Cathedral Essay, Research Paper

Life is a learning experience but sometimes the lessons come from people and places we would least expect them to. This was certainly true for the narrator (who remained nameless) in Raymond Carver s short story Cathedral . A visit from an old friend of his wife s is going to take place. The narrator is not looking forward to it one bit. He is uncomfortable with the whole idea of this man. He dislikes the close connection and communication this stranger shares with his wife, but he especially detests the fact that the visitor happens to be blind. A blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to (38) he remarked. The vehemence of his prejudice is surprising. He was prepared to endure what he assumed would be an unpleasant experience, if only to please his wife. He had no idea that this visitor would have a profound effect on how he saw the world, and would change his view of life, of blind people, and of himself from that moment on.

In the story, the narrator s wife tells him that an old friend of hers, who happens to be blind a blind man, is going to come and stay with them. The blind man was someone his wife had worked for one summer in Seattle and has kept in touch with ever since, exchanging cassette tapes instead of letters over the years to keep up with each others lives. The narrator was a bit jealous of the close connection and continuous communication his wife shared with this man. Over the years, she put all kinds of stuff on the tapes and sent the tapes off lickety-split….She told him everything, or so it seemed

to me. (39-40) The closeness his wife shared with this blind man made him a bit uncomfortable, but the fact that he was blind made him even more so.

The narrator is not looking forward to his arrival and states I wasn t enthusiastic about his visit. He was no one I knew. And his being blind bothered me. (38) The narrator didn t know any blind people personally, but he did have several stereotypes about what blind people were like in his mind. Most of these pre-conceived ideas came from movies. My idea of blindness came from the movies. In the movies, the blind moved slowly and never laughed. Sometimes they were lead by seeing-eye dogs (38) He was really having a hard time seeing how he was going to enjoy this visit. He agreed, however, to be polite and courteous during his stay.

As the narrator spent time with the guest, some of his earlier assumptions about this man began to prove untrue. One assumption he had was that the blind did not smoke because they couldn t see the smoke they exhaled. I thought I knew that much and that much only about blind people. (42) The blind man, however, smoked like a chimney. This was one of the first examples of the narrator s assumptions of blind people not being accurate. It was not enough yet to sway his opinion of this stranger overall.

As the narrator, his wife, and the blind man had dinner that evening the pre-conceptions continue to dissolve. The blind man sat at the table with him and his wife, and had no trouble at all eating and enjoying his meal. The blind man had right away located his foods, he knew just where everything was on his plate. I watched with admiration as he used his knife and fork on the meat. (43) He seems to be as capable as

the narrator and his wife at the art of food consumption, and to his surprise, requires no help at all.

After dinner the three retire to the living room for cocktails and conversation. Gradually, as the evening wears on, the narrator begins to relax with the blind man. As they chat, the narrator learns that the blind man, whose name happens to be Robert, has had an active and well-rounded life. Robert had done a little of everything, it seemed, a regular blind-jack-of-all-trades. (43) Given the narrators earlier notion of the life of a blind person, he was most likely surprised to hear of the many things Robert had done throughout his life. He was actually an interesting person, and quite different from how he had been first imagined. The narrator was actually beginning to enjoy his company.

Although he is slowly beginning to feel more comfortable with the blind man, through out the evening the narrator challenges him in all sorts of ways, such as drinking, smoking cigarettes and dope, and turning on the TV (which, of course, the blind man cannot see). A documentary about cathedrals is showing. The narrator tries to describe a cathedral in words to the blind man. He finds that it isn t so easy and that he isn t doing such a good job of it. When he doesn’t succeed, the blind man asks him to get some heavy paper and a pen. He holds the narrator’s hand as he draws a cathedral on a paper bag. Now the blind man understands more clearly just what a cathedral looks like. The narrator in turn is understanding a whole new way of seeing and explaining.

As the blind man says, “Terrific. You’re doing fine. Never thought anything like this could happen in your lifetime, did you, bub? Well, it s a strange life, we all know that.” (48) The narrator continued to draw with the blind man encouraging him all the way.

Then the blind man tells the narrator to close his eyes and keep on drawing. The narrator closes his eyes and draws blind, saying, “So we kept on with it. His fingers rode my fingers as my hand went over the paper. It was like nothing in my life up to now.” (48) In this exchange, a miraculous event was taking place. The narrator initially saw himself teaching the blind man a bit about cathedrals, and suddenly realized that Robert was teaching him something much more profound in return. The blind man had created a situation where the narrator was able to move outside of himself in a way, and suddenly he began to really understand more than he ever had about himself and about human communication, and probably more than the blind man was learning about cathedrals. For the first time he was seeing the world in a whole new way, by not seeing it. When they had finished the drawing, Robert told the narrator to take a look at the picture and asked him what he thought. But the narrator was not ready to open his eyes and leave this newly found space. With his eyes still shut he said, It s really something (49).

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