

I WANT TO SEE

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Roc O'Connor, SJ

I WANT TO SEE

What the Story of Blind Bartimaeus
Teaches Us about Fear, Surrender
and Walking the Path to Joy



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www.twentythirdpublications.com

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ISBN: 978-1-62785-327-9
Library of Congress Control Number: 2017953856
Printed in the U.S.A.



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Acknowledgments

For
Gerry Stockhausen, SJ
(1949–2016),
friend and classmate,
whose death set me next to Bartimaeus.
A blessing to so many in this life,
his dying has become a gift hidden
in secret places.

Thank you, Dan Connors
at Twenty-Third Publications.
And to Trish Sullivan Vanni
for being such a skillful midwife
to this manuscript.

I am grateful to so many mentors in my life,
especially those gifted with spiritual and
psychological insight. I thank the following:
John B. Foley, SJ; Larry Gillick, SJ; Bill Fulco, SJ;
Donald Bonnington, MD; Frank Burke, SJ;
Patrick Dougherty, LP; and Hal Dessel, LCSW.

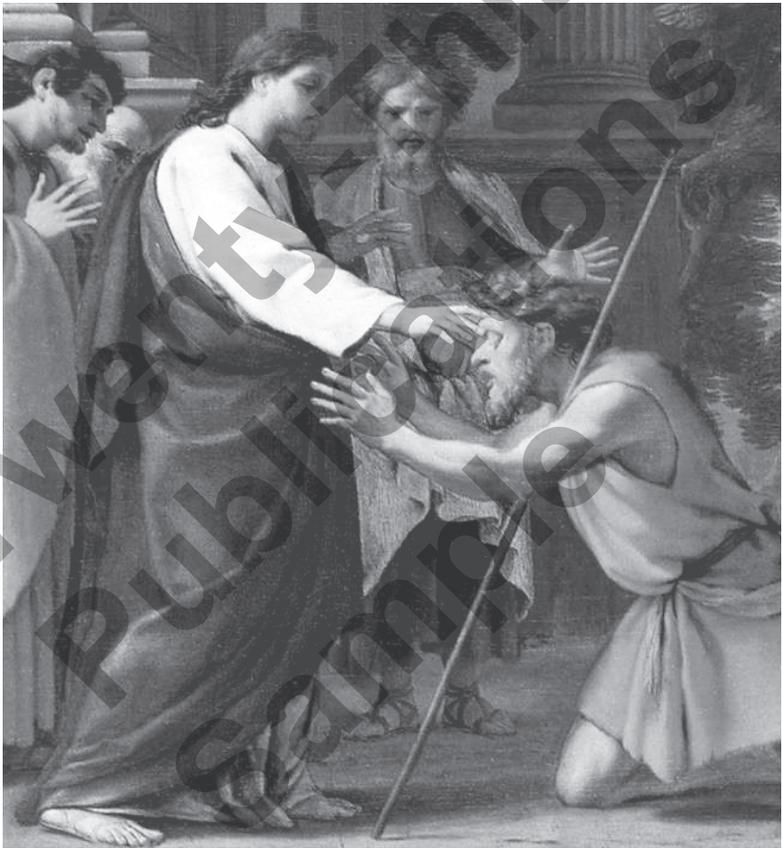
I am also indebted to several others
who wished to remain incognito: Stephanie M.;
Mike P.; Patty C.; Jim S.; Marge O.; Jalinda R.;
Bill, Bob, and Dennis W.; and Tony R.

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*I will give you the treasures
of darkness and riches hidden in secret
places, so that you may know that it is I,
the LORD, the God of Israel,
who call you by your name.*

• ISAIAH 45:3



The Healing of the Blind Beggar

(Mark 10:46–52)

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.” Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Introduction

This is not the best way to start a book. In fact, it's a helluva way to start a book.

The two-year run-up to the election of 2016 revealed new depths of the festering divisions among citizens of the United States. It also exposed the ways many of us seek relief from our vulnerabilities. Feel weak? Blame someone! Feel impotent? Bully another! Feel small? Rage at others! Feel threatened? Escalate! Call them names. Intensify the savage drama. Target others to avoid feeling powerless. Kill 'em. Repeat.

There's a telling adage: *Hurt people hurt people*. Certainly since 9/11, we Americans have experienced levels of vulnerability, even impotence, in the face of terrorist attacks at home and abroad. The very dread we had held at bay for decades invaded our awareness and provoked pageants of power and pedantry that continue to prove themselves insufficient for alleviating our fears. We rely on our nation's might to ward off the very angst that plagues us, yet there aren't enough distractions or bluster to return us to the peace of mind of summer 2001.

