

Unexpected Gifts

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I did not murder my father (although the thought occurred to me on more than one occasion). I did not sleep with my mother (Unthinkable). And I did not poke my own eyes out in retribution for the grievous sins of my life. But like the tragic Greek hero Oedipus, I have become a blind man. Not totally blind, but about 97% blind.

Tonight, I'd like to share with you my journey to blindness. I have been thinking about blindness for a long time. It's often a frustrating and challenging condition. I have days where I find it tedious. But is blindness a curse? Or a blessing? After thinking about how blindness has affected my life, my conclusion is that blindness has provided me with countless unexpected gifts, moments of great humor, and insights into the human condition. It has opened my eyes to our ability as human beings to overcome physical limitations and, to help each other with simple acts of kindness. Blindness is an inconvenience, but it's no curse.

According to the World Health Organization, there are about 36 million people in the world who are totally blind. People are born blind, get diseases that progress beyond repair, or have accidents that rob them of their vision. Another 217 million live with a severe visual impairment. Of this group, over half either don't have access to corrective eyeglasses or have the wrong prescription. Another 25% have

cataracts. The balance deal with a broad range of eye diseases such as macular degeneration, glaucoma, and diabetic retinopathy.

Google “Famous Blind People” and you’ll find a long list that begins with Homer (not Simpson, but Homer of the Iliad and the Odyssey), and includes many familiar names – Stevie Wonder, Ray Charles, Helen Keller, Andrea Bocelli, Joseph Pulitzer and Galileo. Stevie Wonder was blind from infancy. Others, like Galileo, went blind late in life. Most continued to lead highly productive professional and personal lives. Gordon Brown, former prime minister of England, lost sight in his left eye in a rugby accident when he was a teenager. While Prime Minister, he had two retinal tears in his right eye. He had surgery to repair the tears and carried on his duties as Prime Minister. To this day, he has severely limited vision.

My blindness was caused by a witch’s brew of genetics, and my own ignorance and stupidity. My parents and three of my four grandparents never wore glasses. My father’s mother had poor vision, but she was the only one in the prior generation, including aunts and uncles, who had glasses. My parents, first generation immigrants to America, never discussed their own health problems, or those of their respective families. Family health issues, even to this day, are treated like State Secrets by my mother.

I became aware of my poor eyesight around the first grade when I was having trouble seeing the blackboard – a common story. We went off to Union Eye Care in downtown Cleveland, and I was fitted with a pair of classic Buddy Holly glasses. As I got older, my vision continued to get worse, until high school, when my correction reached -13 diopters. That type of correction required lenses that we call “Coke Bottles”, a reference to the thick glass bottom of the classic Coca Cola bottle. At a minus 13 correction, a person is functionally blind without glasses or contacts. The world looks fuzzy and completely out of focus. A 13 diopter lens magnifies an image by a factor of more than 4. I refused to let my poor eyesight slow me down.

I played many sports growing up, always with glasses on. In high school, I played football. For me, contact lens were irritating and uncomfortable. So I wore my regular wire rim or plastic frame glasses under my football helmet. My glasses would routinely fog up and get covered with sweat. They were frequently smashed into my face or shaken askew by a hit to the helmet. It was a nightmare. Notwithstanding all these crazy spectacle related issues, I became a pretty good player, and was recruited to play football at Yale.

During the summer of 1975, between my senior year of high school and my freshman year at Yale, I had a physical exam. Everything was fine, but my physician

strongly discouraged me from playing any contact sports, especially football. He told me that as a result of my very severe myopia, I had thinning retinas that were prone to tearing or detachment. This went into my medical record, which made its way to Yale.

I spent that summer of 1975 working on a garbage truck in our little Cleveland suburb. One of my co-workers was a tall, lean young man named Tom Lang. He had long, curly blond hair and looked like Roger Daltrey of the rock band The Who. Tom had just finished his freshman year at Georgetown, where he'd been on the freshman rowing team. Everyday as we slung smelly trash bags into the back of the big truck, he'd tell me about this mysterious sport of rowing. As a working class kid from Cleveland, it was hard to wrap my head around sitting in a pencil thin boat, with seven other guys, pulling on 12 foot long oars while going backwards. My only familiarity with rowing came from the scene of Charlton Heston rowing as a galley slave in the movie Ben Hur.

