



Truth and Beauty:
Personal Reflections on being Blind

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Postmodernism and Blindness: From Conforming to Creating
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Abstract: Even if a blind person can achieve great results in his personal and economic life, there are terrible gaps which cannot be filled.

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They halted at the shrine in the full moon,
these Cretan girls, elated, light-
footed, whirled synchronously on the nascent
grass around the altar – Sappho ⁱ

Piena splendeva la luna
quando presso l'altare se fermarono;
e le Cretesi con armonia
sui piedi leggeri cominciarono,
spensierate, a girare intorno all'ara
sulla tenera erba appena nata ⁱⁱ

"O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter
and her daughter
they washed their feet in soda water"
- *The Waste Land*, T.S. Eliot ⁱⁱⁱ

1. Introduction

The moon shines on the Sussex Downs where I now live in the words of Sappho ^{iv} and the music of Dallapiccola ^v but the base on which this picture is built - like the layering re-adjustments of an old master - is a moonlit scene in Northern England more than fifty years ago. Perhaps my damaged sight could not handle the glare of the midday sun - if you have never seen 'normally' it is impossible to imagine what that might mean - which perhaps explains why I loved sunsets, particularly those where the moon glowed in the deep blue sky but, above all, I loved full moonlight illuminating a Winter landscape, trees shorn of leaves, fields flat and frosty, shadows as sharp and pure as a black and white photograph. Once I became totally blind, the image was only amended by poetry and music and sharpened by a sense of loss: of many poets Sappho informed the memory with a new richness and pointed to the music of Dallapiccola which drew inspiration from it; and then it took a comic twist with T.S. Eliot. Instead of forming a work of art on canvas, the image is a work of art in my head.

This Lecture of reminiscence then is particular to me rather than general to blindness although I hope to draw some useful, general conclusions: I cannot imagine congenital total blindness; nor can I imagine sustained seriously damaged sight; it is an account of my particular experience and imagination. There are dangers in extrapolation: somebody else with my particular condition and set of experiences might have fared very differently: were my disappointments the result of the condition of my eyes or the vagaries of my temperament; and was that temperament significantly altered by the condition; and would someone with a near identical temperament - no two being precisely alike - have fared better without my eye condition? I will try to be honest, knowing that complete honesty is impossible; and even that would not be enough.

Rather than making a systematic examination of my experience I have opted for the approximately chronological where critical issues will logically surface, enabling me to relate my experience to the theoretical framework I set out in my first four Lectures.

2. Childhood

Pre Vatican II Roman Catholics and Protestants might have disagreed about all sorts of theological issues but their moral outlook was identical: earthly misfortune was a punishment for wickedness and so my blindness was a punishment for being conceived out of wedlock. My blindness was a terrible shock which soon outweighed the miracle that the oxygen which damaged my eyes had allowed a 1.5 kg, 32-week baby to survive. In this unusual cohort of babies, 70% suffered from cognitive disabilities and the other 30% were of above average intelligence; what I call the van Gough syndrome where high intelligence and mental disorder are not at opposite ends of a spectrum but are on a cusp. I was lucky.

The authorities thought my parents incapable of managing and so shortly after I left hospital aged two I was put into a residential school. I believe that the lack of a home infancy and the physical reticence of my carers both made it more difficult for me later on to develop a fully rounded emotional repertoire. The education was narrow but exacting. After all, there wasn't much else to do but learn; playful children were an inconvenience to the ordered system. There were craft and music lessons but I avoided pottery and guitars to protect my reading fingers; I played sport badly; was taught to dance as my parents had been taught while Elvis Presley discs were surreptitiously passed around. I just about managed arithmetic but had learned to read very early and by the age of ten I was reading adult books and being punished for using their language. In essay writing I could competently reproduce echoes of my reading. Even today the facile competence of blind children is mistaken for precocity. I could competently report scenes in my summer holidays which I could not possibly have seen but which relied upon the experience of those around me: I knew that the sun was out but was there really not a cloud in the sky? I could get away with simple statements but what about an estimate of the size of a crowd. The best way to describe this is to say that a blind person cannot make an authoritative decision on a border-line case such as whether a soccer player was off-side when he struck the ball into the net; he can only assess the opinions of those he hears and opt for a majority or for the opinion of a commentator he particularly respects.

I was the second child in the United Kingdom in the modern era to be sent to a secondary school with my sighted peers. As it was a Roman Catholic school the ethos was not very different from my boarding school except that I met a much wider variety of boys. My facility with words made me stand out but my lack of worldly experience put me at a disadvantage; I traded the first to mitigate the second. My major problem was direct speech. Perhaps it was my temperament, perhaps it was the inability to see the reaction of others and therefore modify my approach and tone over time, but I told things as I knew them, unadorned. This behaviour was variously characterised as "arrogant, big-headed" or "showing off" and it was invariably attributed by my carers and teachers to my temperament and never associated with my blindness.

