

The Meanings of Blindness in Nineteenth-Century America

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GEORGE HENRY spent only one day at the Pennsylvania Institution for the Blind, but the experience made a profound impression on him. Midway through a colorful career as a canal builder and bell maker, Henry developed an inflammation of the eyes that gradually destroyed his vision. Desperate to find some new way to support his family, in the late 1830s he went to the school's workshop in Philadelphia hoping to learn brush-making and to get the stock and tools he would need to work at this new trade.

Arriving at the institution, Henry found an impressive schoolhouse surrounded by a 'spacious park' where the blind promenaded on wide gravel walks. By chance, that evening the students were hosting their annual Lyceum, open to blind participants only, and they invited Henry to join them. He was amazed to find the school's main hall filled with more than a hundred educated blind people, conversing on 'the general topics of the day' and enjoying themselves singing, dancing and reading to one another from raised-letter books, 'all seeming to be as familiar with things foreign and domestic as if enjoying their organs of vision.'

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As Henry left that evening, his new friends gathered around to bid him farewell, like 'a band of brothers and sisters.' 'Who can sympathize with the blind but the blind?' Henry realized with gratitude. At the Philadelphia school he had found much more than a lesson in brush-making. He had discovered a remarkable refuge, a place that not only gave the blind a chance for mutual commiseration, but also a forum where they could stand as equals, shielded from the competition and the judgment of the sighted.¹

The Philadelphia school was just one of many established across the country in the 1830s and 40s, pioneered by some of the same men and women who championed common school reform, and built the new penitentiaries and asylums that were the hallmark of antebellum philanthropy. To rouse public interest in the plight of the blind, these educators put their students on exhibition, inviting audiences to consider the scientific, philosophical, and spiritual meanings of blindness. These performances sparked a rich and complex dialogue about the blind in the mid-nineteenth century, played out in concert halls, legislative chambers, and in the pages of newspapers, children's books, and scientific and religious journals.

As George Henry discovered that night in Philadelphia, the blind men and women who came to these new schools were not simply passive recipients of this new charity. Rather, they actively shaped these institutions, sometimes in ways unanticipated by their sighted benefactors. And Henry's account, published as part of a larger memoir about his successful triumph over the obstacles of blindness, suggests another place of refuge and autonomy carved out by the blind in the mid-nineteenth century, a cultural space claimed by dozens of blind authors who published their life stories. With the help of raised-letter books and other teaching innovations, the blind students eagerly learned to read. But a surprising number of them went much further, writing their own

1. George W. Henry, *Incidents in the Life of George W. Henry, Up to the 46th Year of His Age: Together with His Religious Experience. To Which is Added a Number of Choice Hymns and Popular Odes, with Accompanying Music. Dictated by Himself, Being Blind* (Utica, 1846), 231-32.

books that described their experiences as blind men and women. Through these personal narratives, the blind began for the first time to define the meaning of blindness for themselves.

By one estimate, there were as many as eight thousand blind people in America in the 1830s. But reformers found that, in some sense, the blind were invisible, hidden from view. Wealthier families usually kept their blind relatives confined to back rooms and kitchen corners, where they lived out quiet and sedentary lives. When blindness struck the poor, as it did in disproportionate numbers, they were often forced into alms-houses. As he began his work as the first director of the Perkins School for the Blind in Boston, Samuel Gridley Howe found that blindness often condemned people to 'vegetate through life and sink into the grave, unknown even to their neighbors.'²

This changed in 1832 when new institutions for the blind were founded in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York, championed in each city by a small handful of doctors and philanthropists. Each school began humbly, with a lone educator recruiting one or a handful of blind students and teaching them in his own home. Although the blind had been successfully educated in France since the 1780s, and in Britain since the turn of the century, most Americans remained 'very sceptical' about the project. When the German immigrant Julius Friedlander began his work in Philadelphia, well-meaning observers advised him that the blind were best left to 'the support of the charitable, or the shelter of the almshouse.' In New York, when Dr. John Russ experimented with teaching six blind children from the city almshouse, his fellow citizens had little hope for his 'well meant but utopian scheme.'³

2. S. G. Howe, 'Education of the Blind,' *North American Review* 37, no. 80 (July 1833): 55. The 1840 census estimated that there were 5,024 white and 1,892 'colored' blind people. A census of the blind taken in Massachusetts in 1830 reported that 75 percent of the blind in that state were 'indigent.' *House Bill No. 16, Massachusetts House Documents, 1830*, 3.

3. Abram Courtney, *Anecdotes of the Blind* (Boston: printed for the author, 1835), 25; Anna C. Smith, *The Orphan Blind Girl* (Baltimore, 1865), 142; M. Snider, 'An Account of the Origin, etc. of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind,' unpublished manuscript in the archives of the Overbrook School for the Blind, Philadelphia. The

All that changed when the educators held their first public exhibitions. After only two weeks, Friedlander showed that his student, a thirteen-year-old boy, had already made so much progress that the child's own father exclaimed that Friedlander 'must be a sorcerer!' After a few months of instruction, Dr. John Russ exhibited his students at New York's City Hotel. 'The ease and rapidity with which they went through the required performances,' a journalist reported, 'appeared to excite as much pleasure as surprise, particularly the skill of a little fellow in mental arithmetic, who solved problems, propounded by some of the audience, so readily and so accurately that, although the sanctity of the place might well prohibit such a show of feeling, it was found impossible to repress a burst of applause.' In Boston, Howe organized a demonstration at the Masonic Temple that attracted 'a large portion of the learning, taste, and fashion of the city.' The next day, an editor described the sight of blind children reading, reciting, and singing as 'one of the most delightful and gratifying spectacles' that the city had ever seen; one met with 'breathless attention, and not a few indications of deep, tearful sympathy.'⁴

Over the next twenty years, the blind schools put on hundreds of these exhibitions, appealing for funds and raising public interest in the educational needs of the blind. On their first visit to Wilmington, Delaware, in 1835, for example, Julius Friedlander and his students were greeted by more than two thousand spectators. For three hours the children demonstrated their educational accomplishments, singing hymns and reciting poems, reading passages from a raised-letter Gospel, and calculating math problems on raised-metal types. The audience was deeply moved by

school moved to the Overbrook community of Philadelphia over a century ago, and although it soon became its vernacular name, Overbrook School for the Blind was not legally adopted until 1946.

4. Julius Friedlander cited in Elisabeth D. Freund, *Crusader for Light* (Philadelphia: Dorrance, 1959), 57; J. R. Friedlander, *An Address to the Public at the First Exhibition of the Pupils of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind, at the Musical Fund Hall* (Philadelphia, 1833). *New York Daily Mirror*, June 15 1833; *Christian Watchman*, June 1, 1833.

this evidence that the blind were both capable and eager to learn. One reporter noted that 'the gush of feeling on this occasion was unparalleled, leaving hardly an eye unsuffused with tears—and many a manly cheek was seen to bear honorable witness to the power of a sight so deeply affecting.'⁵ The residents of Delaware were so impressed by Friedlander's exhibition that their legislature soon appropriated \$1,000 a year to send the state's blind children to the Philadelphia school.⁶

The Wilmingtonians were not alone in their generous response to this new cause. When Friedlander appeared with his students before the Pennsylvania legislature, the chambers were so packed with eager spectators that many of the lawmakers were unable to get into their own building, prompting a second showing the following day.⁷ And in West Chester the exhibition was 'witnessed with great delight, by an audience much too large for the size of the building, many persons being obliged to remain outside' watching the program through open windows.⁸ In capitol buildings, churches, and public halls all along the East Coast, overflowing audiences gaped at, wept for, and applauded the blind.⁹

With funds raised from their first exhibitions, these three schools established themselves in permanent buildings, where they continued to offer weekly exhibitions. Through the antebellum period, thousands of sympathetic and curious people visited the blind schools each year, including a number of the era's best-known intellectuals, politicians, and writers. 'The Institution was

5. 'To the Citizens of Delaware,' and 'The Institute of the Blind.' These pamphlets are included in unpublished Manager's Minutes, Overbrook School.

6. *Constitution, Charter and By-Laws, and Documents Relating to The Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind, At Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1837), 22–23.

