

Light without sight

Seeing has fooled me into thinking I have a clear view of where the road leads.

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [April 2, 2014](#) issue



I do not know what darkness means to someone who is blind, but I am beginning to understand that *light* has as many meanings as *dark*. There is an old prayer in the *Book of Common Prayer* that goes like this:

Look down, O Lord, from your heavenly throne, and illumine this night with your celestial brightness; that by night as by day your people may glorify your holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*.

Among other things, this prayer recognizes a kind of light that transcends both wave and particle. It can illumine the night without turning on the lights, becoming apparent to those who have learned to rely on senses other than sight to show them what is real. This is the light the mystics see when they meditate in the night hours, picking up their pens in the morning to write down their revelations. It is the light Moses saw in the darkness on Mount Sinai, where the glory of God came wrapped in dazzling darkness. Dionysius the Areopagite called it “the unapproachable light in which God dwells.”

My guess is that this idea is as incomprehensible to those who have not experienced it as it is indisputable to those who have. No one has described it better for me than Jacques Lusseyran, a blind French resistance fighter who wrote about his experience

in a memoir called *And There Was Light*. Lusseyran was not born blind, though his parents noticed that he was having trouble reading and fitted him with glasses while he was still quite young. Beyond that, he was an ordinary boy who did all the things that other boys do, including getting into fights at school. During one such scuffle he fell hard against the corner of his teacher's desk, driving one arm of his glasses deep into his right eye while another part of the frame tore the retina in his left. When he woke up in the hospital he could no longer see. His right eye was gone and the left was beyond repair. At the age of seven he was completely and permanently blind.

As he wrote in a second volume, he learned from the reactions of those around him what a total disaster this was. In those days blind people were swept to the margins of society, where those who could not learn how to cane chairs or play an instrument for religious services often became beggars. Lusseyran's doctors suggested sending him to a residential school for the blind in Paris but his parents refused, wanting their son to stay in the local public school where he could learn to function in the seeing world. His mother learned Braille with him. He learned to use a Braille typewriter. The principal of his school ordered a special desk for him that was large enough to hold his extra equipment. But the best thing his parents did for him was never to pity him. They never described him as "unfortunate." They were not among those who spoke of the "night" into which his blindness had pushed him. Soon after his accident his father, who deeply understood the spiritual life, said, "Always tell us when you discover something."

In this way Lusseyran learned that he was not a poor blind boy but the discoverer of a new world in which the light outside of him moved inside to show him things he might never have found any other way. Barely ten days after his accident he made a discovery that entranced him for the rest of his life. "The only way I can describe that experience is in clear and direct words," he wrote. "I had completely lost the sight of my eyes; I could not see the light of the world anymore. Yet the light was still there."

Its source was not obliterated. I felt it gushing forth every moment and brimming over; I felt how it wanted to spread out over the world. I had only to receive it. It was unavoidably there. It was all there, and I found again its movements and shades, that is, its colors, which I had loved so passionately a few weeks before.

This was something entirely new, you understand, all the more so since it contradicted everything that those who have eyes believe. The source of light is

not in the outer world. We believe that it is only because of a common delusion. The light dwells where life also dwells: within ourselves. (*Against the Pollution of the I*)

At first I thought he was speaking metaphorically—or perhaps theologically—but as I continued to read, it became clear that he was also speaking literally of an experience of light that had nothing to do with his eyes. With practice, he learned to attend so carefully to the world around him that he confounded his friends by describing things he could not see. He could tell trees apart by the sounds of their shadows. He could tell how tall or wide a wall was by the pressure it exerted on his body.

“The oak, the poplar, the nut tree have their own specific levels of sound,” he wrote by way of explanation. “The tone of a plane tree is entered like a room. It indicates a certain order in space, zones of tension, and zones of free passage. The same is true of a wall or a whole landscape.” If Lusseyran had not already established himself as a trustworthy guide, that might have sounded crazy to me. But since he had won my confidence I was persuaded that I was the one who was handicapped, not he.

Why had I never paid attention to the sounds of trees before? Surely the leaves of an oak made a different sound in the wind than the needles of a pine, the same way they made a different sound underfoot. I just never bothered to listen, since I could tell the trees apart by looking. When a sighted friend told me she had been to a workshop where she learned how to listen to trees, I was taken aback.

“What do they say?” I asked incredulously.

“You don’t want to know,” she replied ruefully. Acid rain, pine beetles, clear-cutting developers—what did I *think* trees talked about?

