**Blindness—The Myth and the Image**

An Address Delivered by Kenneth Jernigan  
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At the Banquet of the Annual Convention  
Minneapolis, Minnesota, July, 1970

It is not only individual human beings who suffer from what the psychologists call an "identity crisis"—that is, a confusion and doubt as to who and what they are. So do groups of human beings—communities, associations, minorities, even whole nations. And so it is—in this year of space if not of grace—with the blind, organized and unorganized. We are, as I believe, in the midst of our own full-fledged identity crisis. For the first time in centuries—perhaps in a millennium—our collective identity is in question. For the first time in modern history there are anquish and argument, not only as to what we are, but as to what we may become. The traditional images and myths of blindness, which had been taken for granted and for gospel throughout the ages, both by the seeing and by the blind themselves, are now abruptly and astonishingly under attack.

Who is it that dares thus to disturb the peace and upset the applecart of traditional definitions? The aggressors are here in this room. They are you and I. They are the organized blind of the National Federation. It is we who have brought on our own identity crisis—by renouncing and repudiating our old mistaken identity as the "helpless blind." It is we who are demanding that we be called by our rightful and true names: names such as competent, normal, and equal. We do not object to being known as blind, for that is what we are. What we protest is that we are not also known as people, for we are that, too. What we ask of society is not a change of heart (our road to shelter has always been paved with good intentions), but a change of image—an exchange of old myths for new perspectives.

Of all the roadblocks in the path of the blind today, one rises up more formidably and threateningly than all others. It is the invisible barrier of ingrained social attitudes toward blindness and the blind—attitudes based on suspicion and superstition, on ignorance and error, which continue to hold sway in men's minds and to keep the blind in bondage.

But new attitudes about the blind have come into being. They exist side by side with the old and compete with them for public acceptance and belief. Between the two there is vast distance and no quarter. As an example consider the following quotation: "The real problem of blindness is not the loss of eyesight. The real problem is the misunderstanding and lack of information which exist. If a blind person has proper training and if he has opportunity, blindness is only a physical nuisance."1 That is a quotation from an administrator in the field of work with the blind. Here is another quotation from another official: "We must not perpetuate the myth that blindness is not a tragedy. For each person who has learned to live an active, fruitful life despite blindness, there are thousands whose lives have lost all meaning ... A blind person can't be rehabilitated as a crippled person may be. You can give a [crippled] man mobility, but there is no substitute for sight."2

Those two quotations represent the considered judgments of two professionals in the field of services to the blind. The statements are squarely contradictory. If one of them is true, the other must be false. Which are we to believe? There is no doubt as to which of the two would win a public opinion poll. The more popular by far is the second—the one that repudiates as a shocking fiction the very idea that blindness is anything less than a total tragedy.

Let us take note in passing of the peculiar tone of finality and conviction in which this second statement—the "hard line" on blindness—is expressed. I believe there is a striking irony in it which all of us would do well to recognize, for it conveys the distinct impression that there is something cruel and unfair to blind people in the mere-nuisance concept of blindness, as opposed to the evidently kinder and fairer portrayal of the condition as an overwhelming disaster.

The difference between these two perspectives on blindness is not merely that one is optimistic and the other pessimistic. There is more to it than that. The crucial difference is that one view minimizes the consequences of the physical disability and actively rejects the notion that blind persons are somehow "different." Its emphasis is upon the normality of the blind, their similarity and common identity with others, their potential equality, and their right to free and full participation in all the regular pursuits and pastimes of their society. The accent here, in a word, is affirmative: it is upbeat, dynamic, rehabilitative. It makes much of opportunity and capacity and does not dwell on deprivation and disability.

By contrast the other point of view—which we might call the "disaster" concept—deliberately maximizes the effects of blindness: physically, psychologically, emotionally, and socially. Its emphasis is upon what is missing rather than what can be done— upon lacks and losses rather than upon capacities and strengths. Blindness, these spokesmen are inclined to tell us, is a kind of "dying;"3 and those who are blind (so we are repeatedly informed) are abnormal—they are different—they are dependent—they are deprived—they are inferior—and above all, they are unfortunate. The accent here, in a word, is negative. It is downbeat, pessimistic, professionally condescending, frequently sanctimonious, and ultimately defeatist.

I submit that this disaster concept of blindness is not only a popular opinion among professionals and the public today. It is, with only a little updating and streamlining, the ancient myth of blindness—the classic image of the blind man as a tragic figure. Let me be clear about this use of the term "tragic." In its classical sense, tragedy is not mere unhappiness. It does not refer to accidental misfortune or limited harm, which can sensibly be overcome. Tragedy involves a sentence of doom, a dire destiny, which one can only confront in all its unalterable terror but can never hope to transcend. The sense of tragedy, in short, is the sense of calamity—to which the only appropriate response is resignation and despair. These words of Bertrand Russell convey the mood exactly: "On such a firm foundation of unyielding despair must the soul's habitation henceforth securely be built."

