So What About Independent Travel

by Stephen Benson

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(Note: The following article was published early in 1984 by the Catholic Guild for the Blind of Chicago, Illinois. Some of our readers will already know much of the information which it contains. Others will not. They will find its pointers and tips useful in considering their personal travel skills. In any event, our prime purpose for publishing this article is not to convey technical data but to show the positive approach which can be used by professionals in the field in disseminating information about blindness to blind persons, families and friends of the blind, and the public at large. Too often, the literature which emanates from the agencies is condescending and demeaning. It seems to try to build the ego of the professional by demonstrating that blindness is the most terrible of tragedies and blind persons the most inferior of beings—very special, very mysterious, very limited, and very hard to train. Such literature (at least, by implication) appears to say in almost every sentence: "What we have to offer is so complex and so hard to understand that only one conclusion can be drawn from it. We are very important, very knowledgeable, and very much deserving of credit and prestige for knowing what we know and being what we are." This article is a welcome and refreshing contrast to such arrogance and misinformation.

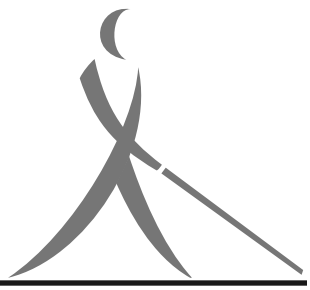
We have printed Mr. Benson's article in its entirety, leaving in it the local Chicago references regarding sources of purchase for canes. Although we do not know, we doubt that the Catholic Guild of Chicago would like to become the supplier of canes for the blind of the nation. It might be noted that the canes listed in the article can be purchased by writing to: National Federation of the Blind, 1800 Johnson Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21230.

Steve Benson is director of the Guild. He is also President of the National Federation of the Blind of Illinois and a member of the Board of directors of the National Federation of the Blind. He says of the article:

"This text is an unequivocal statement that blind people of all ages and conditions can travel independently with only a long white cane. It asserts the philosophy that blind people can participate in the full current of life on a basis of equality with their sighted peers, provided they have proper training and opportunity.

"My thanks to Marie Porter, Peter Grunwald, Steven Hastalis, and Fred Schroeder for their contributions to this work and for their encouragement.")

Introduction



Blind people all over the United States, literally thou-

sands of us from age six to eighty or more, routinely travel with the aid of a long white cane or dog guide. We travel to and from work, school, recreation sites, shopping centers, doctors' offices, organization meetings, or the homes of relatives or friends.

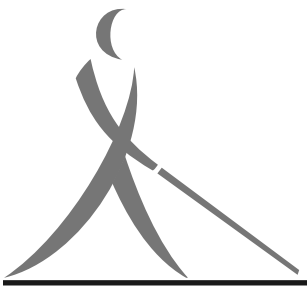
Skills of independent mobility are neither obscure nor terribly complicated. Rather, they are known, available, and acquirable. The fact that so many blind people participate in the full current of life on a basis of equality with ease demonstrates the desirability, the possibility, and the necessity of independent travel.

So what about independent travel by blind people? How does it work? What must one do to go from here to there with only a long white cane? Here is an introduction to the basic concepts of cane use.

The White Cane

The long white cane is a light-weight metal or fiber glass tube. It may be one piece, or it may fold or telescope into one small section or several sections. The length is determined by the individual's preference, or the user's walking speed. State codes vary some, but most provide that the cane may be white or metallic in color, and a few require a red tip.

The amount of red showing on a cane, or the color of the handle, has nothing at all to do with the skill or rank of the traveler; nor does it have anything to do with the amount of vision of its user.



The long white cane, as much as anything else, is the symbol of blindness. It is a sign that its bearer cannot see at all, or cannot see very well. Motorists are required by law to give special heed to the bearer of a white cane. They are obliged to give respect. The respect due is most appropriate, for the cane is a symbol of independence and freedom. It is respectable to use a white cane. Likewise, it is respectable to be blind, just as it is to be tall, short, fat, thin, female, or male.

Blindness is a characteristic, an identifiable trait, like millions of others humans possess. It is neither more nor less than that; it cannot be other than what it is.

