whole philosophy is a lie. The National Federation of the Blind is not only useless—it is downright destructive; for it promises a future which is impossible to realize and beckons with a dream which can never come true. If the Harvey thesis "tells it like it is," let us repent of our folly, disband our movement, and apologize for the trouble we have caused. Let us take whatever charity and kindness society offers. Let us go our way in acceptance and resignation—and let us do it alone; for there will be no need for concerted action, no purpose in pretending we are equals.

But, of course, the Paul Harvey thesis is not true. Everything in us rejects it. All of our experience denies it. The facts refute it. It is the very kind of blatant ignorance which called the Federation into being in the first place and which still continues to poison the public mind. We want no strife or confrontation, but we will do what we have to do. We are simply no longer willing to be second-class citizens. They tell us that there is no discrimination—that the blind are not a minority. But we know who we are, and we will never go back. The vulture sits in the branches of a dead tree, and we see where the wings join the body.

As has always been the case, our principal problem is still lack of understanding on the part of the public. Some of the misconceptions we confront are overt; some are subtle. Some are deadly; others simply ridiculous. Several months ago I received a letter from a man in Missouri:

Dear Sir," he said. "There is a case here of a blind girl around twenty years of age who has been awfully mistreated. I am only a friend to her and her mother. I couldn't be yellow dog enough to make love to a Blind and then try to lie out of it and blame somebody else."

Beneath the crudity, that letter speaks with terrible eloquence, calling up the anguish of the centuries. It spotlights the problem which we the blind must face. That problem is not, as Paul Harvey seems to think, centered in questions such as our need for special signals or the inability of employers to hire us because their insurance rates might go up. Rather, it deals with such basics as the refusal to let us compete (with no favors asked) for jobs we are perfectly well able to fill, denial of our right to equal treatment under the law, arbitrary rejection (without reason) of the notion that we can function as competent human beings, and abridgment of our dignity as persons.

The discriminations against us are not imaginary, but real—not exceptional but commonplace. The proof is overwhelming and irrefutable. It is illustrated, for instance, in two recent court cases. In one a mother was threatened with the loss of her child, on the grounds that, as the judge put it, she "is industrially blind, and does not have the ability to care for the child." In the other case a married couple was declared unfit to adopt a male child because, in the words of the husband, it was "felt that a boy could not relate to me because of my blindness." It need only be added that hundreds of blind mothers are successfully caring for their offspring every day and that adoption of children by blind parents has occurred repeatedly with no problem. In fact, when the adoption case in question was successfully concluded (after considerable conflict with the judge), the boy had no trouble at all relating to his blind father. Yet, they tell us that the problem is in us, not society—that there is no discrimination and that the blind are not a minority. But we know who we are, and we will never go back. The vulture sits in the branches of a dead tree, and we see where the wings join the body.

Last year the American Legion Auxiliary of Oregon prohibited a blind girl (Donna Bell by name) from taking her place as a duly elected delegate to the annual Oregon Girls State observance. The rejection was made on grounds that (as a blind girl) she could not be "physically fit." This arbitrary ruling was subsequently reversed at the insistence of Governor Tom McCall, who said of Donna that "her leadership, character, honesty, scholarship, cooperativeness, and her physical fitness qualify her to be here." She attended; she was accepted by her peers; and she performed without problem or incident.

In September of 1975 the New Orleans Times Picayune featured the headline: "Blind Children Hate Food, Must Be Force Fed." The article which followed quoted a staff member of a Louisiana institution for the blind and handicapped as saying: "A blind child would starve to death if you didn't force him to eat . . . they hate food." Those of you attending this banquet can judge that one for yourselves. It has been my experience that we who are blind stow away about as much food, with about as much gusto as anybody else. But Paul Harvey would probably tell us that our objection to such nonsense about our eating habits, only proves that we are "patients," expressing the "itching, smarting, writhing awareness of an inferiority which we refuse to accept." Yet, they tell us that there is no discrimination--that the blind are not a minority. But we know who we are, and we will never go back. The vulture sits in the branches of a dead tree, and we see where the wings join the body,

The exclusions and discriminations are, of course, not limited to any geographic area, any age group, or any particular type of situation. They occur anywhere and everywhere. Witness the episode of the drugstore proprietor in Matawan, New Jersey, who informed a blind customer that he should use the back door since the front of the building is mostly glass. When the customer persisted in entering through the front door, like any other first-class citizen, he was bluntly ordered to go around to the back door or never come to the store again. In other words knuckle under or stay out.