How does the tragic view of blindness find expression in modern society? I would answer that it takes two forms: among the public it takes one form, and among professionals another. On the public and popular side, it tends to be conveyed through images of total dependency and deprivation—images, that is, of the "helpless blind man." A typical recent example occurred on the well-known TV program, "Password," in which a number of contestants take turns guessing at secret words through synonyms and verbal associations. On one such show the key word to be guessed was "cup." The first cue word offered was "tin;" but the guesser failed to make the connection. The next cue word given was "blind"—which immediately brought the response "cup." There you have it: for all our rehabilitation, all our education, and all our progress, what comes to the mind of the man in the street when he thinks of a blind person is the tin cup of the beggar!

Not only to the man in the street—it also comes, with a slight twist, to the mind of the lady in the newspaper advice column. "Dear Ann Landers," read a recent letter to the well-known oracle and advisor by that name: "I lost my sight when I was eight and I have a wife and three children. It's very hard for a blind man to make a living because nobody wants to hire me. So I do the next best thing. I sit on the corner with a cup and sell pencils. We have moved to several different cities and have done all right. In this town two cops have told me that begging is against the law and to get moving. Why should there be a law against a man trying to make a living? My wife is writing this for me and we need a fast answer so please hurry. Signed, Tough Luck."

To which Ann Landers says: "No one needs to beg in America. There are countless welfare organizations who will help you. Write to American Foundation for the Blind. . . ."

That seems at first glance to be a hopeful and constructive suggestion. But take another look: what the lady is suggesting is that the blind man go on welfare—that the only organizations that can help him are welfare agencies! Here is a man who, by his own word, is only trying to make a living. His problem is that no one has hired him and that he has apparently not had adequate training, encouragement, and orientation; so he is making a living the hard way. But, to the lady columnist, his blindness is the problem. It rules him out of the job market and onto the charity rolls. It never even occurs to her that he might seek rehabilitation, or that it might be available to him.

Ann Landers, of course, is not a professional counseling psychologist or social-work specialist. But she might as well be. As it happens, there is no clear line of demarcation between the popular stereotypes about blindness and the supposedly more learned conceptions of many professionals in work with the blind. A remarkable illustration of assumptions shared in both worlds is to be found in the unbelievable shenanigans of a fascinating philanthropic organization called the Stevens Brothers Foundation of St. Paul, Minnesota. In a circular letter sent to "all State Supervisors of the Blind" (note that wording), under recent date, the director of the Foundation wrote as follows:

Our activities for aid to the Blind for next year will consist of sending samples of some of the following items for which we have made application for Patents, Registered Copyrights and Trademarks.

Templet—Giant Embossed Telephone Dial for the Blind

E-Z-I Dropper and Washer for the Blind

Goldletring-Silverletring on Dark Background for the Industrial Blind

Emergency Whistle for the Blind (and to protect women in emergencies)

Nonskid Barrosette Icegrips for the Blind

Koffeemugg for the Blind

Solesatisfier for Aching Feet of the Blind

National Unifon-n for the Blind

Organization to Investigate the Attributes and Skills of Blind

Flying Bats Insofar as they may be applicable to the Blind

Rockerwheel Krutch for the Crippled, Lame and Blind

My Lord and Ladyships Personal Mechanical Valet for the Blind

Eskeymo Bonnet

Buttonon Necktie for the Blind

Children's Fabrique for Finger Etching—Entertainment—

Commercial Toymakers for the Blind Wraparound Overcoat Tails—Leg Warmers for the Blind [and] Wraparound and Fastenup Muffler Warmer for the Blind.

Pervading this ludicrous if well-intentioned catalog of artificial aids and fantastic gimcracks is the assumption that the tragic plight of the blind leaves them helpless to do anything at all for themselves without a battery of gadgets—not even tie their ties, handle the telephone, lift an ordinary coffee cup, appear in public without a special identifying uniform, walk on icy surfaces or without aching feet—or even walk without a "krutch," such as needed by the crippled and lame!

If any doubt remains concerning the attitude of the Stevens Brothers toward those whom they seek to help, it is set at rest by the concluding paragraph of their letter: "Our experience has been that we have found those patients who use their Signature and Envelope Addresser Cards learn very quickly how to use the Letteriter and we hope that you have the same success in training your Blind in using these Cards." Blind persons, it would seem, are to be regarded as "patients"—who, despite their dreadful infirmity, "learn very quickly" to operate simple gadgets—that is, "our blind" do so, and it is hoped that "your blind" may be trained to do likewise.

