

# Lessons from the Blind

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When I first graduated from college, I worked for two years with the Portland Public Schools as an equipment designer for the handicapped children. I thoroughly enjoyed the work and learned many lessons from the children. I'd like to share a few of them with you.

One of the people with whom I worked a lot was the Mobility Expert for the blind students, Mr. Thompson. His job was to train the blind kids to get around on their own, around the house, the school and the city. He often took me with him to the homes he visited so that I could see first hand what he was up against and what environmental problems my designs would have to survive. On these visits I learned several lessons about human nature that I have applied many times in my career.

One of my early visits was to the home of a young boy in about second grade. Bobby and his family were new to the Portland area and they were just getting started in the local school. Mr. Thompson asked me to come along to meet the family and see what I could devise to help orient Bobby to his new home. He warned me that I would probably see one of his biggest obstacles, but left me to figure out what it was.

We arrived at a two story house on the east side of Portland and were greeted by Bobby's mother. She took us into the kitchen to meet Bobby who was just finishing a snack. Bobby left the table and

walked up to his mother who put her arm around his shoulder and walked with him into the living room to talk with us.

As Mr. Thompson and Bobby's mom talked I watched to see if I could detect the "obstacle". Bobby sat next to his mother weaving his head around much like Stevie Wonder does. He played a bit with the edge of the couch and a throw pillow that was next to him exploring the textures of each. As he leaned forward and reached towards the coffee table, his mother put her arm around him and hugged him closer to herself. Bobby settled into her and started to play with the material of her skirt. Mr. Thompson asked Bobby how he liked his new school and he responded that he liked his teacher and they had lots of neat things to play with. With some more prompting, he described his teacher and several of the toys. Bobby's mother then took us on a brief tour of the house while Bobby stayed on the couch playing with one of the pillows. After the tour, Mr. Thompson and I left to go over the route from the house to the school that Bobby would learn to follow.

As we walked, Mr. Thompson asked me what I thought.

I said, "In general, Bobby was a very well behaved young boy who participated in our conversation when asked to, but really seemed pretty bored by the whole visit."

"Did I recognize the obstacle?"



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I said, “Bobby seemed rather better behaved than most seven-year olds, almost docile, but I’m not sure that that’s a real problem.” I was close, but what I had noticed was a symptom, not the problem.

What I would probably have seen had we visited a normal, sighted child was a young boy running around or fidgeting on the couch or probably throwing one of the pillows rather than just feeling it. He probably would have been reprimanded by his mother at least twice and would either have gone back to the kitchen or gone outside to play. Bobby didn’t really venture very far on his own. Mr. Thompson said that this really wasn’t natural for the boy, but was the result of years of training by his parents.

Mr. Thompson said that he had often encountered blind children who behaved like Bobby who had learned not to venture very far from the “safe zone” defined by their parents. Many did not even know what a doorway was or where the walls extended to, simply because their parents had protected them from running into them. Getting them out of the ‘safe zone’ was always a challenge. It was always harder for the parents than the kids.

Over the next several months I often checked with Mr. Thompson to see what progress Bobby was making. One time he started laughing and told me that Bobby had exhibited a “defining” characteristic that day. Apparently Bobby had begun to enjoy his new freedom in an expanded zone within his house and had run into a wall, literally. Mr. Thompson chuckled and said, “That boy! He ran smack into that wall and looked like he really hurt himself. And you know what he did then? He KICKED that wall! And then, I guess because it hurt his foot, he kicked it again! If I hadn’t stopped him, he might still be trying to kick it down.

“You know some kids will do that. Something gets in their way and they get mad at it. They must figure it shouldn’t be there, that it was blocking their progress when it had no right to. They’ll get mad and try to fight it one way or another. Others will stop, cry and back away from it. They go back into their safe zone and I’ll have to coax them out of it all over again. Still others will bounce back, rub their noses, then get curious and start to explore what it was they ran into. I love working with that last group.”

In the years since that job, I’ve found that I, too, love working with “that last group”. I try to get them on my team. Seek their advice, whenever I run into a wall. They usually have had the same experience I’m going through and can point me in the direction of the nearest “doorway”. They must have run into more of those walls than others, to gain all that experience. It could be that because they looked for the way around them, they could run into the next one sooner. I’ve also noticed that they seem to enjoy those “walls”, butybe it’s just the discovery of the new “doorway”.

By the way, Bobby did get past that wall and eventually became quite mobile, walking to and from school by himself and riding the buses around town. He even started playing soccer with other blind kids. Before I left that job, I worked with the school maintenance group to put a beeper in a ball and some more beepers around the field and at each of the goals. Those were amazing games to watch!



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