To be sure, this is an extreme case. We are not so often thrown out as put down. Recently I received a letter from Junerose Killian, one of our leaders from Connecticut, in which she related the following:

"The other day, when I was picked up for my class in Transactional Analysis, . . . the priest whom we also picked up inquired of the minister who was driving the car: 'What clinic are we taking her to?' Of course, he automatically assumed that I must be a charity case, and he was astonished to find that I was one of his colleagues in the class."

This letter from Connecticut (this drama in microcosm) symbolizes the attitude of the ages. It refutes Paul Harvey. It says in graphic and unequivocal terms who we are, why we have organized, what we must accomplish, what the public-at-large must learn, and what those who knowingly and deliberately obstruct our path are invited to do—and where they can go. It is a sermon in miniature, a blueprint for Federationism.

Shortly after our convention last year Patti Jacobson, who is one of the Federation's student leaders, responded to a want ad which appeared in the Lakewood, Colorado Sentinal. She tells it this way:

"I called to inquire about the job and was told to come on Tuesday for an interview. The ad indicated that the job was for telephone ticket sales, but no other information was given. I arrived at the office and was told to speak with Joe Chapman. Upon noticing that I was blind, he immediately said that I could not take this job because there were cards with names and addresses on them, which I could not read. I offered to get the cards brailled. I offered to have a reader come and read the cards. Each suggestion I made was either ignored, or answered rudely. When he began to see that my suggestions were valid, he started making irrelevant excuses such as: 'Many times these businessmen make excuses, and you have to know what to say to them,' and 'I give directions at the beginning of each day, and you would have to digest them.' I ask you, what does blindness or sight have to do with following directions—using one's ears and mind to listen and think? He later said that he didn't have time to spend with me individually. He never did say what he would have to do for me that he does not have to do for the other employees. When I asked him what he does for the others (I was going to point out that he would do just the same for me, no more, no less), he rudely said, 'That isn't any of your business.'

"He was even further demeaning by saying, 'Believe me, I understand; I've been down and out, too.' He still clings to the old notion that all blind persons are down and out. After some discussion (I was trying to find out more about the job, explain my qualifications and capabilities, and make suggestions, and Mr. Chapman was interrupting), he finally told me to leave. When I would not, because I still had not been interviewed, he threatened to call the police. I had come down there for an interview, and he would not grant me that right."

That is what happened to Patti Jacobson—not in another century or another decade but less than a year ago. It was occurring in the same month that Paul Harvey was making his broadcast. Did her demand for equal treatment prove, as Harvey would apparently contend, that she was inferior and knew it--that she was only feeling the "itching, smarting, writhing awareness" of second-class status which she (the patient) refused to accept? Or did her demand prove the exact opposite? She was not asking for special equipment or special concessions. She was only asking for the opportunity to try, the chance to fail or succeed on her own merit: equal treatment, no favors asked. Yet, they tell us that there is no discrimination—that the blind are not a minority. But we know who we are, and we will never go back. The vulture sits in the branches of a dead tree, and we see where the wings join the body.

It is bad enough when the uncomprehending public believes we are children or patients, but it is pitifully worse when we believe it ourselves—conditioned by the old assumptions and brainwashed by the ancient myths. Listen to this self-description by a blind man in Japan, taken from a Japanese book entitled How Can I Make What I Cannot See?:

"If you lose something as big as your eyes," he says, "then you're not so greedy about the rest of the world anymore. If you're not greedy, if you have very few desires, then don't you think that in the end you have become much richer? Since I've lost my eyesight, I have found I want very little. My wife guides me around hand in hand. I don't spend much money. I hear lots of music I never heard before, and I don't have to witness horrible incidents. Thus, I have great peace of mind. Doesn't my life sound richer?"

"This," he concludes, "is what we call the blind man's heaven." The worst of it is that these remarks were made in the course of a lecture to young blind students on what the speaker called the "positive virtues of blindness."

He is, indeed, a cripple; and he will probably bring his students to the same condition—not because of blindness but because of society and what it has taught him to believe and become. The tragedy cries out for justice. Yet, Paul Harvey tells us (and the network carries his message) that the problem is not in society, but in us.