My natural inclination was towards literature and history in which I was outstanding; and they were the subjects that carried me to university where I found myself following a trajectory which I later understood to be well-nigh inevitable; and this was the turn towards the abstract. There is a limit in the educational process where even the most competent plagiarism becomes inadequate. I found that my best chance in studying history was to opt for subjects where there was least data, where I would not be disadvantaged by the need to describe people and physical situations. I was completely at home with the diplomatic chessboard which took me a long way but over time even the relative advantage of this competence began to decline. My unassailable ground was the history of philosophy, theology, political theory and of history itself. In this abstract realm I could assess axioms and challenge arguments. Just before graduating I discovered that mathematics was a wonderful language whereas at school it had been presented as a set of processes. I left Cambridge for Harvard on a special scholarship to pursue my studies in political theory with John Rawls^{vi}.

While the techniques for teaching blind children have been transformed over the past half century I believe that there are underlying problems which have still not been adequately dealt with.

Many cultures are averse to physical contact with blind children, in some cases this is because of religious and social associations of disability with impurity but in Western societies the inhibition arises because of the sexualisation of touch. Following on from this, improbably you may think, is the failure to teach blind children to enjoy their sense of touch. Even the utilitarian aspects of touch are assumed rather than taught. In the past few years I have worked with blind children to teach them how to touch; their deprivation is shocking and their joy in learning through sculpture - of touch for its own sake - is deeply moving. And without touch and sound, the feel of a smooth pebble washed by icy spring water, there is no real creativity, no conveying of a genuine, as opposed to a vicarious, experience; and without space there is no room in which to discover and to become lost; no room for chance and surprise; and no room for drama.

The root cause of touch deprivation, which serves as an icon for the whole exploratory and consequential creative experience, is not just a scandalous lack of imagination, it also relates to that aspect of a blind child's life which I dealt with fully in my first lecture, and that is the suffocating curricular demands on children whose lives are deprived enough just by virtue of their sight loss. Blind children need to be taught to play and too often the fear of falling and supervisory tidiness inhibit the development of children which must be taught because it cannot be mimetically acquired. It follows closely from this that the child's incalculable deficit in life experience must be mitigated so that blind adults are not all, by default, cast into the abstract and severely handicapped in their efforts to be creative. This deprivation is, as I pointed out, linked to the deeply troubling paradox that those responsible for blind children must cultivate their heterodoxy and ensure, unless a rational assessment ranks the danger over the advantage, that they are peer normatively troublesome.

I mentioned in passing that I attended a standard school from the age of eleven but the move was not promoted on educational grounds; my protectors could not contemplate the prospect of my being educated at secondary level in a specialist high school with Protestants. This experiment began a controversy in the 'Western' world which has raged for more than 50 years and which has gradually spread to developing countries. Special schools, particularly if they are residential, are expensive and they take children from their homes and parents and deposit them in a strange, ultra-protective environment. There may well be a case for educating some blind children, particularly those with additional handicaps - half the cohort in some countries - in residential facilities but the default should be mainstreaming. In many countries the argument has continued to rage because the comparative transparency of the educational argument has been obscured by mainstreaming being adopted by governments to save money which has led to the under-funding of support services.

But the most disturbing aspect of the education of blind children that has persisted, in spite of shelves weighed down with psychological treatises, is a persistent misunderstanding of the connection between blindness and behaviour, and the allowances that need to be made and the measures that need to be taken to mitigate that behaviour which results from poor teaching and caring and not from physical or mental damage. Indeed, there is still a strong tendency to associate socially awkward behaviour by blind children with moral failure, a subject to which, sadly, I will need to return in the context of the way in which adults are treated. But I should note a particularly pernicious paradox which I encountered on a recent visit to Russia: the supposed science of defectology - a survival from the Stalinist era - assigns common characteristics to people with common defects and so, in this context, blind children are classified as "abnormal" and require "social adjustment" which they are, strangely, to acquire by meeting blind peers; but the paradox lies in this, that their "abnormal" behaviour which is 'scientifically' classified as defectological is still classified by their teachers as moral.

It needs to be understood that children who are born blind have quite enough difficulties on that account alone, without being largely starved of physical contact, suffocated by a triple curriculum, taught as if they were robots with no imagination from their teachers and carers, regimented out of their childish ways and then punished for inappropriate behaviour.

