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The Keys Are in Your Hands

by Shawn Mayo

From the Editor: Shawn Mayo is the executive director of BLIND Incorporated (Blindness: Learning In New Dimensions). She delivered the following speech at the 2008 convention of the National Federation of the Blind of Minnesota. It provides a little different explanation of what NFB-conducted adult training centers for the blind are doing and what they offer to their students. This is what she said:

Wayne Dyer, a best-selling author and lecturer, tells the following story in one of his speeches. There once was a village where an enemy army had come through and taken many of the men prisoner. Four philanthropists lived in the village. The first came to the commander of the prison camp and said, "I hear the men have terrible food, only gruel to eat. I want to donate the crops from one of my fields to make sure they get proper nutrition." His request was granted, and he felt he had done a good thing.

The second philanthropist approached the commander of the prison camp and said, "I know the men are sleeping on rocks and are very cold. I would like to give them blankets to keep them warm." The commander allowed this request as well, and the philanthropist was satisfied that he had done well.

The third philanthropist came to the commander and said, "The prisoners do not have clean water to drink. They are getting sick. I want them to have the water from my well." He too was granted his request, and he went away smiling.

The fourth philanthropist had a different approach. He found out where the keys to the cells were kept, took the keys, and set all the prisoners free.

The approach of the fourth philanthropist is the approach of BLIND, Inc., except for one difference. Instead of running around unlocking cell doors, we walk up to the cell with the key in an open hand and say, "Here's the key to your cell. If you want it, take it. If you want to know the fastest way out of here, follow us."

So why do I make this distinction? Because so much of what makes blindness into a prison exists within the minds and hearts of the prisoners themselves—the internalized negative attitudes, bad experiences, doubts, and fears. And, although some of the folks who don't like us very much have accused us of trying to brainwash our students, the bottom line is that no one can really change other people's minds. You can guide and encourage and persuade, but actually changing their minds is something they have to do themselves. Unfortunately some people don't really care to leave the prison. They have food and water and a nice blanket. They are taken care of; have security; and, most important, have someone else to blame for their circumstances.



The people who take the key—the ones who say, “I don’t want to be taken care of; I want to be free to take care of myself,” are our students and alumni. The kind of blind people who want our training are the people who cannot stand being told where to sit. Our students and graduates are the kind of people who can't be satisfied loafing around—they are people who feel a burning desire to work and achieve and engage with the world around them.

The key that we offer is a set of blindness skills developed by blind people and refined through decades of experience. It’s skills that work for people with limited vision and people with no vision at all. If you use these skills, you won't lose them. Some people take the key tentatively and others practically rip it out of our hands. Some people’s cell locks have rust in them and take longer to open, but all who want to can and will use this key to let themselves out of the cell.

Then there is the second part of what we tell people—“If you want to know the fastest way out of here, follow us.” We know that the fastest way out of the blindness-as-prison mentality is the philosophy of the National Federation of the Blind. We at BLIND Incorporated have seen it ourselves for the past twenty years, and it’s been the fastest way out since 1940.

Many of our students choose to follow our lead and march out the front door; some choose to wander around a bit on their own. Some choose to take a longer and lonelier path; that’s their decision to make. But it would be at best unkind and at worst cruel for us not to offer them the wisdom we have acquired.

Federationists have mapped every inch of this prison. We know where all the dead ends and snares are. We’ve been there, done that, and gotten the heck out of there. Federation philosophy taught us how to live free in the ordinary world without dragging blindness around like a ball and chain. That's why BLIND, Inc., is a Federation training center.

We are compelled to give people the opportunity to benefit from what has benefited us. It's everyone's individual choice whether or not to take what is offered, but I believe that those who take the time to look carefully at the core Federation values--the idea that it is respectable to be blind; that equal rights come with equal responsibility; and that blindness should not stop anyone from living a full, happy, and successful life--they will see that putting Federation philosophy into practice is truly the fastest way to freedom.

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