Barbara Pierce is one of the leaders of our movement in Ohio. She is in this audience tonight. She is an attractive, capable, busy, normal woman—married to a college professor, raising a family, and minding her own business. She works to change misconceptions where she finds them and recognizes the value of united action on the part of the blind.

A few months ago the Public Relations Committee of the National Federation of the Blind held a seminar, and Barbara attended.

"The PR seminar was very useful," she said, "and raised the level of Federation spirit in the group. I thought you would be interested in a little piece of public education I managed during a cab ride on Sunday. Inspired by the conference, I decided to engage in some spreading of the word. I learned to my consternation that the cab driver had always assumed that blind girls, as he put it, 'got fixed by doctors so that they would have nothing to worry about in that way.' I didn't feel equal to inquiring whether the problem was that blind girls couldn't handle the emotion or the children. I set him straight, but I learned that you never know when you will meet extraordinary ideas."

As President of the Federation I receive many letters. Some are brief, and some are long. They cover the entire spectrum of human experience—tragedy, humor, love, hate, joy, sorrow, pathos, and fear. Through the years I have shared many of these letters with you in articles, releases, and speeches. Yet, I have never received a communication which touched me more deeply or spoke more eloquently than the one I am about to read to you. It says it all and "tells it like it is." For obvious reasons I have changed the names. It was written at the time of last year's Convention. Here it is:

"DEAR MR. JERNIGAN: I am a fully sighted woman, age 23, who is dating a blind man, age 23. You may know him—his name is Jim Smith.

"When I first joined NFB, I did so because I wanted to better understand the concerns and problems that Jim had. I knew there were problems and discriminations, but I never knew they were so overt until just recently.

Both of us are college educated and now hold very good jobs. Jim works for the Social Security Commission and I teach blind children. My philosophy in teaching is that they are just children and need the same things that all children do. I believe that in order to teach them, I must look at them first as children and second as children who need special training in certain areas. If I can't do this, the only thing I'll teach them is how to be physically handicapped and blind. Because of my job, I had begun to understand why Jim was so angry with public attitudes. I, too, have experienced anger toward people who (when they see my children) shake their heads and say, 'Poor pitiful little thing,' and then say, 'But he's so happy' as if the only thing he's capable of doing is being pleasant. My children are happy. They also are smart, sweet, cranky, mean, irritable, etc. They're all the things all children are. They get discipline when they need it and praise when they earn it. They are not told how wonderful and brave they are. They are praised for accomplishments and praised for trying as well. I tell my children that I will never ask them to do anything that I don't think they can do. I expect them to achieve and they expect achievement, too. I think this is the only way a blind child can grow up to be a worthwhile adult. I don't want my children to think that every little achievement is earth shattering. All my children are proud of their accomplishments and they should be—they worked hard for them; but I think it's insulting to the child to go on and on about how wonderful he is, To me it implies that you think the child is stupid to begin with and you never had enough faith in him to think he could do it in the first place. I am learning Braille now and Jim is helping me. He praises and encourages, but he doesn't act as if I've done something out of the ordinary. I think that is much more of a compliment. I feel as if he knew I could do it. If he made a big deal out of it, I would think that he thinks I am somewhat feebleminded and that it really is something for such a dimwit as me to learn Braille.

"I feel anger toward parents who baby their children and never permit them or make them do anything. All children fall down, fall out of swings, bump their heads, etc., and the children I teach have a right to fall down, too. I know it's hard for some of these children to do certain things, but they have to try. When you get these children in a classroom they're almost impossible to teach. They have been made to feel that they don't have to do anything, and they'll grow up into adults who think the world owes them a favor. Another group of parents I detest are the ones who are ashamed of their children. These children are also hard to teach. They feel that they're ugly and unloved. They stay angry and hurt all the time because they have been made to dislike themselves. I believe that you have to learn to like and accept yourself first before you can expect anyone else to. I love my children, and I've known anger and hurt because of various reactions to them. The reaction has never been cruel—pitying and sickening, yes—but not cruel.