3. Employment

My reason for entering Harvard as a special student was only contingently concerned with political theory. Although I had been the President of the Cambridge Union, an office which in my generation was a prized stepping stone on the way to a political career, and although I had edited the University's newspaper, *Varsity*, an equally prized office as a precursor to a career in journalism, the BBC refused even to interview me for a job in radio journalism because, it said, I had no previous radio experience; but as it had a monopoly of radio broadcasting, the argument was circular. And so I went to America to help run Harvard's Radio station where I wrote and broadcast news, was the drive time DJ on a Friday afternoon and spent many happy hours playing music between midnight and six in the morning. I returned in

triumph, joined the BBC as a journalist and worked on the experimental broadcasting of Parliament before being one of the 2000 victims of a last-in, first-out policy as the result of a rise in revenue lower than inflation. The decision was superficially just and I would have found it difficult to ask for special treatment because I was blind; but below the surface I knew that I hadn't helped myself: I had been in the United States during Watergate and frequently corrected colleagues who were making errors; I had insisted on one infamous occasion that the Angolans who were backed by the Chinese were not necessarily pro Chinese; and I protested that a national broadcaster's news agenda should not be set by a national right-wing newspaper clique. And then, of course, I was blind, an anomalous nuisance. This unhappy combination of circumstances put an end to my meticulously planned journalistic career as a precursor to my entry into politics. I did ultimately stand for the UK Parliament many years later but that was more of a retrospective gesture than a prospective opportunity.

And then, through the force of circumstances, I descended into the abyss. In the month that I lost my job at the BBC I finally lost my residual vision and became totally blind. But that was not the abyss, although it was bad enough. The real humiliation was that I was head hunted and was forced to take a job working in an organisation that served blind people. All the credit and self-confidence I had built up had gone. Nobody else in history had been President of the Union and Editor of Varsity but when a social worker came to see how she could help, she offered me a place at a rehabilitation centre so that I could learn how to make my bed and fold my clothes; and when I suggested that I needed help to get a job, she thought that I might do well as an office clerk; after all, I'd been typing since I went to secondary school. And so the offer of a job working with blind people was better than being a typist. I wanted to get married and without a job my father-in-law would have been even more difficult than he was. As he rode with his daughter to the church where we were to be married he told her that it was not too late for her to change her mind and find someone 'normal'.

There isn't much to say about my fifteen years of work with blind people in developing countries that would contribute very much to our theme. I was routinely typecast as a blind person who could only work with blind people. All my other attributes and skills were disregarded. If I was noticed at all in social gatherings it was so that I could be patronised, an exhibit to show how humane my temporary protégée was. I was picked up at receptions and then dropped; I was described by those making introductions as "wonderful" because I could read braille; and conversely my opinions on matters where I had considerable expertise were dismissed on the ground that I could not possibly grasp the whole situation. Who can? My economics, epidemiology, strategic and analytical skills were all swept aside; I but I was a fine example of what blind people could do, whatever that was.

Through all this degradation and myself perception of failure, I did my professional best; blind people were entitled to my professional commitment; it was not their fault that I wished someone else might serve them. Over the years my doggedness was transformed into passion for these people that I tried to help; but that was my undoing. I told the truth as I saw it and this was regarded as undiplomatic; and when I told that truth inside my own organisation it set up a train of events which would ultimately result in my being forced to leave. Here was a very perverse paradox: in

an organisation dedicated to improving the lot of blind people, a strong blind advocate on behalf of those people was organisationally disruptive. Although I did not know how I would survive, my decision to resign came as a relief.

Although I could not completely escape from the blindness stereotype, I did make some progress when I set up a consultancy to help disadvantaged people to benefit from the new digital technologies. I decided that the only minority I would not help was blind people but whenever I turned up at a seminar or a conference I was questioned on how blind people accessed computers. In the course of time I became identified with the issue of how people with disabilities interact with digital technology, so I had got myself one stage away from blindness emersion. But with the exception of a few minor roles, I have not been able to escape. I love my current role as Chair of the Royal National Institute of Blind People but it would be immeasurably more rewarding if the other roles in my life were far away from disability in general and blindness in particular.

Let me summarise my conclusions on employment.

First and foremost, I have earned less than 25% of the salary level of my university peers, the other people who were either President of the Union or Editor of Varsity. As I said at the outset, I might have met some resistance because of my less than adequate social conduct but I have to admit that many of my peers who are national figures are socially obnoxious to a degree that I could not possibly challenge. At every critical point in my life - including in the blindness sector itself in most cases - all my aptitudes and achievements have been obscured by the inability of people to get past my impairment and their automatic reflex of turning it into an insuperable disability. Consequently, I have been much less well fulfilled and very much poorer than my peers. Apart from the psychological cost, we need to recognise how expensive skills acquisition is in terms of the return on the investment of money and time; and we also need to recognise that the more uncertain the world is the more uncertain the return on investment becomes. This is not an argument against higher education for blind people but we must begin to think seriously about how they and society receive a return on the investment.

Prejudice can be so totally insulting that it becomes impossible to deal with. I remember my job interview at the BBC after returning from Harvard, having spent a brilliant year reporting on Watergate, the fall of the Generals in Greece and Portugal, the Yom Kippur War and its subsequent oil crisis, and a fascinating Parliamentary general Election in the UK, when the first question was whether the BBC would be liable if I fell down the stairs. Many years later when I was elected to the parliament of the English Church I was invited to join the disability committee even though my main claim to notice was my recent acquisition of a Masters in Systematic Theology.