When a long cane is properly used, extended in front of an individual—generally centered on the body—it will come in contact with objects, much like a bumper. As the person moves forward, he swings the cane and touches the ground in front of him at approximately the point of his next footstep. This "touch technique" is most effective when the cane tip is kept close to the ground and the touch points approximately the width of the user's shoulders. If the traveler were standing at six o'clock, facing twelve, the cane tip should touch at eleven and one o'clock. In other words, stay behind the cane.

It is reasonable to expect that a blind traveler's natural pace would be the same as if he were sighted. A natural pace or stride actually makes travel easier, especially in terms of keeping a straight line.

Blind people use moving ramps, escalators, revolving doors, and turn-stiles with as much ease as any sighted person. When encountering stairs, it simply isn't necessary to explore each step. The cane tip is used primarily to detect the beginnings and ends of stairways. In either case it is a good idea to hold the cane in a manner that would not trip a fellow pedestrian.

As the traveler moves along, the cane may contact a fence, fire hydrant, child's toy, or an automobile. As in the case of stairs, it is not a signal to make a thorough exploration of the surroundings; all one need do is step around the object and proceed. If the object contacted (a truck, for example) extends into the street, it makes simple good sense to take note of that fact and exercise caution, if it is necessary to walk around the truck on the street side.

Awareness

Much of travel with a long white cane is a matter of good sense rather than a matter of individual instruction. While a teacher may be able to give valuable tips and fine points, it is impossible for any teacher to expose a travel student to every situation. Each of us must assume responsibility for our own safety and well being. The beginnings of that responsibility occur in the first lesson. It requires confidence and good sense. Confidence begins with the knowledge that thousands of us walk the highways and by-ways safely every day of the year. Associating with blind people can be most helpful in terms of enriching one's knowledge about cane travel.

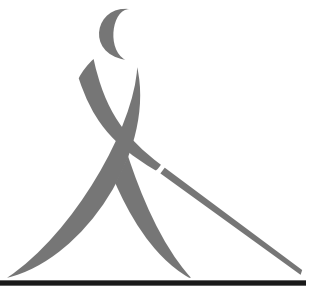
Good sense comes from the ability to use cumulative life experiences while analyzing a situation and reaching a conclusion after thinking about available facts. It is something that requires practice, not something automatically possessed.

In addition to confidence and good sense, a blind person must be aware of what is around him. That awareness is acquired through sound, smell, air pressure and wind changes, the sun, the surface underfoot, and a myriad of other sources. All of this comprises an environmental picture. While walking along a large building, it is relatively easy to tell when the end has been reached by changes in wind direction and/or speed, heat from the sun, or traffic noise from an intersecting street.

Sound

It is vital that a blind traveler be able to identify, interpret, and use all kinds of sound. The sound of traffic indicates whether one should cross a street, or it may be used to determine whether one is walking straight. Construction sounds may indicate a barricaded street or sidewalk.

The sound of children at play may indicate the presence of toys on the sidewalk. All of us have been children, so we have some notion of children's habits with



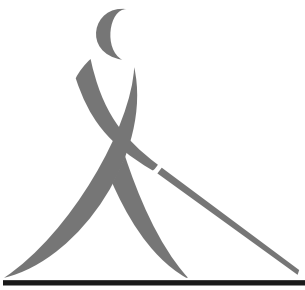
respect to toys. The blind traveler should anticipate the possibility of having to pick his way through wagons, bicycles, and other assorted playthings.

Some of the simplest sounds, sounds that would be taken for granted, or that would go unnoticed by some people, are among the most useful. For example: a door opening or closing, crowd or street noise coming through an open door, footsteps of a fellow pedestrian traversing a flight of stairs, traffic signal relays, the sound of flapping of pennants or flags, a distant highway or railroad, all have value.

Touch

Ordinarily one might assume that when reference is made to touch, that it is made about fingers and hands. It should be noted that we possess sensitivity in our faces, ears, feet, and, in fact, our entire body. We are sensitive to heat, cold, rain, snow, and wind-all of which can be useful. One can determine by touch whether a sidewalk is rough or smooth, whether one is walking on grass or dirt, gravel or asphalt. Incidentally, these surfaces can also be identified by sound.

