

## Learning to See

Moses wandered the man-made desert of concrete, steel, and vice. I never asked about his exodus into the homeless parks of my city. If his tattered clothes kept him warm, it was only because the holes in the layers of clothing did not line up. He carried a white, collapsible cane that allowed him to "see" the world by its tapping. His disheveled white hair faded to black at the tips, like the core samples scientists pull from the arctic glaciers. Though I never learned the story they told, I felt the last time I saw him that I understood it.

Six days past my eighteenth birthday and two months past my graduation, I strove to show my independence by any means necessary. \$250 per month for a furnished apartment sounded better in the classified ads than it looked in real life. Apparently "furnished" has several meanings. Then again, I chose to pay more for that apartment. I could have saved \$50 a month if I didn't mind a window that opened only into the smoking area—better known as the stairwell. The view from my window wasn't much better, smog and constant traffic.

I named the old man from a distance, afraid to come near at first. I feared the homeless; as a child, I only saw them when we came shopping in the city. I blamed my parents, who always rushed to safety when asked for change. Truthfully, I feared the unknown, the unseen. Moses feared nothing unseen. I named the blind man Moses after that first encounter, but the last time I saw him, I finally saw how apt my image of him was.

Traffic moved on the weekend, and I tried to let some of the admittedly stale air inside mix with the less than usually noisome air outside. I heard Moses before I ever saw him. The deep, haunting baritone filled my room, and for a moment, I looked skyward as if God himself sang the lyrics.

"Come and gooo with me. To the *Promised Land*. I said come and gooo with me. To the Promised Land." And the white cane he carried tapped the cement in time; intentionally or not, it became the beat of a metronome. "Come and go with me," *tap, tap*, "To the promised land." *Tap, tap*, "There is peace o'er yonder," *tap, tap*, "In the *Promised Land*."

The only light came from the stoplight, and every shadow threatened to heave an inattentive eye to the ground over cracked sidewalks. It made no difference to Moses, of course. He needed only his cane to walk these streets in driving rain, blinding sun, or total darkness. "He knows these streets like the back of his hand," I thought, as I cringed at my own insensitivity. Insensitive or not, it was an apt statement. Of the two of us, the blind man saw the pavement as it was.

Staff in hand, he walked by every day and back every night. I finally decided that he must go daily to the Gospel Mission, but he must not sleep there. I never saw him beg. I never saw him hold a sign to us mere men explaining his poverty, but then how would he write it?

Moses' songs had a way of haunting me. I would fall asleep with them and wake to their memory. His sonorous tone seemed like an invitation to something. They called up memories of Sunday school, Zion, and the Promised Land.

The metaphor of his name kept unfolding in my mind. He wandered the streets with no home. Could he have lived on this pavement for forty years? Nothing grew here except in oases centered on city sprinklers. These desolate streets formed an uninviting wilderness like the real Moses. My Moses wandered like the real Moses, dreaming of a promised land. Or at least singing about one. I could not help wondering what his Heaven must look like.

How insane to walk these streets blind! More than once, I had thrown my body to unyielding pavement to save it from an unstoppable piece of steel. In the side streets, people

forgot where the stop signs stood. In the main streets, people didn't care. Somehow, Moses' blind faith protected him.

The time came for me to make my third rent payment. Most landlords don't take cash. Then again, most landlords rent rooms with individual bathrooms.

As I exited the front entrance (between a bathroom fixture store and the Chinese restaurant), I heard the rhythmic tapping to my left. There was Moses: Blind, crooning, and coming straight towards me. I learned that a wise man fears only what he can see, but I did not freeze and hold my breath in wisdom. Twenty years later, I see how rude it was to stand silently in a blind man's path. I feared he would ask me for drugs, though to this day I can't explain why that made sense.

Moses' white cane tapped first my left foot, and then my right. Without missing a beat, he took a step to his left and avoided me. My mouth would have dropped open if I had been breathing normally. I looked him directly in the eyes then. His clouded eyes followed me without moving like an old painting.

"I don't know why you're holding your breath, son," he said with a smile. "Only God's grace kept me from running you down."

As I looked at the disabled man, I almost said *Strange way for God to show grace, Moses*. Luckily, I kept my ignorance to myself that day. Instead, I smiled, nodded, and then felt silly. He couldn't see me, but he somehow nodded. A chill went down my spine just then, and I was afraid to ask the question. Moses resumed his song, *tap, tap, tap, tap* "Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho..." and left me realizing for the first time in my life how much I did not know.

I soon got used to seeing Moses every morning. We exchanged greetings. In truth, he met my generic platitudes with meaningful statements such as, "Blessed morning," or "Glory to God for a beautiful day," or "Faith, brother." The day he said the last, I answered with a rather rude (and reactionary to my Biblical and then unwelcome upbringing), "Yuhuh."

