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No Such Thing as Blind Culture

by Barbara Pierce

From Dan Frye: Occasionally someone asks whether or not a defined or distinct blind culture exists. Generally the people raising this question want to educate themselves or others about blindness; the query is generally made in good faith. We recognize that this question is subject to some debate and disagreement among the blind community across America, but mostly we find that blind people reject the notion that a distinct blind culture exists. Certainly this is Barbara Pierce's perspective. We reprint below a thoughtful email reply that Barbara sent to a high school student assigned to report on some particular subculture for a multicultural class project. He and several friends decided to conduct research on blind culture. He found the NFB of Ohio Website and contacted her with a request that she send him the name of someone who could tell them definitively about blind culture. Her letter offers a clear and concise explanation defending her view that blind culture does not exist. Her argument may provide food for thought for others struggling with this question. Here it is:

Dear Zak,

I certainly would be happy to talk with you and or your group about blindness and blind people. As the president of the National Federation of the Blind of Ohio, I certainly am the most knowledgeable person in this state to speak with you. However, I feel compelled to raise a question about whether or not there is such a thing as "blind culture," analogous to "deaf culture," a term that deaf people use pretty often and widely. I think that a separate culture develops when barriers exist interrupting the communication between members of the group in question and the larger society. Hispanic people, or any group using languages other than English as their preferred tongue, often draw together and communicate in their own language. They may have a distinct cuisine, literature, music, even religion. They may function in the larger society, but they naturally gravitate toward others who share their life experience. Deaf people frequently use American Sign Language as their preferred method of communication. They recognize this as a distinct language. Even the written communication of profoundly deaf people is often characteristic of their culture and quite different from standard English composition. For this reason and because they frequently have difficulty communicating with hearing people at all without an interpreter, they talk about the "deaf culture." It is not uncommon for deaf parents to be relieved when they learn that their baby is also deaf so that they will not have to live constantly in two cultures.

Blind people have no problem communicating with other English speakers. Braille is not a language since it is used to write any language. It is merely a tactile method of writing. And, as you can see, blind people have no difficulty using a computer to communicate in

written English. Blind people do not congregate in living groups or in order to enjoy a shared lifestyle, religion, political outlook, or any other similarity of experience that holds a cultural group together. Today you will find blind people in every walk of life and at every social and economic level of American society.

It used to be that blind people were relegated to only a handful of occupations: piano tuning; broom-making; basket-weaving; and, for the very bright, teaching other blind people some of the skills they need to know, like reading Braille. But this is no longer the case. Think of an occupation and, unless it actually requires vision (like driving or doing surgery), I probably know a blind person doing that work. Blind people used to congregate in segregated housing because they were discriminated against in renting apartments or buying homes, but laws now make such enforced segregation illegal.

Blind people do, however, still share the fallout from certain kinds of discrimination. We have a 74 percent unemployment rate, not because we are unable to work, but because people presume us unable to do so and will not give us the chance to prove them wrong. Only 10 percent of blind children are taught to read Braille, not because 90 percent of them are unable to learn it, but because many parents of these youngsters don't want to admit that their children would benefit from being taught to do so, and many teachers, even teachers trained to instruct blind children, do not know Braille or do not know it very well and avoid teaching it as often as they can do so. When you consider that about 85 percent of the blind adults who are employed are fluent Braille readers, you can see that not teaching blind children to read and write Braille is close to criminal and discrimination of a fundamental kind.

Blind people have created consumer organizations to fight these injustices and to try to protect blind children and their parents and newly blind people from suffering the impact of such discrimination. We often enjoy each other's company, and we certainly spend time together working on the problems that face what we often call the "blind community," but I would argue that this community is different from an actual culture.

Having said all this, I will be happy to speak with you if you still wish to discuss these or other matters.

Cordially,
Barbara Pierce, President
National Federation of the Blind of Ohio

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