There may be those who would dismiss this rigmarole as merely the work of a harmless crank, not to be taken seriously by anyone in a position of authority or respectability. Would that it were so. But the most astonishing thing about the exploits of the Stevens Brothers of St. Paul is that they have been found acceptable by a high official of the Federal Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. In fact, he recommends that the philanthropists send their materials to the American Foundation for the Blind and the American Printing House for the Blind. And this same official, coincidentally, has maintained on more than one occasion that blindness can not be regarded as an inconvenience but must be faced up to as an unmitigated disaster.

Yet, is it only coincidence that the man who rejects the nuisance-concept in favor of the disaster-concept of blindness should also be the man who finds acceptable the frivolous gimmicks of the Stevens Brothers? Perhaps; but I think not. I believe there is a direct connection between the philosophy and the practice, between the theory and the behavior. Feeling as he does that the blind are truly different—that they are, in the words of a recent article "socially isolated" from others and trapped forever in the tragedy of their dark fate—feeling this, what could be more natural than the idea of filling their empty and separate world with toys and games, with wraparound tails, and funny uniforms?

Nor does this government official stand alone in his acceptance of the work of the Stevens Brothers. A veritable flood of congratulatory letters came to the St. Paul philanthropists both from here and abroad in response to their overtures, and were immediately circulated by the hundreds and thousands to public agencies and government officials throughout the world to add respectability to what otherwise would have appeared as sheer nonsense or fantastic lunacy. Here is a typical letter from a state director of services to the blind: "We shall be very honored, indeed, to act as your agent in distributing these aids to the blind persons in schools and institutions.... Congratulations on your exploration into other possible aids and areas where some aid or benefit could result to lessen the handicap of blindness. Best wishes to you for continued success in your efforts, and may health and happiness be yours in great abundance."

Here is another, from the head of services to the blind in a different state: "We will be happy to participate in the distribution of the material for the blind which you have been sending us.... We feel the material which you so generously are providing will be very beneficial to the blind."

Here is another, from a workshop for the blind in Bombay, India:

"Words are inadequate to express our deep sense of gratitude for your generosity and willing assistance in promoting the cause of the welfare of the blind."

Here is yet another, from the director of the Nak-Tong Revival Home in Pusan, Korea: "Once again the Thanksgiving Season ushered out the Autumn and brings in the Winter, with the turkey steps forward. Furthermore, it's most richest season for us mankind, with poverty averting her head and will not spoil the feast of harvest.... While we who lost touch love again and workers pause to pray, the children and adult patients of the Nak-Tong Revival Home should like to extend their sincere greetings to the benefactors like yourself for their goodwill during the past year."

There are many other letters besides; but none of them, I feel, can top that! Surely all of these professionals, who take such delight in the toys and gadgets of the Stevens Brothers, would subscribe to the philosophy of one of their colleagues, as uttered some years ago! "To dance and sing, to play and act, to swim, bowl and roller- skate, to work creatively in clay, wood, aluminum or tin, to make dresses, to join in group readings or discussions, to have entertainments and parties, to engage in many other activities of one's own choosing—this is to fill the life of any one with the things that make life worth living."4

Let me remind you of the way in which Dr. Jacobus tenBroek, then in his prime as president of the National Federation of the Blind, responded to that statement. In one of his great convention speeches, "[Within the Grace of God](https://nfb.org/Images/nfb/Publications/convent/tb1956.htm)," he quoted the passage and went on to say this: "Are these the things that make life worth living for you? Only the benevolent keeper of an asylum could make this remark—only a person who views blindness as a tragedy which can be somewhat mitigated by little touches of kindness and service to help pass the idle hours but which cannot be overcome. Some of these things may be suitable accessories to a life well filled with other things—a home, a job, and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, for example."5

The point I am seeking to make now is the very same point that Dr. tenBroek was seeking to make then. There are two opposing conceptions of the nature of blindness at large in the world. One of them holds that it is a nuisance, and the other that it is a disaster. I think it is clear that the disaster concept is widespread alike in popular culture and in the learned culture of the professionals. Moreover, I would submit that the concept itself is the real disaster—the only real disaster that we as blind people have to live with—and that when we can overcome this monstrous misconception, we shall ring down the curtain forever on the fictional drama entitled "The Tragedy of Blindness."

In order to emphasize still further the full extent to which the disaster concept—the tragic sense of blindness—prevails among the professionals in our field, let me introduce in evidence another exhibit. It is a comment from overseas by an official of the National Council for the Blind of Ireland. This is what he says of the blind people of his country: "Although the exceptional and stubborn can learn a trade or pursue an education up to university level [note that "up to"] and follow successful careers, such cases are unusual. Since unemployment has always been a factor in our economy, there are not many posts available. We lack the industries with the necessary repetitive machinery on which the blind can safely work."