Ultimately, the irrational world we live in becomes so bizarre that people begin to doubt their own competence; I have never doubted my abilities but I frequently question whether I have the means of persuading people to enable me to change my life for the better.

So far I have followed the approximate course of my Lectures but I will now take a slightly different route.

4. Love and power

Without wishing to become too formalistically spiritual, many people would agree with my characterisation of human existence as a struggle between power and love which people with disabilities experience, on the consumption side, if I may call it that, in a particularly acute form. We are subjected to super normative quantities and intensities of both and, to a considerable degree, we experience one masquerading as the other which is perhaps not surprising as care of people with disabilities largely originated out of religious movements which have found it egregiously difficult to separate the two. I cannot speak directly of other religions than Christianity although their treatment of people with disabilities looks remarkably similar from the outside but I think I am something of a connoisseur of treatment dispensed, regardless of my opinion, for my own good. Since my parents were more or less forcibly deprived of me, matters in 'Western' countries have greatly improved with a recognition of parental and even child preference; and the general movement towards rights rhetoric - as opposed, as I mentioned in a previous Lecture, to rights enjoyment - has meant that formal processes involving people with disabilities are much more politically correct, a term I use in its proper sense of according to all people equal concern and respect within a social structure. But, as in many other areas, the theoretical accordance of status is well ahead of practice. It is still true today that a person with a disability cannot have any other peculiarity, one being quite enough; so that, for example, if a blind person falls down drunk, the fall will be attributed to the blindness; but, at a more serious level, one of the peculiarities which a person with a disability must rule out is definite self-expression as this is unacceptable in anyone so incomplete, so dependent on the world's goodwill.

This problem is particularly acute for blind people because of the additional hazards. First, what we say is much less dialectical because we often find ourselves delivering into a feedback vacuum. We might, for example, be talking quite innocently about the death of a relative, not knowing that one of our listeners lost her uncle earlier in the day; we do not see the rising emotion or the hint of a tear and have to be told, at which point we are likely to be blamed and not understood. Secondly, if we are in dialectic mode we run the risk of intervening at the wrong time and being characterised as aggressive and, again, our difficulties are not understood. And, finally, blind people in particular, because of the way we grow intellectually, tend to be dogmatic. I mentioned this briefly in my Lecture on children but I want to go a little deeper here because I can speak with some personal experience.

I noted earlier my intellectual turn to the abstract and I think that this is a natural course of action, given our limited access to data input. I noted that we have much less access both to beauty and to ugliness and I believe that this often misleads us into discounting the importance of the two: it is more difficult to be a pacifist if your attitude to war is based on philosophy rather than on what our peers see on television; and it is also easier to be dismissive of the impact our beautiful world makes on people because we cannot access it ourselves. But in tandem with this general deprivation - as I would characterise it - we lack the ability to perceive nuance except in vocal tone and music. We ought, therefore, in theory at least, to be equal with our peers in telephone conversation but real presence reduces us to formalism at best and clumsiness at worst.

At a conversational level, then, our intrinsic lack of facility shifts moral power to our interlocutors who choose to exercise it rather than recognising our shortcomings in love. But I fear that there is even more than this to take into account. I asked the question in the Lecture on rehabilitation and training whether the power relation in a negotiation would alter if prior to sitting down, I asked my opposite number to show me to the toilet. This outright dependence may, I think, not seriously affect negotiations between blind women and their sighted peers but I think it has a profound effect on the male balance of power such that as I get older I tend to hold on for longer at the risk of my kidneys. I just can't bear the dependence nor, incidentally, because as I become older I become more fastidious, can I bear the risk of dirty facilities.

There are really only three reactions to the power deficit: the first is to give way and there are plenty of people who quite properly do this; life should not be an ambassadorial struggle for disability rights and if the pursuit of happiness, if not liberty, is most successful through giving way, then I will not pass judgment. There is quite enough of that already. The second option is to negotiate and that is by far the best strategy, winning some points and losing others; and I just wish I could do it but the complexity of the game is beyond me. By the time I've got all the moves right the argument has been diced. And so I have generally opted for the third route which is to be direct, allowing no doubt. This is often kindly referred to as "telling truth to power" but more often, as I hinted earlier when talking about my childhood, such directness leads to accusations of arrogance, inflexibility, dogmatism and aggression. All of these accusations are partially true but the power relation wants to exaggerate rather than to give any credit. My converse perception is that most people who deal with me possess one or more of these shortcomings in part, together with many others, but the degree of honesty is, because of the power relationship, radically asymmetric: anybody who cares to is entitled to criticise me to my face, in front of others but I am not allowed to reciprocate without running a massive reputational, and often operational, risk.

