

THE MAN BORN BLIND: A VARIETY OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

By LAWRENCE GILLICK

THE DISCIPLES pose a startling question to Jesus in the ninth chapter of John's gospel. Seeing a blind man, they ask, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' They seem to equate blindness with sin, or at least to regard one's being blind as punishment for sin. They search for an explanation of his being visited with so dreadful an affliction.

Being blind myself, I have heard my heart ask questions similar to that of the disciples. I was not born blind, but received this 'terrible gift' at the age of eight. Since then I have had people pray over me and medical doctors re-examine me. I have been blessed with Lourdes water and with the relics of martyrs and saints, but now at the age of forty-four I am still blind. I still hear the questions from within and without, trying to reconcile my blindness with God's provident love. The questions come quickly, the answers so much more slowly, but they do indeed come. I attempt to record some of them in these pages.

Recently I travelled through the Badlands National Park in South Dakota. My two companions soon found it impossible to explain to me the natural beauty and awesome ugliness of the rocks and hills and valleys through which we were moving. I have often had experiences like this, of friends trying to describe the colours of mountains, the graceful movements of dancers or the breathtaking agility of basketball players. Their frustration at putting into words the indescribable leads them to say, 'It really does lose something in translation'.

As I am writing, I too sense some frustration in my attempt to put into words the experience of being blind. You would indeed find it frightening to close your eyes and to imagine how it is to

be blind; yet even in that momentary darkness you would know that, if the phone were to ring, you could quickly open your eyes and reach for the receiver. And thus, just as my friends could not explain the terrible beauty of the Badlands, neither can I make you understand my experience of possessing this 'terrible gift'. I do not, therefore, attempt such an impossible task. Instead I write of something that I hope will prove more helpful and closer to your own experience. I am writing about our common blindness and what my physical blindness has taught me about the more universal gifts which God gives to those who acknowledge their own darkness.

Sometimes I have the experience of people avoiding contact with me, and sense that they fear getting too close lest they, too, contract my curse of blindness. Of course it is their fear of offending or insulting me which makes them hurry past, but they are also hurrying past an opportunity to reflect upon their own blindness as well.

My being blind has made it much harder to avoid facing that blindness that afflicts and blesses us all. I still wrestle with it, to be sure, but as I bump into it day after day, escape is harder for me. I have experienced more and more peace when I allow myself to be conquered by my blindness rather than continue my frustrated resistance to it.

Jesus answers the disciples' question that opens chapter nine of John: 'It is not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him'. He speaks to them, and to us, about our own blindness. He puts it quite clearly to the group of reluctant Jews, 'For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind' (Jn 9,39). Jesus tells us to face our blindness that we might see the deeper realities, the divine 'coincidence' of the constantly 'eye-opening' love of God in all the events of our lives. That is what the spiritual life is: a prayerfully living within the natural weakness of our humanity as we allow ourselves to be slowly guided into the enlightened life of the Light. It is a process, not a cure. It is the living honestly within the confines of not seeing clearly.

Insecurity and blindness

We often use the word *see* for the experience of knowing. 'I see', and 'I know', 'Do you see what I mean?' and 'Do you know what I

mean?' are used interchangeably. We can be as terrified of not knowing as of not seeing. Demanding to know can be a terrible form of blindness. We all suffer as the 'twin' of the apostle Thomas who had to see before he would believe. Jesus encourages us instead to be believers, blessed because we have not seen (Jn 20,29).

After thirty-six years of being blind I still experience paralysing fear when I meet the unfamiliar and confusing. I was in Korea a few years ago to direct retreats. I remember my fearful reaction to the noise outside my window on the first morning. The jesuit residence is high on a hill, and I could hear the far-off din of trucks and buses and the ever-present cabs of downtown Seoul. I have heard similar sounds all my life. They are the sounds of chaos and disorientation. They are always both an invitation to adventure and a warning to stay in the safety of the known. I have learned to face my fears and to respond to these invitations by leaving the security of the hilltop and entering into the turmoil and uproar of places like downtown Seoul. In the noise and dizzying movements of such mysteries I have learned to see. If we regard insecurity only as something to avoid or abolish, we are blind. We have failed to accept the invitation to walk upon the waters of our fears.

