

PERSEVERANCE

Cameron D. Algie

Was it really that long ago when my eyesight failed? After years of tribulation, reality softens to become dream-like and facts blur to become almost mythological in their telling. But, what I now relate took place as an Australian story on disability.

It was a lover's evening in 1969, when a bloated, bronze Moon hung as low as ripened fruit when, unheralded, destiny's genetic arrow struck. Unlike sweet amorous barbs from Cupid's fickle bow, my genetic helix revealed itself to change my life. It appeared so strange on that fateful evening, that this lover's Moon in a puff, a blink, a moment, simply vanished. No clouds to be seen as white stars softly glowed through their purpled canopy. Shifting my gaze, this moon's golden globe flicked back into sight, then just as quickly, vanished. How curious, I mused, thinking little more of this phenomenon.

However, six months later in broad daylight, I observed 'Yo' the Kelpie Dog's brown tail suspended magically in thin air, an apparition like the grin of Cheshire Cat from Alice in Wonderland. Shifting my gaze the dog's body came into full view so that a cold shiver of fear bore down upon me. Yo was directly four meters in front and absolutely nothing stood in between.

At first a somewhat dim prognosis.

'I'm sorry, I can't do anything more for you!'

Then, a dismal outlook, I was going blind! One year later, effects of this disease called Retinitis Pigmentosa, had so worsened that reading late into the night, blue, purple, or red blotches like water stains on paper, impaired my field of vision. Attributing this to mere tiredness, or glare of my bedside lamp, it wasn't long before my night vision became affected by thousands of flickering, flashing, maddening, blinding lights. I could only steel myself with bloody-minded, if not foolhardy determination to carry on.

While still attempting to cling on to vestiges of my former life, my driving abruptly ended in 1973 where in a spirit of false bravado, I drove down to the Kings Arms for a drink. At 10pm I climbed into the ute declining cheerful, good-natured

offers of friends to take me home. But, in my fog of flickering lights and not driving more than thirty kilometres per hour, suddenly; BANG! A dark shape flashed then just as quickly disappeared. To my absolute horror, I heard a dreadful groaning. Oh my God! I thought. I've hit a parked car and injured someone, resolving that had I done so, I'd shoot myself!

In the still shining lights of my ute, I stumbled across the body of a black cow in its death throes. No blood on the road and hardly a mark on its body. With this revelation that it was only an escaped neighbour's cow, a giant tsunami of overwhelming relief swept over me. Acknowledging this luck, I never drove again.

With my world of books shrinking and shut off from a source of so much pleasurable stimulation, a new Dark Age began. To my everlasting sorrow, the sheer joy of selecting and holding a crisp new book, its clean smell of paper and printer's ink, the choice of topics and speed at which they could be omnivorously devoured, were not replaced by bulky, cold, electronic apparatus and I remained inconsolable. Then in 1971, my distress of failing eyesight became exacerbated when I noticed difficulty in hearing conversations within a room, within a small group, or across a table. On quiet occasions, at night, or in grassy fields in perfect silence of a spring day where overhead, pure notes of trilling skylarks were normally heard, all I could hear was deeply uncomfortable whooshing and roaring noises far greater and more worrisome than mere tinnitus. So unpleasant were these sounds and so obsessed and frustrated did I become with this impediment, that at times I wished only to quell this damned roaring by ramming an object into my ears and in this perverse way, gain tranquillity through utter silence. Diagnosed with Otosclerosis, this deafness was curable by newly devised microsurgery inserting a plastic stirrup bone. One week after this operation, and to my absolute amazement and delight, I could hear clearly again, sounds of cars on the main road more than one kilometre away, dogs barking from neighbours' farms, sounds of wind in trees while bird song became joyous music again. I remain convinced, experiencing deafness was far worse than blindness.

As time progressed, it became increasingly difficult for me to identify faces of family and friends. Reluctant to initiate first salutations for fear of embarrassment, I

just said 'Good day! Or hello!' Hoping that their voice, or subject matter might identify them. This incremental progression of blindness and its unexpressed grief only led me to withdraw from social events. Despite restoration of my hearing, in the wearisome last years of rebuilding the farm, hardened by my drawn-out struggles and giving up driving, I became physically isolated and emotionally withdrawn so that I began to plumb black depths of absolute despair. How easy to finish it all I pondered. Even a place for my last act identified. A spot facing my favourite view, northwards over beautiful blue mountains where in summer I marvelled over towering Valkyrian thunderheads. As their majestic turbulence reached the upper atmosphere's jet stream some 10,000 metres high, they formed supernatural anvils. Thor's Walhalla, I thought, would be a blessed relief, a peaceful release from all my struggles.

