Seeing

by Lauren L. Merryfield

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From the Editor: Lauren Merryfield lives in Eugene, Oregon, with her two cats, Toby and Laynie. She is a frequent contributor to our Federation literature, and in this article she shares her concern that people frequently fail to tell us about things because they find them boring and hastily conclude we will as well. Here is what she says:

The dictionary, thesaurus, and our culture define "seeing" as: 1. to perceive with the eyes; look at—the sense or power of sight; vision. 2: considering. 3: going out with someone. 4: meaning/vision. 5: the clarity of focus. 6: be careful or certain to do something; make certain of something. 7: to follow with the eyes. To follow. 8: discern, perceive, glimpse. 9: note, spot, notice, mark. 10: (I would add) to regard, feel/touch, watch, to get to know/become familiar with, to spend time with, and so on. Though the books filled with definitions focus on eyesight and the "power" of physical sight, remember that those books were written by sighted, light-dependent people.

One day when a man brought a de-scented skunk to our school, I immediately said "I want to see it," as sighted staff were ooohing and aaahing over the cute little animal. I meant that I wanted to touch it, to become familiar with what a skunk is shaped like and its size. I had heard skunks referred to as polecats and, cat person that I am, I wanted to know if the "cat" part of that term meant there was some resemblance to felines.

In third grade, some of us from the school for the blind were taken to a museum. We were allowed to touch some pottery and statues. I enjoyed it so much that several years later I was eager to attend a museum again. Imagine my disappointment when I was not allowed past ropes and told that I could not touch anything due to oil in my fingers. Subsequently, I learned that this was the norm at museums, so I stopped going. I felt cut off when I wasn't allowed to "see" the items there. In some cases I had pieces described to me very well; however, it still was not the same as seeing for myself.

One day, when my mother and I were going home after she had picked me up from the university, I asked her what a particular house we always passed every day looked like. She became frustrated with me, stating that she hadn't ever really noticed.

When my daughter was young, two people chased her and her dad and me out of a grocery store, yelling for us to stop. According to them, our daughter had shoplifted. I said I did not think she had; that we were examining items in the store, and she was showing her dad and me some items, which meant that the three of us were picking up items off the shelves and feeling them. This did not mean that anyone had shoplifted. Before I could object, they rammed their hands into her coat pockets gruffly saying, "Let me see what you have in your pockets."

They not only assumed that she had shoplifted, they further assumed that because her father and I were both blind, that we did not see it happen. I felt like they were invading our daughter's privacy and ours. People were standing around, you guessed it, looking to see what was going on and what would happen.

Since our daughter only had tissues and the candy we had just bought her in her pockets, we were allowed to leave—and leave we did. We never went back to that store, even though they had the best doughnuts in town.

When I visited my first cat show, out of both curiosity and chagrin, I sat in the audience hearing meows and listening to the presentations. No one would allow me to "see" the kitties, as in touch them. They were afraid of germs. They feared that the cats would be distracted. I left the show disappointed and even more concerned that showing cats might be more cruel than not. And I never even heard anyone talking to their trained cats or referring to them as "kitties." I felt sad and cut off from the cats I had so wanted to "see." It was not that blindness itself was causing me to be cut off. It was the behavior of the people there who were refusing to allow me to "see" the cats that brought about the disconnect.

After joining the Cat Writers' Association (yes, there really is such a thing), we were given press passes to attend the cat show near our convention site. So my husband and I attended. At first I heard the meows and the occasional "cat out!" over the sound system. But before I knew it, people began to bring their kitties to me or invite me over to the table where their cat was resting. They, contrary to my first experience, felt that my "seeing" their cats would help socialize them. They also seemed to realize that if I didn't get to touch the cats, I would be unnecessarily detached from them and lacking information about them beyond their meows. I got to see cats with full coats, cats with short or long fur, cats with slinky or stout bodies, cats with long, thin, thick, short or no tails—this is beginning to sound like Dr. Seuss—a Bengal cat, a Devon Rex cat with almost no hair, a Russian blue, a Scottish fold with differently-placed ears, kittens, "cattens," and cats. And, yes, I heard some of the people owned by these cats refer to them as "kitty."