7. Manager's Minutes, February 4, 1834, Overbrook School.

8. William Chapin, Unpublished Diary, August 9, n.d., Overbrook School.

9. The New York and Boston schools began in 1832, the same year that Friedlander arrived in Philadelphia. Gabriel Farrell, *The Story of Blindness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 41–52. An account of the earliest exhibition of blind students in the New York institution can be found in Mrs. C. M. Sawyer, *The History of the Blind Vocalists* (New York: Douglass & Hempstead, 1852), 55–59. The earliest Philadelphia exhibition is described in 'Exhibition of the Blind at the Musical Fund Hall,' *United States Gazette*, November 21, 1833.

flooded with them on visiting days,' a student in the New York school recalled. 'The elite of New York and Brooklyn came with their fine equipages, and strangers to the city in search of strange sights and wonderful things were sure to visit the Blind Asylum, as they called it.'¹⁰

Why were so many antebellum Americans drawn to these exhibitions and so profoundly moved by the sight of blind children reading, singing, and answering geography questions? We can best answer that question by recalling the fate of many blind children up to that point, a fate rooted in centuries of misunderstanding about the very meaning of blindness. In the early 1830s, philanthropic organizations were reaching out to a wide variety of dispossessed people, but advocates for the blind expressed regret that their society had taken so long to turn its attention to those whom many agreed were 'the most unfortunate class of all.'¹¹ Compassionate Americans had no doubt always felt pity and concern for blind individuals in their communities, and followed their ministers' injunctions to provide physical and spiritual comfort to those who suffered 'death in the eyes.'¹² But, until these exhibitions proved that the blind could be educated, even the most charitable considered their earthly prospects to be bleak. No less than in the days of Scripture, when blind beggars called out to Jesus in the streets of Jerusalem, blindness seemed synonymous with dependency, marginalization, and poverty.

Newspapers in the early nineteenth century contained scattered reports about 'remarkable' blind people who made their

10. 'Exhibition of the Blind,' *Juvenile Rambler*, March 27, 1833; Lansing V. Hall, *The World As I Hear It* (Dansville, N.Y.: A. O. Bunnell, printer, 1878), 182. A very partial list of visitors to blind schools includes Henry Clay, David Crockett, James Polk, Jenny Lind, Thomas H. Benton, Winfield Scott and writers such as Longfellow, Francis Wayland, and Lydia Sigourney. European travelogues from the period often include a visit to one or more of the nation's new schools for the blind; see the travel writings of Harriet Martineau, Charles Dickens, and George Combe.

11. C. G. Ridgeley, cited in *Manager's Minutes*, Overbrook School.

12. Early American sermons urging aid to the blind include those by Josiah Dwight, *A Bright Side of Dark Providences, The Great and Sore Affliction of Such Living Christians as are under a total Deprivation of Sight, Considered, Commiserated and Improved* (Boston, 1710); John Danforth, *King Hezekiah's Bitterness and Relief* (Boston, 1710).

own livings. Accounts circulated about resourceful blind cabinet-makers and book peddlers, watch repairers, composers, and even an English road builder. Yet the sighted authors who related these tales of talented and self-reliant blind people never treated them as evidence of the capacities and needs of the blind as a class; rather, they reported these accomplishments as curiosities, odd exceptions to an otherwise inviolable social law that consigned the blind to abject dependence. In the public mind, to be blind was to be 'indigent.'¹³

The powerful emotional reaction that many Americans felt when witnessing an exhibition of educated blind children can best be understood in this context. 'Could you have believed that all this has been effected,' a speaker at the Wilmington exhibition marveled, 'had you not witnessed it? It might possibly have entered your dreams, but you would have discarded it as a moral impossibility.'¹⁴ For audiences at these performances, centuries of stigma and despair were lifted in an instant.

For many observers, analogies to Christ's miraculous healing came quickly to mind. Though the blind remained in physical darkness, new technologies and enlightened teaching methods now brought them intellectual and spiritual light. To antebellum audiences, the appearance of blind children smiling, reading raised-letter Scriptures, and proudly demonstrating their knowledge of world geography seemed nothing less than a redemptive miracle, the profound and unexpected resurrection of a class of people once thought to be forsaken, some thought even punished, by God.¹⁵ 'The emotions of the heart can find no representatives

13. See, for example, 'Blindness,' *Boston Medical Intelligencer*, July 12, 1825, 40; 'Powers of Blind Persons,' *The Atheneum; or, Spirit of the English Magazines*, April 1817, 74; 'On Blindness, and the Surprising faculty of blind persons,' *The Evening Fire-Side, or Literary Miscellany*, April 26, 1806; *Life of Blind Jack, of Knaresborough* (London, 1845).

14. C. G. Ridgeley, cited in Manager's Minutes, Overbrook School.

15. While many commentators compared the education of the blind to Christ's miracles, many others also recalled God's promise, found in Isaiah 29:18, that 'the eyes of the blind shall see.' Both examples, running throughout the literature on the education of the blind, point to the power of the Bible as a source of metaphor for antebellum Americans. While many of the techniques for educating the blind were developed by the deist De Huay, in revolutionary France, many Americans understood these pedagogical innovations as hav-

in words,' a friend of the blind explained. 'They are too deep, too intense for utterance.'¹⁶

This vision of blind children redeemed spoke not only to vague evangelical hopes, but also to a specific theological problem of intense interest in antebellum America. Christians at all ends of the theological spectrum were struggling at this time with the doctrine of original sin, particularly the strain of Calvinist orthodoxy brought to America by the Puritans. An increasing number of Americans were finding untenable Calvin's view that children were born inheriting the stain of Adam's sin, and that many were predestined by God to eternal punishment.¹⁷

Seen through the lens of orthodox theology, the blind were the victims of an inscrutable Providence or, even worse, were suffering punishment for sin, their own or their ancestors'. Contemplating blind children on the stage, many in the audience searched for a different theological moral. Why, they wondered, would a good and just God allow these apparently innocent children to suffer in this way? Many commentators took comfort in the idea

ing a more evangelical origin and purpose, to effect the spiritual salvation of the blind. For example, see the Reverend Joseph D. Tyler, *The Duty and Advantages of Educating the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind. A Sermon Preached in Christ Church, Staunton, On Christmas Night, Dec. 25, 1842* (Staunton, Va.: printed by K. Harper, 1843).

16. 'Institute for the Blind,' undated pamphlet in Overbrook School, Philadelphia. While many of the supporters of education for the blind were not evangelical, the evangelical impulse to save the blind is nicely exemplified by an act of charity toward the blind that was performed at the same time that Friedlander and his allies were trying to raise interest in a school for the blind in Philadelphia. When the philanthropist John Wills died in 1825, he left a significant bequest to found an asylum for 'the blind and the lame.' Wills had evidently been inspired by the biblical verse that spoke of Christ's healing of the 'lame, blind, dumb, maimed, and many others,' a passage that had been recently captured on canvas by the popular Philadelphia artist, Benjamin West. Proponents of a school for the blind argued that they would be better served if Wills's money were used to create a school, not an asylum. Though the New Testament had lumped the 'blind and lame' into the same group, these friends of the blind found this arrangement too 'heterogeneous.' 'The lame and the blind cannot be mixed together,' they argued, 'consistently with the objects of the education of the latter.' The trustees of the Wills estate concluded that the support of an institution that served the blind but not the lame would violate the terms of the bequest. However, the Wills Hospital later evolved into the Wills Eye Hospital.