That is not to say that all human relationships are grim but it is to acknowledge that the area of choice and the effectiveness of consonance are limited. At a very superficially level, for example, it is much more difficult for me to choose conversational parties at a drinks reception than it is for you. It is more difficult for me to escape the bore and to pick out the pleasing face or figure. To a quite considerable degree - even taking into account what a blind person might bring to a relationship - relationships are governed by the approach of the other. From my early teens I discovered how difficult it was to chase - and not just physically - after girls. I suppose I can say that at least this eliminates risk; the people who come towards me in friendship have clearly made up their mind and I have many long-lasting relationships. I should also say that I have many recently acquired and deep friendships which have arisen because my wife and I have lived in the same large village for twenty years which facilitates a web of relationships and we should therefore note, conversely, how difficult it is to establish close relationships in our highly mobile, postmodern environment.

It would be an evasion not to talk about Eros as well as Agape and here the territory is predictably difficult. As with platonic relationships, it would be naive not to acknowledge that there is a power dynamic in sexual relationships because, implicitly at least, below the monogamous surface of civilised society we are still sexually competitive creatures who seek the best life chances for our offspring. This dynamic does not work for blind people because, except for a chance encounter, we don't experience the potential competitors to our partner (nor for our partner, for that matter). In more than twenty years of marriage I've only encountered two or three women to whom I felt powerfully attracted and in all of these situations they were in close proximity in smallish rooms; but my peers roam corridors, shops, parks and beaches enjoying at least the fantasy of alternative power and pleasure. And if I praise the virtues of a happy marriage and a reasonably tranquil life that does not mean that I do not miss what I have lost. I think I might have been a better lover even if I had only seen many more women because it is very rare for a person to make love to the same partner for many years without making love to the last attractive person they saw, or an amalgam. This is not a complaint but a statement of where I stand. I am not sure whether my philosophical position, that experience is a gift not a right, nicely adapts to the limited opportunity I have to enjoy rights or whether I hold this for less self-interested reasons; but there it is. And I will return to that subject near the end.

I don't think that what I have said on the subject of love and power is particularly controversial but the very act of saying leads us into relatively new territory. One of the reasons why work with blind people has met with such limited success is the stilted dialogue that takes place between professionals and policymakers on the one hand and clients or beneficiaries on the other. In this area it is extremely difficult to assign weight to the various factors but we should note the most salient.

First, in almost every culture in the world the gods blind those they do not kill. If we consider disability as four clusters of syndromes, ranked in descending order of prevalence, blindness is at the bottom and it is therefore possible in rich countries and the well-off sections of poorer countries to live your whole life without meeting any blind person other than somebody over the age of sixty and so unfamiliarity may be a factor in the lack of empathy but there is widespread evidence that all kinds of professional groups, including teachers, think that it would be more difficult to deal with a blind person than a psychologically damaged person or a serious criminal released from custody, even though - with the caveats I mentioned earlier - blind people are generally capable of comprehending speech and articulating some kind of reasonable reply and are only likely to be verbally troublesome.

But with this incomprehension comes pity and admiration which tend to bifurcate blind people into two classes deserving one or the other. The reality is much more mundane for the professionals who recognise the unreality of this dichotomy. What they are more likely to be confronted by is a congenitally blind person who behaves in one of the three ways I mentioned earlier but who is most likely to insist that "everything is all right", or a person who has recently lost sight who is in a form of more or less dazed denial. But because policy for working with blind people has largely been and still is dictated by the way we deal with congenitally blind people, I will concentrate on that dynamic. I think we may have to acknowledge a certain degree of reticence in the Anglo Saxon character which might be a special factor but,

still, I have been in contact with blind people all over the world extensively enough to make a fairly safe generalisation that a major strategy for retaining a sense of dignity in a difficult world is to insist that things are going well, what the English call the "stiff upper lip". We can see that this is not the best opening gambit in a frank exchange of views. Most blind people of my acquaintance would prefer me to say less about my own limitations and, by implication, those of other people who cannot see.

Somehow, I am letting the side down when I admit to weaknesses and even to sadness's. And because blind people cannot find it in themselves to be honest, professionals, out of a proper sense of respect, will not broach difficult subjects and are forced to collude. In time this collusion turns into acceptance and to a narrowing of the focus to the functional. It's obvious that blind people can't drive cars, have difficulties with print and are properly suspicious of smoking fat; but what else is there to worry about?

I want to spend the rest of this Lecture listing the things that blind people and professionals ought to be aware of, a kind of - to echo my Lecture on children - 'additional' and 'hidden curriculum' which are almost out of sight while we struggle in the kitchen and the high street.

5. Ergonomics and Serendipity

To be blind is neither to be pathetic nor heroic, it is to occupy the treadmill of ergonomic minutiae; it is to live a life of chronic concentration and recurring pain and disappointment, not in an emotional but in a directly physical sense. If the planning goes wrong, tiny opportunities are missed; and if concentration lapses I bang my head; again.