"But this weekend I saw discrimination and cruelty, and for the first time I fully understood just how important NFB really is. In my experience I have come in contact with the pitying reaction: 'Poor pitiful little thing. It must be awful to go through life like that'; the brave and wonderful syndrome—everything the child does is somehow beyond the realm of human expectations: 'My, aren't you smart!' The child is always described as 'special' and 'brave'; nobody expects him to be able to do anything, and when he does, praise is grossly out of proportion. Rejection: the child is ignored or avoided.

"Jim and I have experienced a mixture of all three. Friday night, Jim and I had some people over for a cookout. I was in the kitchen fixing baked beans and deviled eggs. Jim came in and asked if there was something he could do. I asked him to slice the tomatoes. (I never meant to start a riot. I only wanted the stupid tomatoes cut up.) One of the other men came in the kitchen and said, 'But, he might cut his finger.' Jim told him that he had cut tomatoes before and was sure he could do it again. He did so and soon had a nice plateful. The other man, who stayed to watch, then took Jim by one arm and the plate of tomatoes in the other to show everybody what he had done. (A cerebral palsied child who has just learned to walk doesn't get that much praise.)

Jim then proceeded to walk out back and light the charcoal. The same man said, 'Are you going to let him do that?' I shrugged and said, 'Why not?' The man jumped up and ran out back. When he came back, all he could talk about was how remarkable Jim was.

"Everyone calmed down and we began to eat. Then it started to rain. Jim got up and said to me, 'Are the car windows down?' They were, so Jim proceeded to run outside to roll them up—without his cane. The other man jumped up and grabbed Jim's cane. He said, 'Does Jim need this?' I said, 'No. Don't worry so about him. He's fine.' Jim came back and we started to eat again. Jim wanted some more beans, so he went to the stove and got them. The comment then was, 'That is just wonderful.' What is so wonderful about dipping beans? Jim told me later (after they left) that he felt like taking a bow after everything he had done. I don't think he did anything out of the ordinary, and neither does he. The whole night he felt as if he were on exhibit, and I was experiencing a strong desire to stand up and scream, 'He's not stupid, and he's not a child. He's not doing anything terrific, so shut up!'

It didn't end there. Later on that night Jim and I made a trip to the hospital emergency room. He had got into some poison ivy, and it had spread to his eyes. The nurse on duty was horrible. She didn't think he was remarkable—she thought him to be blind, deaf, mute, stupid, and incapable of doing anything. She asked me, 'What is his name? Where does he live? Do his eyes itch?' I was offended and said, 'I think he can answer his own questions.' Jim calmly told her what she wanted to know, but I could tell he was mad.

"When he went in for treatment, a man came over to me and said, 'You are so wonderful to be kind to that poor man.' I tried to explain that I felt lucky to have a man like Jim. (And I am. He's the best thing that ever happened to me. When we're together, I feel happy and secure and protected. I love him.) After I finished trying to explain to this man our relationship, he said, 'You mean you're dating him? Why would a pretty little thing like you want him? He's blind. 'Then I said something I should not have said. 'Yes, he is blind, but he's more of a man than you'll ever be.' Jim came out of treatment then, and we left.

"Saturday afternoon some more friends came over, and we all went roller skating. It was fun and we all had a good time. When we got back to Jim's apartment, one of the girls said to me, 'You really are good to Jim. He needs somebody like you.' I told her that I needed him, too. She then asked me if when we were alone was he able to do all the things that other men do. You can imagine my shock at such a question. I assured her that he was.

"By Sunday, I was so overwhelmed with all that had happened I couldn't even think. Jim knew something was wrong. I told him that I was okay. He had some cans that needed to be labeled, so I started doing that on his brailler. I was putting a label on a can of pineapple juice. I spelled it wrong. Jim said he had never seen it written that way. So I cried. He looked utterly shocked that I was crying over pineapple juice. So he said, 'I'm going to ask you one time what's wrong, and if you don't want to tell me that's okay, but I'd like to be able to help you with it.' So I told him.

"I told him that I didn't think it was fair, and that I loved him too much to watch him put up with all that mess. Jim is a sweet, loving, compassionate, intelligent, sexy, desirable man; and I love him, and it hurts for everybody else to treat him like some kind of freak. He's got such a good self-image. And I don't want that changed. He said, 'Honey, take it easy. You'll get used to it.' No, I won't. I am not going to get used to seeing him insulted.

