Getting There

by Lauren Merryfield

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From the Editor: Lauren Merryfield is a longtime member of the National Federation of the Blind, a contributor to the Kernel Books we have published in the past, and a person who often reminds us that what is important about the way we function is not whether it is perfect but whether it is real, sustainable, and effective. What I like about Lauren’s perspective is her rejection of the idea that we need to learn route travel and that it is only through being shown that we can figure out how to move safely in the places we live, work, and play. I had been traveling for five years before someone convinced me that I could learn new travel routes on my own and that if I needed help it could come from someone other than a specially trained mobility instructor. It could even come from a blind person! I learned that it was okay to be lost and that being lost did not mean that I was in the jungle where I would soon be eaten. I learned about stopping to take stock of where I was, about attempting to reverse my route, and about asking other people to tell me the street that I was on and the street I would come to if I kept walking. Mostly what I learned was not to be overly anxious or afraid and that being lost was a part of the normal travel experience that blind and sighted people encounter all the time. This is the message that Lauren brings, and I love the way she does it. Here is what she has written:

Quite often when I am using my long white cane and now a walker, some people become perfectionistic about my getting from one place to another. I know there are blind people who make it from point A to point B without making any errors. However, I know of some blind people who do not even try to get around by themselves because they fear they will not do it perfectly.

My feet don't work right, so I generally do not walk a straight line, but I go anyway. In getting somewhere, I am sometimes likely to bump something with my cane or walker. This is what the cane is for—to tell me about things in my path. Some people will say that I am running into things, but if my cane strikes them and I do not, I am not running into them; I am simply detecting them.

Sometimes when someone is directing me, they are concerned when I don't make a straight shot without coming in contact with something. While using a ramp, they correct me so that I don't come in contact with the rail, but it is okay with me if I do this. I can always correct myself—this is just the way I travel.

I figure that as long as I get from point A to point B, that is the main thing. It would be nice if I could do it perfectly as some people do, but to me, it is not a requirement. I don't stay home, refusing to get out for fear that I will hit something and someone will see it. I have long since given up the worry that someone will see me hit something and assume that I and all blind people are clumsy.

I consider myself to be an investigatory blind person, for often when I come in contact with something, I want to check it out. At times, when I am in the process of checking something out, a worried person will tell me what the object is or where I am or assume that I am lost or about to get hurt or perhaps fall. I appreciate their interest but wish I could spare them the worry. This is the way I learn; this is part of my life with which I am very comfortable.

Last year I moved to a new apartment house. I learned the route, but occasionally I drift off. Sometimes people watching will become concerned, not knowing that part of my skillset is to learn by and from my mistakes. I tell them I am not as much lost as I am correcting myself. I explain that sometimes when I accidentally get off course, I actually learn more about my surroundings than if I go perfectly on my path.

I am surprised when some people get concerned about me going into a restroom—like, how far off course can one get in a restroom? Really! The concern is as misplaced as wondering whether or not I can travel up and down the aisle of an airplane—how can one go wrong?

Once a blind person told me he never got lost. I was skeptical. He considered it a compliment to himself when I thought he was being dishonest. My reasoning in rejecting his claim is simple: sighted people get lost, so why wouldn't blind people also get lost? Sighted people go from point A to point B with occasional errors, so why wouldn't blind people be likely to do the same on occasion?

When my second husband was driving, he occasionally became quite lost. We sometimes drove around for quite a while before getting our bearings. Sometimes we stopped to ask someone for directions. Sometimes he had a map that he consulted. Sometimes I was the one who told him where to go. But we always made it back home. He didn't decide that we couldn't go somewhere for fear he would become lost, like some blind people I have met.

I remember one time when I was walking along a strip mall looking for a certain store. On the way I made the wrong turn, finding myself at the door of an ice cream parlor. I could have panicked or anxiously asked the people inside for directions; but no, I stopped in for a treat before going on my way. I did not consider that I had made a mistake as much as adding something interesting to my day.

Sometimes blind people I know will confuse the reasons for my difficulty. They will assume that I lack good skills of blindness, when the truth is that there are other problems I have acquired as I have gotten older that play into my mobility challenges. What they also need to understand is that my goal is to be an exploratory traveler and not a perfect traveler. Most of the time I am comfortable if traveling from place X to place Y involves a detour. Often I can find value in this, and even when it is an inconvenience, it certainly doesn’t justify staying home and being isolated.

Though my determination to get somewhere by myself is my norm, due to chronic illness and pain I will occasionally ask for directions, refuse to go somewhere with someone unless they know their way, or resort to being taken somewhere by someone who knows the way. Some blind people may think this is the easy way out, even the lazy way out. I consider it simply an alternative. I don't want my having health issues to keep me from going somewhere and getting back home. So, yes, sometimes I have help getting from point A to point B. But I do not do this because I do not believe I could get there myself; I do it out of convenience or necessity if I am not feeling well. If I have a time constraint, I may likewise accept help from someone. If I am feeling bad, I may take more help than if I am feeling well. I think this has nothing to do with blindness and everything to do with realizing that each of us has options and that there is an appropriate time and place to exercise them.

Sometimes my travel leads to humorous experiences and exchanges. I am reminded of the time when I walked into the hotel in New Orleans for our National Convention, asking “Which direction am I going?” What I wanted to know was whether I was facing north, south, east, or west. The guy at the front desk said “Straight ahead.” That made me laugh. It also made me realize that sometimes it is just better for me to figure out things myself.

Often my traveling from point A to point B is more like a story. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end; however, there are plots, subplots, and surprises along the way. To me the main thing is that when I embark on foot, the issue isn’t how straight or quickly I get somewhere, but getting there and being proud of the fact that I have the skills, the courage, and the mindset to go. This is what it means to be free; this is what it means to be independent.