

LOOK INTO MY EYES EQUATING BLINDNESS WITH IGNORANCE DISCREDITS THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED BY GEORGINA KLEEGER

If I could see my blind eyes in the mirror, they would be indistinguishable from the eyes of sighted people. While untreated cataracts can be visible as a clouding or whitening of the pupils, and prosthetic eyes, though crafted to have the color and sheen of natural eyes, sometimes lack the movement associated with vision, many common causes of blindness are not visually apparent. Some blind people wear patches or dark glasses, but these accoutrements might be interpreted as fashion statements. In my own case, I know that my eyes sometimes appear out of focus. They do not necessarily line up with the eyes of someone I'm talking to. But this characteristic may be understood as something else: distraction, shyness, arrogance.

Certainly my eyes do not resemble the eyes of sighted actors who portray blindness in movies and go to great lengths to alter the appearance of their eyeballs to execute a convincing performance. They may strive to keep their eyelids wide open, their gaze rigidly fixed. Sometimes they even wear special contact lenses to make the eyes appear to protrude unnaturally.

The expression “to turn a blind eye” denotes indifference or ignorance, possibly even willful ignorance — a deliberate resistance to consider factors that might rouse the complications of compassion. The blind eye is unfriendly, unfeeling. It disregards and overlooks. It borrows from the image of Justice — who, I'd like to point out, is blindfolded, not blind — to convey unbiased neutrality, but may in fact be complicit with evil.

I have spent my entire career pointing out this metaphor and others like it, arguing that it does damage to people like me. People dismiss my objections, saying, “It's only a metaphor. Don't be so sensitive. No one's talking about you.” I am labeled a politically correct killjoy bent on depriving speakers of vivid language. Or else people advise that I abandon the word blind to describe myself and adopt instead any number of other phrases such as “an individual living with severe visual impairment.” The writer in me finds these locutions ungainly and clunky. Why must I abandon a perfectly respectable word to describe myself so that others can use it metaphorically to denote obliviousness and prejudice?

I am finally of an age when many of my peers are experiencing some degree of sight loss. After over fifty years of blindness, I feel that I have valuable expertise to impart. While I'm not equipped to address the psychological effects of their loss, I have practical tips that may help them adapt to their new condition. I can discuss the pros and cons of white canes versus service dogs, describe the utility of computer screenreaders, tout the benefits of learning Braille. I can point out that now blind people and those with other disabilities enjoy legal protections against discrimination in employment, education, and housing. I could introduce them to my many blind friends and acquaintances who hold jobs, raise families, and enjoy hobbies. While diverse in their backgrounds and interests, the blind people I know are as rational, competent, and fair-minded as our sighted peers.

But for people who are joining our ranks, it seems that the last thing they want to do is talk about blindness; they don't even want to speak the word out loud. After a lifetime of hearing and probably using negative metaphors about blindness that associate it with indifference and ignorance, anything I might



say about eye-free navigation or aural reading will seem paltry to the point of insult. The biggest hurdles a newly blind person encounters are the lifelong association that comes from stereotypical portrayals of blindness and the ways the word is used figuratively. I remember all sorts of common expressions that thinking people have now excised from their speech for the ways they perpetuate negative stereotypes about other minority groups. I could cite examples, but it would feel like hate speech. Why are the metaphors about blindness so durable?

Equally problematic are all the clichés and idioms that equate vision with intelligence, discernment, even prescience. People say, “I see what you mean,” even when talking on the telephone. The expression is about understanding, not eyesight. For this reason, I cringe when headlines to human interest features about some blind person turn on the idea that while physically sightless the person has some supernatural gift of vision: “Though Blind She Sees the Truth.” It feels like a clumsy

attempt at a consolation prize. While

carrying around these blind eyes, I’m supposed to have the capacity to read others’ minds or predict the future.

But we know that looks can be deceiving and images lie. In an era when photos and videos can be doctored to show the opposite of the truth, people would be wise to mistrust information that comes to them through the eyes alone.

I would like to propose a different meaning for the phrase “to turn a blind eye.” I’d substitute the usual associations with an idea that turning a blind eye is to offer a different perspective on the subject, to provide observations devoid of the distractions and manipulations of images, and to foreground other sensory perception as well as knowledge outside the sensory realm.

Will this new definition catch on? Perhaps not. People cling to their metaphors. Clichés become a habit, an easy way to convey meaning. Still, as the population ages, and more people experience sight loss associated with aging, perhaps this metaphor and others like it will be revealed for what they are. If you want to talk about foolishness, indifference, or prejudice, why not use those words? Leave my blind eyes out of it.

“A blind eye” is often used to describe indifference, even evil. But does this metaphor do justice to those who are actually blind?



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