I got to Yale in late August 1975, and after settling in, went over to the Yale Bowl for my first football practice. Upon checking in, the Freshman Coach informed me that I would not be able to play due to my eye condition. I would not have admitted it then, but I was relieved. I had a look at some of my classmates who were linemen

and linebackers, and the thought of hitting and getting hit by these monsters didn't seem all that appealing.

Thanks to the great "sell job" by Tom Lang of the garbage truck and Georgetown University, I went back to the Old Campus to pay a visit on the rowing coaches. In those days, the Men's rowing program set up a 60 foot, 8 oared shell in the middle of Yale's Freshman Campus Green, in search of tall, athletic looking young men like me who might be good rowing prospects. Today, the men's and women's crews are filled with heavily recruited American and foreign athletes, most of whom have already rowed on their country's junior national teams. In 1975, it was an entrepreneurial effort by coaches to fill boats with rejects and has been from football, basketball and track. Even by my senior year at Yale, when we had won two Eastern Championships, the Yale Varsity crew had only three men who had been high school rowing recruits, and one was the coxswain.

Joining the Yale Crew was the first BIG unexpected gift of blindness. It was life changing. Being a member of the rowing team was a tremendous experience that led to life time fitness and friendships. Rowing taught me to be a grinder. I learned about team work, long range planning, and the need to keep pulling no matter how

much it hurt – life skills that have served me well to this day. I competed until 2014, when I stopped because of the possibility that rowing exacerbates my vision issues.

Glasses and I were never good friends. They enabled me to see, but they were always a problem in sports and day to day life. They'd break. They were expensive. Because of my severe myopia, I could never get the prescription quite right. And they'd fall off my face and get lost, usually in an inconvenient location like an ocean or a river.

Perhaps my biggest frustration as a young man with glasses had to do with women. When I got to college, there came that moment when I was ready to become a MAN, to lose my virginity. I had fantasized about this moment since I was 12. I had seen Playboy magazines in my older cousins' home. Now my time had arrived to see a woman fully naked, live, and in color. But when the moment arrived, I couldn't really see her. And I didn't have the courage to say "excuse me, would you mind if I kept my glasses on while we do this?" Ultimately, it didn't stop me from reaching Manhood, but it was a never-ending source of frustration.

Only in one instance that I can recall did I keep my glasses on in an unlikely situation. Late in my senior year at Yale, my friends and I discovered that the windows to the rowing tanks in Payne Whitney Gymnasium were left open during the spring. One

night, a few of us snuck into Payne Whitney and got into the swimming pool, normally used for competitions, for a skinny dip. A few weeks later, the night of the Yale Prom, we recruited a big group of more than 10 couples to go over to the Gym for a post Prom dip. My roommate Andy Fisher climbed through the open window and let the group in through the side door. We found the lights, turned them on, everyone removed all their clothing and hopped in. There was plenty of frolicking. At one point, I sat down on the pool deck and saw what looked like a dolphin swim over to me. It was Yale Star Swimmer Molly Smith, who sat down next to me, buck naked. She looked at me and asked, "Ted, do you always swim with your glasses on?" "Well Molly, no, but I don't normally swim with 10 beautiful naked women, whom I've admired for four years." I was not going to ask for permission that night. I refused to miss the action.

For over 35 years after graduating, my Bulldog crew friends and I kept rowing in the fall Head of the River races in Boston and Philadelphia. One year, we were getting ready to start a race at the Head of the Charles in Boston. We were near the starting line, when the coxswain stopped the boat to let us take off our sweat gear. I was removing my sweat shirt, which caught the little strap that was holding my glasses securely to my head – or so I thought. As the sweat shirt came off, the collar caught the strap and PLOP, the glasses fell into the Charles River. After a brief

discussion, the coxswain asked “so Ted, what do you want to do?”. Let’s row! We finished the race and got back to the boat trailer. One our classmates, Margaret Desjardins was there to greet us. At the time, Margaret and I were long time acquaintances. She and I chatted about mahw y glasses and the fact that I could not see two feet in front of me and did not have a spare pair with me. “No problem” she said, “I’ll be your Seeing Eye Babe.” We spent the day together, and since that day, she and I, and my wife and children, have been as close as cousins. Another unexpected gift of blindness. Ultimately that weekend, my wife had to “Delta Dash” a spare pair of glasses to Boston, as I had business meetings that week in the Northeast.