I have known people who are sad to have become physically blind, but I have known many more who are sad to the point of depression because they are blinded by the need to know and by the fear of the insecure darkness. They dread entering relationships or marriage or other vocational choices they might be offered because they have no evidence of what God might be holding in his other hand. Their need for clarity, then, is ironically a desperate form of blindness. Clarity of vision is so prized; yet in the spiritual life it is a defensive posturing which works towards excluding God's care. The spiritual life is not a 'spectator sport' in which one merely watches how others live in God's care. It is a journey in which we struggle step by step to remove ourselves from protective invulnerability. If we live defending ourselves and refuse to face our darkness, we are living in illusion, and our experience of God's love will be elusive and vicarious.

The english poet John Keats wrote about a quality he called 'negative capability', one which he claimed indicates a person of great achievement. It is present when, confronted with uncertainty, mystery and doubt, one meets them 'without any irritable reaching after fact or reason'.

People growing in the spiritual life are persons who welcome without irritation the mysteries of not knowing, not seeing, but who move and walk and trust nonetheless. The man born blind asked for sight. Jesus responded, 'Go, and wash in the pool of Siloam' (Jn 9, 7), without directly even promising him his sight. He had to trust, and if he was to receive his sight his trust had to move him physically. Receiving his sight depended on entrusting the mystery of his darkness to the healing promise of Jesus.

Blindness is a terrible gift, but it is made wonderful by the growing through 'going'. I have learned to move more freely towards whatever 'pool of Siloam' I am being sent. I boast only of the faithfulness of God to his promises in my life. Jesus told the man to go and wash, and he returned seeing. Being blind, I have often been sent into darknesses of all kinds, not of course without bumps and scratches. But I have returned seeing, and having seen, I believe. Facing the darkness of insecurity, then, is the first element of the spiritual life I have learned from being blind.

Selectivity and receptivity

The Jewish leaders who confront the man born blind are seeking clarity and their own security. Jesus insists that they relinquish their strict legalism and enter into the insecurity which is at the heart of the true religious spirit. In the chapter we have been discussing, these leaders argue with the man's parents and then with him, trying to discredit the truth of the miracle. Note that the blind man never seeks Jesus but rather that Jesus twice comes to him (Jn 9, 1-35).

The sighted are seeking their lie while the Truth comes seeking the blind. The blind leaders so possess their need for security that they cannot accept the offer of true sight. The blind man, however, does not want to enter into religious debate. He only knows that once he was blind and that now he has received his sight (Jn 9, 25).

My own blindness has offered me a second gift of the spiritual life, that of receptivity. It is sometimes the most painful of all to accept. At parties or any large gatherings I do not have the freedom to choose with whom I will talk or sit or spend the whole evening. I cannot say to someone, 'Excuse me, please, there's an old friend I haven't seen in years', and thereby escape. Of course I am not saying that I am always totally open and grateful for this or that

particular person who he has sent to me, but I have heard him invite me to receive his gifts with the same smile with which he is offering them.

Selectivity is the option of a person in charge, a person of power and wealth. Christian spirituality is based on 'receptivity of spirit' that kind of poverty which empties us enough to be accepting and grateful. I have been invited to practise the virtue of gratitude in some wonderfully strange situations. Several times I have been assisted across the street by intoxicated persons who generally want to continue helping me after we have reached the other side. One time in Toronto the train stopped and the doors opened as I waited on the subway platform. Two helpful persons, one on either side, pulled me by the arm toward opposite ends of the car, and because of the crowd and noise, neither could hear my protests. Receptivity is no easy virtue!