17. On changing ideas of human suffering in this period, see Elizabeth B. Clark, "'The Sacred Rights of the Weak': Pain, Sympathy, and the Culture of Individual Rights in Antebellum America,' *Journal of American History* 82 (September 1995): 463-93.

that the Creator offered 'compensations' to the afflicted. 'Providence,' Friedlander explained, 'ever attentive to our condition and our wants, always compensates for the loss of one sense by the improvement of another.' Though the blind were shut off from the beauties of sight, some claimed that God had balanced the tally sheet by granting them greater sensitivity in their remaining senses. Others speculated that God had made the blind particularly musical, or spiritual, or naturally humble, blessed by a constant reminder of humanity's ultimate dependence on God. At a time when Americans were increasingly concerned about alleviating pain, the sight of educated blind children seemed to make human suffering less troubling, more comprehensible.¹⁸

Others were drawn to exhibitions of the blind in search of philosophical rather than spiritual insight. Since the Enlightenment, philosophers had often speculated on the mental life of the blind, considering it a useful test case to help resolve questions about the role that the senses play in the formation of human ideas. John Locke had argued that humans are born blank slates, and that all of their ideas are subsequently derived from sensory experience; others disagreed, claiming that the mind contains innate ideas, or at least certain mental faculties that predetermine how we interpret the information we receive from our senses. In his *Letter on the Blind*, Diderot suggested that a philosophical investigation of a blind man's mind might help resolve this debate. 'We should learn to understand his psychology,' Diderot urged, 'and should compare it with ours, and perhaps we should thereby come to a solution of the difficulties which make the theory of vision and of the senses so intricate and so confused.' Following the great *philosophe's* advice, visitors to the exhibitions often asked the blind what sense they could make of our many words drawn from

18. Julius Friedlander, 'The Education of the Blind: An Address Delivered Before the Annual Convention of the Pennsylvania Lyceum, Held at Lewiston, Pa.,' reprinted in *Student Magazine*, April 1, 1840, Overbrook School. On the history of the concept of 'compensation,' see Michael Monbeck, *The Meaning of Blindness: Attitudes Toward Blindness and Blind People* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 468.

visual experience. What do you know about colors? they wondered. What do words like 'radiant' suggest to you?¹⁹

Of course, not everyone in the audiences at these exhibitions was searching for philosophical insight. Some came for much the same reasons that they might buy a ticket from P. T. Barnum to see Tom Thumb, or some other human aberration. To this portion of the audience, the exhibitions provided a chance to stare. After each demonstration, some came forward to ask the questions that the blind students soon knew by heart. Is it true that blind people can distinguish colors with the touch of their fingers? When you eat, how can you find your mouth? When you sleep, do you close your eyes? How can blind men shave? As one student noted with bitter amusement, these people 'appeared to regard us as a race distinct from themselves.'²⁰

While educators winced at some of these questions, they did all they could to encourage a more high-minded public curiosity in what Howe called 'this interesting class of people.' They understood that, by putting the blind on display, they were stimulating the sympathy that produced the dollars needed to support their institutions and advance their careers. Explaining the practice of touring exhibitions to his family back in Germany, Friedlander wrote, 'Even though it is rather trying to travel with several blind children, I do not mind doing it because it is customary and even necessary in this country to get the people interested in enterprises of this sort. In this way most of the charitable institutions here become very wealthy.'²¹

19. Denis Diderot, 'The Letter on the Blind,' *Diderot's Early Philosophical Works*, trans. Margaret Jourdain (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1916), 117. For a discussion of the Enlightenment's interest in the blind, see William R. Paulson, *Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Blind in France* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), 3-71; Ernest Freeberg, *The Education of Laura Bridgman, First Deaf and Blind Person to Learn Language* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 10-11, 38-41.

20. Mary L. Day, *Incidents in the Life of a Blind Girl* (Baltimore: J. Young, 1859), 174; Annie Kane, *The Golden Sunset; or, The Homeless Blind Girl* (Baltimore: J. W. Bond, & Co., 1864), 141.

21. Howe, *Address of the Trustees of the New England Institution for the Education of the Blind to the Public* (Boston, 1833), 11; Howe, *Seventh Annual Report* (Boston, 1839), 9-10; Friedlander, cited in Freund, *Crusader for Light*, 79.

But in the minds of these educators the goal of the exhibitions was not simply to raise money for their schools by cashing in on a natural sympathy for blind children. Just as importantly, they used these opportunities to shape and direct the public's sympathetic impulse toward the blind. These educators realized that teaching the blind was only half of their responsibility, and that they also had to teach the sighted a new way of thinking about blindness. Using the platform of their exhibitions, they hoped to erase notions about the infirmity rooted in centuries of tradition. The entire public performance, usually capped by a lecture from the director, was carefully arranged towards this end, as a direct assault on their society's inherited stereotypes about the blind.

The first myth that these directors hoped to dispel was the notion that the blind were 'necessarily destitute of intelligence' and incapable of education.²² Through their public performances, the blind students made it clear that, aided by such inventions as the raised-letter printing press, they could master every branch of the curriculum. In addition to reading and writing, students demonstrated their ability to point out features on an embossed globe, to make rapid math calculations in their heads and on metal types, and to comment on the finer points of moral philosophy. These displays of educational accomplishment made a deep impression on the public, driving home the reformers' claim that blind children were entitled to a full common school education as part of their democratic birthright. The blind students appeared so eager to learn, so anxious to use their remaining senses to improve themselves, that Horace Mann even praised them as role models for the rest of the nation's youth.²³

The energy and determination that the blind demonstrated at their exhibitions helped to dispel another myth about them, that they were necessarily weak, lazy, and unattractive. Friedlander conceded that the blind often suffered from deformed bodies,

22. Courtney, *Anecdotes*, 25.

23. Ernest Freeberg, 'More Important Than a Rabble of Common Kings': Dr. Howe's Education of Laura Bridgman, *History of Education Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1994): 305-27.

'distortions of the face,' and 'the most awkward postures,' characteristics that the sighted found 'revolting.' He insisted that these were not unavoidable symptoms of blindness, but the result of misguided care. Blind children were 'mostly treated as infants,' carried and indulged. Parents protected them from physical play with their sighted peers, and, as a result, the blind spent most of their lives 'fixed to a particular spot.' In Boston, Howe did all he could to strip away the 'rust' of inactivity. Visitors to his school were shocked to see blind children climbing ropes, riding horses, and playing aggressively in the schoolyard. A proper physical education, Howe believed, would help his students overcome their 'disagreeable habits,' removing another barrier that had always alienated them from the sighted.²⁴

Another prejudice that these educators hoped to discredit was the popular notion that the blind were bitter, jealous of the sighted, and perpetually gnawed by despair. At the most basic level, this idea was probably rooted in a dread of blindness felt by most sighted people. Visitors at public exhibitions often confessed that they considered the loss of sight to be one of the worst of earthly calamities, extinguishing much that makes life worth living. A trustee of the Pennsylvania school, for example, was only sharing common knowledge when he suggested that the uneducated blind man 'sympathizes not with the crowd around him and for the most part is a stranger to our joys. He shrinks into the dark recess of his own mind, and dreams in moody silence of the fancied pleasures given so liberally to others; to him denied.'²⁵ Still worse, some assumed that the blind harbored a secret desire to curse God, or at least to question the wisdom of His providence.²⁶

24. Julius Friedlander, 'The Education of the Blind'; Howe, *Address of the Trustees* (1833), 15.

25. B. W. Richards, *American Sentinel and Mercantile Advertiser*, January 24, 1833.

26. A summary of the history of these ideas about the blind can be found in Monbeck, *The Meaning of Blindness*, Ch. 2. These old myths were reinforced by a new story, an often-repeated tale about the deathbed skepticism of the blind scholar Nicholas Saunderson. A friend of Newton and a professor of mathematics at Cambridge, Saunderson was perhaps the best-known blind person in the Enlightenment period, as famous for his accomplishments as he was infamous for his agnosticism. As Saunderson lay dying, a clergyman reportedly tried to convince him of the existence of God by pointing out 'the astonishing

Educators sometimes agreed that the *uneducated* blind were prone to listlessness and apathy and were more often prey to sensual appetites. They insisted, however, that these were not the inevitable moral consequences of blindness, but the product of ignorance and the humiliation of dependence suffered by the blind. 'The uneducated [blind] must in most cases abandon themselves to despair, to ruinous excess, or pine away in unavailing complaints,' Friedlander told his audiences. 'Only those among them,' he added, 'whose minds have been enlightened by a wholesome and extended system of education, can reconcile themselves to their privation.' Through their exhibitions of smiling and energetic young blind students, these reformers offered compelling proof that education could erase the blind's apparent character flaws.²⁷

No commentator attending an exhibition of the blind failed to note, with surprise and admiration, that these children were apparently not bitter, but happy, not alienated from God, but thankful. This message was underscored throughout the performance. In Philadelphia exhibitions, for example, a young blind boy often recited a poem written 'specially for the occasion,' which assured the audience that suffering of the blind had not dampened their hope and gratitude towards God: 'The Bird, that never tried his wing, / Can blithely hop and sweetly sing; / Though prisoned in a narrow cage, / Till his bright feathers droop with age. / So I, while never blest with sight, / Shut out from Heaven's surrounding light, / Life's hours and days and years enjoy, / Though blind,

mechanism of the universe.' 'I have been condemned to pass my life in darkness,' was Saunderson's reply, 'and you speak to me of prodigies which I cannot comprehend, and which can only be felt by you, and those who see like you!' In the early nineteenth century, liberal and conservative theologians alike shared a faith in natural theology, the proof of God's existence and his love, as reflected in the beauties and intricacies of the natural world that He created. Saunderson seemed to confirm the view, repeated again and again, that the blind were unmoved by this most compelling evidence of God's existence. Cited by W. H. Prescott, 'Asylum for the Blind,' *North American Review* 31 (July 1830):74. This story was probably popularized by Diderot, who included it in his widely read *Letter on the Blind*.