Since so much information is conveyed by the long cane, it ought to be considered as part of the sense of touch. Whether a fence is made of wood, metal, or masonry can be determined by touch.



The sun's heat can be used to orient oneself to direction. The relative position of the sun changes, of course, according to the time of day and the time of year; but it can be used very effectively. It is also possible to determine (by using the sun) when one is walking next to a building, a fence, or in the shade of a tree. Ordinarily the long cane cannot detect low- hanging branches; so many a blind traveler has bumped his head. Usually branches pose no major hazard. However, one ought to be prepared to avoid them whenever possible. Trees and bushes (which may also hang over sidewalks) may be a nuisance during a rain storm, but both may also serve as valuable landmarks.

Snow and Ice

Snow brings interesting challenges. It is a nuisance, not an insurmountable barrier. As long as the traveler is aware that snow muffles sound, and as long as the appropriate precautions are taken with respect to crossing streets and moving in a straight line, there should be no major problem. If the snow is deep, it may be more difficult to use the touch technique, in which case the traveler must be a bit creative, modify the cane technique, and take advantage of landmarks, such as fences, buildings, and bushes. The snow banks on either side of a shoveled walk may be considered landmarks, but one must understand that melting and shoveling may change the character of those snow banks. Travel in snow can be fun. It should not be regarded as dangerous. Few people, sighted or blind, relish walking on ice. While children may find it a source of fun, adults, especially seniors, must exercise caution; bones become brittle with age.

The rules of thumb for walking on ice apply equally for blind and sighted people: Relax, slow and shorten the stride, try to keep weight over the foot that is touching the ground, and place the feet flat. It must be pointed out that the long cane detects ice very well. It might be a good idea to avoid low spots; places that flood constantly are likely to ice over. It may also be wise to avoid driveways or alleys which if not kept clear of snow and ice, take on the character of polished glass as the result of auto traffic.

Landmarks

Almost anything can be used as a landmark. An exhaustive list of landmarks would be neither possible nor practical. However, here are a few examples: buildings, spaces between buildings, the width or depth of a building or store entrance, bushes, trees, sign or lamp posts, steps, curbs, benches, vending machines, bumps, dips, curves or cracks in a sidewalk, the smell of a gas station, bakery, candy or shoe factory, traffic sounds or music from a store loudspeaker, a parked car, or a slope of a driveway—all are landmarks. Use of landmarks is a matter of creativity and good sense because landmarks may change; removal of a fence or building, reconstruction or relocation of some other object, can be skill-testers, but no major problem.

The character and use of indoor landmarks are similar to outdoor, although the actual landmarks may differ slightly. Here are several examples: floor covering (carpet to tile), furniture, position of a door in a corridor, recesses in a wall, a window or set of windows, vending machines, phone booths, the sound of office machines, changes in acoustical properties (hall to room), smell of a kitchen, a large collection of books, or a laundry.

Effective use of landmarks makes a blind traveler more confident. Learning to use them is not difficult although it may take a little time and practice.

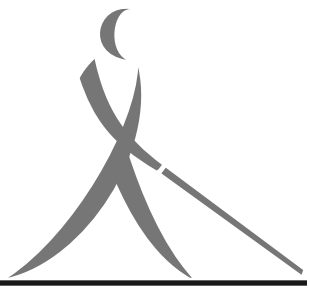
Public Transportation

Buses, trains, rapid transit systems, and airplanes are easily accessible and useful transportation alternatives. Blind people use them daily.

Rapid transit systems (subways and elevated trains) are, perhaps, the most efficient passenger carriers. The most important feature a blind person should look for in such a system or in a conventional railroad is the edge of the platform. Once located, the platform edge serves as a very useful guide. It is clear of containers, signs, and pillars which ordinarily occupy the center of a platform.

Locating the Platform Edge

Upon reaching the platform, the blind traveler should immediately locate the edge with the cane. After the edge has been found, it can be trailed with the cane to the boarding area.



Boarding the Train

All trains make noise that is useful in one way or another. As the train passes the platform, one can hear the separation between cars. When a train comes to a halt, it is possible to hear the doors open and close. In boarding a rapid transit train, one simple rule prevails over all else: Step only where the cane has touched, in this case the floor of the car.