Quite often at Christmas gatherings, wedding and baby showers, and other events, people quickly rip open their gifts, exclaiming over them, and I have no idea what they unwrapped. I usually ask, which annoys some people, as if they are saying "It's none of your business." I think it is. If everyone else in the room sees what so-and-so got, why is it their business but not mine? I have even suggested that we pass items around, like my family used to do, with someone always saying that would take too long.

Someone I know becomes impatient with me, like she wants to say "Why do you need to feel it anyway? Why is it so important that you see it?" She has stated that I am too curious and snoopy, especially when I am in other peoples' homes or out in the public. When I visited her recently, she became quite annoyed when I started touching items on the small table next to where I was sitting. One of the items was a personal piece of paper that I could not even read, so why the fuss? For one thing, I wanted to figure out where to put my drink, and, for another, I was, yes, I was curious about what all was on the table. She did not understand that she could see everything on that table just by looking over in that direction taking it all in with her eyes, but that was not considered "too curious" or "snoopy," or other negative terms or connotations. In other words, it is all right for sighted people to look around, notice something, take in what is there, but when a blind person wants to touch things, that is somehow not okay.

Too often it is assumed by some sighted and even some blind people that not physically seeing something means that we cannot function on our own. Some people will not understand that my long white cane is a tool to help me find out what is in my environment. They assume I cannot cook because you have to see to cook, which is not true. The senses of touch, smell, and especially taste can make a blind person a very good cook, even if that person is not me. If I cannot see, how did I raise my daughter? How do I get to the store? How do I get my groceries? How do I ..., how do I ..., how do I ..., all assuming that one has to use physical sight to perform these life tasks.

When the Broadway version of Cats the musical came to town, my husband and I attended. Because we were not familiar with the T. S. Elliott poetry, the song lyrics, or the actions onstage, we were really at a loss to what was going on during the show. All I really remember was that the lady sitting in front of me had a fur coat draped over the back of her seat, and I was relieved to know that it was not made of cats.

The other day a friend and I spent some time at a cat shelter because I had recently lost my Maryah of fourteen years, and I was considering an adoption. On our way home I asked her what color the last two kitties were—the two I was most interested in. She said she could not remember, that they just looked like regular everyday cats.

Now that it is commonplace to use PowerPoint slides, display song lyrics on the screen at churches, and other projections, once again I often feel unnecessarily cut off. The other day, I asked someone at church what the words were to a given song. She said she did not know unless she saw them on the screen. I thought about all of the songs and hymns I had memorized over my lifetime, and I decided that for me that was preferable to depending on a screen. I wondered how many times people reading from a screen really understood what they were singing about and whether the hymn really became a part of them.

Quite often when I go to the movies, I am the only one laughing. Some people are so immersed in watching that they miss the conversational aspect of the movie. They, of course, upon seeing me, assume that I am going to miss out on the whole movie, like, why am I even there? They have a point, to a point. However, with Descriptive Narration, when the devices are available and in working condition, I am able to "see" the movie as well as the next person.

Not long ago one of my friends here where I now live visited my apartment. I asked him what was on the screen of my laptop. I was curious about the background picture that was presented behind a sales pitch. I assumed it was probably the beach, a beautiful building, flowers, or something exotic. He just said "Oh, it doesn't matter. It's boring."

I said "Wait a minute! You think it is boring, but I want to know what it is. I might not think it is boring, or I might, but I want to decide for myself."

He informed me that it was just a picture of men and women in suits carrying briefcases and one guy holding up a bright, shiny brochure. He apparently decided that I wasn't missing anything.

To conclude, sighted people do not always see what is there. Blind people are not cut off due to blindness, but sometimes are unnecessarily cut off by the attitudes around them to what is available to be seen.

Now let me finish with what our physical education coach used to say: "I see, said the blind man, as he picked up his hammer and saw."