

Chapter One

BLIND BY THE WAY

A Modest Proposal

The late Sebastian Moore, OSB, identified a subtle spiritual feint we humans use to domesticate God. It transforms religion into an effort to win God's favor and buttress our fragile self-esteem. We clutch at the illusion of perfecting ourselves to gain approval by the divine judge. We skew the Good News toward proving our worth: "at last the transcendent God has looked down and said, 'OK, you made it, I'm satisfied.'" This is the very picture of living on the outside.

And it is exactly the reverse...It is the invasion of
[humankind] by [Christ] with God at the center as love.
But this total and final reversal takes place in the context

of the people we are, still conscious animals scared of our animality and seeking to ennoble ourselves.²

St. Francis kissed the leper to discover Christ. Like Francis, we could become aware of our “inner leper” and find a new willingness to meet Christ *in the midst of* our precious wounds. And to endure the pain of how we have wounded others as we become willing to make amends.

Adult spiritual practice quickens as we see we are blind to our self-will and charade. Mesmerized by distractions, habitual inattention, or unrelenting perfectionism, we avoid looking inward and do not realize how shame obscures the nature of our character defects, wrongdoings, sins, and unskillful behaviors *as well as* our true strengths and goodness.³

Bartimaeus the blind beggar will guide us. I have come to see him as *the* model of discipleship in the Gospel of Mark. He was poor. He couldn't see. He knew his situation. And, so, he begged to “look up” to see the *Way to Life*.

Onward and inward.

Our Foundational Image: Divine Comedy

I urge you to take this first image to heart. Post it on the lintels of your heart. In his masterpiece for the ages, the *Divine Comedy*, Dante Alighieri (d. 1321) journeys with the great poet Virgil among the broken and damned. Virgil guides him through the fires of purification to the sweetness of the beatific vision—a quest that begins *only* when Dante awakens to the realization that he had strayed and was lost:

2 Sebastian Moore, *The Crucified Jesus Is No Stranger* (Minneapolis, MN: The Seabury Press, 1977), pp. 48-49.

3 So many books deal with discovering our gifts; do seek one. I deal with discovering Christ in our woundedness.

*Middlemost through this life's journey, I wandered
from the straight path and awoke to find myself
lost and forsaken in a forest somber. How shall I tell*

*its true terror! I never saw so grim,
so noxious, so unyielding a wilderness!
Its harsh memory denotes fear itself.*

*Death—scarce more bitter a pill than that realm!
Amazing! good emerged from therein, I will tell
all God's grace did teach me there.*

*I remember not how I found my way,
restless, anxious, and discontent I had become
when I realized I had lost the One Path.⁴*

Dante had drifted and found himself at the gates of his personal hell. Virgil guides him into the depths of *inferno*, through *purgatorio*, and eventually to heaven's brink. He shows Dante the burdens of the hell-bound. He reveals to him the frozen defiance of Satan. He shows him the healing power of purification, the thawing of rebellion. He testifies how the melting of bitterness will free Dante to enter Glory. When Virgil delivers him to the gates of heaven, Dante's beloved Beatrice welcomes him.

Dante discovers how *everything* in his life has not only prepared him to enter the Presence, but how *everything*, purified and transformed, is, in fact, a beautiful gift to share. The insights of this great masterwork confirm what Dante had learned from St. Augustine—knowledge of God is intimately related to knowledge of self.

4 Dante Alighieri, "The Inferno: Canto I, verses 1-12" in *Divine Comedy*, my paraphrase.

We have all strayed. We may have even stood before the gates of hell and become appalled at our icy defiance. This is our starting point. Therefore, I urge you to hold onto Dante's journey as *the lens* through which to read this book. He embraced the journey of purification and walked toward the Light.

We'll do this together. It is folly to enter the gloomy valley without a wise guide and an ever-deepening experience of the mercy of God.

The following images bring to light aspects of blindness to which, I believe, you and I are, well... blind. The Light already surrounds us! My hope is that our exploration inward will prompt the journey upward.

First Image: The Dang Log

If you're anything like me, you resist the idea that you have trouble seeing clearly. And when Jesus challenges me, I don't always like it:

*"Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye,
but do not notice the log in your own eye?
Or how can you say to your neighbor,
'Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,'
when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye?"*

•² LUKE 6:41-42; ALSO MATTHEW 7:3

Over the years, friends, fellow travelers, spiritual writers, and therapists have shined a light upon the many logs in my eye: burdened by shame, blind to my gifts and talents, discounting what drives me to act out, overlooking self-absorbed willful ways, disregarding how I earn and maintain my fragile self-esteem, rationalizing whatever impact I have on others—these are among them. I have minimized my real situation by living on the outside unwilling to look inside.

On so many levels I get it. So why do I habitually ignore Jesus' teaching? Because I live outside myself much of the time. I don't see. I operate as if what I see is objectively accurate and undeniably true, thank you very much. For example, I still blame a lot of folks for my wounds. I resent the harm they did to me. It's much easier to look at them than at myself.

Paradox: I am blind, yet act as if I see everything clearly. You?