27. Julius Friedlander, 'Education of the Blind.'

a merry-hearted boy.'²⁸ Attending an early exhibition in New York, an observer reported with surprise, 'the blind are cheerful—their elastic movements, their clear bright cheeks, and their sprightly voices, showed how happy they really were.'²⁹

Some skeptics doubted that education would make the blind happy for long. They charged that once these students graduated, leaving behind the sheltered protection of their institutions, they would once again find themselves in a state of abject dependence. Thrown back into the almshouse, the educated blind might feel the hopelessness and injustice of their lot in life all the more. From the start, the reformers insisted that education was all that was needed to rescue the blind from poverty. They predicted that many of their graduates would become self-reliant, enjoying a new measure of personal dignity while relieving taxpayers of the 'weight of public burden.'³⁰ As his first graduates left Perkins, Howe told another educator that he would be 'sadly disappointed if three fourths of our pupils cannot support themselves.'³¹

To ensure their success in the marketplace, the directors of the new blind schools devised a curriculum that balanced the full range of common school subjects with vocational training in manual skills. Impressed by the 'mental superiority' of his first students, Howe initially believed that his graduates would fare best in the professions. Some, he predicted, would win 'collegiate honors' and enjoy literary careers following in the footsteps of Homer and Milton. And he saw 'no obstacle at all' that could bar an educated blind man from becoming 'an able counsellor at law, or occupying the pulpit with ability and advantage.' A few years of experience, however, convinced Howe that most of his graduates would have to rely instead on manual trades. In Boston his

28. The poem is 'The Blind Boy's Soliloquy,' written by Philadelphia poet Park Benjamin. Freund, *Crusader for Light*, 88.

29. *New York Observer*, May 21, 1836.

30. *Poulson's Daily Advertiser*, January 15, 1834; Julius Friedlander, 'To the Citizens of Delaware,' typescript copy, Overbrook School.

31. S. G. Howe, *Annual Report of the Trustees* (Boston, 1834), 9; Howe, *Address of the Trustees*, 1833, 6; Howe, 'Education of the Blind,' 29.

students learned to weave mats and sew mattresses. New York scholars spent afternoons learning to weave willow baskets and paste together 'fancy boxes.' Philadelphia provided training in the creation of silk and bead bags, shoes, fringes, and hearthrugs. The schools sold these articles at their exhibitions and opened storefront outlets to market them. The directors insisted repeatedly that articles made by their students were of the highest quality. 'They will be sold at their actual value,' Philadelphia's director announced, 'and not a farthing asked on the score of charity.' The blind were no longer seeking alms, but only a fair chance to trade as equals in the marketplace.³²

As the greatest idealist in the cause of education for the blind, Howe infused the movement with a still grander sense of purpose. Speaking to both his students and the sighted world beyond the Perkins School walls, Howe proclaimed, 'A new era in the history of the blind is commencing in this country.' He urged his graduates to claim all the 'social and political rights and duties' that were enjoyed by the sighted, including an equal role in universities, churches, and lyceums, on juries and in government. 'Through your means,' he told his first students, 'the blind shall be gathered in from the wayside, and the alms-house, to the bosom of society, and the enjoyment of its choicest privileges.'³³

When Howe made that prediction, the movement to educate the blind was a decade old. By most measures, the project had proven a success. The public no longer considered the schools in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia 'a doubtful experiment.'³⁴ Each institution produced a growing literature on the education of the blind and an expanding collection of raised-letter books. And each annual report brought news of more pupils and new schools being founded in western and southern states, often pro-

32. Howe, *Annual Report of the Trustees*, 1834, 9; *Third Annual Report of the Managers of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind* (Philadelphia, 1836), 7; *Tenth Annual Report of the Managers of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind* (Philadelphia: J. Crissy, 1843), 7.

33. Howe, *Tenth Annual Report* (Boston, 1843), 15-17.

34. Howe, *Tenth Annual Report*, 11.

viding teaching jobs to the graduates of the first blind schools. Through children's books, journal articles, and weekly exhibitions, the public came to embrace the education of the blind as 'a bright era in the history of our race.' Tour books for American cities urged sightseers to visit these new schools for the blind, monuments to the population's enlightened and liberal spirit.³⁵

Still, some of the hopeful predictions made in the early 1830s remained unfulfilled. At least two graduates of schools for the blind successfully completed college—one taking a degree from Harvard and the other from the University of Pennsylvania. And in New York, a small group of female students took up literature, most notably Frances Crosby, who gained some celebrity as a hymn-writer and poet.³⁶ However, the humbler but more practical goal of economic independence for the blind was far from realized. At the start, the reformers had promised that their graduates would make their own way in life. The most talented would integrate into the professions, while the rest would know enough manual skills to at least keep themselves free from the poor house. By the end of the decade, they found that most of their students were faring badly in their economic competition with the sighted.

Only a few years after they began, the directors were faced with pleas from their former students asking to return to the institution. 'I have made every effort in my power to get my business under way in this place,' one desperate graduate wrote to Howe, 'but all my friends speak very discouraging as to the prospect of my doing any thing here and have declined assisting me.' 'I have no house and do not know where to go,' another wrote, adding, 'I should like to know if you can not give me some employment by which I might obtain my board and clothes.' 'I have tried in vain to get employment elsewhere,' a young woman pleaded, 'and if

35. Richard A. Smith, *Philadelphia As It Is, In 1852* (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1852), 260. On schools for the blind as tourist attractions, see John F. Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 222–23.

36. *Year-Book of the New York Institute* (New York, 1932), 56; Seventeenth Annual Report (Philadelphia, 1850), 14.

you do not think it best to let me come I must go to the poor house.' 'You were a friend to me before,' Howe was reminded by another graduate, 'and I hope you will be a friend to me now.'³⁷

Facing the fact that many of their students were headed to the almshouse, the directors of these schools were forced to rethink the nature of their institutions and, ultimately, the nature of the blind themselves. In 1841 Howe took the lead, creating a 'workshop' for blind adults that provided shelter and subsidized employment for about twenty men and women, most of them Perkins graduates. With tools and materials provided and products sold through a new storefront run by the school, some blind workers could earn a modest living weaving baskets and sewing mattresses. Most only earned enough to pay for their room, board, and clothing. Even this, Howe believed, was 'a great thing, because it relieves them from that state of dependence which more than anything else makes the blind man unhappy.'³⁸

New York followed Boston's example three years later. Asking the legislature for 'a slight addition to the privileges conferred by their charter,' the trustees added to the school a subsidized workshop for blind adults, and a permanent home for the adult blind. While they had once dreamed of freeing the blind from economic dependence, experience had forced New York's educators to concede that 'success cannot be reasonably expected' by most blind workers trying to make their way alone. Instead, friends of the blind could only hope that, with the help of an institutional 'retreat,' their graduates could earn enough to defray the cost of their room and board.³⁹

37. *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Managers of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind* (Philadelphia: John C. Clark, printer, 1847), 7; *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Managers of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind* (Philadelphia: John C. Clark, printer, 1846); Howe, Columbus, Ohio, to Trustees of the Perkins Institution, May 26, 1836; Jacob Doughty to Howe, May 28, 1840; Josiah Worthen to Howe, April 10, 1848; Susan Baker to Howe, August 24, 1846; Maria Brackett to Howe, July 5, 1847, all from Howe Papers, Perkins School for the Blind, Watertown, Massachusetts (hereafter cited as HPP).