All that needs to be remarked about that dreary pronouncement is that it heavily reinforces the defeatist notion that blind persons in general (those who are not peculiarly stubborn and exceptional) should give up any idea of pursuing a normal trade or even of attaining an ordinary education, and should resign themselves to the prospect (itself not too likely) that society in its kindness may be willing to set aside enough repetitive and mechanical chores to take care of most of them, in penury and penitence.

If you think this dark picture reflects only the bogs and mists of old Ireland, consider this letter from the Dean of Admissions of Oral Roberts University, of Tulsa, Oklahoma, written not in the last century or even ten years ago but on May 27, 1970, to a blind applicant for admission:

Dear Blank:

We have received your application for admission and are very impressed with the academic record you have established in high school.

In checking your application I notice that you are blind. At this time, ORU does not have the facilities to accommodate blind students. There is a possibility that some type of program will be initiated in future years; however, at this time, I regret that we will be unable to admit you.

If you have any questions, please let me know. We will be praying with you that the Lord will guide and direct you.

Cordially yours ...

There it is again. One's academic record is impressive, says the Dean; ordinarily it would constitute the sole and sufficient evidence of capability. But unfortunately it appears that one is blind; therefore the academic record, however impressive, is suddenly irrelevant, incompetent, and immaterial. For the university, says the Dean, does not have the "facilities" to accommodate blind students—whatever those facilities might be. Never mind that there are not, should not, and need not be any such facilities, any special aids or instruments, anywhere that blind college students matriculate. Someday, says the Dean, there might be "some type of program;" in the meantime, we shall pray that others may possess more faith, hope, and charity than we at Oral Roberts Christian University.

The life of a blind person, in this considered spiritual view, is therefore a life without meaning—just as it is in the secular view of the Stevens Brothers. Fill it with whistles and tricks, wraparound tails and funny uniforms—but do not undertake to enrich it with higher education or imbue it with serious purpose.

To the deans of small faith and their like-minded ilk, to the Landers sisters and the Stevens brothers and their relatives everywhere, we have not progressed at all beyond the outlook of the primitive Mediterranean society, thousands of years ago, among whom it was a common saying that "the blind man is as one dead."

-How are we to reply to these prophets of gloom and doom, who cry havoc and have nothing to offer us but whistles in the dark? We might use logic or theory. We might use history or precept. But the simplest and most effective argument comes from our own experience as blind people. Everything which we are and which we have become rises up to give the lie to the disaster concept of blindness. We, the blind people of this country, are now working as farmers, lawyers, scientists and laborers; as teachers, mechanics, engineers and businessmen. We are now functioning in all of the various professions, trades and callings of the regular community. We do not regard our lives, as we live them on a day-to-day basis, as tragic or disastrous—and no amount of professional jargon or trumped-up theory can make us do so. We know that with training and opportunity we can compete on terms of equality with our sighted neighbors—and that blindness is merely a physical nuisance.

The blind people of yesterday, and the day before yesterday, had little choice but to accept the tragic view of the gloom-and-doom mongers—the prophets of despair. Their horizons were limited to the bounty of charity, and their world was bounded by the sheltered workhouse. At every turn they were reminded of their infirmity; on every occasion they were coaxed into immobility and dependency. It is no wonder that they fulfilled the prophecy of despair; believing it themselves, they made it come true.

But that was another time, another era, another world. We the blind people of today have carried out a revolution, and have won our independence. We have won it by finding our own voice, finding our own direction—and finding our own doctrine. That doctrine may be simply stated: it is that the blind are normal people who can not see. It is that blindness is not a dying—but a challenge to make a new life. It is also that there are none so blind as those who will not see this simple truth.

The blind people of today, in a word, were not born yesterday. We who are blind do not accept the tragic prophecies of a dire fate. We have a rendezvous with a different destiny. The destiny we go to meet is that of integration and equality—of high achievement and full participation—of free movement and unrestricted opportunity in a friendly land which is already beginning to accept us for what we are.

That is where the blind are leading the blind. Let those who would resist or deny that destiny remain behind, imprisoned in their own antique myths and images—while the rest of us move on to new adventure and higher ground.

**FOOTNOTES**

1. Iowa Commission for the Blind, What Is Ihe Iowa Commission For the Blind? Published by the State of Iowa, Des Moines, n.d.

2. Dr. Jules Stein, "Blindness Study Urged by Doctor," New York Times, November 19, 1967, Page 19.

3. Reverend Thomas J. Carroll, Blindness: What It Is, What It Does and How to Live with It (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1961).

4. Philip S. Platt, "Challenges of Voluntary Agencies for the Blind." Paper read at convention of the American Association of Workers for the Blind, June 26, 1951, Page 8.

5. Dr. Jacobus tenbroek, "Within the Grace of God," An Address Delivered at the Banquet of the Annual Convention of the National Federation of the Blind held in San Francisco, July 1, 1956.

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Publication of the  
NATIONAL FEDERATION OF THE BLIND  
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