

How a blind man sees

By Peter White Tuesday, 6 April 2004

¹ Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, they say, but what they tend to forget is that it's also in the ear, the mouth, the nose and the fingers, and that they can be equally good judges of what goes to make up the complex decision about what is beautiful.

² When you are totally blind, people tend to spend a lot of their time telling you what you're missing. 'It's such a shame you can't appreciate this lovely countryside', they'll say, or 'Did you see that beautiful goal Thierry Henry scored . . . oh, I'm terribly sorry, of course you didn't.' In purely physical terms they are right. Obviously you didn't see the goal Henry scored, and you can't appreciate the countryside in exactly the same way they do. But that doesn't mean you can't take an enormous sense of pleasure, and beauty, from a great sporting occasion or a walk in the country.

³ What people tend to forget is that appreciating beauty is a two-way street: it doesn't just depend on the sensations coming in, it also depends on your capacity to enjoy and appreciate what's going on around you. It's quite possible to have someone who can see

perfectly with very little sense of the finer things of life, and a blind person who can make absolutely the most of every sensation that touches them.

⁴ Optimism is an important component in appreciating the beautiful things of life. I've been putting together a series for Radio 4 called *Blind Man's Beauty*, and in it I've been talking to a whole range of blind people about what makes their spirit soar, and their soul leap. What's become clear is that the trick can be pulled by a whole range of experiences. A fellow broadcaster, Gary O'Donoghue, told me the story of a perfect brass cube, which went missing from the laboratory in his blind boarding-school. There was a big hue and cry about this missing cube. Threats were made, and the usual litany about the whole class being punished was gone through. In the end, it turned out that one of Gary's blind friends had 'borrowed it', and the reason was that he regarded it as such a beautiful object because of its smoothness, the weight of it in his hand, its perfect symmetry. It also turned out that there had been such a fuss because the science master, perfectly sighted, also coveted it; to him, too, it was a beautiful object.

'people tend to spend a lot of their time telling you what you're missing'

⁵ But to be honest, things don't really do it for me. The problem with any object much larger than Gary's cube is that it can't be encompassed in the human hand, and as soon as that begins to happen, you start to run into problems of visualisation. You can only touch one part of an object at a time, which means that you can't get a sense of its totality: you are imagining it, rather than seeing it. Some blind people like playing these kinds of games, but I'm a bit of a literalist: if I can't 'see' it accurately, then I don't really want to be bothered with it. Which is why I derive my sense of beauty from other sources; from people, and from dramatic events, and dramatic natural phenomena. So how do I know if someone is beautiful?

⁶ Well, beauty is so subjective anyway, that no one's idea of it ➡

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➡ stands up to rational scrutiny, so I think my methods are as reliable as anyone else's. Sighted people desperately want us, for some reason, to have a sense of physical beauty which in some way matches up to theirs. You'd probably be surprised how often I've been asked: "Would you like to feel my face?". This, sadly, is not usually a sexual overture, but a genuine belief that in some strange way this will convey an impression of them which is comparable to seeing their face. It doesn't work. The face, I'm afraid, shorn of its visual attractions, I find rather unedifying from a tactile point of view. Quite apart from the rather creepy feeling one gets tracing your fingers over someone's face, in anything other than an intimate situation, it is about as aesthetically pleasing to me as rifling through your fridge-freezer's fish compartment.

⁷ Beauty in a loved person is for me an amalgam: of voice, of temperament, of warmth and, when you know that person really well, total knowledge, emotional and physical. Voices are particularly poignant: they echo through my life, as strong a stimulus to memory as any photograph album could be. I can still hear in my head the voice of my much-loved father; having to go away to boarding-school as a blind child, when I heard his voice for the first time on coming home, it was a signal that the holiday had truly begun.

⁸ He's been dead for more than 20 years, but the memory of that Hampshire-accented vibrant voice still gives me a pang. I think the power of voices only becomes as strong again with the arrival of children; your own, and then your grandchildren. As I write this piece, my granddaughter Hannah is celebrating, noisily and with gusto, her second birthday in the room next door. I'm sure others would not describe Hannah's voice as beautiful: and even I would acknowledge that as she rips open her fifth present of the afternoon, her laughter is decidedly raucous. But it's beautiful to me, reflecting her sunny, unaffected nature, and her obvious relish at the discovery of life.

⁹ Children also illustrate very well this business about size and visualisation. When people say to me: 'It must be terrible not to know what your children look like, I have to put them straight; because up to the age of about three or four, I genuinely feel I did know what they looked like. They were small enough then as I sat them on my knee or played with them in the garden, to have a real sense of the whole of them, from top to toe. Of course this is the one relationship where the embargo on feeling faces can be broken, and it's the faces I remember, one of my three children relatively flat and stolid, one small and pointed, one squarer (I won't embarrass them by identifying which is which).

'Hell, for me, is a still day'

¹⁰ But perhaps the greatest pleasure and source of beauty for me, outside of family and friends, is the drama and excitement of sport. It's a strange fact that most of the blind people I know are dementedly attached to sport: not just in the "oh, I wonder how so-and-so got on sort of way", but to the extent of carrying vast amounts of what is to everyone else useless encyclopaedias of statistical knowledge in their head, and taking the support of their team to insane levels.

¹¹ I can't begin to explain where this comes from. I'm sure psychologists could have fun speculating about whether it's the result of repressed competitive urges or some kind of autistic need for completeness. Suffice it to say that in my youth I used to play out whole test matches using only a cup and dice, recreating the innings of each individual player, establishing the bowling figures down to the last extra, and compiling detailed scorecards. Mad it may be, but it afforded me huge satisfaction and, yes, a sense of completeness. It was only bettered by finally going to Barbados and witnessing a whole test match, ball by ball, for its entire five days. Perfection! Cricket is the most aural of games, and it is possible to describe a match without being able to see it, just by hearing the ➡

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➡ sound of bat on ball, the cries of the players, and the reactions of the crowd. Indeed, for the series of *Blind Man's Beauty*, we are putting this theory to the test, and I will be commentating on several lovers of cricket for my BBC local station, radio Solent.

¹² I think that action is essential for blind people to experience beauty. When you stop and think about it,

if things are static and silent, for us they might just as well not exist; and this is nowhere more true than with weather. Hell, for me, is a still day. Give me thunder, lightning, hail and snow – anything to remind me that I am part of an exciting universe. Rain is a particular delight, because it brings alive normally static surfaces, painting a landscape for me of what is usually invisible.

I love to lie in bed, listening to

the different noises rain makes, depending on where it's falling: pattering on the roof, tumbling out of gutters, rushing down drainpipes, drumming on tarmac, whispering on to grass. Never complain the next time you hear rain forecast: just bear in mind that when it falls, it will be painting beautiful pictures for blind people. ■