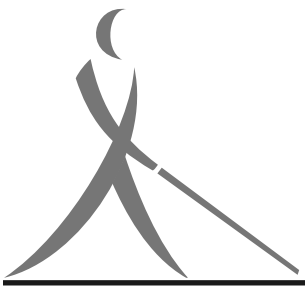
Buses

Buses also have distinctive, useful sounds. Their diesel engines and air brakes sound different from trucks. Engines are ordinarily at the rear of the bus, and one can hear the doors open and close.

Entering or leaving a bus is usually no more difficult than traversing a short flight of stairs. Blind people use buses as often and as easily as sighted people. Usually drivers are required to call stops, if requested to do so.

Priority Seating

There is no law or regulation that requires a blind person to sit in a specific seat on buses or trains. Transit systems are required to designate certain seats as "priority seating" for the elderly and the handicapped by the Urban Mass Transit Administration of the federal government. Failure to comply with this regulation would result in the withdrawal or withholding of federal funds; but blind people may sit where they choose.



Information Services

Most metropolitan transit systems provide information about schedules, bus and/or train routes, and travel directions. Consult directory assistance for the telephone number of such services.

Airlines

Several years ago it was the practice of airlines to pre-board blind passengers and to provide other "services" whether they were needed or not. Because of the efforts of the blind, themselves, it is now more common for airline personnel to ask what assistance, if any, is needed. If none is required, none is given. If assistance is needed, it is reasonable for airline personnel to expect that a traveler will ask for it and specify the assistance needed. There was a time when long canes were considered baggage by airlines. Flight attendants confiscated canes and stored them in closets during take-off and landing. Efforts of the blind themselves, primarily the National Federation of the Blind, changed that policy. Blind people now have the right to keep their canes at their seats, most valuable in case of emergency, or in case the traveler must use the restroom.

With the right to keep our canes naturally goes responsibility. Whether on an airplane or train, in a restaurant, movie theater, department store, at a

party or athletic event, we must handle our canes in such a manner that the safety and well being of our neighbor is not jeopardized.

Accepting Assistance

It has already been noted that airlines are generally giving assistance upon request rather than imposing it on blind passengers. Airlines are now better informed on how blind people expect to be treated. But what about the pedestrian who offers assistance in crossing the street or identifying bus or train number.

Much of the public believes, as the airlines did, that blind people need more assistance than is necessary. Sometimes a blind traveler will encounter a pedestrian who simply won't take "No" for answer. No blind person must endure rude or incon-siderate behavior on the part of the public. On the other hand, it is reasonable for a blind traveler to be courteous to a pedestrian who offers assistance. If a blind traveler is rude or inconsiderate, he does neither himself nor any other blind person a favor. A sighted person who is treated rudely may never offer assistance again. In dealing with the sighted public, it may be necessary to be firm, but not rude. It is good to be instructive and courteous.

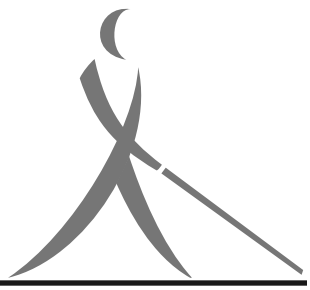
The question of whether or not to accept assistance depends, to some extent, upon circumstances. Each person must decide when it is appropriate. If excess noise (say from a construction site or elevated train) prevents one from hearing normal traffic sounds, it might be wise to accept or seek assistance. On the other hand, if there is no excess noise, it is hoped that a blind traveler would cross the street with ease and confidence.

Some blind travelers always seek assistance, whether it is needed or not, thinking it "easier" and/or "safer." Always taking the easier course is selling ourselves short, and it is not always safer. Believing that all blind people have the same travel ability is self-deception. We don't. However, independent travel with a long cane is neither awesome, fearsome, nor beyond possibility. Traveling with a long cane is little more complicated than walking and chewing gum at the same time.

So Why Travel?

There can be no question that travel needs vary according to age, health, employment status, family obligations, leisure time, and community involvement. Blind seniors may travel well within a nursing home, across country, or anything in between. Children's travel needs vary dramatically from the preschooler who may be confined to a back yard or play ground, to children who travel regularly to school and after-school activities. The interests of blind adults are as wide ranging as those of sighted adults.