38. Howe to Mr. Dugan, Principal of the Paris School for the Blind, September 12, 1842, Howe Papers (HPP).

39. *Ninth Annual Report* (New York, 1845), 8.

Educators in Philadelphia also struggled to help a growing number of students who faced only 'friendlessness and destitution' after graduation, and who 'clung with affection to the Institution.' More than a dozen female students with no family and no prospect of employment had been allowed to remain after graduation, assisting as teachers and housekeepers. By the early 1840s, the school's trustees called each year for the creation of a more permanent solution, a 'Retreat for the Adult Blind.'⁴⁰ But the institution was troubled by several changes of leadership through the decade, and the project was delayed until 1851, when a special committee concluded that a retreat had become 'indispensable.' 'To refuse them this,' the committee warned, 'and dismiss them hence, to make their way in the wide world, unfriended, unprotected, will, in most cases, be the means of obliterating all they had learned, and consigning them to the poor-house or to vagrancy; a burden to the public and a disgrace to themselves as well as to the Institution from which they were inconsiderately discharged.'⁴¹

In short, by the early 1840s, optimistic predictions about the effect of education on the blind were giving way to a new, much less hopeful view of their prospects. In part, this was a useful correction, rooted in the actual experience of the challenges faced by the blind in an industrial economy. Only the most energetic and skillful blind workers could hope to compete against the new factory system that was taking over many trades in antebellum America. Frustrated in their dream of helping the blind become self-reliant, educators heeded their students' pleas by building new institutions—sheltered workshops—that gave many adult blind workers some income and a measure of independence.

40. *Thirteenth Annual Report . . . of the Pennsylvania Institution*, 9–10.

41. *Report of a Special Committee Appointed to Consider the Subject of A Home, to be connected with the Institution, As a Retreat for the Adult Blind Who Have Been or May be Educated There* (Philadelphia: John C. Clark, printer, 1851), 5. Other institutions around the country soon followed the lead of the older schools. Illinois, for example, added a workshop in 1856. See *Brief History of the Illinois Institution for the Education of the Blind* (Chicago: J. Morris, Co. printers, 1893).

The directors' compassionate and flexible response to the needs of the blind, however, was accompanied by a reevaluation of the 'meaning' of blindness and its influence on human personality. Howe once again took the lead, initiating a census of the blind as part of a wider investigation into the causes of blindness. A decade of work at Perkins had convinced him that his notion of 'blindness' was too simplistic, a single label that poorly described a wide variety of physical and mental conditions.⁴² The blind, he began to argue, should be divided into two distinct groups, those born without vision and those accidentally blinded later in life. The latter, Howe argued, showed all the energy and drive of sighted people; the blind people who managed to support themselves by their own enterprise, he explained, usually came from this group.

But those born blind and those who lost their sight quite early in life due to an apparent hereditary 'predisposition' to blindness were much less likely to make their way in the world. Based on his simple statistical survey of the students at schools for the blind around the country, Howe concluded that the majority of blind people fell into this category. For these people, Howe theorized, blindness was simply one symptom of a more fundamental physical and mental malady.⁴³ Anson Phelps, director of the New York Institution, seconded Howe's finding that the congenitally blind demonstrated 'less energy of character, both physical and mental,' the product of 'a general disorganization of the constitution.'⁴⁴

Howe, who had once led a national reform movement that aimed to destigmatize the blind, now began to characterize them

42. Howe, *Tenth Annual Report*, 6-7.

43. Howe, *Tenth Annual Report*, 6. In formulating their theory about the hereditary transmission of blindness, Howe and several other educators of the blind were strongly influenced by the theories of phrenologists. On the phrenological explanation for congenital blindness, see George Combe, *The Constitution of Man Considered in Relation to External Objects* (Edinburgh: William and Robert Chambers, 1836), 165; L. N. Fowler, *The Principles of Phrenology and Physiology Applied to Man's Social Relations; Together With an Analysis of the Domestic Feelings* (New York: L. N. & O. S. Fowler, 1842), 67. Fowler includes the congenitally blind among 'the vast multitude of wretched victims' of 'abused nature and her broken laws' of marriage. See also Freeberg, *Education of Laura Bridgman*, Ch. 10.

44. Anson G. Phelps cited in Sawyer, *Blind Vocalists*, 69.

as prone to laziness, ingratitude, and vanity. In spite of his efforts to promote physical education, too many had proven unable to resist 'the temptation of the lolling-chair.' Their physical apathy, Howe concluded, had unavoidable mental consequences, creating 'a want of that spontaneous activity which causes what is usually called natural quickness and intelligence.'⁴⁵ Other educators followed Howe's lead. Speculating on 'the effects of blindness on character,' Anson Phelps announced that the blind were inordinately 'suspicious,' overly-sensitive, and prone to 'a gloomy cast of mind.'⁴⁶

In the early 1850s, Philadelphia's new director, William Chapin, offered a note of dissent, rejecting Howe's unflattering new ideas about the blind. 'We would deprecate the discouragements that have sometimes been put forth,' he wrote in his annual report, 'in which elaborate arguments have been used to show the mental and physical inferiority of the blind, and their inability to compete with seeing persons.' Chapin believed that Howe's diagnosis exaggerated the faults of the blind and overstated the rate of congenital blindness in the population. Further, he worried that, since the blind always read these reports, the effect of such speculations would only 'deter the strong and paralyze the feeble.'⁴⁷

Disregarding Chapin's mild reproof, Howe became increasingly interested in approaching blindness as a biological, rather than an educational, problem. Following these conjectures to their logical conclusion, by the late 1840s Howe began to champion the idea of a gradual and *voluntary* program of eugenics. The blind, he argued, should abstain from marriage in order to prevent the 'taint' of blindness from being passed down to the next generation. Through this means, Howe urged, blindness would not simply be ameliorated through education, but could be practically eliminated through society's mastery of the 'organic law' of heredity.

45. Howe, *Sixteenth Annual Report*, 4.

46. Anson G. Phelps cited in Sawyer, *Blind Vocalists*, 68-69.

47. William Chapin, *Nineteenth Annual Report of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind* (Philadelphia, 1852), 21.

'I am aware that many people would condemn this proposition, as cruel,' Howe told a Boston audience. His own blind students, in fact, had rejected the idea that they had a moral obligation to remain celibate as 'barbarous and unnatural.' But Howe insisted that the blind should put the welfare of the 'community' ahead of their own personal interests. According to Howe's new theory, blindness was not just a tragic accident or an inscrutable act of Providence, but an imperfection that an enlightened society should work to eliminate as part of the gradual improvement of the race. Howe's speculations had the ironic effect of stereotyping the blind in a new way. In the 1830s the Boston reformer had called on the sighted to drop their prejudices and embrace the blind as equals. Twenty years later he confessed that he had been too optimistic, and that 'the inequality between (the blind) and other persons is greater, even, than at first appears.'⁴⁸

While the project to teach and integrate the blind into sighted society suffered diminished expectations by mid-century, the educators of the blind overlooked one of their most important accomplishments. For the first time, *the blind began to speak for and about themselves*, adding their voices to the ongoing debate about the meaning of blindness. By the 1870s, more than a dozen blind men and women became authors, telling and selling their story to the sighted public. Benjamin Bowen, one of the first to graduate from the Perkins School, sold dozens of printings of his *Blind Man's Offering*. Another blind author could boast of selling 'more than twenty thousand volumes.'⁴⁹

48. Howe, 'Education of the Blind' (Boston, 1836) copy in HPP; *Sixteenth Annual Report*, 50; *Seventeenth Annual Report*, 24.

