

Seeing Things Differently

by Joe LeBlanc

Progressive eye disease that slowly and continuously steals your vision until you are completely blind is a tough condition to live with. In fact, it can seriously disrupt your life while you're waiting for the impending darkness to close in. Gradual vision loss has been my reality for twelve years. Looking back at my fear of blindness and my early efforts to thwart vision loss brings memories of despair, humor...even hope. I did not know then that I would eventually achieve success and that it would arrive only when I could embrace my losses and uncover solutions inside myself.

Early on in my vision loss, I decided to "Take On Blindness" by getting rehabilitation training while still having usable sight. I was prepared to fight vision loss and win. I voluntarily spent eight weeks blindfolded in an attempt to conquer any challenges blindness could throw at me. One day, when I was learning the proper techniques to use when navigating with a white cane, I nearly met my demise. It was a crisp November morning, and I set off to a local bakery where I would navigate independently while my mobility instructor kept a watchful eye. Amazement flooded my mind. As if by smell alone, I found the bakery in short order. After filling up on caffeine and muffins, I felt a renewed vigor to attack the route home. My cane swung as though synchronized with a Swiss timepiece, and my feet picked up their pace. I was feeling invincible, despite the blindfold. As I was starting across a busy intersection, I heard a man's voice call out, "You need to slow down." *"How could he be talking to me?"* I thought and I increased my speed. I reached the sidewalk on the other side of the street, but in my frenzy I didn't notice the sudden drop of a short flight of stairs. I lost my balance. Adrenaline shot through my limbs like a jolt of electricity. Instinctively, my right hand reached out and made contact with a small vine growing on the side of the adjacent wall. My body swung in an arch and landed me at the bottom of the stairwell. Roaring with laughter, my mobility instructor proclaimed "That was spectacular!" It was evident that I would need to reduce the intensity of my rehabilitation if I was planning to survive blindness. I also needed to recalibrate my respect for the severity of my situation.

At that time, life consisted of holding onto my past identity and accomplishments, which stifled my ability to forge forward as a productive person with blindness. Leaving the field of custom guitar building due to failing eyesight, I found myself also losing the ability to continue my craft as an employment option. Years spent mastering instrument building seemed to vanish overnight. Blindness took from me, for a period of time, the ability to "see" my potential for the future.

Serious soul searching led me to assess my non-visual transferable skills in order to discover other possible employment options. It took years before I realized that I am more than just my eyes. In fact, woodworking had nurtured many skills that endured, despite my vision loss. For instance, guitar building revealed that I enjoy teaching people, that I have great patience, and that I listen and solve problems well. Eventually letting go of the painful loss of guitar building, I

recognized the potential of using my current skills in the field of counseling. I discovered that Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation Counseling is a great option that matches my abilities with meaningful work. However, on top of being away from college for over twenty years, I faced the challenge of obtaining a degree without full vision. Fear immobilized me as I questioned how I would overcome the difficulties ahead, but it was obvious that refusing to accept the challenge of returning to school would limit my employment options. So, despite many reservations, I signed up for a single course.

Returning to college demanded more courage than learning Braille, assistive technology, and a different mode of mobility. Small doubts echoed with unwelcome messages such as "You will not succeed in school," and "It is better to not try than to fail," and "You will never complete your goal." My response to these thoughts was to complete my one class, regardless of success or failure. Ignoring negative thoughts led me to exceed my expectations and complete my first year of courses with honors. Able to navigate my way to classes, I experienced success almost immediately after settling into the weekly routine of my course load. My greatest fear had been facing my challenge alone. Although the work was up to me, I experienced great support from other students offering assistance when needed, as well as my professors and college staff who were always willing to help me figure things out. Good grades followed good effort. My positive experience instilled me with the confidence to engage in an internship the following semester, revealing the personal growth that had taken place over the previous years.

Today, blindness has softened its hard edges as I have adapted to its daunting challenges. Although I am now functioning with severe tunnel vision, I am less anxious about not being able to see. Talking computers assist me in accessing social media and email. Braille allows me to actively read news articles and correctly retrieve personal belongings such as credit cards from my wallet. Earlier in my life, visual learning had been my preferred method of education. I have now learned to adapt to auditory learning, reading books by listening to computerized speech. No longer able to see what I am typing, I compose essays by listening to the computer reciting my keystrokes word for word and then commanding the computer to reread the entire document. In a similar way, I can copy passages of auditory textbooks into a Word document to create chapter notes. At first, my need to use technology was overwhelming, but now audio is becoming second nature to me.

It seems I found the possible start of my journey at a point in time when I thought my story might be ending. Vision impairment redirected my focus outward, letting me see my potential to help others. Drug and Alcohol Counseling is a field that supports clients dealing with issues such as depression, anxiety, fear, and life transition. My journey, ironically, has exposed me to many similar experiences and has given me the opportunity to share empathetically with this population. I hope to use my current skills to work directly with clients in recovery, counseling them in a group setting. The experience I gain by completing my Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation degree will guide me in determining whether to pursue additional schooling.

Reflecting back over these transitional years, I wonder if I might have approached vision loss differently. It was my perception early on that my greatest problems in life were the result of

losing my vision. Yet the most significant problem was actually not accepting myself “as is.” Time has proven that my fear was more debilitating than any limitation my physical disability could impose. Now, I view myself as greater than any one ability I possess.

Blindness, for me, is like a man who stumbles into a jail cell upon which the door slams securely behind him. In panic and desperation, the prisoner screams and rattles the door to no avail. Years go by. In time, the prisoner remembers that he is actually the warden - with an entire ring of keys. Painstakingly trying key after key, the man finally hears a *click*, and the door that held him confined is now the gateway to freedom.