"I just can't understand what difference it makes whether he sees or not. One of our friends recently said to me, 'You really are an exceptional person that you can accept Jim.' I said that I really wasn't, and that I just didn't think about it. She said, 'Oh, it must be hard to forget a thing like that.' I told her that I didn't try to forget it, I just didn't think about it—the same as you don't think about the fact that someone has brown hair. It really makes very little difference what color his hair is, and it's the same way with Jim. I know he can't see, and I don't try to forget about it, but I don't really think about it. She couldn't understand. She said, 'But it is so obvious.' I told her that she stopped looking when she saw the glasses—and that she couldn't see the man behind them, and that she was 'blinder' than Jim is. One friend—gone.

"The real killer comes when people find out that I'm a special education teacher, I don't think I need to tell you what they say,then.

"Jim stayed with me half of the night. He talked to me and listened to me cry. I hope you understand that I wasn't crying because I feel sorry for him but because I love him, and it hurts me when people do such horrible things.

"If you have any suggestions as to what to say to these people, I would appreciate hearing them.

"Sincerely yours,"

How could I respond to such a letter! Its poignant feeling and depth of understanding left nothing to be added—no room for elaboration. It said all there was to say. I called the writer and told her she had strengthened my faith in humanity. I told her the Federation would never quit until the put-downs and denials were finished. I said I felt honored to walk by her side in the march to freedom.

That march has been long, and the end is not yet in sight. The road stretches on for decades ahead, and it stretches backward to the nightmare past of slavery and pain. Yes, I say slavery, and I mean exactly what I say. I use the word deliberately, for no black was ever forced with more absolute finality to the sweat of the cane fields or driven with more terrible rigor to the heat of the cotton rows than we have been forced to the broom shops and backwaters and driven to the rocking chairs and asylums. Never mind that the custody was kindly meant and that more often than not the lash was pity instead of a whip. It was still a lash, and it still broke the heart and bruised the spirit. It shriveled the soul and killed the hope and destroyed the dream. Make no mistake! It was slavery—cruel, degrading, unmitigated slavery. It cut as deep as the overseer's whip and ground as hard as the owner's boot.

But that was the past--another time and another era. This is a new day. It is true that the vestiges of slavery still linger. The drugstore owner still sends us to the back door, and the courts still tell our women that they cannot keep their children and our men that they cannot be suitable fathers. We are told that we hate food, that we cannot go to Girls State, and that we cannot be interviewed for a job. It is automatically assumed that we are headed for the clinic instead of the classroom; the cab driver thinks that all blind girls must be "fixed"; and the sighted woman weeps for the pain and humiliation of the man she loves. Some of our own people grovel and simper about "the positive virtues of blindness," and Paul Harvey sums it up by telling us that our claim to equality is simply the "itching, smarting, writhing awareness" of the inferiority which we (as patients) know we have but refuse to accept. Doubtless there is not one of us (sighted or blind) who has totally escaped unscarred from the conditioning. We must wait until at least the next generation for that. Many of the blind have not yet fully understood and have, thus, not joined the movement. Some of our local affiliates are chapters in name only, waiting for the touch of a leader and the sound of the call to awaken. Much of our work is still ahead—yearning, challenging, needing, and waiting to be done.

All of this is true, but we must see it in perspective. It is not that our situation is worse or our problems greater today than in former times. Far from it. It is only that we have become aware and that our level of expectation has risen. In other days we would hardly have noticed, and even if we had, we would not have been organized to communicate or prepared to resist. We have it better now than we have ever had it before, and tomorrow is bright with promise.

As we make our advance and set our daily skirmish lines we come to the fight with gladness--not with cringing or fear. We come with a song on our lips and joy in our hearts, for we have seen the vision of hope and felt the power of concerted action and self-belief. In the conflict ahead we will take casualties. We know it, and we are prepared for it. Whatever the price, we will pay it. Whatever the cost, we will bear it. The stakes are too high and the promise too certain to let it be otherwise. We are organized and moving forward. We will be free—and the sighted will accept us as partners and equals. We know who we are, and we will never go back. The vulture sits in the branches of a dead tree, and we see where the wings join the body. Our gaze will not waver. Our shaft will go straight to the mark, and the vulture will fall. My brothers and my sisters, the future is ours. Come! Join me on the barricades, and we vwill make it come true!

s