When to Stop Relying on Low Vision and

Low-Vision Aids

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            It has been said that, in the world of the blind, the one-eyed man will be king. The inference here seems to be that the more sight a person

has, the more capable he is. This is a widely-held but very damaging and false idea. How ironic it is that many partially sighted people who consider themselves

superior to those who are totally blind are in many respects less capable as a direct consequence of coming to rely too much on their partial sight. Rather

than making of them a king in the world of the blind, partial vision can make of them that very inferior being, which they supposed they had avoided by

possessing partial vision.

            Is it possible that having some vision can actually impede the progress we would make if we had no sight at all? How can this be? When should

we stop relying so much on low vision and low-vision aids? Here are four suggestions:

            1. Stop relying on low vision and on low-vision aids the moment you find yourself clinging to them as a passport to normality.

            In the mid-seventies I was a client at the Idaho Commission for the Blind. I had just taken my first teaching job on the faculty at Boise State

University. I wanted the Commission for the Blind to buy me a CCTV that I could use at home. I already had one at my office, but I wanted another at home

so that I could be more productive there. As evidence of how normally I could function with such a machine, I told the commission director, with pride

in my accomplishment, that I had just recently used my CCTV at the office to grade some hand-written quizzes. I told him that with the CCTV I was able

to grade almost all the quizzes by myself. I had to have someone else read only three of them to me because of the poor handwriting. I desperately wanted

to be able to grade all my students' papers by myself. I knew very little about alternative techniques at the time. The thought of having someone else

read my students' papers to me seemed an admission that I was incompetent as a professor and that I was not normal.

            The commission director helped me to see how much I was relying on my partial vision and on the CCTV as a way to prove that I was normal. He

asked, "What will you do if your CCTV machine ever breaks?" I suddenly had the very unpleasant vision of myself lying helpless on the floor, unable to

perform my job at all until my CCTV could be repaired. I had assumed I would be more normal as a professor if I could get a CCTV. I also felt that I would

be a more worthy and acceptable professor if I could grade my students' papers by myself, in the same way the other faculty did.

            Of course these ideas are simply not valid. The important thing for me as a faculty member was not how I graded my students' papers but that

I would get them graded and facilitate learning for them.The exact method of grading--whether I graded them by myself with a CCTV or used a sighted reader

or had the students submit assignments electronically for me to access with my speech-synthesized computer--was really beside the point and irrelevant.

            The real damage of such ideas is that they can lead us to believe that we really are inferior when we have to use alternative techniques. Accomplishment

of the task at hand is more important than the method of its accomplishment. So stop relying on low vision and low-vision aids the moment you notice yourself

clinging to them as a passport to normality.

            2. Stop relying on low vision and on low-vision aids if doing so keeps you illiterate during part or most of your day or life. True literacy

is the ability at any given moment to read and write. Like many other partially sighted people, I have had to struggle to accomplish the requirements of

my job. One day I realized that my main problem was not that I couldn't see very well but that during much of each day I was illiterate. When I was more

than an arm's length away from my desk and my CCTV, I could neither read nor write. At those times, for all practical purposes I was an illiterate Ph.D.

            Recently several national programs have been developed to reduce or eliminate illiteracy in this country. One of the biggest problems these

programs have is finding those who are illiterate. People who have grown up in our society without ever learning to read or write go to great lengths to

hide this fact. They feel great shame and bluff a lot. Partially sighted people do the same thing. Many of us feel shame, and we often pretend more sight

than we really have. Why do we do this? I think it is because of our illiteracy.

            One day I was introduced to the Braille 'n Speak. Within only a few days I was able to write whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted; and, what

is even more wonderful, I could actually read what I had written. After a time I began to hunger for the ability to read Braille with my fingers. I began

using simple Braille notes to read things which I had formerly committed to memory. I will never forget what a liberating feeling it was when I conducted

my first meeting by referring to a small card on which I had Brailled a few characters or a single word on each line to remind me of the next agenda item.

I still remember the feeling of freedom the first time I Brailled my flight itinerary complete with departure and arrival times, connecting flights, and

seat assignments, on a card and was able to refer to it at any given moment during my trip. I felt I had achieved major milestones in my life the first

time I read a treasurer's report in Braille at a public meeting of the NFB of Arizona and the first time I completed a Braille book that consisted of seven

volumes. These were times I wanted to ring the Freedom Bell and shout for joy. As I increased in literacy, I felt much less shame at being partially sighted.

            Don't wait to start learning Braille. Get going now! You'll never do it any younger.You can still use print when you want to or when you are

near your CCTV, but during the rest of your day and for the rest of your life you won't be illiterate.