Whether one travels for some specific purpose, or whether for the sheer pleasure of walking, it can be said that many blind people derive substantial pleasure from



being able to travel unassisted using only a long white cane. There is a sense of liberation.

When To Begin

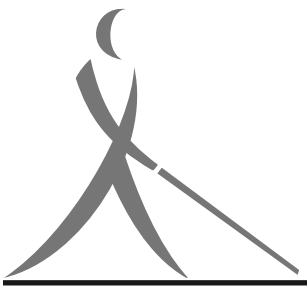
Although there is no "right time" to begin learning cane travel, it is a good idea for children to start learning as soon as possible. With proper encouragement and direction, a child will usually make his travel readiness known.

It is important that the child learn to respect the cane and understand that the cane is not a toy but a very useful tool—a symbol of independence. In terms of actual travel, the same limits imposed on any child with respect to distance from home, ought to apply to blind children. They are just children after all.

A senior must also understand that independent travel is not something to be feared. All of us must realize that travel is well within our reach. The only limits imposed are those of general health and those we impose on ourselves.

So What About Canes

The Catholic Guild for the Blind (The Guild), Suite 1720, 180 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60601; 312-236-8569, sells a variety of canes in lengths from children's sizes to sixty-five inches. Visitors are welcome to come to the Guild's offices and look at not only canes but a whole host of items on display in the show room.



What's The Best Cane?

This is largely a question of personal choice and/or need. If one does a lot of traveling, the flexible, fiberglass long cane may be advisable. If little travel is done, a folding or collapsible cane may be more appropriate. Generally, the flexible fiberglass cane is more durable and, in the long run, less expensive.

The First Step

Before venturing out into the community, it is important that some basic concepts be understood. First, blindness is not the tragic condition much of the public imagines it to be. It is first and foremost an identifiable characteristic, as is having red hair, freckles, or dark skin. Blindness is a loss of sight sufficient to require the use of alternative techniques. For example, if the aid of a reader or tape recorder, special lens system, or closed circuit t.v. is required for reading, the individual may be said to be blind. No matter how the cloth is cut, no matter how one gilds the lily, no matter what it is called, blindness is blindness.

The Most Formidable Barrier

The most formidable barrier with which blind people must cope is not the physical loss of sight. It is, rather, the myths, misconceptions, negative attitudes, and stereotypes about blindness.

Since blind people represent a cross section of society, often the attitudes of the larger group become the attitudes of the blind. Unfortunately, all too often blind people do much to perpetuate those attitudes.

Attitudes toward blindness begin in childhood. They are shaped and given force by history and tradition, by the influence of parents, institutions (especially agencies for the blind), and by organizations of the blind.

The familiar misconceptions are these: Blindness is something of which one should be ashamed, something to be hidden and feared. Blind people are different, either totally helpless and dependent, or superhuman, possessing extraordinary gifts and powers, such as the ability to foretell the future. Blind people are wonderful musicians, have a special talent to do work with their hands (such as weaving rugs and making brooms), and they have especially sensitive hearing and wonderful senses of humor.

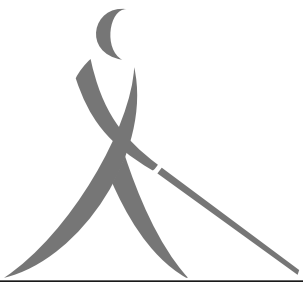
The truth is: Some blind people are gifted musicians, most are not; some blind people have especially good hearing, most do not. Some blind people are beggars, most are not. Some blind people have good senses of humor, some do not. Blind people are, after all, a cross section of society—physically, intellectually, politically, economically, and in every other way.

Attitudes shape and give substance to expectations. Blind people are, too often, not expected to do even the simplest things. When a blind person does the routine things of life as a matter of course, it is perceived as extraordinary. It is common for blind people to engage in home repair, auto maintenance, child care, cooking, work in a competitive job setting, etc. But it is also common for the public to mistakenly believe it is extraordinary for a blind person to: comb hair, polish shoes, open a door, cut food, dial a phone, or type a letter.