In this wretched state and as usual working in fields through the bitter chill of a winter's day, I can remember resting for a while under shelter of some pine trees. The sky lay heavy, a sombre leaden grey as a desultory chill wind moaned despondently in the boughs above. All that surrounded me appeared weary, hopeless and unending. Yo, the brown kelpie cattle dog, ever faithful and friendly, saw me seated and came sidling over to sit beside me. His keen yellow eyes with pupil's mere beady black pinhead dots, looked up at me empathically as though he truly understood. Stroking the soft fur of his head and ears in return affection, I hugged him. Then, lifting my head to the sky, I mournfully howled:

'Yooooooooo! - Yoooooooooh! Yoooooooooh!' For the black spirits moved me. Yo looked at me knowingly, then raising his be whiskered, brown pointy snout to the sky, he howled too. So together, we howled in unison to a cheerless sky and I felt the better for it.

In a strange twist of fate, I found myself eligible to go as Early Leaver to University. With help from the Royal Victorian Institute of the Blind's Tape Reading service, I studied Law motivated by others like totally blind Jim, or paralysed Dennis, and wondered what did I have to worry about? There were certainly others worse than me and so I plunged somewhat naively into this new career. I was not readily identified as vision impaired so that an identity crisis which affects many people with

partial sight, emerged. There was no practical need for me to wear badges of blindness, sunglasses and white cane. So, from this point, I maintained a split personality, normal but disabled, a confused identity encouraging introspection and withdrawal. While I could still read large print, book titles or larger font found inside front covers, I turned to other students with book in hand.

'Could you help me read this? I am Legally Blind!'

The dumbfounded student, seeing no patent abnormality, looked at me thinking I was joking, turned away no doubt thinking I was tricking them. As with so many, I now began to grapple with the invisibility of disability.

I soon learnt that to use the term blind, when to all extents I was obviously not totally so, caused confusion. It was far better to say, *could you help me? I have got bad eyesight*, than say *I'm blind*, a word associated with fear. When I started to say *I've got bad eyesight*, changes in response were amazing. A student could relate to the term as relevant to themselves, earnestly confiding that they too had bad eyesight and they should get new spectacles. With this revised approach I usually obtained all the help I needed.

However, crossing the expansive six lane Wellington road from my students' accommodation created significant logistical difficulties. My general technique for braving this death trap, for there were no pedestrian lights, was either to wait until other students were crossing and walk with them without flagging that I needed help, or, if such manoeuvre was not possible, to wait, listen carefully for oncoming traffic and if none could be heard, make an anxious, heart racing dash for it.

As my studies commenced I began to realise that, in my formative years of learning, I had relied largely upon visual, not aural memory. As an artist and farmer I had also lived by observation. Now, as this faculty faded, I was increasingly required to learn and retain knowledge by using my aural memory. To improve concentration I followed the practice of other blind students by speeding up my tape to twice the normal speaking rate. Some even read at three times normal, creating sounds like Donald Duck on steroids.

So, in this robotic way, page upon pages of books were converted to hours and hours of squawking voices, mind-numbingly boring. After four years of this, I regarded myself as the tormented figure in Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream*. Haunted, desperate, frantic, crying out, muffled in an impervious bubble of the psyche and surrounded by a desolate landscape. I related to its expressions of tormented emotion to feel great affinity with its mood and meaning. Never fully adjusting to this medium, I then jumped from frying pan into the fire as I attempted to find work.

As 1980 ended, I applied and was admitted to practice as a Barrister and Solicitor. By this time the Legal profession in Victoria, had slipped into a period of significant recession. During the last two years of university and my year undertaking articled clerkship, I had written more than three hundred job applications to law firms and a variety of other businesses, but all were unsuccessful. In this confronting way, I came to terms with a stark and harsh reality, that few employers took on articled clerks and even fewer, someone with vision impairment. Very few people with blindness were actually employed in legal practice. Then, in a strange twist of fate, I was offered a role as Executive Officer of an industry body representing Cooperative Housing Societies.

On the first day of my introduction to this new and unexpected role, I was shown a library of office records, several cabinets of files, numerous labelled storage shelves containing folders of reports, minute books and other files. Nodding in dumb appreciation, I attempted to create an aura of intelligent understanding while barely containing my apprehension. For I could read nothing while my conscience cried out, what the Hell am I doing here? All writing appeared blurred, a series of white, grey or yellow smudges. Underneath this façade, I remained fearful, if not terrified, of revealing that my eyesight was so bad I could not read.

While practically blind, my remaining peripheral vision permitted me to walk, move around, acknowledge facial recognition and greet people as if all were normal, but this deception only created a conflict of identity. For, in facing this practical hurdle, I was still also unsure how much my Board Members really understood the extent of my vision loss, remaining terrified this vulnerability be exposed.

There was another level of apprehension. I pondered, what impression would it make if everyone were to find out the new Executive Officer was blind and how would this look if an industry, already under pressure, was to have appointed to its rescue, a blind man? It all appeared pointedly ludicrous, like some Monty Python perverse nonsense script, *The Ministry of Silly Walks*?