In the simplest of things I find his invitation to stop being so finicky. I do not like eggs in any form, and when dining as a guest at someone's house, I have often encountered large and small pieces of egg in the salad. Often I do not even know exactly what I am eating. During my visit to Korea, my companion would look at me and say, 'I can see it, but I can't tell you what it is'. When buying clothes, I have someone else do the selecting. I usually go with the same person; that way my appearance stays somewhat constant.

A poet from India, Tagore, wrote, 'He comes, he comes, he ever comes'. As Christians we are asked to receive his comings in whatever form he chooses. This is the deadly blindness: bound by the evidence we see, to fail to see that it is he who comes. Skin colour, hair style, shape or lack of shape, these obviously enclose him, wrap him, enflesh him, but it is he who comes, ever comes, desiring to be unwrapped and received. Jesus asks us to see him and clothe him and house him as we meet him in the least of our brothers and sisters (Mt 25, 40).

Hopkins, the english Jesuit, writes in one of his poems,

For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

This 'terrible gift' of blindness has not totally replaced my desire for the freedom and luxury of choice. I still have my own

preferences, my own longings, and I grasp after them, but as I learn to be more receptive to his assistance and accompaniment, I learn that in his divine loving perversity I receive what is best for me. Though I extend my hand with desires and expectations, I am learning not to have my hands 'pre-formed' to what must be put there, but to remain choiceless, sensitively ready to unwrap his presence.

The man born blind received the light of faith along with his physical sight, while the Pharisees in their obstinacy lost the opportunity for belief. The receptivity of the blind man is juxtaposed to the selective argumentation of the Pharisees. In the spiritual life it is important to have desires, but not demands; hopes, but not hardened expectations. By accepting my blindness I receive the sight which faith provides. I am learning to be grateful for however he comes and for whatever he brings.

Dependence and independence

I have experienced in my own life the tension between asserting 'I can do it by myself' and conceding 'Would you help me, please'. I can easily be afraid of trying to do too much, trying to prove that I am normal, or of being unrealistic and heroic and of not accepting my limitations. I am also afraid of being too dependent, being a burden on others, of not doing my share, of trading upon my blindness or of appearing lazy.

The blind man in John's gospel relied upon three realities for his identity. He was known by the villagers as the beggar blind from birth. He depended on his parents for support. And he identified himself as a member of the Jewish religious community.

Jesus enters this man's life and, by his cure, calls him dramatically beyond these three identifying dependencies. In verse eight his neighbours question among themselves who this man really is. Who he had been all the village knew, but who he is now causes confusion.

The man's parents now separate themselves from their being responsible for their son. They say, 'Ask him, he is of age' (Jn 9, 23). They themselves fear losing status in the synagogue. By receiving his sight the man becomes independent of his family.

In verse thirty-four, the ultimate freedom is offered. The newly sighted man is cast out of the synagogue, is expelled from his lifelong religious tradition. In the following verse Jesus seeks after him and offers him a new incorporation, a new identity, a new

religious dependence. Faith and disbelief, sight and blindness, create the tension in this story. The freedom which sight provides allows this man to move to the liberating dependence of a believer.

A few years back I made a thirty-day retreat which centred around this very question. I struggled with being properly dependent upon God and being receptive to the people and the aid he sends me. A week later I was sent to work in the psychiatric ward of Massachusetts General Hospital. My supervisor's initial instruction to me was, 'Now of course, the first thing you have to learn in this hospital is to be totally independent'. I have learned not to expect perfect resolution of the tension between proper independence and graceful dependence. It is enough to know that the tension is ever present. I know it is a grace for me to ask for help and a grace for the person I ask. I know pride can prevent me from making known to others my need for help. It is a continuous struggle. I never know when it will be easy and natural to ask for help or when I will find it unbelievably odious. When I walk down the street, I may not even be aware that I am tapping in front of me with my white cane. At other times I find that cane an almost intolerable symbol of surrender and defeat.

I can find the tension resolved when I accept the truth: I am blind, but I can do some things by myself without help and without debating about whether I am being too independent. I am blind, and when I accept the truth gently, I can gracefully accept the light of the assistance from others. I can receive their help, and I can allow my need to be a grace for them when I don't resist the 'terrible gift' itself.

