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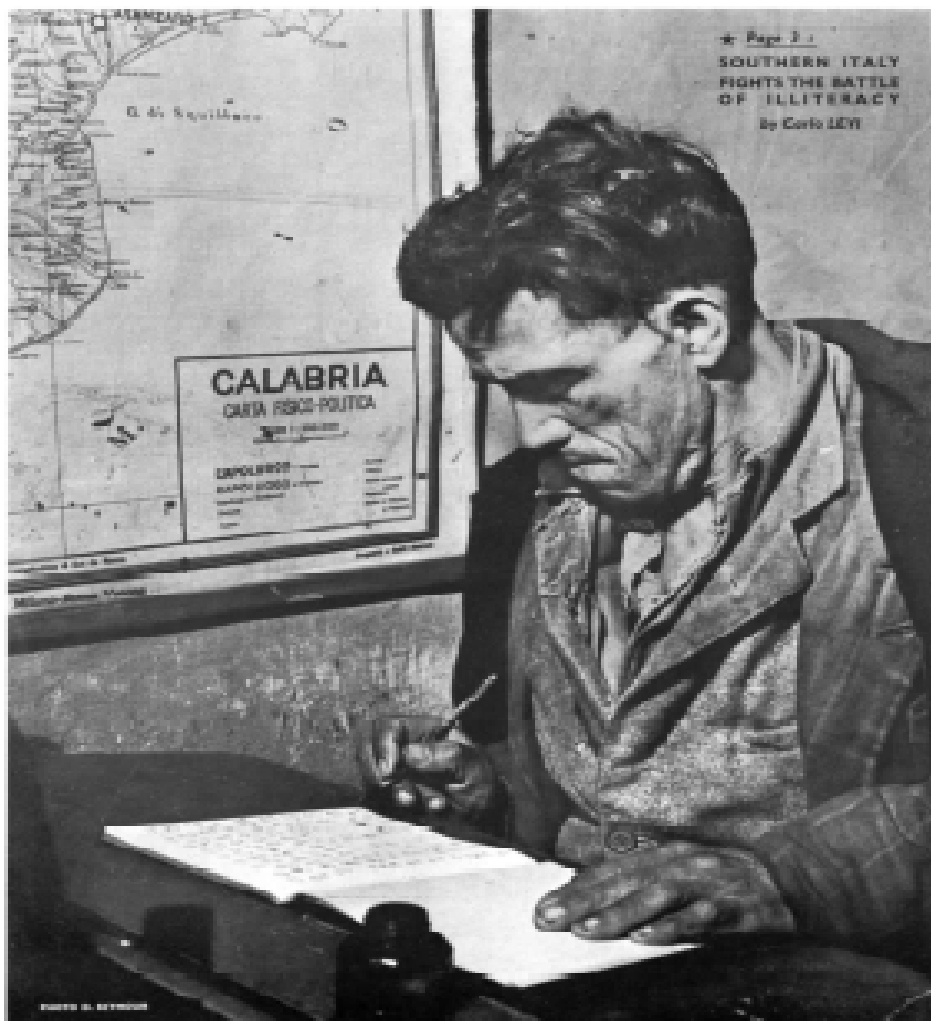
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The Blind are Achieving a Fuller Role in Everyday Life

by

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A blind man is not merely a person deprived of sight with all that this implies in the limitation of his possibilities for action and inquiry. Socially speaking, he is a creature subject to serious constraint. The attitude of people towards blindness in the past was always surrounded by an aura of fear or mystery. This is revealed in their treatment of the blind.

In primitive societies, the blind were held to be possessed ; and if their lives were sometimes spared, it was because people feared the spirits dwelling in them. The Laws of Manu authorized the killing of infants born blind and relegated to the ranks of the outcasts those smitten with blindness later in life. In Ancient Rome, the current of opinion which tempered the dread prerogatives of the *paterfamilias* never went so far as to condemn the practice of Abandoning children born with an infirmity. In the old Biblical days, blindness was considered an uncleanness: "Blind, or broken, or maimed, or having a wen, or scurvy, or scabbed, ye shall not offer these unto the Lord..." (Leviticus, XXII, 22) ; "... a blind man, or a lame,... shall not come nigh to offer the offerings of the Lord" (id., XXI, 18). The practice of blinding princes to prevent them from acceding to the throne, which still prevailed at the Persian Court as late as the 17th century, was conceived less as a punishment than as a means of branding them with a mark of infirmity.