Nevertheless, I survived by taking notes, minutes, and responding to information presented as a normally sighted person might, then struggled for hours upon hours, typing, or dictating information onto tape. If possible, I read required information prior to any meeting then bluffed my way through, memorising sufficient information to discuss, negotiate and effectively present Industry views. If caught on the hop with a last minute letter or document, I asked my secretary to read the document. Sometimes, by asking others to explain their opinions first, I gained sufficient gist to follow the subject matter. Later, with my reputation more established, I made excuses based on acquired denial and avoidance behaviour, saying, *Oh, I've left my reading glasses behind, could you read it?* In my role I was required to understand economic, government and Industry policies and these required intense concentration and assiduous preparation.

By perseverance, however, I maintained this role for fourteen years, achieved legislative change, negotiated with banks and government to restore funding to this sector of \$680 million in 1989. At a time of State Bank and Pyramid Building Society crises, I negotiated with the State Government that a guarantee for my industry increased to \$1 billion. While determination was needed to accomplish these outcomes, being boss of my office allowed me to arrange work priorities as suited. Had my work been a lesser administrative role, it may have been impossible to carry this out before introduction of accessible technology, but I was lucky. People who are blind or vision impaired have considerable skills and are often blocked from taking more senior roles because of prejudice, a belief that, because you are blind, or vision impaired, you are useless. To manage my role I memorised verbal instructions, made rough notes with a 'Pentyl' felt tipped pen of intense black ink, maintained a degree of confident intelligence, dictated my instructions and correspondence and asked what I thought were incisive questions. However, my success was not achieved alone. While appointing a highly capable personal assistant, I also survived with help of volunteer readers. For urgent or lengthy reading, the best reader

remained my poor, ever-patient mother. As soon as I telephoned she scurried into my office dropping other tasks to make my reading a priority. Only introduction of JAWS and adaptive technology in 1994, changed this scenario.

After nearly fourteen years when this work became somewhat repetitious, the time was right for change. Thus the scene was set for my next demanding professional challenge, returning to the Law. There were moments of near death experience, times where one wished to disappear, fall through the ground, vaporise, or something of this magnitude in the hope that stressors would go away. I recall many tight gut-wrenching attacks of fear as shaking, throat dry and bearing pain of stomach cramps, I walked up Lonsdale Street to the Supreme Court of Victoria. Similar to unfortunates on death row, visions of my earlier life flashed before me; my struggles for self-improvement, my debating and public speaking, my representations to banks and government and even my years of farming suddenly seemed considerably more desirable and came before me as flashes of earlier happy times. Why was I doing this? I asked myself. What sensible person in their right mind would put themselves through such a crushing mill of trauma, for it all seemed so absurd, a blind man endeavouring to do what seemed physically impossible, a task that even fully sighted people might find difficult. This wasn't normal I concluded and clearly I must be stupid.

Over the next ten years, I did persevere and found court hearings to be so harrowing that they became significant stressors leading to my eventual emotional collapse. However, at that moment, blinkered by my determination to succeed, I jumped through this ring of fire. In this state, I conducted Supreme Court test cases, matters in the Planning jurisdiction and settled disputes on property cases. Becoming more confident, I took initiatives in managing clients affairs. With initial contact by phone, I found that I could not only identify the issues, but give instructions to the client. They provided their documents, or evidence on my terms. For example, instead of waiting for a client to attend the office and bring in materials I couldn't read, I requested they send them in first. I encouraged clients to go down to their local Council and request copies of plans, by-laws and planning zones themselves. Clients were quite happy to do this especially when I explained how

much it would cost them if our firm were to do this. Eventually I conducted a number of cases where I did not meet the client. Good clients carried out my instructions assiduously and this contributed to good results. From a constructive point of view, I had gained for the first time, confidence to be a Legal Practitioner. Facing this final reality check was the clarity of sight I needed. In the end, there was no single decisive moment, no flash of inspiration, or divine revelation which emerged from my low points, rather, it was a watershed slowly emerging which I crossed by arriving at the simple realisation that, it was how I reacted to circumstances over which I had control which mattered. Perseverance arose out of a self-realisation that I could change what I previously thought was unchangeable. A slow dawning which highlighted a thought I could take responsibility for my own attitudes and not blame others. The Dalai Lama had stated life's goals so simply, 'To love yourself and have a goal!' A philosophy which cut away self-doubt and nurtures self-esteem from which elements required for perseverance are possible. Underlying this revelation was an oft quoted adage from Shakespeare, *For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.*

Within these principles lay a practical answer. It is how you think about things which governs us and our attitude, which can be the greater barrier, not disability itself.

Cameron D. Algie was born and raised in West Gippsland, Victoria. Despite vision impairment, he studied Law at Monash University and became Chief Executive Officer for the Cooperative Housing Societies Sector. He built up a Society for RP research and made a Member in the Order of Australia in 1993. Cameron conducted major test cases in nuisance and equitable interests in property, ultimately becoming a Member of Planning Panels Victoria. Finally, he became a Facilitator with Vision Australia utilising his life's experience.