

ON BEING LEGALLY BLIND

When you are told that someone is blind, you imagine that this person sees nothing at all or only vague shadows. And that is true of some people. But for many others, blind is legally defined; it means that the individual's visual acuity measured by rreading an eye chart, with glasses, if needed, is below some arbitrary standard, 20/200 or 6/60. This notation means that the individual can read letters or see things at 20 ft or 6 m, which someone with normal vision can read or see at 200 ft or 60 m.

There are many causes of blindness in any form - some of them age rekated, others congenital, as in my case - but this essay will not go into those causes. Rather, it will try to convey what life is like for such a person during their school days and thereafter. The person in question is me, and may not be typical of all legally blind persons.

Legally blind persons used to get an extra deduction in federal income taxes. I never took it, because it was mostly a tribute to the power of the vision lobby. Legally deaf people do not get a similar break, even though deafness is a much more serious disability, since it isolates you from people.

For my first four grades, I went to an ordinary state school in Sofia Bulgaria. I learned to read and write and was indoctrinated with Bulgarian patriotism. I was an avid reader, bringing material a few inches in front of my eyes to read. In fact, that was the method I used until fairly recently, when I became too lazy and succumbed to modern devices like video magnifiers and iPads.

In the early grades, my poor vision presented little difficulty in class;

there was relatively little blackboard work, and what there was could be transcribed on paper by my teachers. I remember only one embarrassing incident attributable to my poor vision. Before one Bulgarian national holiday, we were lined up in the school courtyard to be addressed by a priest of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Presently all the children were doing something with their hands in imitation of the priest. I was not sure what they were doing, but not wishing to be odd, I did the same. Later I was told that what they were doing was crossing themselves and that I should not have done so.

When we moved to New York, I attended regular classes in PS 9 Manhattan for one year, during which reading the blackboard was not an issue. By sixth grade in Brooklyn, there was more blackboard work, more than a busy classroom teacher could write out for me. So my parents sought other solutions within the public school system, namely schools which had special home rooms for 'blind' students. I attended those classes throughout high school.

In those special home rooms, sighted student volunteers came to read us assignments and help us take some tests. Presiding over the home room in Bushwick High School in Brooklyn that I attended was Mr. Ellis, a patient and thoughtful man. We were all supposed to read and write Braille - a tactile writing system based on cells of raised dots. (See attached page of the Braille alphabet). In the old days, it was written with a stylus on a clipboard 'slate'. See attached photo; I may pass around the rusty relic I got on Amazon recently; in the old days the slate was shiny and chrome-plated. Writing braille was a laborious process of using the

slate to poke raised dots into thick paper. Nowadays, there are braille typewriters, where people who can touch-type can produce braille output much more easily.

Reading braille properly with one's fingers is a skill blind people learned through practice, during which their brains became reorganized to improve tactile discrimination. The visual analogy is to look at print through foggy glasses, until eventually the fog somehow clears and you can see the letters clearly. I never went through that process but became quite proficient in reading braille - but with my eyes; my fingers never got the hang of it. However, my method was quite hopeless when text was written on both sides of the page. In any case, I do not recall that Mr. Ellis compelled me to read braille properly.

Each cell could contain up to six dots. There are different 'grades' of braille. In grade one, each cell was used for a single letter of the alphabet. In higher grades, each cell could encode common letter combinations like 'of', 'and', 'th'. In yet higher grades, special two-cell combinations could encode entire common phrases. Somebody like my totally friend Tony Mussillo who was very proficient, could read braille books nearly as fast as a good sighted reader read printed material.

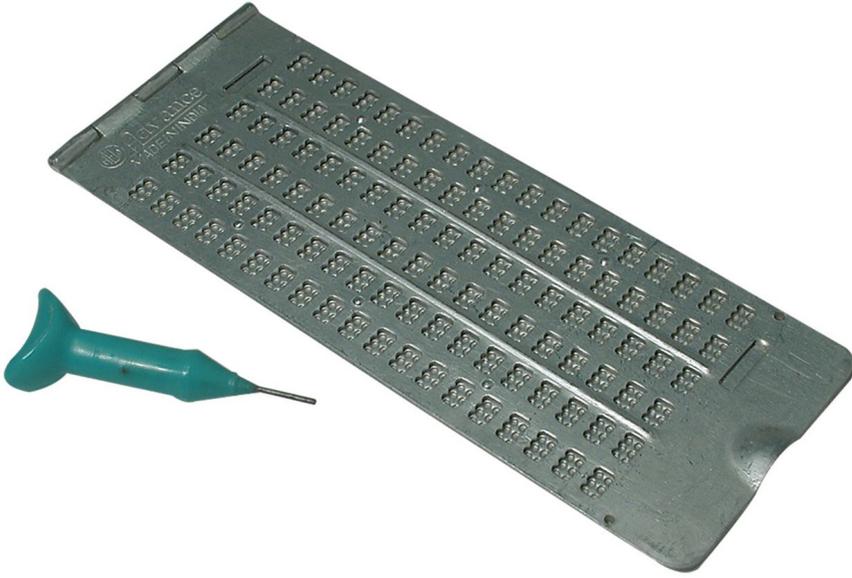
Now Tony (short, black hair, olive-skinned) was exceptional in many ways; blind from birth, he was nevertheless capable of operating in the normal world, without a Seeing Eye dog or a cane, using only finger snaps and the sound of footsteps to get a clue about the environment around him. And he was also fearless to ask questions of people around him. That enabled him to go on the subway to his part of Brooklyn. He knew his

way around in his home neighborhood so well that he was employed by a bookie to take bets! He went to one of the city colleges as I did, but I lost touch with him when I transferred to Cornell after my freshman year.

In sharp contrast to Tony was another friend I met in those classes, with whom I did keep in touch until his death, John Frieslaben. He was of medium height, always dressed in brown, including his cap. John was a much more thoughtful and sensitive person, who had good vision at birth but was diabetic. Unfortunately he was overdosed with insulin, as a result of which he lost most of his vision and some hearing. He never regained his self confidence, and was extremely hesitant in walking about, usually requiring someone to take him by the arm.

So these two examples show that what one can read on an eye chart is a very imperfect predictor of how one operates in the real world.

Useful as these special homerooms were, in other ways they were a bad idea because those of us assigned to them tended to become socially isolated from our peers. An analogous problem exists for deaf students who attend schools for the deaf. To avoid the social isolation problem, some sort of 'mainstreaming' is theoretically preferable.



Braille slate and stylus

Braille alphabet

● ○	● ○	● ●	● ●	● ○	● ●	● ●	● ○	○ ●	○ ●	● ○	● ○	● ●
○ ○	● ○	○ ○	○ ●	○ ●	● ○	● ●	● ●	● ○	● ●	○ ○	● ○	○ ○
○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	● ○	● ○	● ○
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
● ●	● ○	● ●	● ●	● ○	○ ●	○ ●	● ○	● ○	○ ●	● ●	● ●	● ○
○ ●	○ ●	● ○	● ●	● ●	● ○	● ●	○ ○	● ○	● ●	○ ○	○ ●	○ ●
● ○	● ○	● ○	● ○	● ○	● ○	● ○	● ●	● ●	○ ●	● ●	● ●	● ●
N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
○ ●	● ○	● ○	● ●	● ●	● ○	● ●	● ●	● ○	○ ●	○ ●	○ ●	
○ ●	○ ○	● ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ●	○ ●	● ○	● ●	● ●	● ○	● ●	
● ●	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	
#	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0		