The blind ceased to be outcasts when the Gospel made them (and also deaf-mutes and the dead) the subject

of miracles and proof of Divine healing power. Mediæval Christianity and Islam accorded them the status of privileged beggars; and on occasions they served as intercessors with the Divinity and read the Lord's prayers or recited the verses of the Koran. Nevertheless, their position in society remained precarious and degrading.

A certain degree of progress has been achieved in modern society. For the past 250 years men have made an effort to understand the psychology of the sightless, beginning with William Molyneux, the English physicist, who early in the 18th century first put the famous question to John Locke : would a man who was born blind and who later gained his sight be able to distinguish a cube from a sphere ? And for the past 170 years, attention has been given to the systematic education of the blind. In spite of this, the attitude of sighted people towards blindness remained coloured by many fictions derived not from external experience-that is, from direct observation of the blind-but from subjective and largely emotional sentiments. To a seeing man, any understanding of or influence upon the outer world seems impossible without sight. When a person closes his eyes in an attempt to realize what a blind man may think and feel, his mind, emptied of all visual impressions, is invaded by the terrors which beset primitive man in the dark. Those who can see are too afraid of Blindness to be able to understand it. Here, indeed, is the chief obstacle to the natural assimilation of the abnormality which the blind man represents

in the social organism.

From this it is clear that the emancipation of the blind has depended and will always depend on progress in understanding by those who can see. So long as sighted people fail to free their minds of the subjective and emotional factors which so strongly colour their ideas of blindness, so long will the efforts of the sightless to shake off their burden of infirmity be doomed to failure.

Nevertheless, whatever may be said by those who have suffered from what they somewhat bitterly call social prejudices, these do not represent the only chain which the blind must break. Blindness is a fact. It narrows down space very considerably and limits a man's mastery of the material objects in space. The biological function of sight is to anticipate and avoid pain and danger. Nature is hostile to any creature incapable of reaction at a distance. Had all men been blind, mankind could not possibly have survived the dangers which threatened it. The world, with all the things which men have developed for their use, such as houses, communications, tools and books, has been organized by those who can see, and for them. The blind man thus meets life with a grave handicap. How can he possibly overcome it except by cultivating and making the fullest possible use of the faculties he retains ?

The first idea that comes to mind is that the blind person should develop those of his senses he can still

use, particularly hearing and touch.

One hundred and fifty years of associationist Psychology held to the theory of sensory transfer. We know now that education of the senses is in fact education through the senses, and that all transfer is essentially of a mental kind. For example, it is the mind which organizes fragmentary data acquired analytically by the sense of touch, and gradually builds up a series of spatial images. These, though lacking the richness, spontaneity and potential emotional content of visual images, are enough to meet the Practical needs of the blind. That such images do exist even in the brain of the congenitally blind can no longer be doubted. Diogenes demonstrated movement by walking ; people born blind come and go about their business and solve geometrical problems which proves that their minds are capable of conceiving space and shape. But it is equally true that the number, the quality and the practical value of these mental images depend on adequate training. Without such training, a blind child cannot overcome his initial handicap. This is a point to bear in mind in any discussion concerning the emancipation of the blind through education and culture. We shall return to the point in a moment.

First consider another aspect of the problem. While the blind man is handicapped by the loss of one of his senses and must find ways to compensate for this, he can at all times express his ideas through the spoken language.

In fact, long before there was any thought of creating special schools for the sightless, blind persons often astounded their seeing contemporaries with the scope and quality of their learning. Many are the blind who have achieved fame. We need not dwell on those whose blindness is considered legendary or otherwise disputed (such as Oedipus, Democritus, Homer, Ossian), or those who lost their sight late in life and therefore offer less conclusive evidence. It is noteworthy that as early as the 14th century, an Arab scholar named Safadi published the biography of 307 distinguished blind Moslems. In Japan, blind scholars had their own academic institutions for many years, in which they transmitted the traditions and history of their country. Blind persons in Japan also held a practical monopoly of massage and other healing practices.