Let me give you some examples. I have either travelled or worked in more than eighty countries but I am remarkably ignorant of many aspects of many of them. If I visit a country for a series of meetings the typical schedule, unless my hosts intervene, is that I arrive at an airport, take a taxi to a hotel, eat homogenised international meals, visit government buildings where meetings take place, take a taxi to the airport, cajole an airport escort to take me to the departure lounge souvenir shop and go home. Last year I went to Ethiopia on a UN contract to work for two weeks and if I had not taken immense trouble beforehand to research restaurants I would have eaten in the same, boring hotel restaurant for the whole time. As it was, my trips to restaurants my only non-work activity. I was driven almost mad by drinking bottled beer, smoking my cigars and listening to 24-hour television in my room. Except for meetings and visits to IT centres I really learned nothing about Ethiopia. I couldn't roam the streets, visit the churches, read the history, enjoy the scenery, watch the people, look in shop windows, buy food off hawkers, assess the state of public facilities, survey the age of the cars, avoid armed soldiers, share a joke, give coins to a beggar or simply hang around waiting for something interesting to happen.

The same pattern, with obvious variations, occurs at home. If I am between two meetings in London I either stay longer at the place of the first or arrive early at the place of the second. I don't wander down the street to look in shop windows, decide to have a coffee and watch the world going by, enjoy the pretty girls, buy a shirt, or enjoy a vista.

I have to plan my every move and today we recognise, courtesy of the unlikely philosopher, Donald Rumsfeld, that we don't know what we don't know, so the narrowness of a blind person's perception, which I have already dealt with at some length, is maintained if not increased.

You might counter that somebody like me actually lives a life not very different from yours: I have an interesting job, am married to a lovely wife, enjoy food and wine and have travelled more than most people: "what else is there?" you quite properly ask.

The first answer is serendipity. I have already mentioned this in terms of your walk in the street but consider for a moment how much you plan and how much you take in purely by accident, simply because it is there. And because you are open to an unending stream of stimuli, think of how many connections you see to make your intellectual network more dense and to set you out on new ventures: you see a poster of a teenage boy with a gun which adds an extra dimension to your understanding of the relationship between design and violence; you are passing a travel agent when you see a special offer for a country you had never even thought before of going to but, then, you didn't know that it had such interesting landscape and fine golf courses; and you see a tiny advertising bill for a fine theatre production and later find that you love the work of this up-and-coming dramatist. Meanwhile, I learn none of this in my taxi between two meetings. I have access to broadcasting and, to a limited extent, to the internet, but the density of my network does not increase at the rate of my peers. What I know has to work harder and often has to guess better.

But there is another no less important deprivation in being so ergonomically tied and so serendipitously deprived and that is in the area of life for its own sake. Without a great deal of care, life for a blind person can be totally occupied with functionality, with doing things for a reason. Many of us listen to the media, enjoy good food and so on but the ergonomics of functionality and survival all too easily take over. Even in my own house I find myself planning journeys so that I have the shortest distance to travel to pick up one object and put another down in the right place. My wife and I joke about my management of the cupboards and the fridge but there is a grimly serious side to it, as I often discover when she is away for a few days. When I lived alone my two greatest problems were butter and broken glass but now there are all kinds of hazards without planning or if I make a mistake: spilling red wine, disabling the heating system in the middle of Winter without knowing why, knocking out all the radio pre-sets, wearing odd socks, opening the wrong food package, are all part of the daily drama of living alone.

None of this is all that bad in itself but it never stops; it's the inexorable aspect that wears me down. Sometimes I just want a rest but of course when I go on holiday there's another lot of learning to do: finding the bathroom, working out the functions of the extra buttons on the phone, explaining to bewildered chambermaids what you can and can't do; and helping my navigationally challenged wife to find the way to town and feeling guilty that I'm not doing the driving.

I know, I am going on a bit, aren't I? But that is simply to represent the nature of the challenge which is intrinsically tedious but which has three consequences which deserve attention. The first is that I never dreamed life would be like this when I was starting out. There was functionality training but no preparation for what turned out to be a life which is isomorphically close to the athlete in training; but, then, part of the problem which I mentioned earlier is the reluctance to own up; perhaps we take the tedium for granted. Secondly, and obviously, all the time taken up with ergonomics isn't being taken up with something else, like enjoyment or creativity; it's time lost when the serious things in life usually take us longer than our sighted peers. Thirdly - and I think this is the most crucial but the least understood - there is the narrowing factor I alluded to and which I will consider next in my discussion on creativity.

6. Creativity and Self Identity

In my introduction to these Lectures I made some observations on the postmodern environment which I explored more precisely in the references to Margaret Boden in my discussion of the education of children in my first lecture. We have all, throughout recorded history, been concerned with the creation of our own identities but we are a long way from using a bronze talisman or a honed skill in archery to manufacture our own distinguishing identity; our range of activities, goods and services is enormous. Boden noted the three phenomena of collage, variation and transformation and, in line with what I said earlier, I will only consider the first two.

