Help for the Blind or Visually Impaired Person: The Blind Person’s Perspective

Solomon Mekonnen PhD
PO Box 2504
Tarpon Springs
Florida
USA

Dr Solomon Mekonnen serves on the Board of Christian Blind Mission International USA.

The current chairman, Dr Van Joffrion, treated the author in the seventies when he was in Ethiopia. Dr Mekonnen now serves with Dr Van Joffrion to organise help for the blind and facilitate the ‘Vision 2020’ global effort.

Dr Mekonnen lost his sight due to a domestic accident in which boiling water spilled over his face at the age of eighteen months.

The author holds graduate degrees from Columbia University in Law, Political Science, and Philosophy.

Dr Mekonnen and his wife, Taddelech Nigussie, have five children.

Arguably, help is essential in the human experience. It is expressed through giving and receiving. These expressions are exercised within the framework of either a real or a perceived attitude of mind. Such attitudes are not necessarily created both by the social, cultural, religious, economic, and political environments in which individuals are raised or the particular inclinations that develop through the different stages of human growth and development. There are, however, some common factors shared by most of those who receive help, and a more realistic perspective is observed from the personal experiences of such individuals, especially in the absence of any documented study that surveys the outlook of most, if not all, those who benefit on the issue of help.

A Blind Orphan: Realisation

As a blind orphan growing up in an institutional setting, my childhood perspective on life was narrowly defined. The school grounds of my childhood home were the entire world and everyone within the fences accounted for the inhabitants of what I then thought was the whole earth. I had no complaints. Provisions were plentiful and I wanted nothing more. My unformed perception always assured me that my blindness was not an after effect. Nor did I need or receive help. Everything at the school was all that there was. Everything was normal and nothing was out of place.

It was not long before I realised that there was something different about me. Two unpleasant factors affected my thoughts with the harsh realities of my situation. First, I realised that those around me – including some students – had sight. They had something I did not have. Second, as far as I could tell, I was the only one.

A Spiritual Experience

In 1973, the course of my journey was completely altered by a profound spiritual experience. The narrow childhood perspec-

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It was not long before I realised that there was something different about me. Two unpleasant factors affected my thoughts with the harsh realities of my situation. First, I realised that those around me – including some students – had sight. They had something I did not have. Second, as far as I could tell, I was the only orphan in the school. Hence, the truth about me was that I was a blind orphan unlike anyone else in the school. Why?

Although not voiced at the time, the truth deeply hurt my feelings and completely undermined my stability. Suddenly, I was lonely even though nothing around me had changed. It hurt to know that the two sockets beneath my brow had contained a once vital organ damaged by a domestic accident. Could this have been prevented? What is a blind orphan good for? Am I now twenty percent less of a human being simply because I lost the use of one of the five sensory faculties? There was no answer. I felt that the world was deliberately quiet, cruel, and condescending. I became suspicious of everyone around me.

Instead of resigning to a fatal acceptance of my perceived fate, I resolved within myself not to surrender to a condition that I did not bring upon myself. Nor would I look beyond myself to anyone for anything at all. Armed with the vow I made to myself and with the determination to back it, I began my lone journey in life and thrust myself onward, at all costs and by all means, achieving for myself. I ‘charmed the naïve, impressed the gullible, outwitted the witless, disarmed the condescending and complimented the fearsome’. I was convinced that, wherever and whenever, everyone around me was there simply doing what one did and it was up to me to make it work for myself. I began a life without appreciation. I did not know any better because I did not understand anything at all.

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tive that directed my life was completely reconstituted. Compelled by the need to recapture what I had missed during my growing years, I forced myself to relive the past by recalling my experiences and re-examining each aspect with a much broader, more enlightened, and more mature perspective.

I asked one simple question that guided me through my journey back in time. What would it have been like if I did not have the help I had as I grew up? We may never find out the ‘might-have-beens’ of the past. Nevertheless, observing the lives of those who were less fortunate confirmed that my circumstances would have been hopeless, if not fatal. Awakened from an enduring numbness (lack of feeling), I suddenly realised that I am not only alive, but also better off than most of my blind compatriots.

One single and essential constant provided the core building blocks for my life, i.e., help—what others did for me. Indeed, goodness and kindness cradled me in the loving care of those who offered help. My life was deeply influenced by each caring individual who selflessly offered the help that made a difference. My aunt helped in pleasing my case to the late Emperor Haile Sellassie when she recognised her limitations to care for me. The Emperor helped me through my journey back in time. What would it have been like if I did not have the help I had as I grew up? We may never find out the ‘might-have-beens’ of the past. Nevertheless, observing the lives of those who were less fortunate confirmed that my circumstances would have been hopeless, if not fatal. Awakened from an enduring numbness (lack of feeling), I suddenly realised that I am not only alive, but also better off than most of my blind compatriots.

Help and the Blind Person

My thoughts showed me that help does not bring anyone to a lower situation of permanent dependency (relying on others). Rather, it is an interdependent society responsible for securing meaning and significance for its members. Because of help, mankind enriches itself through the potential of each individual by extending the benefits of its resources to others. Society’s resources are mobilised through giving and receiving.

A companion effort in orientation and education must be integrated into all eye care programmes, to facilitate these aims. Both those who give and those who receive must be aware of the great significance of their participation in this most noble and most required of all causes.

In some areas, setting blind children on fire to rid communities of evil spirits has been reported. I remember a ten-year-old blind boy who did not know how to walk because his parents kept him secluded in a little room, out of embarrassment. On the other hand, there are some individuals of enormous wealth and others with incredible skill who fail to recognise the rewarding significance of their participation in fulfilling the good purposes of help in the lives of others, through organised and individual efforts.

Help and Need: Testimony and Professional Care

The good purpose of providing support and professional help must be clearly presented to all beneficiaries (those who give) so that they may find their places in this cause and fill it effectively and enthusiastically. Also, the personal experiences of those who receive must be strategically included within the overall eye care effort so that their testimony can help in penetrating the formidable barrier between help and need. Help is necessary, indispensable, and good. But, meaningful, effective, and efficient help is even better. I commend the efforts of eye care centres as well as those who are organising help. Certainly, a concerted effort of all involved parties will most assuredly realise the most excellent and finest aspects of help. We should no longer watch quietly, as indifference and despair deny us the wonderful rewards of a fulfilling experience.

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**The Part 3 Examination will be changing in September 2003 - for details please contact the Exams Department**

**Diploma in Ophthalmology (DRCOphth)**

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**From November 2001, there has been no practical refraction section in the Diploma Examination**

**India Examination Dates**

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**Overseas Location: Aravind Eye Hospital, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, South India**

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