In civilizations where a formalized culture is handed down by memory, and where teaching is almost entirely by word of mouth, a blind person with a good memory is almost on an equal footing with those who can see. Not so long ago, over 1,000 blind students were enrolled at a theological seminary in Egypt preparing to teach and comment on the Koran. Taha Hussein Pasha, formerly Minister of Education in Egypt and rector of the Farouk I University, began his successful career in this way. Though blind, he has risen to be one of the leading educational reformers of his country. Endowed with a great memory, he has people to read to him and dictates his own writings, so that he has never found it necessary to learn Braille.

He has already published a formidable body of works : 20 volumes of criticism and essays, half-a-dozen novels, translations of Sophocles and Racine into Arabic, and a fascinating autobiography, *Book of Days*, which is not only a somewhat satirical account of the training given at El-Azhar 50 years ago, but also an invaluable document on the psychology of the blind.

No instances of formal education for the blind are to be found either in Greek or Roman times, or in mediaeval Christendom. On rare occasions, the greatly gifted found their way to fame : Didymus of Alexandria became the teacher of Saint Jerome in the fourth century ; Palladius, one of the pupils of Didymus, later became bishop of a see in Asia Minor ; Joannes Ferdinand, born in Bruges in the 15th century, acquired fame as a philosopher, poet and orator ; Pierre Pontanus, known as the "blind man of Bruges" early in the 16th century, left treatises on the art of writing poetry, and spoke out fearlessly on the social problems of his day. Other blind scholars, philosophers, theologians and writers appeared in Italy, England, and other countries, leaving a permanent mark in their specialities.

By the 18th century, the number of sightless whose achievements astounded the whole world rose sharply. History has recorded many of their names : Elizabeth of Waldkireh in Switzerland, Mélanie de Salignac in France, Maria von Paradi.- in Austria, and Nicolas Saunderson in England. It was Diderot, in his famous *Letter on the Blind* who first drew the world's

attention to the work of this extraordinary man. Blinded at the age of one following an attack of smallpox, Saunderson had a painstaking mentor in his father. When he attended school his lightning mental calculations astonished his teachers. He was a brilliant student of Latin, Greek and mathematics. Before Saunderson was 30, he was appointed to the Lucasian Chair of mathematics at Cambridge University, and he was one of the rare persons in England who could explain Newton's *Principia*. His students were filled with admiration at his lectures on optic's and his explanations on the rainbow, the nature of colours, reflection, refraction and vision. Lord Chesterfield Later called him the miracle of a man who lost the use of his own sight and taught others to use theirs. To aid his remarkable memory and complicated mathematical demonstrations, he invented the arithmetical board which is the basis of today's mathematical equipment for the blind.

This is a significant point. Most blind people during this period found it necessary to use or to devise for themselves many kinds of mechanical, aids to learning. Cut-out letters, writing guides, relief surface maps, musical notations on a projecting slave, were all used. One blind person, living in Hesse, Germany, even built up for himself a huge series of ideographs consisting of little pieces, of wood of different shapes and sizes.

It was, in fact, the advance made in educational techniques that laid the foundation for the efforts to teach them to read late in the 18th and early in the

19th centuries. Had teaching continued to be mainly by word of mouth, and the development of printing not made the book rather than the teacher the chief source of reference, Valentin Haüy might never have thought of giving his pupils his enormous quarto volumes with their pages covered with ordinary letters embossed in large type. And, 40 years later, Louis Braille might have devoted less care and thought to converting the meagre system of sound symbols which his predecessor, Charles Barbier, had suggested for the use of the blind, into an alphabet capable of adaptation to every language and every form of human knowledge.

In the history of the rehabilitation of the blind and of their gradual attainment of fundamental human rights, the invention of the alphabet in raised dots marks the beginning of the era of their intellectual emancipation. Since then, blind children have been able to study the same school subjects as the sighted. Their programmes of study are the same though the methods of teaching are different, and they receive the same degrees. Special libraries have slowly been built up, mostly by voluntary efforts, in which the adult blind can find entertaining and instructive literatures, while scores in Braille notation are published to enable blind musicians to study and practise their art as well as teach it.