After college, in the summer of 1979, I moved to New York for a job on Wall Street. Friends and I did all the usual things – worked hard, tried to stay fit, made friends and dated. In 1984, I met my wife Anne through a friend who had rowed for Penn. My wife Anne is the second **major gift** of blindness. I am certain I would not have met Anne but for rowing. And I would not have found rowing but for my severe myopia.

We married in 1985 and lived in Manhattan. My business partners and I had some success as bankers during the Roaring 80’s, and we began investing in operating

companies. In May 1989, we purchased a company called Hamilton Sorter, based here in the Cincinnati area. In those days, Hamilton manufactured office and mailroom furniture. Our purchase was meant as an investment only. But by the end of 1990, 18 months after we purchased it, Hamilton had run out of money. One of Anne's uncles, an old Navy man, advised me to move to Cincinnati and figure out what was wrong with the business, and "to fix the goddam thing yourself". I told Anne we had to move, but only for a year or so. "Well be back in Manhattan before you know it." We rented a house on Erie Avenue in Hyde Park, and arrived in March of 1991 with a one year old in tow and expecting our second child.

What I thought would be a simple, one year fix up job took six years. We arrived with one child, and by 1995 we had three. I worked by day and studied by night – I was a finance guy when I arrived. I didn't know anything about manufacturing, selling, distribution, marketing, product development or managing. I read, read, read – every book I could on all these subjects. And we did all the things we thought good parents should do with their kids – the zoo, church, the Museum Center, the Baldwin School of Music, CCM weekend programs, and so on and so on.

But not once, not once in that six-year period did I even think about going to an eye doctor. One day in the Spring of 1997, I was sitting in my office in Fairfield and the

thought popped into my head “I should go see an eye doctor.” I had met an ophthalmologist, Lindsay Bibler socially. I called her and said I had a free afternoon and needed a checkup. She had no free appointments that day but set me up with her partner. I went downtown thinking I’d be there for half an hour, get a prescription tune up, and be home early. Three hours after I got there, after a thorough exam and a visual field test for each eye, she told me “Ted, you have glaucoma. And it’s pretty bad.” I asked “what is Glaucoma. Isn’t that something old people get?”

I got home and told Anne about this diagnosis, and then called my good friend and highly respected eye surgeon, Dwight Kulwin “Hey Dwight, I just got diagnosed with glaucoma, and the doctor said it was pretty bad.” He said “you need to see my partner Alan Zalta. He’s one of the leading glaucoma specialists in America.” So I began my now 21-year glaucoma odyssey with Alan. Despite all of his efforts, the vision loss has proven to be unstoppable, although he has slowed it down significantly.

I also called my mother. “Hi mom. Does anyone in our family have Glaucoma?” “Oh ya, my brother Adam has it. And I think your father’s mother had it.” “Wow, I said, I wish someone had told me about that before.”

Genetics. Ignorance. Stupidity. I didn't know about my family's medical history. I really hadn't paid any attention to the wide range of potential eye diseases that could affect me. And my own stupidity was not thinking about the simple fact that a guy with a negative 13 correction needs to be going to an eye doctor regularly. It wasn't arrogance. It's just that in my 20's and 30's, it never occurred to me to think about diseases of the eye. Those were old people problems.

Simply put, glaucoma is a plumbing problem. Every eyeball is filled with aqueous fluid. The fluid goes in and is drained, or flushed out, through a complex, web like sponge mechanism. When this drainage system stops working properly, pressure builds in the eye, and slowly destroys the optic nerve. Once discovered, the first treatment protocol is eyedrops that slow the flow of fluid into the eye. When eyedrops stop being effective, a tiny shunt, or drain pipe is installed in the eye to relieve the pressure caused by the excess fluid. The fluid drains into the eyelid area, and is absorbed by the body.