Moses stopped suddenly and turned to me. "What is it, son?" Moses asked. I normally objected to being called "son," but Moses looked old enough to call me grandson. "You don't believe we are brothers or you don't believe in faith?"

"Both, I guess," I answered. I was not equally certain of both.

Moses nodded. "Faith is must be hard for you, stricken with your affliction." He tapped his finger below his useless eye. "I know the secret to faith."

"Being blind makes you a better Christian?" I said dubiously and impertinently.

"Being blind forces me to have one kind of faith," Moses said. "That leads me to look for higher faith too. You'll understand one day."

I watched him walk off, listening to the sounds of his latest gospel chorus ("Go tell it on the mountain," *tap, tap, tap*). I wondered what he meant as I headed to my bus stop. I walked this way every day. Surely, if a blind man could walk it sight unseen so could I.

I closed my eyes and walked. Amazingly, I found that some part of me really did know the texture of the pavement. I stopped, opened my eyes, and found I was only ten feet from the bus stop. I grinned stupidly, pleased with myself, until I noticed a fellow passenger watching me with one eyebrow raised. Embarrassed, I pretended that I did not see him.

My neighborhood was poor, and like all poor neighborhoods, the younger residents felt it their duty to cause more problems. Gang violence was new to me. I knew only to never wear a

red shirt outside of my apartment. Down town, a blue shirt was equally dangerous, and I stuck to black or green.

I'd had a few close calls with younger and larger teenagers. Once, they demanded money from me. I did not have any or I would not have lived there. Another time my hat was stolen. A third, I was pushed once by a kid that could not have been older than fourteen while a group that could not have had one member over sixteen laughed. In all these encounters, I embraced self-preservation and felt cowardice the safest reaction.

The day when Moses truly earned his name, I came off the bus half a block away from a group of underage smokers. I was hesitant to walk by them, and pretended to read the bus schedule at length. An objective observer would note that it made no sense to check times for a bus I had just stepped off. Again, cowardice was safest.

I was frightened to move one step closer to my apartment until the younger group finished their cigarettes, until I heard the tapping and singing of Moses' baritone, "So I'll chehhh-rish the old *rugged* Cross..." My unconscious felt this the appropriate time to wonder aloud if he always sang as he walked or only when near me, but I reminded myself of the more pressing issue. Moses would walk right by those red shirted hooligans—self-proclaimed "bloods." A blind, homeless, old man singing gospel songs was an easy, tempting target.

The leader (apparently) motioned for them to be quiet, though they barely stifled laughs. They turned to follow, mimicking him in a harmless but infuriating procession. Forgetting my fear, I followed at a safe distance. I have no idea what my plan was—they would surely kill me just as happily as follow Moses—but I would not be asked to have one. Moses would protect himself; or perhaps, as he would likely have said, faith protected him. The boys tired of the

mimicry, which was likely less fun when their subject was unoffended. I could tell from their body language they meant to advance to violence to satisfy themselves.

Just like every day, Moses walked along the main road that came in front of my apartment and fed into the freeway. Technically, the speed limit did not change to 60 for half a mile, but that did not stop impatient motorists. The short stoplights contributed to this as drivers rushed to make them like lemmings jumping to their doom. The car accidents outside my window were the cheapest entertainment I had.

The gang bangers rushed towards the blind man silently and I could barely hear the traffic, rushing like an unstoppable river, over my pounding heart. Just as I thought I *must* do something, Moses turned towards the deadly current of cars. He stepped forward and raised his white cane.

Before him, the cars stopped, parting miraculously like the Red Sea. Holding one hand up to signal the stop and his staff aloft in the other, the bearded man walked with confidence and literal blind faith. His pursuers, rushing like chariots, paused at the water's edge.

After a moment's hesitation, the Pharaoh of the pack called, "After him!" and they rushed into the gap. Moses had reached the other side of the road by this time, and he dropped his arms. In a scene from my Sunday school stories, the water of steel, gasoline, and smog resumed its flow. The boys were inundated by the rushing traffic. Two dodged, but a car struck the third, catching him against the windshield and carrying him onward for a space. The other cars did not stop immediately, and the fluid motion gave an impression of his being swept away to drown.

A police officer asked me soon after whether I had seen what happened. I don't remember what I actually said. I vaguely remembering an assertion that I was not on any mind-altering chemical. The officer stopped taking notes and never bothered to get a follow-up statement.

I never saw Moses again. To this day, I cannot shake the sound of his voice the first time I heard him. I cannot help but wonder if he made it to that Promised Land he sang of. He must have wandered the city for decades before I was born. Perhaps he spent 40 years in this concrete wilderness. Then, with faith in self and providence, he stepped into the deadly sea of traffic and out of my life. I could only close my eyes and imagine the world and heaven of my Moses.