

After the healing (John 9:1-41)

by [Frederick A. Niedner](#) in the [February 26, 2008](#) issue

In Richard Powers's novel *The Echo Maker*, a young man suffers a brain injury in an auto accident and is afflicted with Capgras syndrome. When he wakes from a coma, he can see and even recognize family members and friends, but he takes them for impostors. As the delusional fellow tries to learn why he's surrounded by phony doubles of everyone once familiar to him, and while his sister and a therapist try to help him see reality, readers find themselves sliding into the baffling blindness that affects everyone in the story and keeps them from ever seeing or knowing the truth of their own lives, much less anyone else's.

John's Gospel diagnoses just this sort of syndrome in its cast of characters, and in its audience. Understandably, layers of confusion afflict the man to whom Jesus gives sight. His neighbors, however, suffer an even worse disorientation. They no longer recognize the man when he is able to see on his return from washing in the pool of Siloam. "It looks like him," they say. "But no, it must be someone else."

Why the confusion? For one thing, such occurrences simply don't happen. For another, they shouldn't happen, especially on the Sabbath. Given the line of questioning that opens the story, a shameful but universal lie lingers in the air throughout its several scenes. Most of us assume that we deserve the ability to see, and somehow this blind man, and everyone else like him, must have forfeited sight through some error in judgment. We'll surely see to it that we never make *that* mistake!

Along with the delusion that we can keep our lives and control our destinies through rectitude, we live in the steadfast but patently absurd conviction that we deserve all the gifts that have come to us, including sight, hearing, taste—even life itself and the love of all who care that any one of us has waked and walked upon the planet. The Pharisees in the story, like the Pharisee in each of us, prove stubbornly blind to the reckless dispensing of mercy that takes place. It has come on the wrong day, to an unworthy recipient, from a maverick agent whom the Pharisees can't see for dust.

Even the newly sighted man's parents put distance between themselves and him. They've acted and spoken on his behalf many times, but now that he can see what he shouldn't see, they may look bad to the neighbors.

At a deeper level, John is offering us an allegory concerning life and death among the baptized. It not so subtly describes how and why the baptized got tossed from their synagogues in those early decades, and who would serve as a new community for them once they'd been cut loose from family and friends. In addition, John 9 tells the universal story of perfectly good eyes that can't see the truth. Baptized readers of every age find themselves in the man born blind, buried and reshaped in the mud of the new creation, washed in the water of the sent One. Now we see as never before, but we scarcely recognize ourselves, much less those around us or even the One who healed us.

We knew the old ways in the world of darkness. We cowered. We begged. We had an excuse for everything we couldn't or wouldn't do. Now, however, we find ourselves blinded by the light. Like addicts ripped from bondage in the world of secrets and shadows, we move slowly, one day or even one moment at a time, which is exactly how baptism works. Daily we die and rise from the mud, washed and dispatched by the sent One into another day of confusing scenes and bad theology run amok. Every day's challenges prove quite capable of killing us. That's all right. As it turns out, starting over is what we do best.

We do none of this alone. The one whom the Father sent doesn't abandon us in our confusion. Jesus seeks out the freshly ostracized fellow whose new eyes have caused so much trouble. Jesus speaks with him and teaches him. For a moment he even stays with the man.

Then he's off to his own washing, the one in Bethany that will mark him for death. His closest friends will swear they never knew him, and in a muddy, earthen tomb he will join all who have ever slipped into the endless darkness. There he will lie, together with that nameless friend from the neighborhood near the pool of Siloam, the one who's known several ways of seeing and every sort of blindness imaginable.

The baptismal story doesn't end there, of course. The Father will raise up these two mud creatures, and all the pairs like them. Once more, they will look into each other's eyes. This time also, only the One will fully recognize the other, who in turn will be stunned in the new light and think that he sees the gardener. Even then, in

whatever scene comes after our return to the mud and the tomb, God's steadfast faithfulness holds us close. No matter what or whom we think we see, the other looks into our startled eyes and says, "Ah, it's you. Come with me.

"On second thought, go. Tell the others."