49. Works by blind authors include William Artman, *Beauties and Achievements of the Blind* (Danville, N.Y.: n.p., 1854); B. B. Bowen, *Daisies and Dew-Drops* (Lowell: published by author, 1840); B. B. Bowen, *A Blind Man's Offering* (Boston: published by author, 1847); James Champlin, *Early Biography, Travels and Adventures of Rev. James Champlin, Who Was Born Blind, Written by Himself* (Columbus: n.p., 1842); Abram V. Courtney, *Anecdotes of the Blind: By Abram V. Courtney, Himself Totally Blind* (Boston: printed for the author, 1835); Abram V. Courtney, *Adventures of a Blind Man and His Faithful Dog: A True Narrative of his Eventful Wanderings, By Land and Sea* (Boston: n.p., 1856); Mary L. Day, *Incidents in the Life of a Blind Girl* (Baltimore: J. Young, 1859); Mary L. (Day) Arms, *The World As I Have Found It* (Baltimore: J. Young, 1878); Harvey Fuller, *Trimsharp's Account of Himself, A Sketch of his Life* (New York: E. O. Jenkins, 1876); Lansing V. Hall, *The World As I Hear It* (Dansville,

The publication of these memoirs represents a landmark of independence for the blind, and the act of selling them was often impressive as well. Usually guided by a hired 'boy,' these authors criss-crossed the country, knocking on doors and 'canvassing' for customers for their self-published works. Mary Day, a graduate of Maryland's school for the blind, found a ready market in the federal offices of Washington, D.C., and then moved on to sell her story in New England, the upper and lower Midwest, and the South. She even ventured as far west as Utah, recording her encounter with Mormon leader Brigham Young. On one successful trip to Louisville, she reported selling 500 volumes of her work at a \$1.25 each.⁵⁰

Some of the authors apologized for the quality of their prose. 'Glance not upon it with a critic's eye,' Annie Kane pleaded in her preface. Her only aim in writing, she explained, was to gather 'flowers of sympathy and affection' from her customers. And Lansing Hall reminded his readers that the sale of his book was his only way to feed and clothe his children. 'If in this I fail,' he fretted in print, 'God only knows what I shall do.' While all of these authors conceded that they were driven to write and sell their books out of a similar economic necessity, most also denied

N.Y.: A. O. Bunnell, printer, 1878); George W. Henry, *Incidents in the Life of George W. Henry, Up to the 46th Year of His Age: Together with His Religious Experience. To Which is Added a Number of Choice Hymns and Popular Odes, with Accompanying Music. Dictated by Himself, Being Blind* (Utica, 1846); George W. Henry, *Trials and Triumphs For Three-Score Years and Ten In the Life of G. W. Henry, Whilst Sojourning Forty Years in Spiritual Egypt, One Year in the Slough of Despond, And Twenty-Six Years in the Land of Beulah; Together with the Religious Experiences of His Wife* (Frankfort, N.Y.: 1871); Annie Kane, *The Golden Sunset, or The Homeless Blind Girl* (Baltimore: J. W. Bond & Co., 1864); Helen De Kroyft, *A Place in Thy Memory* (New York: J. F. Trow, printer, 1850); Caleb Lyon, *The Blind Man's Story* (Sing-Sing, 1855); Anna C. Smith, *The Orphan Blind Girl* (Baltimore: n.p., 1865). See also the Reverend J. Cumming, *The Coming Wars, and Distress of Nations . . . Published for the Benefit of Blind E. Hanes, Including a Brief Account of His Misfortune* (n.p., 1861). Later works that include first-hand accounts about the early years of education for the blind include Henry Hendrickson, *Out from the Darkness: An Autobiography Unfolding the Life Story and Singular Vicissitudes of a Scandinavian Bartimaeus* (Chicago: H. J. Smith & Co., 1890); Professor James W. Welch, *The Achievements and Abilities of the Blind* (Columbus: Fred J. Heer, 1905). A large number of blind poets also sold their work in the mid-nineteenth century. Their work is not considered here.

50. (Day) Arms, *The World As I Have Found It*, 33.

that they had taken up writing simply as a pretext for receiving charity. By writing, publishing, and selling their stories, these authors insisted that they were striving for an 'honorable living,' and giving their patrons full recompense for their dollars. As Mary Day explained it, blind writers sought more than sympathy and alms; they wanted the public's 'respect, and, if freely extended, their patronage, as do any other class of people plying a legitimate vocation.'⁵¹

What could a blind author hope to offer a sighted customer? Abram Courtney put the matter bluntly. 'I have observed that men generally take an interest in matters relating to the blind, or others deprived of the ordinary means of communicating with their fellows.' These writers tapped into a market already cultivated by the educators of the blind in their exhibitions, the public's dread and curiosity about a life without light.⁵²

Following in a tradition established by Diderot and developed by the educators of the blind, some blind authors offered thoughts on the psychological experience of blindness, for the first time from an insider's perspective. Lansing Hall explained that his remaining senses had developed in surprising ways. He found he could 'feel' objects some yards away, through 'a wonderful acuteness of the nerves of the face.' And he enjoyed an uncanny ability to sense the presence of others, even in a quiet room, through an intuitive grasp of what he called the 'magnetic' qualities of human personality. 'These are some of the compensations which the blind receive for the great loss they have sustained,' Hall informed his readers.⁵³

Most blind authors drew more on theology than psychology to describe their experience. Many of their memoirs clearly bor-

51. (Day) Arms, *The World As I Have Found It*, 245; Hall, *The World As I Hear It*, 199; Kane, *The Golden Sunset*, 9. These memoirs are one part of a larger nineteenth-century literary movement described by Ann Fabian in *The Unvarnished Truth, Personal Narratives in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). Fabian shows that a number of beggars, convicts, escaped slaves, and soldiers, 'told and sold' their stories in the nineteenth century.

52. Courtney, *Adventures of a Blind Man*, 3.

53. Hall cited in Day, *Incidents in the Life of a Blind Girl*, 252-57.

rowed from their culture's more familiar narrative of evangelical conversion. Like sinners, the blind described being cast down into a fascinating but horrifying darkness. Abram Courtney reported that, after losing his sight, he had fallen into a 'desponding condition,' his flesh wasting away as he took to his bed for months. Both eyes clouding over in a matter of days, Caleb Lyon fell into 'hopeless misery.' Mary Day described her first struggles with blindness as a 'slippery path' through 'shadow, and gloom, and darkness.' When Annie Kane learned that her blindness was incurable, she 'fell prostrate.' 'Mighty waves of sorrow rolled over my soul and I thought my heart must break and be at rest. I felt as if God, as well as man, had forsaken me.'⁵⁴

The blind authors who emerged to tell their stories had been 'saved' from this dark fate through the cultivation of spiritual strength and sometimes by a complete evangelical conversion. The crucial first step in this journey from physical darkness to spiritual light, these authors explained, was the cultivation of the virtue of resignation, a humble and heartfelt acceptance of God's will. As we have seen, the notion that the blind could become happily resigned to their fate was a common theme at exhibitions of the blind, as educators tried to assure the public that their pupils were not embittered. And growing sentimental literature on blindness echoed this idea that education would make blind people 'uniformly cheerful.'⁵⁵

While drawing on this theme themselves, the blind authors described a much more complex and difficult struggle to accept their fate, a process that for some was never fully accomplished, as they labored to win the respect of the sighted. In the midst of a passage on the importance of resignation, for example, Helen DeKroyft still had to insist, 'It is not pleasant to be blind. My *poor* eyes long to look abroad upon the beautiful world, and my pris-

54. Courtney, *Adventures of a Blind Man*, 67; Lyon, 17, (Day) Arms, *The World As I Have Found It*, 9.

55. M. of Lowell, *Blind Susan, or The Affectionate Family*; Dorothea Dix, 'Little Agnes and Blind Mary,' *American Moral Tales* (Boston, 1832), 36.

oned spirit struggles to break its darkness.' Blind from birth, Lansing Hall was often urged by his neighbors to accept his condition, but he defiantly admitted that he was sometimes overcome by the 'impotent rage of a caged lion, who vainly tries to break his prison bars and gain his liberty.'⁵⁶

The blind authors stressed that resignation was not a virtue needed by the blind alone, and that the moral of their story could be applied as easily to the reader's life as to the author's. Anyone, these stories made clear, could fall prey to a sudden reversal of fortune—if not blindness, then the death of parents and other loved ones, disease, economic depression, or natural disaster. Such calamities came suddenly and unpredictably and respected no boundaries of class, age, or gender. Blind persons knew this as well as anyone, but they also knew that in the face of such calamities the human spirit can show remarkable resilience and strength. Pointing to their own experiences, these authors laid claim to a moral authority to speak to their sighted brethren. This lesson alone, they often suggested, was worth the price of their book and deserved the respect and attention of a sighted reader.