We can see from every aspect of our lives that we construct collages and design variations to standard phenomena; the most immediate example, which relates very closely to identity, is clothing. In the modernist era, as I noted, clothing was a primarily conformist phenomenon, even in that highly emotive world of ladies' fashion, but every detail of clothing for both sexes is now significant, from the way trainers are laced to the colour of underwear, from the cut of a lapel to the way light plays on a fabric. At one time the only discussion worthy of interest in fashion was the hem line but now everything is in flux; and that flux depends upon a complex interplay between collage and variation. These two aspects of what we wear determine to a certain extent how we see ourselves, dressing to draw attention to an aspect of ourselves such as our physical beauty or our strong preference for social heterodoxy. The way the logo has become inside out has been immensely significant, together with the emergence of sporting brands, the advertorial role of television, the democratisation of formerly 'high' fashion and the breakdown of modernist paradigms.

And so, at a very basic level, we can relate self-identity to creativity; in a limited sense - and risking the accusation of being pretentious - we make ourselves. We are what we wear, eat, and put into our homes as well as what we do; and even what we do is part of what we are in a way that modernism would not recognise. There was a time when secretaries went to the office and athletes went to the gym but secretaries going to the gym are making a statement about themselves. And so if you put together the almost infinite variety of goods, services and activities from which we can choose it is only a matter of time and logic that choice rather than conformity identifies us. This does not deny the reality of creativity within conformity which produced a powerful tradition of rule based and rule breaking production but our emergent postmodern temperament has democratised the production so that creativity is peer normative rather than elitist.

How can blind people avoid being grey and flat footed in this kaleidoscopic world of colour and movement? The real decision depends on resolving the question: what balance should I strike between orthodoxy and heterodoxy always bearing in mind that there is a fascinating recursion which makes heterodoxy orthodox?

The question goes back to our discussion of knowing how to distinguish between sameness and difference; for most of us, for all except the most mundane, the most extreme, it is a matter of nuance and nuance is what we lack. There is too much else to learn and not enough time to learn it. There were endless decisions of nuance to be made in the age of modernity; you could say that while everything was formalistically stratified, from office furniture to social attire, there was deep consciousness of nice distinctions within each stratum; but now the field is more open, the boundaries more perforated and the decisions are about individual self-identity and not about the degree of social cohesion. Conformity is, in the inversion of a paradox we noted, heterodoxy and nowhere is safe. Perhaps the worst somebody can say of us is that we are dull; it is a world of celebrity, irony, game-playing, stunts and surprises.

But all is not lost.

I gained myself a degree of self-identity by staying close to my core. While most of my professional life was still involved with disability in general and blindness in particular, I found a way out through playing to my core, my abstract strength. In my late thirties I felt the unstoppable need to write allied with a long-term faith commitment which took a theological, rather than a pastoral, turn. Hymn lyrics and carols set me free. Then I studied to be a lay minister and preaching set me free. No problems with negotiation there; it would take a brave person to walk out of church; and in a way that should have been more obvious to me than it was at first, this was the right place for me to be, in the area where bravery, telling the truth, handling difficult issues, is at one remove from the democracy of the seminar. I had found myself in one of the few places, a Christian church, where hierarchy still flourishes in spite of its scandalous asymmetry with the teachings of its founder.

And then I went on to create through massive and complex novels with layer upon layer of elaboration, constructing the kind of reality that I had learned from Proust but without his facility for the description of landscape and people. My characters talked as I would talk to myself, in extended periods of introspection, dialogues with the like-minded and disputes with the hostile.

But that is just me and there must be other ways. I often wish that we could take some blind people who are dissatisfied with their lives and plunge them into a world of virtual reality, haptic force feedback, 3D printers, mysterious music, strange food, outrageous clothes and facilitators bent on the generation of innocent - and not so innocent - wildness. I was, at a more modest level, deeply moved by a television programme where a leading UK fashion designer, Gok Wan, helped a blind woman to express herself to her own satisfaction and to make her mark among her peers by dressing differently. We at the Royal National Institute of blind People are committed to helping those we exist to serve to be more full and effective citizens. We take education, training, rehabilitation and employment seriously but I am proud that we have broadened our idea of life chances and are interested in shopping, money, media and technology; and although there will, as I noted, be an inevitable gap between us and our sighted peers, we can and will do better.

7. On Beauty

In my end is my beginning. I move towards my close by reverting to my opening. We have discussed many aspects of life that become limited by ergonomics and functionality and areas where serendipity is limited but for me at least it is the area of the non-functional world where I feel most deprivation.

Ever since I lost my sight in my mid 20s I have never forgotten the moonlight. I can write deeply philosophical books but do not feel competent to create a face or a place for your mind's eye. I was a classical music critic for ten years, learning about all kinds of music that until then I did not know existed: I went to the Garnier when I fell in love with Rameau's operas; I joined a specialist choir when I discovered the world of Medieval Christian music, I learned in immense detail how Schubert handled sonata form and my life is so much richer for all this. And over time I came to learn about and love sculpture - although, as I noted, much of it is designed to be looked at rather than touched - but there is so much beauty beyond my grasp.

