Crying My Eyes Out

A Chronicle of My Experience with Structured Discovery

by Kate Smith

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From the Editor: Kate Smith is a middle-aged woman from Alabama who is currently receiving training at the Louisiana Center for the Blind. Here is her story about what many experience in making a successful adjustment to blindness:

Anyone who has experience with visual rehabilitation as a rehabilitator or a rehabilitatee knows that professionals disagree about whether people with low vision should be trained to use methods to optimize their vision or trained to do what they have to do without vision. I think the person who is living with low vision should be the one who makes this choice. But many people with low vision resist training methods that require them to wear a blindfold and work without sight. I am here to convince everyone with low vision to try training under a blindfold a few times before making a decision.

I have struggled for many years with fading vision. Like most people I know with low vision, I mostly tried to ignore my limitations. Whenever I found a task that I could no longer do efficiently or optimally, I searched for magic glasses or a magic surgery or a magic machine that would allow me to keep on pretending that I was still able to function visually in a visual world. My method worked for quite a while. But then it didn't. At some indefinable point I crossed a visual line and stepped into a confusing world of shifting shadows, glaring light, and fuzzy, diffuse edges. I started having conversations with coat racks. I visited men's rooms. I spilled fine wine in posh restaurants. I tripped and fell too many times to count. In short, I lost control of my life.

So by the time I recognized I needed vision rehabilitation, I was fed up with my vision, and I was fed up with vision aids. I was desperate to learn how to get along without my eyes. I eagerly accepted the opportunity to work with a blindfold. I was ready for the darkness—or so I thought. I cried uncontrollably the first time I put on a blindfold; I cried the second time too. I was surprised the first time I cried, and equally surprised the second time. Now, knowing what I know, I think the most surprising thing is that I actually thought I wouldn't cry. You see, I thought this was a rational decision, and I am pretty good at rational decisions. I am a rational, educated woman. So, once I had accepted that I needed to learn how to function without my vision, the next rational step was to blindfold myself and get a teacher to show me how to function that way. Isn't that the rational thing to do? But the rational, educated woman had failed to consult the rebellious, terrified child within; I had been ignoring her for years. She was still sure she could see if she tried hard enough. She was pretty sure there were monsters in the dark. She was scared, and she was having none of this blindfold business.

So there I was, educated woman and terrified child, crying in front of my brand-new cane travel instructor, crying on a public street, crying my eyes out. This wasn't new—this public humiliation--I'm the woman who hangs out in men's restrooms--but it was still surprising. Because this time I had decided; I had taken control of my destiny. Me, the grown-up—rational, educated woman—and I couldn't figure out why I was crying. My instructor, Chantal, allowed me to continue my first cane travel lesson without the sleepshade. But the second time, when the tears surprised me again, the sleepshade stayed on. We both just pretended the tears weren't there. By the third lesson the tears were gone and the grown-up was firmly in control. The worst was over, or so I thought. I started a new phase of rehab training—the independent living class. The teachers, Carol and Sue, told us we would spend part of each class day working under sleepshades. I smugly informed them that I had already worked under a blindfold and I was comfortable with the experience. I grandly announced to the class at large that, in my opinion, structured discovery was the best form of rehab and the blindfold was the best teaching practice available. We were lucky, I said, to have teachers willing to guide us through the process. I assured everyone who could hear me that the fear would subside quickly. And then another student, Janet, started to cry, and then I cried—again. So much for the grown-up, rational, educated woman.

But, as I write this, we are almost finished with the independent living class. Janet and I don't cry anymore. We ironed shirts under sleepshades, and we didn't cry. We cooked spaghetti under sleepshades, and we didn't cry. We have even been able to laugh some days—almost every day. So here's what I learned under the sleepshade: I learned to walk with a cane; I learned to eat without spilling; I learned how to cook spaghetti. The blindfold helped me to turn off my eyes and learn things in a nonvisual way—important stuff.

But even more important was the stuff my terrified inner child learned from the blindfolds. She learned that I can still do the things I need to do; she learned that I am still going to laugh; she learned not to be afraid of the dark; and she learned that sometimes you just have to cry your eyes out.