Parents have a natural inclination to protect their children from harm. Unfortunately, when the children are blind, the inclination is intensified, and the consequences of this behavior may be that the children are deprived of life experiences, leaving them ill-prepared for self-direction as adults.

Newly blind adults have similar experiences with overprotective families and friends. In addition, they may have to cope with years of reinforced negative attitudes and low expectations.

No matter the age, blind women must cope with additional constraints related to their gender. Fear, stereotypes about age, “woman’s place,” and self-imposed limitations find too many blind women either being denied or denying themselves access to full participation in life. Some blind women believe that the only way for them to travel is by using a dog guide. Dog guides are perfectly legitimate tools. However, it must be noted that dogs become ill and they die. A blind traveler ought not to be totally dependent on a dog guide. Mastery of cane skills and of one’s fears and



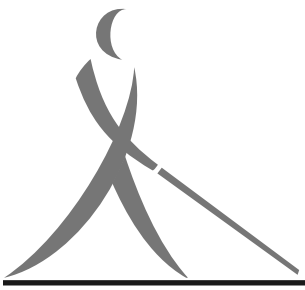
misconceptions about blindness are essential.

Blind people are better off today than fifty years ago, or five years ago. The public mind is changing, and the blind, particularly the organized blind, are taking a positive leadership role in the process of change. It is a role that must continue.

It is vital that we understand attitudes about blindness; understand and cope with them openly, firmly, with no bitterness or anger. We must convey to the public that blind people can (provided we have proper training and opportunity) compete on a basis of equality with our sighted neighbors in the full current of life.

The goal of this text is independent travel. How is that perceived by the public? It is viewed with disbelief, awe, admiration, as being common place– depending upon the enlightenment of the watcher. Some, unfortunately, are frightened by the prospect of a blind person traveling independently. It becomes our responsibility to change the public's attitudes about blindness and about blind people participating in our society.

This text was written by a blind person, who has traveled with a long cane for many years. Many lessons were learned about blindness and what it means. One of the most important was this: Concealment, denial, and rejection of blindness harm rather than help the blind person. It is respectable to be blind.



Time To Move Out

As one contemplates travel with a long white cane, and as one contemplates the first lesson with an instructor, who may be blind, it would be useful to keep these things in mind. Human beings tend to be creatures of habit. This tends to influence how communities are laid out. For the most part, they are laid out in simple grid pattern, like a checker board, straight lines. There are some exceptions, angled streets, but these can be learned without a great deal of difficulty.

The Guild for the Blind publishes in Braille and large print a very useful street guide. It also publishes a transit guide for the Chicago Metropolitan area. If you have questions on these publications, contact the Guild at 312236-8569 or Room 1720, 180 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 6060l.

This may be the first step in preparation for taking advantage of the new opportunities open to us, and by us. It is hoped that this material is thoroughly studied, understood, and believed, for these are the ingredients essential for achieving equal participation in society. So What About Independent Travel?

Author's Remarks

"I am blind, and it is likely that I will remain blind for the rest of my life. It seems to me that blind people have at least two life options: One, to sit and wait for a cure or for someone to take care of them, push and pull them around like a doll, with little or nothing to do with directing their own lives, thus perpetu-

ating all the stereotypes; two, they can be active, contributing human beings, loving life, participating in it to the fullest extent. As far as I am concerned, the latter option is the only one that makes sense. Not only does it offer the opportunity to be a wholly vital people, it also offers the opportunity to participate in changing the public's mind about blindness. I believe that is an obligation each of us must fulfill so blind people who follow will have richer, fuller lives.

"At this writing I am forty-two years old. I cannot do many of the things I did as a youth. I cannot, for example, run the forty-yard dash in 4.6 seconds as I did when I was twenty, but it has nothing to do with blindness, for I was blind then as I am now. We cannot measure ourselves against what we once were, or might have been, we can only measure ourselves against what we are and what we have the courage to become. Blindness is certainly an inconvenience; it is by no means an insurmountable barrier.

"As I complete work on this text and take my cane in hand and travel, independently, where I want to go, when I want to go, only infirmity and the limits of my imagination will stop me.

"As I engage in my daily pursuits, I hope to meet many of you. I hope you will leave your easy chairs, pick up your long white canes and walk with me, as we change the public mind about blindness. "