In their homage to resignation and their appeals to public curiosity about blindness, these authors drew heavily on the same rhetorical strategies pioneered by the directors of the schools for the blind. Indeed, some borrowed wholesale from the published reports of their schools, at times without attribution. But in most cases, these writers were not simply mimicking their teachers. Rather, their memoirs enrich, and sometimes directly challenge, notions about blindness promoted by their sighted benefactors. Sighted authors were fascinated more by the condition of blindness than by the lives of particular blind people. In their writings, the blind often appear as abstractions—a 'class' of people to be rescued, a Biblical archetype, a spiritual metaphor, or a provocative philosophical test case. While drawing on all of these traditions in their own works, the blind authors added something new

⁵⁶ DeKroyft, *A Place in Thy Memory*, 21; Hall cited in (Day) Arms, *The World As I Have Found It*, 273.

to the nineteenth century conversation about blindness, an attention to the lived experience of individuals. Their memoirs often asserted what Mary Day called the 'dignity and individuality' of blind people. These authors presented themselves not simply as representatives of a class, but as men and women with their own stories to tell.

According to these authors, the daily life of a blind person in nineteenth-century America was one of anxiety and despair, alternating with energy and determination. Benjamin Bowen of Marblehead lost his sight as an infant. 'Long and dreary were the hours of childhood spent sitting in the chimney nook or by the doorside, mournfully speculating on the strange difference which existed between myself and those around me.' Other children, 'with an instinctive dread of suffering,' left him alone and isolated. When Abram Courtney was blinded by an accident at the age of twenty-four, he descended into a period of inconsolable despondency. 'I was nervous and restless,' he explained, 'and was like one struggling for something beyond his reach, and my feelings were not assuaged by the many ill-judging persons who visited me from curiosity, and who expressed their sympathy by dwelling on my great loss and telling me they should think I had rather die than live.'⁵⁷

While their books are full of grateful remembrances of sustaining acts of kindness done for them, these authors also reported the various ways that sighted people made their lot harder to bear. 'I am frequently reproached and shamefully treated,' E. Hames protested. As they traveled selling their books, they were sometimes teased by children placing stumbling blocks in their path. Wherever these writers went, the curious gaped and asked degrading questions, or mistook them for beggars. 'They would stand close beside us,' Mary Day recalled, 'and pass remarks upon us, as though they thought we were unthinking and unfeeling as might be a breathing statue.' Some writers reported being robbed

57. Bowen, *A Blind Man's Offering*, 14; Courtney, *Adventures of a Blind Man*, 67.

or otherwise cheated. During the Civil War, Henry Fuller was even accused of being a rebel spy, suspected because he failed to make eye contact as he passed through town. Convinced that people who lacked eyes 'must be perfect idiots,' the sighted were sometimes suspicious of Abram Courtney's energetic mobility, convinced that he was an impostor who only feigned blindness to receive alms. His worst treatment came at the hands of a man who was admittedly 'not himself at the time.' After unsuccessfully trying to provoke a fight by blowing smoke in Courtney's face, the man tossed him into a canal.⁵⁸

In their desperate searches for a cure, the blind also reported suffering at the hands of medical professionals. Some, especially those from urban centers in the East, remembered their doctors with fondness and respect. After an 'exquisitely painful' encounter with the surgeon's knife, a few even enjoyed a temporary restoration of sight, only to have their eyesight fade permanently within a short time. But others were less impressed by learned city doctors, and used their books to outline longstanding grievances. The Reverend William H. Milburn blamed the loss of one of his eyes on medical malpractice at the hands of an 'illustrious' Philadelphia surgeon. At the age of five, Milburn had suffered an accidental blow to the left eye. He later believed that, if left alone, the eye would have healed. Instead, a medical professor used his case to perform a public demonstration of a new cure that, not surprisingly, turned out to be ineffective. 'Without an act of grace, a pat on the head, a caress, or word of sympathy, the harsh man seized, fastened me as in stocks between the knees, pressed my head back against his left shoulder, and recklessly thrust the caustic through the eye—not a delicate operation, truly. But then his brother professors must agree with him that it was a shame such a beautiful operation should be spoiled by the unmannerly

58. Hames's story is told in Cumming, *The Coming Wars, and Distress of Nations*, 4; Day, *Incidents in the Life of a Blind Girl*, 174; DeKroyft, *A Place in Thy Memory*, 33; Fuller, *Trimsharp's Account of Himself*, 94; Courtney, *Adventures of a Blind Man*, 82.

behavior of that cub. What right had he to make such an uproar—as if modern science ought to regard human agony.⁵⁹

Those who had the misfortune to go blind in rural areas often faced even more painful and counterproductive encounters with a wide range of medical ‘healers.’ George Henry believed that he had completely lost sight in one eye through ‘the mal-treatment of a quack doctor.’ As Mary Day searched for a cure, a succession of physicians experimented with ‘electrical treatment,’ a month-long diet of bread and molasses, ‘intense and excruciating’ operations, and various teas and ointments made of mashed roots. One doctor swabbed her swollen eyes with a wash of ‘alum and rum,’ an experience she found so painful that she fainted. ‘After I recovered I would not let him touch the other eye, which made him very angry, and he cursed me bitterly. Upon leaving the house I heard him say, “*I hope she will never see!*”’ To this story Day added bitterly, ‘He has had his wish.’⁶⁰

Negotiating their way through desperate cures and the taunts of the sighted, some of the blind fared remarkably well, even without the aid of an education. In his own travels, Abram Courtney sought out ‘all blind persons’ he could find. He found some, especially those born blind and left uneducated, who were ‘utterly helpless.’ But Courtney also met a number of independent and industrious blind men—a violinist, a ‘most excellent cabinet maker,’ and even a blind farmer who did his own hoeing, and rode horseback around his village ‘with ease.’⁶¹

Benjamin Bowen’s mother died when he was just six, and his father was left ‘indigent,’ forcing the child to leave his hearthside and ‘make some exertions’ on his own behalf. Benjamin soon learned to grope his way around his home village of Marblehead and began to earn money carrying fresh fish from the docks to the

59. Courtney, *Anecdotes of the Blind*, 23; The Reverend William H. Milburn, ‘My Blindness and Albrecht Von Graefe,’ *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, September 1873, clipping in New York Institute for the Blind.

60. Henry, *Incidents in the Life of George W. Henry*, 87; Day, *Incidents in the Life of a Blind Girl*, 62–68.

61. Courtney, *Adventures of a Blind Man*, 72, 75.

homes of the wealthy. He even learned to fish himself, helping to manage the boat, bait hooks, and haul in the catch. Although the fishermen taught him some bad habits that took him years to overcome, Bowen noted with bitter irony that these rough men had always treated him with 'a kind of equality' that more refined members of society rarely offered to a blind person.⁶² Even so, when Dr. Howe offered Bowen the chance to become one of the first pupils at the Perkins School, he gladly exchanged 'the fishing boat for the school-room.'