The problem with seeing the regular way, Lusseyran wrote, is that sight naturally prefers outer appearances. It attends to the surface of things, which makes it an essentially superficial sense. We let our eyes skid over trees, furniture, traffic, faces, too often mistaking sight for perception—which is easy to do when our eyes work so well to help us orient ourselves in space.

Speed is another problem. Our eyes glide so quickly over things that we do not properly attend to them. Fingers do not glide, Lusseyran points out. To feel a table is a much more intimate activity than seeing it. Run your hands across the top and you

can find the slight dip in the middle of the center panel that you might otherwise have missed, proof that this table was planed by hand. After that your fingers work in inches instead of feet, counting the panels by finding the cracks that separate them, locating a burn—sickle-shaped, like the bottom edge of a hot skillet—and a large burl as well. You can smell the candle wax before you find it, noting the dents here and there left by diners who brought their silverware down too hard.

By the time you reach the legs, you know things about this table that someone who merely glances at it will never know. You know that a patch on one of the legs came unglued and fell off sometime during the last century and that someone raised the overall height of the table by adding globes below each foot. Until very recently I would have said that the one thing you cannot tell without looking is what kind of wood the table is made of, but that was before I visited the violin maker who taught me about the sounds of different woods. He used only spruce for the front, he said, and maple for the back. Then he picked up a rough cut of each and rapped them with his knuckles so that I could hear the difference. If the violin maker were blind, I think he could have figured out that the table was made of walnut, heavy and dense from years of slow growth.

If this does not sound particularly spiritual to you, that may have more to do with you than with the table. Every major spiritual tradition in the world has something significant to say about the importance of paying attention. “Look at the birds of the air,” Jesus said. “Consider the lilies of the field.” If you do not have the time to pay attention to an ordinary table, then how will you ever find the time to pay attention to the Spirit?

“Since becoming blind, I have paid more attention to a thousand things,” Lusseyran wrote. One of his greatest discoveries was how the light he saw changed with his inner condition. When he was sad or afraid the light decreased at once. Sometimes it went out altogether, leaving him deeply and truly blind. When he was joyful and attentive it returned as strong as ever. He learned very quickly that the best way to see the inner light and remain in its presence was to love.

In January of 1944 the Nazis captured Lusseyran and shipped him to Buchenwald along with 2,000 of his countrymen. There he learned how hate worked against him, not only darkening his world but making it smaller as well. When he let himself become consumed with anger he started running into things, slamming into walls and tripping over furniture. When he called himself back to attention, however, the

space both inside and outside of him opened up so that he found his way and moved with ease again. The most valuable thing he learned was that no one could turn out the light inside him without his consent. Even when he lost track of it for a while he knew where he could find it again.

If we could learn to be attentive every moment of our lives, he said, we would discover the world anew. We would discover that the world is completely different from what we had believed it to be. Because blindness taught him that, he listened with disbelief as the most earnest people he knew spoke about the terrible “night” into which his blindness had pushed him. “The seeing do not believe in the blind,” he concluded, which may help explain why there are so many stories in the Bible about blind people begging to be healed. Whoever wrote those stories could see.

In seminary I was taught to interpret those stories as teachings about spiritual blindness, but no matter how you read them it is clear that Jesus heals only a very small percentage of those who ask for his help. There is also that strange thing he says at the end of a long healing story in John’s Gospel. “I came into this world for judgment,” he says after healing a man who has been blind from birth, “so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind” (John 9:39).

Before reading *Lusseyran* I always heard that as a threatening judgment. Now it sounds more promising to me. At the very least it makes me wonder how seeing has made me blind—by giving me cheap confidence that one quick glance at things can tell me what they are, by distracting me from learning how the light inside me works, by fooling me into thinking that I have a clear view of how things really are, of where the road leads, of who can see rightly and who cannot. I am not asking to become blind, but I have become a believer. There is a light that shines in the darkness, which is only visible there.

Even the Man in the Moon is blind tonight. I always wondered why it took three days for significant things to happen in the Bible—Jonah spent three days in the belly of the whale, Jesus spent three days in the tomb, Paul spent three days blind in Damascus—and now I know. From earliest times people learned that that was how long they had to wait in the dark before the sliver of the new moon appeared in the sky. For three days every month they practiced resurrection.

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.” Maybe. Maybe that is how grace works, but tonight it seems equally possible that the grace I need will come to me in the dark, where I too may learn to see the celestial brightness that has nothing to do with sight.

*This excerpt is from Barbara Brown Taylor's new book, Learning to Walk in the Dark.
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