For the first seven years after I was diagnosed with glaucoma, I used multiple eyedrops to control the pressure. Then, in late 2003, I discovered I had cataracts. I had my left eye cataract replaced, and I could see beautifully, with no glasses.

Unfortunately, the cataract surgery created some debris that clogged up my eye's drainage system, and I had my first drain pipe installed.

The surgery for installing a shunt is called a Trabeculectomy. It's straightforward (at least for the patient). One hour, nice music, pleasant anesthesia, and you're home the same day. But the post operation protocol is daunting. A variety of eyedrops every hour or two, no lifting, bending or stooping for two weeks, and no real exercise for several weeks post surgery.

I saw Alan Zalta almost daily for ten days after my drainage tube was installed. When a shunt, or drain pipe is installed in one's eye, the pressure does not instantly regulate itself. In my case, the pressure was too low for a week or so after the surgery. That meant the shunt was working well, but it also means that the eye was too soft, and needed to be "REFLATED" to a normal pressure, to prevent potential problems like a retinal detachment.

Reflating an eye is a medieval form of torture. Alan puts a little Novocain on the eye and places a lid speculum onto the outside of the eye to keep it from blinking. He tells me to hang on tight to the metal handles below the chin rest and says "don't move". He then takes a syringe full of inorganic goop and injects it directly into the eyeball until it feels like it's going to explode. With my first shunt, we did

this procedure four or five times in the week after surgery. Since then, I've had four more shunts installed – one more in my left eye and three in my right. Each time, the post op process is similar. Daily visits, and four to five injections of goop. Fortunately for me, my wife Anne was with me for each of these intensely uncomfortable procedures.

After 21 years of procedures, eye drops and quarterly checkups, I'm fortunate to still have a sliver of vision in my right eye. We don't really know what causes glaucoma. The only thing we can control is eye pressure. But even when pressure is controlled, the optic nerve still deteriorates as time goes on, but more slowly than if pressure is uncontrolled. There is no known cure for glaucoma. Someday, researchers may discover how to regenerate a human optic nerve with stem cell or other technology. However, the optic nerve is a complex, ganglionic nerve. It may take many years before the solution is found. I'm hoping it's in my lifetime.

As you've all observed, I now have a cane. The cane serves several functions. It helps me to feel what's in front of me. Things like curbs, changes in elevation, and obstacles that previously did a number on my shins, such as fire hydrants and short posts. It also alerts people around me that I am visually impaired. I still travel 40 to 50 times a year for business and pleasure. Airports are dangerous places for

someone who can't see. Train stations are even worse. Prior to having the cane, I would routinely get run over by people pulling rolling bags across my path. It still happens on occasion, but I generally find people helpful when they see me coming along with the cane.

I love a party more than the average guy. Big groups of engaging people energize me, like our group here at the Literary Club. But socially, one of my biggest challenges is recognizing faces, particularly in poorly lit rooms. I see the world through a misty haze, like looking at things through a piece of Cut-Rite Waxed Paper. Blindness has not miraculously improved my other senses, but I find that I rely on them more intensely than before. I depend on my ability to memorize and recognize voices, body shapes and sizes, and even hair do-s. Even for me, telling the difference between Jerry Kathman, Dr. Robert Smith and Tom Schuck is pretty easy. Jerry – tall guy, lots of hair, distinct melodic voice. Dr. Smith – unmistakable British accent. Tom – balding, beard, booming clear voice.

I stopped driving five years ago. At first, this was a complete nuisance. But being unable to drive a car has provided many wonderful moments. On Monday nights during the Literary Club year, it's given me a chance to spend time with my great

young friend Nick Trelka. Many of you have offered and given me rides to and from the Club, which has given us time for great conversation.