We have turned our righteous indignation toward our enemies—or against the most vulnerable—to relieve our shame. As we focus our humiliations on such scapegoats—those who *must die* to ease our disgrace—we make them pay for our incapacity to deal with self-contempt and our unwillingness to address our terrible yet precious inadequacy. “We must project power. Inflate! Avoid!”

How the deuce can any of us pray when we're so fearful, irate, ashamed, and allergic to our exposed powerlessness? How can we see others clearly enough when we're terrified within? The good news (and not so good news) is that these dis-eases can become the very vehicles for Grace to set us on the *Path to Life*. In other words, we can learn to become "wounded healers." *We have to go through to get to.*

In the following pages I offer what I have discovered about that path. I propose a journey into the secret places, those recesses we assiduously avoid, to find ourselves located at the crossroads where Life and Death separate. Here, we sit with Bartimaeus the blind beggar. With him, we, too, rarely see what fuels our blindness. We don't notice what we avoid. We live half-lives without vision. And at the same time, infatuated with personal and corporate dramas, we know neither the Giver nor our true gifts. We overlook riches hidden in the secret places of our wounded creaturehood. So, we begin here at the crossroads. Blind and with divided hearts.

I propose that becoming aware of ourselves as blind in a world bathed in Light can become a joy. Discovering how we are pretenders to the throne may be liberating. Having our idolatries exposed could set us afresh on the *Path to Life*. God's grace can make use of every one of our flaws to draw us into the reconciling love of Christ. The most wonderful discovery in life involves seeing how we who claim to follow Christ are blind concerning everything and everyone, most especially God.

You may be wondering now: "Why would I want to read this? Start *where*?" Well, there are scores of books already published that focus on accepting our gifts, recognizing our blessings, and undergoing spiritual transformation. I simply wish to introduce the shadow side of our lives into the conversation. So, here it is. You be the judge. Notice what speaks to you. Leave the rest for further reads. Onward!

Know Thyself

*Late have I loved you,
O Beauty ever ancient, ever new,
late have I loved you.
You were within me, and I was outside myself
and it was there that I sought you...*

☛ ST. AUGUSTINE, CONFESSIONS 10

When St. Augustine became aware that he was living outside himself, he launched a more intense inward journey to find not only himself but also the God he thought he knew. He entered into his depths and ever more deeply into the divine mystery. Or rather, his search to connect deeply with God led him to embrace his own self-will and self-reliance, which he had yet to recognize.

“You were within me, and I was outside myself and it was there that I sought you.” Does he name your experience? He does mine. Long ago, Augustine identified our chronic predicament, the very dilemma that could launch our journeys to encounter God, self, and others anew.

It is probable our journeys will become narcissistically circumscribed quests for happiness or wholeness or security or self-esteem or even wisdom. Hold the presses! In fact, that’s an excellent starting point! Perhaps, like Augustine, we begin outside ourselves, seeking *our selves* out there somewhere.

The arduous-yet-potentially-healing path from outside to inside naturally leads into the night, into our gloom, into the places where we are blind. It’s like cautiously edging down the stairs into the basement, light dwindling, door closing behind, groping in our murky crypt. It seems a wintry place. Our frozen hearts reside there. There are things down there we haven’t

wanted to see, and for good reason. We have locked them away and lived our lives upstairs, outside, on the surface, in artificial light we can control.

Perhaps today is the day to notice the door that leads into those obscure depths. May courage and curiosity accompany you. Take with you a wise guide, a spiritual companion, a therapist who sees riches in your gloom. It is absolute folly to descend into night alone.

I intend the following study of Bartimaeus to gradually uncover some of what we have been blind to and, with divine grace over time, to bring them into the Light where some of the hurts, wounds, and sorrows can become the secret riches of our lives. Perhaps our frozen hearts will thaw a bit. If they melt, even a tad, we may be able to lift *our* burdens from the shoulders of our scapegoats.