I can become angry at the easy independence of others. They are able to get into their cars and go to the store, visit friends, even do wonderful works of charity. I can resent those who are able to pick up a book and read so quickly. I must admit that I have become overwhelmed with fatigue upon entering a library, because it is so hard not to be able to read so many books. But I am aware that my sighted friends experience a similar form of dependence in other areas and that they, too, have to learn to live with incapacities and confinement. I am consoled that this war between self-establishing independence and truthful dependence is universal. My friends can drive, but they might wish to pilot a plane too. Those who can casually pick up a picture book and glance over the beauties of the world would also like to be able to paint or photograph beyond what they can. We all battle with our

limits; yet these limits do provide us with the opportunity to be truthfully dependent.

One of the more painful aspects of being dependent is having to be patient. My time has to fit in with others' time. John Milton wrote at the end of his famous poem on blindness 'They also serve who only stand and wait'. It is so easy to believe that I am only waiting while I am standing, waiting.

Often I have to wait for someone to come along to read my mail to me, but when he does come, I might have to wait some more while he first reads his. It is hard to get angry at someone who wants to help, but my impatience makes me rankle at my dependence. In crossing the street, not only do I have to wait for all the cars to pass, but I have to wait for them to get far enough past me that I can assure myself that there are no more coming some distance behind.

Here, too, blind people are not the only group which struggles with impatience. Sighted people, the deaf, crippled, all wrestle with such a demon. I became much more interested in the adventure of the spiritual life when I came to the understanding that the demons with which I was wrestling in my blindness were the very ones which all my fellow Christians and human beings everywhere were encountering in their daily lives. Being blind faces me constantly with such a demon as impatience. And it is hard to read in Lamentations, 'It is good to wait for the Lord to save' (Lam 3, 26).

The impatient energy in me sometimes explodes, and I rush out of my room and stub my toe on the stair or bounce my head into a partially open door. I hear the words of Isaiah, 'The Lord waits to be gracious to you ... Blessed are those who wait for him' (Isai 30, 18-19).

In front of the gracious God, I wait. I am slowly being converted to being a 'waiter' rather than a 'server'. He waits to serve me, to calm me, to give me strength, not power, encouragement, and not merely raw energy. My struggles with my impatience—impatience with others and impatience with God—call me to hopeful expectations.

People come to talk about their prayer. They ring my doorbell three times before I can get downstairs to open the door. They rush into my room, quickly sit down and tell me they have only fifty-three minutes for our conference because they're already behind schedule. Then, as if it were a total surprise to me, they

tell me they are experiencing dryness or emptiness in their prayer and in their life generally. I am tempted at these times simply to sit in total silence until they can hear their words which announce they are unfamiliar with unproductive patience. The truth is that our lives are consistent: we are with God the way we are with others. If we are demanding or impatient or independent, it will be reflected in most of our relationships, including our relationship with God. The blind man of our story could not seek Jesus but had to wait for Jesus to come to heal him and then had to wait for Jesus to come back and reveal himself as the one who had given him physical sight and to offer him the opportunity to receive his new vision of faith.

Conclusion

The spiritual life and the life of this blind person have many things in common. As Christians we are relating with the unseeable God. But we tend not to see all of creation as belonging to him; we mistakenly possess things as our own because of our blindness. We can often regard ourselves as our own property and operate totally free from the Creator's wishes. It is so easy to regard security as always being the best thing for our growth, and insecurity in any form as something to be avoided. We also feel that we should be the independent determiners of what we have and what we should reject. Being blind hasn't helped me overcome these demons, but my daily hand-to-hand combat with them has intensified my war with them and made it more graced. Like blindness, the spiritual life involves a never-ending series of conversions, failures, and resurrections. I am as likely to become the perfectly integrated spiritual person as I am to become the well-adjusted, always grateful blind person.