And thanks to Uber, I have made hundreds of new acquaintances from around the world and learned to say hello and thank you in more than a dozen languages. Uber is a ride sharing service that was started in San Francisco in 2011. Uber came to Cincinnati in 2014, about a year after I stopped driving. Along with the iPhone and iPad, Uber is one of the wonders of my world. Before Uber, I'd have to arrange for rides well in advance of my travel. Now, I put on my reading glasses, open the app on my iPhone, and in two minutes, I know a car is coming to pick me up to take me wherever I'd like to go. It has given me the freedom to live a normal life. It's reliable, and the people I've met through Uber have, almost to the person, had an interesting story to tell. There is a future paper about Uber drivers, but only a short summary tonight.

When opened, the app asks for my location and my destination. It responds, typically in less than a minute, with the driver's first name, car make and model, license plate information, and the time of arrival. When the car arrives, I always ask the driver if it's OK to sit up front. The conversation usually goes as follows:

“Hi Mohammed, where you from?” The range of answers has been fascinating. Lebanon, Iraq, Pakistan, West Africa, Senegal, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia, Somalia, Ethiopia and Yemen. And that’s just here in Cincinnati. If I see the driver has a Russian sounding name, like Yuri or Sergei, I’ll always start the conversation by saying hello in Russian – “Privyet”. Saying hello to someone in their native language always seems to bring a big smile to their face. It’s the international ice breaker. Marhaba in Arabic. Nangadev in Wolof. Sa’alam in Farsi. Once the ice is broken, the conversation rolls easily.

“How did you get here to Cincinnati?” “When did you start driving Uber?” “Why are you driving Uber?” The answers to these questions always give me great hope and enthusiasm for the American Experiment. People like my non-US born Uber friends have come here for the same reasons people have been coming to America for more than 400 years. They come for freedom from political persecution, to escape wars, to get educated, to get their kids medical help at Children’s Hospital. And for the economic opportunity - if not for themselves, then for their children.

Riding Uber has given me a window on the world that I would not have had if I was still driving. The insights I’ve gleaned about peoples lives and motivation have

enhanced my appreciation for the buoyancy of the human spirit. Uber - another unexpected gift of blindness.

Glaucoma and blindness have forced me to stop doing a few things I loved – especially biking, running, rowing and driving. But the rest of my personal and business life is normal. Kindle, Audible and the iPhone make books, newspapers and magazines easily accessible. I installed a gym in my home, hired a trainer who has become one of my great friends, and bought a Peloton stationary indoor training bike. My friend Andy Fisher, the one who climbed through the window at Payne Whitney 39 years ago, invited me to ride a tandem bike with him across Iowa last year. He was my seeing eye guide for seven days and more than 400 miles of riding. I still play golf. I've become a better golfer because I no longer look up to watch the ball. Friends like my guest tonight, Stu Shulman, line me up on the tee box or in the fairway, and I fire away. They tell me where the ball's gone, whether it faded or drawn, and then take me to where it's landed for the next shot. I'll admit I don't get invited to many member guest events any more, but I have plenty of fun with my wife, sons and my friends playing on my home course. My wife Anne makes my life easy and organized at home. Without her, the journey would be a lot harder. My three sons, now 28, 26 and 23 have become my protectors and bodyguards,

especially when we travel. I believe they too have learned that blindness is an inconvenience to be dealt with, not a disability to sulk over.

Impending blindness has also caused me to hurry to see more of the world. Until very recently, I'd never been to Florence, Rome or Sienna. I've been to New Zealand and Tasmania. I have a sense of urgency to see what I can see while I can still see something.

I wish I'd taken more steps sooner to discover and slow down my glaucoma problem. I should not have read those Playboy magazines, which the good Franciscan nuns who taught me in grade school, told me would make me blind. But I'm grateful for the age we live in. Technology makes blindness much easier to live with than would have been possible even 20 years ago, let alone one or two hundred years ago. Family, friends and technology, combined with patience and humor, have made the journey happy and productive. I could never have foreseen the unexpected gifts and blessings that blindness has bestowed upon me.

Stevie Wonder, blind from infancy, had a big hit in the early 70's called "Living Just Enough for the City". Near the end of the song, we can hear the NYC traffic, police officers chasing kids down, and then Stevie saying "Wow! New York, just like I pictured it – Skyscrapers and everything..."