A Modest Proposal

*In the Exercises,
“progress” in the spiritual life
is brought about in consolation
(Spiritual Exercises, 316).*

✪² ADDRESS TO THE 36TH GENERAL CONGREGATION
OF THE SOCIETY OF JESUS BY POPE FRANCIS

On October 24, 2016, Pope Francis reminded the XXXVI General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, “Progress in the spiritual life is brought about in consolation.” This saying is terribly counter-intuitive to those of us who habitually need to prove our worth by trying harder. “I need to be more open in prayer. I shouldn’t only ask for what I want. I must be more patient, pure, joyful, and generous. I must be a better _____. I should be kinder. I ought

not gossip about others. I shouldn't hold grudges. I need to *try harder, damn it.*" You know this?

I believe most people who promote "trying harder" genuinely wish to encourage, motivate, inspire, challenge, and spark deeper spiritual living among the faithful. They say: "We/you should, we ought, we need to, we must, we had better...; if we only... then we would..." However, such intolerance of imperfection generates enough internal resistance to counteract and overthrow every good intention, every commitment to change. Anger at self for always being less than perfect never gives birth to the very transformation we seek. *Trying harder is self-defeating.*

I offer an idea to deal with this conundrum: we learn to inhabit our lives by surrendering our need to change. We leave transformation in God's hands by sitting with Bartimaeus at the crossroads. Here, two paths diverge. One leads toward deeper recognition of inner wounds and greater accountability for fears, resentments, and shame; the other to the path the scribes and Pharisees walked, on which we make others pay the price for our unseen hurts. Let's test whether God really *can* make everything work together for our good and the good of the world.

Immediately below I offer a brief illustration of what stepping onto the *Path toward Life* looks like. "There," I believe, is where we intend to go.

It's Where We Are Called—"There"

Here is my current favorite description of "there."

Now on a day while he was riding over the plain that lieth beneath the city of Assisi, [Francis] met a certain leper, and this unforeseen meeting filled him with loathing. But when he recalled the purpose of perfection that he had even then conceived in mind, and remembered that it behooved

him first of all to conquer self, if he were fain to become the soldier of Christ, he leapt from his horse and ran to embrace him.

When the leper stretched forth his hand as though to receive an alms, he kissed it, and then put money therein. Then forthwith mounting his horse, he looked round him on all sides, and the plain was spread before him unbroken, and no trace of that leper might he see.

Then, filled with wonder and joy, he began devoutly to chant praises unto the Lord, purposing from this to rise ever unto greater heights.¹

Francis leapt from his horse to embrace what he most feared: his inner leper, his poverty, his alienation. He met Christ there and was blessed with wonder and joy at this encounter. He praised the Lord for turning his commonsense world upside down and showing him how the *Way to Life* led through his aversion to poverty to the love of Christ *in* his poverty.

This portrait of Francis is at once an ideal and an antidote to idealism. We can take this ideal as an indictment of our lack of compliance: “You’re not enough! Try harder! Then you’ll be worthy. God will finally approve!” Or, by becoming aware of the distance we experience from the ideal, we could become willing to embrace ourselves *as we are*. Every burden can become its own antidote to shame as we progress in awareness of our patterns and God’s mercy.

1 Saint Bonaventure, “Chapter One: Of His Manner of Life in the Secular State,” *The Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, translated by E. Gurney Salter (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1904). Published on the internet by www.eCatholic2000.com: <http://www.eCatholic2000.com/bonaventure/assisi/francis.shtml>

Segue

*Without God, we cannot.
Without us, God will not.*

•² ST. AUGUSTINE

Sighted people assume that all who cannot see as we do are blind. This is simply not the situation I address. Blindness serves here as a metaphor for the all-too-human unwillingness to recognize whatever wounds, hurts, and dis-eases keep us from recognizing God, ourselves, and others. We may someday discover that what we previously judged harshly in our lives and the lives of others are in truth hidden riches that can lead us to become “wounded healers.” It’s the journey inside-from-outside that’s the kicker.

I still cling to the need to have God make my life absolutely joyful by taking care of all my problems. I have prayed for that since my youth. Didn’t happen. Why doesn’t God make me better? Why can’t I make me better myself?

What I have come to see only recently is how sitting with Bartimaeus at the crossroads where Life and Death intersect discloses my situation: I get to choose which path to follow. And I get to explore whatever fuels my regular choice of the path toward Death—fears, resentments, etc. This is my starting point, our starting point as disciples. Grace continues to open the mystery of my all-too-human incompleteness, inadequacy, and shortcomings as I become willing to inhabit my life right here.

Let’s take a seat here with Bartimaeus, the blind beggar. What does the *Path toward Death* look like? What does Jesus say about the *Way to Life*?

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