All of the blind writers agreed that the new institutions for the blind provided a rare and life-transforming experience. Lansing Hall was delighted to find one place in the world where the value of sight was 'somewhat at a discount,' and where a young blind man could find inspiring role models, blind men and women who were 'intelligent, accomplished and refined.' Helen DeKroyft spent a year at the New York Institution, a place she fondly described as 'a paradise.' She had gone blind while mourning the death of her husband, who had recently died of consumption, leaving her bereaved, destitute, and helpless. DeKroyft was deeply appreciative of the temporary haven provided by the institution. The school along the Hudson was, she found, a 'little world of sweet sounds,' the noises of wind and the river mixing with the music lessons and laughter of young blind girls.⁶³

In their exhibitions and annual reports, the directors always presented a uniformly positive depiction of daily life at their institutions. But the blind authors sometimes gratified their readers with a peek behind the exhibition hall stage, offering a more realistic account of their experiences. Lansing Hall noted that many of his fellow male students would 'drink when opportunity offered, and swear as proficiently as if they had been schooled in a

62. Bowen, *A Blind Man's Offering*, 14.

63. Bowen, *A Blind Man's Offering*, 14; Hall cited in (Day) Arms, *The World As I Have Found It*, 262; De Kroyft, *A Place in Thy Memory*, 18, 84-86; for a recent profile of De Kroyft, see James Emmett Ryan, 'The Blind Authoress of New York: Helen De Kroyft and the Uses of Disability in Antebellum America,' *American Quarterly* 51, No. 2 (June 1999): 385-418.

navy yard or the U.S. Congress.' While praising most of his teachers, he also recorded scenes of excessive corporal punishment. 'I have known boys and young men to be whipped until the coats on their backs were cut in strips.'⁶⁴

Nevertheless, Hall developed a 'strong affection' for the institution and dreaded graduation day, when he would be forced to leave 'the fostering care and protection of the old home in which I had spent eight of the happiest years of my life.' Other blind authors left their schools with similar trepidation. 'Now commenced the real struggle of life,' Mary Day recalled. 'Alone I must earn my bread.' Many of her classmates, she had seen, were not up to the challenge, and ended up alone and destitute in the poorhouse. Only a handful would rise above the obstacles placed before them, to become 'noble men and women.'⁶⁵

The authors of these remarkable memoirs, striving to use their new education to earn an independent livelihood, clearly wrote not only to help themselves, but also to speak on behalf of the blind. On many points, they endorsed the ideals espoused by the educators who founded the blind schools. Their stories offered powerful testimony to the redemptive role that education had played in their lives. And, no less than the directors, they often exhorted their fellow blind to face their challenges with a mix of determination and resignation.

But on several crucial issues, the blind authors used their pages to challenge their sighted mentors directly. They insisted, for example, on their right to marry, flatly denying the claim made by Howe and other reformers that they should remain celibate for the greater good of the race. Mary Day made the point by describing an encounter she had with Susan B. Anthony while trying, apparently unsuccessfully, to sell the famed feminist one of her books. Day reported that Anthony snapped, 'Are you married?', while tossing the book back in Day's lap. 'I knew a blind woman,' Anthony reportedly went on, 'who had five children, and

64. Hall, *The World As I Hear It*, 172, 199.

65. (Day) Arms, *The World As I Have Found It*, 11.

they were all deaf and dumb! I think Congress ought to pass a law to prevent these people from marrying and bringing such *creatures* into the world!' Day, who later married, reported that she was stunned to silence as Anthony left the room. 'Long did I dwell upon the cruel words,' she wrote in her second memoir, 'wondering if they could have emanated from a woman who advocated the inviolable right and bewailed the deep wrongs of her own sex, or if Congress had the power to exclude the blind from loving and following the holiest impulses of their natures, like other human beings!'⁶⁶

Other blind writers also noted that the sighted were frequently surprised and scandalized to learn that the blind married and had children. In the face of this social taboo, Lansing Hall took obvious pleasure in recounting the extraordinary measures that blind boys and girls at the New York Institution took to meet, violating the strict rules designed to 'preclude the possibility of intermarriage among the pupils.' Frustrated by a wooden partition set up to divide the sexes on the school's piazza, one boy cut a hole in the boards 'large enough to kiss through.' With no trace of disapproval, Hall explained that the student was later expelled for battering the partition down. 'I doubt if granite walls and solid iron fences, horse high and pig-tight, could have kept the boys and girls apart,' he proudly recalled. Other writers also noted examples of blind couples they met in their travels who were happily married, earning their own bread, and maintaining 'tasteful, comfortable' homes.⁶⁷

Benjamin Bowen included several fictionalized accounts of romance among the blind in his book. One tale recounted the story of a young blind couple that met at a school for the blind. Although teachers tried all in their power to keep the two apart, they sent each other love notes, first pricking letters with a pencil point, then devising a secret alphabet all their own. When the boy

66. (Day) Arms, *The World As I Have Found It*, 181.

67. Bowen, *A Blind Man's Offering*, 215; Hall, *The World As I Hear It*, 168-70; (Day) Arms, *The World As I Have Found It*, 33.

was expelled from school for these acts, the two vowed to meet beyond the walls of the institution one day, presumably to consummate their romance. In another story, a beautiful sighted woman, the daughter of a congressman, fell in love with a blind writer and musician. The proposed union caused a 'sensation' among the woman's friends, who considered it tragic for her to marry a man who would never 'behold her beauty.' But she married the blind man over their protests, and Bowen ended the story by concluding that 'over such a union the angels held jubilee in heaven.' The angels, Bowen made clear, saw the issue of marriage for the blind quite differently from Dr. Howe.⁶⁸

The blind also challenged some of their sighted teachers' views on their character. When blind graduates pointed out the formidable obstacles that confronted them in their quest for economic and social equality, Howe and some other educators had charged that they were ungrateful for all that had been done for them. But these blind persons insisted that it was not ingratitude, but simple honesty, that compelled them to speak out about their troubles. No matter how skilled they had become, Mary Day explained, the educated blind soon learned that 'their surroundings are all against them.' Benjamin Bowen found that out when he returned home to Marblehead after graduating from Perkins. He was soon 'penetrated with a more profound consciousness of the deprivation to which I was subjected, without being able to do much more than before I entered the institution, to overcome its defects.' These writers unanimously praised the education they had received. It was the very thing which had convinced the blind of their worth, and raised their hopes for a fuller life among the sighted. But they insisted that education alone could not compensate for the inequalities of the marketplace. 'It must not be supposed,' Bowen wrote, 'that society has done all its duty to this class of mankind, by merely establishing institutions where they may be educated. Something must be done to protect them from

68. Bowen, *A Blind Man's Offering*, 64, 208.

the ruthless and relentless competition, against which they are poorly qualified to attend.⁶⁹

Sheltered workshops were a useful addition but, in the experience of most blind writers, they were insufficient. Bowen observed that those who put in fifteen-hour days at these workshops earned on average only a half-dollar per day, a bare subsistence wage, leaving them with no time for the comfort of 'mental cultivation.' Mary Day pointed out that female workers fared even less well. Though a few women learned the 'men's' trades in the workshops, most were only taught to sew, crochet, knit, and do ornamental beadwork, occupations that offered no prospect of self-sufficiency.⁷⁰

A few went further, proposing new measures to help the blind. Bowen was the most outspoken, calling for 'direct' aid. The government should grant blind workers a monopoly in certain manual trades, he suggested, and churches should give preferential treatment to blind organists. He also suggested that the state could provide a 'bounty' to subsidize products made by the blind, freeing them from a dependency on the more humiliating indirect subsidy of the schools' new workshops. And he thought the railroads should grant the blind free passage. 'If we have special legislation to protect wealth,' Bowen charged, '(and who in his senses can, for a moment, doubt we have) surely there can be no very serious objection to a few special enactments which shall secure to the poor blind man at least his daily bread.'⁷¹

Although much has changed since Bowen's day, blind workers still struggle to earn their daily bread. A recent study found that, in an era of unprecedented low unemployment, 70 percent of blind workers remain unemployed. Clearly, the reformers' early

69. (Day) Arms, *The World As I Have Found It*, 246; Bowen, *A Blind Man's Offering*, 41.

70. Bowen, *A Blind Man's Offering*, 16-18, 427-8; (Day) Arms, *The World As I Have Found It*, 288.

71. Bowen, *A Blind Man's Offering*, 42. For a very different set of proposals from a blind author, see Orlando C. Brown, *Legal Wrongs Against the Neglected Blind: An Appeal to Law Makers of the State and Nation* (Columbus: n.p., 1886). Brown called for much stronger state homes and workshops, and the institution of a national workshop for the blind.

dream of empowering the blind to self-sufficiency, integrating them into society, and erasing the stigma of blindness remains largely unfulfilled.

But the writings of Benjamin Bowen, Mary Day, and the other blind authors who passed through the first schools for the blind point us to one of the great and often overlooked achievements of the educators who built America's first schools for the blind. Empowered by education, the blind began for the first time to find a voice of their own, a tool to explain and express themselves, and to advance their own interests. Since the Enlightenment, philosophers had been debating the meaning of blindness, an inquiry that engaged thousands of Americans in the mid-nineteenth century who attended exhibitions by blind students. Through the memoirs of these authors, the blind began at last to enter that conversation themselves, sharing their own ideas about the meaning of blindness.

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