I live every day blind to the redwood tree firmly planted in my eyes *because I don't notice it; I easily forget Jesus' words*. Spiritual Alzheimer's? Instead, I act like I can see the splinters in your eyes. (You should do something about them. Really. Let me help.) Thus, denial keeps me blind to myself. Nor do I see you for who you really are. I habitually overlook my part in things that have caused me pain.

Whom do I in fact see when I look at you? Yep. Me. And there's more. I beat you with that same log I use to club myself. You recognize it better. Ouch.

What follows is basically a report on the log in my eye, as best I can see it. It's right here in my eye as I sit beside Bartimaeus. (NB: When I say "I," I mean me. When I say "We," I'm generalizing from my experience.)

Second Image: The Dang Elephant

When my dad was in his final years, he developed macular degeneration. No more driving. He relied on my six sisters for day-to-day help. Once I visited him and he remarked on the differences between the six of them. "Ya know, I'll say something to one of them and get back five other versions. What was that story about different interpretations? Is it the one about the guys with macular degeneration who came upon an elephant? Was it this story? These six blind guys examined an elephant. Each stood around the great beast near the trunk, an ear, a leg, the tail, a tusk, or its

belly. Each one tried to convince the other five that *his* reckoning absolutely defined the creature. But we know each dealt with only a portion of the mammal and mistook his segment for the whole.” Yeah,” my dad said, “it’s like that.”

Reality is what it is. How we interpret it is another thing altogether.

Why don’t we get this?

Now, for the record, I am not a relativist. I’m simply applying Plato’s paradox of the “One and the Many.” Truth is absolute. It is one. Interpretations particularize the one truth. They are legion. For example, the United States is blessed with its constitution and amendments. Why so many opposing opinions? The Roman Catholic Church was influenced by Vatican II. How ought we account for so many incompatible interpretations—other than “everyone else is wrong”? Christians have one Bible. Why so many different understandings?

Blindness? Forgetfulness? Spiritual Alzheimer’s? Me too.

Third Image: That Dang Inkblot

Let’s add another principle: we interpret from out of our own personal vantage point and consider other possible ways of understanding reality second or third. Reality is *the* great inkblot test, eliciting profoundly personal and varied responses from each of us. We don’t recognize how we interpret every person, every event from our inside out.

Though commonsense tells us otherwise, we don’t reckon with the grids through which we judge *the meaning of* reality. And these exist within. Like the log in the eye, it is as highly personal as it is invisible. It “resides” in our minds and influences our attitudes and actions. The process of perceiving, understanding, and evaluating whatever is before us resembles interpreting an inkblot. And our starting point is “me.”

Here is another wrinkle: the grid through which we engage reality is not only personal but also corporate. That is, the ideologically compatible group to which we each pledge allegiance shapes the framework through which we engage and interpret everything. Whether it's family, teachers, church, political party, or peers, we huddle with those who think like we do. We find security in sticking with like-minded folks. Our group grounds us. It insulates us. It endorses our right to scapegoat others who don't think like us.

Perhaps one day we may feel cramped by whichever confining vision we subscribe to. We may begin to wonder about the lens through which we interpret everything and evaluate reality. Realizing our blindness could position us to beg Christ to see.

Fourth Image: The Drama Zone

Outwardly focused, we miss how the log in our eye, our part of the elephant, and our highly patterned, chronic responses to reality point to unseen, inner processes that shape our dealings with what we call "the world." These all have become our habitual ways of organizing the chaos of reality.

Voilà! A fourth proposition: We followers of Jesus are actors on stages of our own making on which we play out inner dramas 24/7/365 based on time-worn scripts.

Happy scripts celebrate persons or events that gratify us. Angry scripts tether us to those we perpetually blame for our unhappiness. Fear-based scripts lead to fight, flee, or freeze. People or events provoke us. However, our recurrent-yet-unidentified scripts keep us outwardly focused on them *to avoid noticing and accounting for* whichever personal anxieties and resentments drive us. Here are several examples of "scripts" I deal with personally.

- “I act tough, angry, or cool to conceal my vulnerability.”
- “I overwork to prove my worth, my value.”
- “I buy things or overeat to feel full.”
- “I maneuver others to alleviate my loneliness.”
- “I bristle at others and blame them to avoid seeming weak.”
- “I’m the best. God approves of me.”
- “I’m ashamed. I bargain with God: ‘At least I’m better than.../not as bad as I used to be.’”
- “I’m completely worthless. God rejects me.”

Our scripts keep us focused outward. Self-esteem threatened? Blame someone. Self-will opposed? Batter them to comply. Vulnerability exposed? Inflate in anger to avoid feeling small. Insecurity, loneliness, a sense of inadequacy, fear of abandonment, or unworthiness provides raw material for our inner script-writers. Inner vulnerability, emptiness, fear of failing, and more all urge us toward center stage: “Let the show begin! Curtain! Up Music! Lights!” Suddenly, I’m special again—no longer beset by the pains and weaknesses of the moment. Dazzled by the lights, we take on a part we know well, reinforcing our inner blindness.

As we learn to read the text of our recurring scripts and learn to recognize what fuels our dramas, we can discover neglected parts of our lives to bring into the Light. As did Dante. The good news is that, at the word of God, Abram and Sarai left their land for a promised land. Moses led the people across the Red Sea. Saul, hunter of Christians, became St. Paul. What would it be like to go off-script to be directed by the divine scene-stealer?