In the less developed countries, welfare work to improve the lot of the blind sometimes results, paradoxically, in educating people who, had they been

able to see, would have remained illiterate. Education then is regarded as the primary condition for the emancipation of the blind. But is education enough by itself? Can we say that, where the blind have attained a certain standard of education, they are automatically freed from the psychological and social constraints imposed by their blindness?

It would be wrong to believe this or to allow the blind to do so. They need more than knowledge or university degrees if they are to have equal chances in the world of those who can see. There are plenty of examples where education, which should have opened a door to freedom for the blind, has merely stimulated the "malady of thought." Having more to think of, they suffered more. Spurred on by a strong desire to be compensated for their disability or ill-advised by those around them, the people we have in mind took up studies which never helped them to make their way in the world.

Civilization can no longer be content merely *with homo sapiens* ; it needs man with a social *conscience*, and *homo economics*, as Léon Jouhaux has called him. Formal education may lead to a development of the first of these, but it plays only a small part in the formation of the other two. In a sighted person, social consciousness derives from a spontaneous imitation of everything he sees around him, which determines his gestures, expressions, dress, the setting of his existence and which, while he may retain his own share of individuality, develops in him a resemblance

to his fellows. The potential for developing the 'economic man' is found in the opportunities for Productive and creative work or at least in the training for it which sight makes possible.

The blind person, however, is restricted to the boundaries of his own world which he must patiently explore and chart. First he must learn how to appear like other people ; he must painfully acquire all the substitute skills that may help him to bridge the tremendous initial gap between his natural abilities and those of a sighted person, and, in addition, he must overcome emotional disturbances which so often spring from his disability. From this we can see what 'education' and 'culture' signify to the blind and to what extent the ground to be covered goes beyond what are generally called the mental faculties.

A hundred years ago it was a great achievement to be able to teach a sightless person how to read, write, count and to provide him with a minimum of general knowledge. Today it means very little. This is something which should never be forgotten by those who work to free the blind from ignorance in the unhappily numerous areas of the world where educational opportunities are still extremely limited.

It should be recognized, however, that while culture, of a strictly intellectual order, may not suffice alone, it is an indispensable condition, for the substitution of one faculty for another is primarily a mental process.

There is a long list of trades in which the blind are trained today, ranging from chair-making (above) to high-precision instrument work.



Moreover, where a sighted person understands and acts quickly and without effort, because he can take in all the factors involved in deciding his action, the blind man must go through slower processes of inference and calculation.

The skill with which a blind man finds his way about a city, the capabilities of the sightless 'odd job' man or worker, the blind woman who not only copes with all her domestic duties, but, quite unaided, makes herself a becoming dress-maker are examples of how acquired knowledge may be put to use. When competing with those who can see, the blind can only hope for success through excelling in some respect. Even to obtain a modest position he must possess qualifications not generally required for the post. It is therefore not unusual to find blind university graduates working as telephonists, shorthand-typists and in other jobs which by no means call for the full use of their capabilities.

In this article, we have had in mind chiefly the blind since childhood, although not because there are more of them - two-thirds of the blind are over 50 years old - but because their situation sets them more sharply apart. We have said nothing of Milton, Euler, Augustin Thierry, Henry Fawcett, Handel or countless other poets, scientists, scholars and artists who have continued their careers despite loss of sight. Their brains continued their work ; others became their eyes. Probably the most striking instance is that of François Hubert, the Swiss naturalist who impressed his contemporaries in the late 18th century with his

observations on bees-observations made through. the eyes of his servant.

Today many blinded people continue successful careers in journalism, documentation services, teaching and scientific research, with the help of someone else's eyes.

There is no doubt that blind people have found in the intellectual or aesthetic sphere, a means of sublimating instinctive energies whose natural outlet has been barred, and that they have sought compensation in their pursuit of culture in all the forms and at all the levels they can reach. We have shown that the world of the intellect remains open to them, and it is natural that they should take refuge there, even if, for some of them, it means a certain overstraining of their natural aptitudes.

(M. Pierre Henri, who is himself blind, has published in French The life of the Blind and The Life and Work of Louis Braille.)

BlindVoice UK

Oral History Project

“Blindness Through the Decades”

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