Now it might be argued by people who believe that we are just neurochemically driven animals, that this does not matter all that much, but I firmly believe that we were made for more than surviving as long as possible and ensuring the survival of the species; but even if you limited us to that, beauty, if nothing else, is the balm that helps us to endure and without it the endurance is much more difficult.

I only have to make a short list for us to recognise what I mean: a blazing sunset over the bay of Sorrento (my photographer wife has a collection of sunsets); the glacier over Lago Grey, Chile (where I heard a piece of ice break off and fall into the water); and new fallen snow (in which I enjoy crunching my boots).

Then there are all the pictures I have never seen and the ones I am beginning to forget. I talked in my third Lecture about re-visiting pictures I had once known and loved but most of my legacy hangs necessarily unvisited and what was once vivid has faded - colour first so that the form remains like the embroidery on a fading tapestry and then form and finally the real picture dies and I only have a meta-experience of knowing how to describe something that no longer lives in my head. At the top of the first flight of the grand staircase in the Louvre hangs Gericault's *The Raft of the Medusa* which has been dying inside me for more than a decade and not even Henze's music can bring it back.

But more important still are the myriad transience's of light and water and light on water, the precise green of a budding leaf from Spring day to Spring day.

And of course the greatest gap is not in nature or art but in a distance from the ravishing presence of humanity. I hear its voice laughing and crying, singing alone at a window in a strange city or roaring collectively at a football match but I long to see it. And, most of all, I long to see those close to me and, most of all, my beautiful wife.

I am now at the very edge of what might be wrongly categorised as sentimental but I am simply stating the obvious. Nobody can change this situation much - as I have pointed out in detail - and all I want is the deprivation recognised and allowances made; and for me it is only a partial loss whereas for those born without sight the deprivation is so great as to be almost incomprehensible; and yet we are expected, and we expect, to go about our business as if nothing much had happened, to be cheerful and even accepting of statutory, structural and social unfairness. All of us are subject to the vagaries of politics, power, hierarchy, fashion, chance and accident but to live in a situation where life chances are so subject to these vagaries is a cruel imposition.

8. Conclusion

And yet; and yet.

I have seen a blind woman being trained to work alongside her sons in a field in Northern Ghana; I have bought a drink from a blind man in charge of a thriving market stall in Uttar Pradesh; I have been frightened by the thought of blind women in Malawi making clothes on manual sewing machines and was particularly shaken by a blind man in Jamaica who was chopping down trees with an axe. I have spent hundreds of hours with professionals trying to work out ways of making the world real through imagination and ingenuity; and I have experienced more joy in more places where sight is scarce than the world is entitled to expect.

That is why I have come to terms with my professional situation. I was guilty for a long time of a kind of pride, of thinking that the objective was somehow to get away from and above the condition of blindness in which I found myself; and to strike out, to make a figure in the difficult world out there, as if I could somehow escape by my own efforts. Perhaps some people do for a while but the realisation dawned on me over time that I had to do what I was always advising others to do: to play to my strengths; to adopt a rational strategy; to take carefully calculated risks; to be careful

not to offend people by accident; and to choose my ground for collaboration and confrontation equally carefully. To live in a state of abdication or denial was to be as ungracious to my blind peers as those in the world whom I put on trial. I learned, in short, that humility is quite different from resignation or fatalism.

All that having been said, to be good or even wise is not an adequate response to the problems that we confront in life. Professionals and the blind people they work with must not only be wise and good, they must, as part of that wisdom, be as honest as it is humanely possible for people to be; and, in calling for realism, I am not advocating setting limits for the sake of the achievement of a safe mediocrity. Realism is a denial; it calls on the part of the professional for careful investigation, meticulous preparation and sympathetic facilitation and on the part of the blind person for self-examination, perseverance and the grace to accord the benefit of the doubt.

But, above all, we must all rise above the mundane and the obstructive, the tedious and the tortuous, to put ourselves and our people above the tyranny of process and the fear of failing to translate a necessary passion into the steady transformation of those we care for and care about so that they can come as near as possible to reaching their full potential, with us and them knowing that that is what they have done.

ⁱ Translated by the Author

ⁱⁱ Dallapiccola, Luigi; Cinque frammenti di Saffo on: Canti di Prigionia; New London Chamber Choir, Ensemble Intercontemporain; Julie Moffat, Soprano; Hans Zender; Erato 4509-98509-2

ⁱⁱⁱ Eliot, T.S; The Waste Land and Other Poems (Paperback)

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/The-Waste-Land-Other-Poems/dp/057109712X>

^{iv} <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sappho>

^v <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dallapiccola>

^{vi} Rawls, John; *A Theory of Justice*; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Theory_of_Justice