            3. Stop relying on low vision and on low-vision aids if doing so deceives you into thinking you can make it on your own or that you don't need

the National Federation of the Blind. Simply by being members of our society, we all develop false notions about blindness and doubts about our abilities

as blind people. These ideas lurk deep within us, far below the conscious level. The problem is that, when we encounter a situation, large or small, in

which our vision or the lack of it becomes an issue, those old feelings come back to erode our self-esteem and confidence.

            The National Federation of the Blind has taught us the truth about blindness. It has taught us that the blind are normal people with the full

range of normal abilities. Every blind person should read Walking Alone and Marching Together. This book chronicles the fifty-year history of the organized

blind movement. It sets forth our philosophy--the truth about blindness.

            The NFB provides an invaluable support system. Without the NFB we would be forced to spend our lives walking alone. Regardless of how strong

our resolve and how hard we work to achieve our goals, our chance of success without the NFB would be greatly diminished. As we walk alone, we are constantly

bombarded from every side with the subtle message that blindness means inferiority. Since we all tend to see ourselves as others see us, we can come to

expect less of ourselves. When we march together with other Federationists, we are constantly reminded of the truth about blindness. We are normal individuals.

With proper training and opportunity we can achieve normally.

            Read Walking Alone and Marching Together. Learn the philosophy of the National Federation of the Blind. It is the truth about blindness. Get

involved. Help other blind people to find and understand this precious truth. You will be helping yourself.

            4. Stop relying on low vision and on low-vision aids when they are doing you more harm than good. Is it possible that partial or even 20/20

vision could actually be a disadvantage to someone? The answer is absolutely yes.

            Aaron was a student in one of my finance classes at Boise State University. Soon after the start of the semester, Aaron came to my office for

help. He was flunking out of all his classes and was about to drop out of school altogether. Right away I knew something was wrong because Aaron was quite

obviously a dedicated and intelligent student. During our conversation it became clear that he was severely dyslexic. For him reading was unbelievably

difficult and slow. He spent many hours each day trying to read even a little of the material for his classes. He just couldn't do it.

            Aaron had 20/20 vision. He had a driver's license and was an accomplished gymnast. But when it came to reading print, Aaron was functionally

blind. When I first pointed this out to him, he was even more discouraged and just wanted to give up. I explained some of the alternative techniques which

the blind use when dealing with printed material. Aaron caught the vision and was soon using recorded textbooks and live readers to accomplish the studying

and library research required in his classes. He rose to the top of all his classes and graduated with honors. Here is an example in which reliance on

20/20 vision was a severe handicap when it came to reading the printed word.

            In a similar way those of us with partial sight often come to rely so much on our remaining vision that we often reject techniques which in

reality could be much more effective. Perhaps the reason is that we have accepted, at the emotional level, the notion that anything done with vision is

superior to what can be accomplished without vision, even with the use of alternative techniques.

            The last time I talked with Aaron he was studying Braille. Even though he had 20/20 vision, he understood that in order to be successful, he

had to adopt techniques for dealing with print which did not rely at all on vision. The challenge for those of us with partial vision is to know when to

adopt these so-called blind techniques and when to continue relying on our limited vision.

            In my own case I have found that with few exceptions the alternative techniques which totally blind people use effectively have made me more

efficient and effective in accomplishing the full range of tasks and activities of daily living. I did not come to this conclusion all at once. The most

difficult thing for me to accept was that I should carry a white cane. When I first began carrying a cane, I felt as if I was a fraud because many people

treated me as though I were totally blind. This was, of course, not true at all. But when I did not carry a white cane, some people, especially those I

met in casual encounters, thought I had 20/20 vision. Of course this was not true either. It finally occurred to me that I had no obligation to ensure

that everyone around me had correct information about my visual acuity.

            As I continued carrying my white cane, a wonderful thing happened. I began to feel more at peace about my partial vision, or as I began to

refer to it, my blindness, than I had yet felt at any point in my life. Perhaps it was because, when I held a white cane, it seemed pointless to try and

bluff more sight than I had or to give the impression that I could see things which I could not. I also began to feel more comfortable crossing streets

at crosswalks where there was no traffic light. I found it much easier to find the first step when I went down a flight of stairs. I also felt less stress

when I entered dimly lit theaters and restaurants.

            Over the years I have come to the conclusion that there is another reason for us partials to carry our white canes. We are trying to change

what it means to be blind. In order to do this more effectively, the public needs to see more of us with white canes going to school and work and doing

all the normal things. We shouldn't hide.

            I still use my CCTV at times. I still use a screen-enlargement program on my computer at times. I am grateful for the useable vision I have.

But these days I am even more grateful to the National Federation of the Blind for teaching me that it's okay to be blind or even partially sighted. I

feel as if a whole new world has opened to me as I have begun to rely less and less on my partial vision and more and more on alternative techniques to

accomplish necessary tasks at work and at home.