

First Runner Up, Inspirational Category, Writercon 2020
Published in Conclave Literary Journal, Spring 2021

VISION

When I was a little girl no one realized I couldn't see. Well, "see" is both an objective and a subjective word here. Objectively, I was nearly blind. From how early an age no one knew, but the fact was discovered when I was in the second grade. The subjective part of "see" is a whole different ball of wax—never having any idea that my way of comprehending the environment through sight was any different than anyone else's, I saw plenty in my universe.

My adult sense of self, the world, and social justice is weaved of lessons learned while trying to understand my surroundings as a child without the aid of adequate vision. I strive to wrap the resulting fabric of myself around the kids in my pediatric practice, my grandchildren, and any other little one who crosses my path, hoping to impart strength of character, purpose in life, and self-esteem.

Early memories consist first of shins, then knees, and finally hemlines or the occasional rolled down stocking top on my grandmother's stout leg—whatever was in nearest proximity to my nose. Because of the need to be close to an object to see it, I remember every line of that dear old woman's face: the blue eyes with crinkly corners, the grey ringlets of hair smelling like lavender, and the soft, rosy lips with a bit of prickly whisker showing over the top as she whistled a quiet tune.

She taught me that I could do anything I wanted to if I tried hard enough. Unable to believe otherwise despite being judged a misfit, I learned life lessons the hard way. Hearing the ball just before it hit me in the head instead of catching it, not understanding how to gauge its trajectory. Listening to the girls giggle as I kept on running once everyone else had stopped, never seeing the finish line, thinking I was winning the race. Feeling my sister's grasp as we headed for the bus at the end of the day, being scolded when I missed that same bus in her absence because I didn't see it arrive.

Summertime meant playing with a multitude of cousins, running barefoot along scorching hot paths. Scratching my legs on briars and cutting my feet on rocks as I traipsed behind was a small price to pay for acceptance into the ranks. I'm glad I couldn't see their looks of puzzlement as I fell straight into the same ravines they had just hopped over.

Learning to jump up and go on was an easy lesson. Understanding why they treated me like a dimwit was not.

I longed to know what was going on outside my range of view as pots and pans were clanged in the kitchen, or beans and peas were snapped off the vine—sounds that brought awe and wonder to me, as my mind fashioned the actions that must be taking place from the sounds I could hear. When a peal of thunder startled me, my grandmother would joke: "Taterman toppled his cart." Reason told me that the taterman must live above us in the sky, and not seeing him didn't preclude his existence. I learned the meaning of events or things by the sounds they emitted.

Those sounds became ever more important as to how I was treated in the world once I entered school. During math class the *click, click, click* on the chalkboard was as foreign to me as some sort of Morse Code, and my teacher took my incomprehension as a lack of intelligence.

That, combined with the fact that my mom was a single working woman in the late 1960s, quickly placed me in the ignorant and socially unacceptable category. Though I could not understand what I had done to make it so, I had no basis to refute that teacher's view of me.

As I started second grade my mother married a high school math teacher, and we moved across our little state to an even smaller town. Looking back, I am sure I entered that new school quite a bit behind in my education. Behind, that is, in everything except reading. Given that reading was taught in small circles with a picture book I held close in view, and that the instructions were spoken instead of being *click, click, clicked* onto the chalkboard, my little brain absorbed those reading lessons like a sponge. A lifelong fascination with words began.

Armed with excellent reading skills and a social status upgrade to teacher's daughter, I sensed a change in how I was perceived. Frequently I was called upon to help other kids read, to erase the chalkboard, and other such bits of privilege.

Very soon after starting that school year a dumpy bespectacled man with pants pulled high around his waist brought a box into a room adjacent to our classroom and proceeded to call us one by one to perform some sort of test. Only upon my own turn at the test could I see him well, and my view of him (both literally and figuratively) became one of disrespect. He is the only adult I can ever remember hating as a child.

Seated in the appointed spot, peering into the box through two holes with my chin held in a plastic cup, the test began. Anxiety welled up to meet the challenge as my mouth twisted into determination and my palms filled with sweat.

From the other side of the box he droned, "How many apples are on the tree?"

What, is this a trick or something? Silence.

His voice rose an octave higher. “Young lady, I asked you a question . . . how many apples are on the tree?”

I was at a loss for an answer as he leaned so close I could feel his dull breath on my forehead and regard his menacing countenance.

Finally, I heard my timid voice: “What tree?”

He inspected the box and we began again, with the same question and the same response, which apparently enraged him because he became quite animated, spewing hateful words to my bewildered second-grade self.

“I know you can see that tree and those apples. You’re fibbing.” He twisted his mouth into a tiny pucker. “I’ll have to send home a letter to your parents stating you can’t see well, even though it’s clear you aren’t telling the truth.”

Humiliated, I returned to the class fighting back tears. Stunned at the whole transaction and confused as to how I had failed the test or made him so mad. I was sure that I had never before caused a grownup to speak to me with such contempt. I must be a very bad child indeed.

As an adult I want to feel sorry for my little girl self, but in reality that single discourse changed my life forever. Oh, how I then hated that miserable little man, but I now know I must thank him as well. The letter he sent home prompted a visit to the optometrist, and the memory I have of his actions stops me in my own judgmental tracks on many a ranting occasion.

With the help of corrective lenses I now see most things 20/20. But I never cease to be amazed at how many things I view differently just because of my poor vision at that young age—skin color doesn’t matter but tone of voice does, a grandmother believing in you can be more powerful than being laughed at when you fail, unkind assumptions always hurt and are frequently incorrect.

When I encounter a five-year-old who doesn't look me in the eye from across the exam room, or a grandchild who can't follow my instructions on retrieving the proper utensil from the drawer, I always stop to wonder if it is because they can't see things the way I do.

And the second thought I have is whether that might just be a good thing.

Copyright ©2019 Adele Holmes

All rights reserved. This article or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express permission of the publisher except by a reviewer, who may quote short excerpts in a published review. Adeleholmes.com