

Last Wednesday, the ninth of January, I was walking from the barn studio to my parent's house to prepare lunch—redness swirled in front of my eyes. Then I thought I saw the back door, cut in portions, dancing at crazy angles. I stood dumbfounded. Elements continued to swirl and there was pain in my eyes and head.

I stumbled inside and found the telephone. I got the number dialed. I hear my wife's voice answer.

"I think . . ." I began, and then collapsed into weeping.

"What is it? What's happening?" she asked urgently.

"I think I can see."

I could not talk anymore. Only mumblings came out, until I managed to say: "Call the doctor. Please hurry."

I sat in a chair at the table. The room was broken up. Triangles of color faded and swirled. Weird designs of floor and wall and ceiling fused. It was like being hit a terrible blow on the head. My system could not bear the shock. Numbness filled me.

Was ever a man in a stranger position? My own wife and children, people who were my life, and yet if I saw them in the street I would not even know them! The doctor's voice was deadly calm. "Are you really seeing?"

"I think so," I heard myself saying, as though another's voice spoke.

John Howard Griffin served in the Solomon Islands during WWII when a Japanese bomb exploded nearby. He suffered a severe concussion and gradually went blind. A decade later, inexplicably, his eyesight gradually returned. He describes the experience of going blind and the experience of regaining sight in *Scattered Shadows: A Memoir of Blindness and Vision*.

This memoir was not published during his lifetime. He is famous for writing *Black Like Me*. The thematic parallels between these two books is striking, despite different social contexts. In *Black Like Me* an Anglo writer disguised as an African American travels in the segregated South for six weeks before returning to the white world of privilege.

In the memoir, a soldier injured by forces beyond his control, gradually goes blind and then, just as unexpectedly, recovers eyesight a decade later. In both stories the same man, perceived as a stereo-type and reduced to the lowly status of the *Other*, discovers a profoundly deeper humanity in *Otherness*.

Griffin realized that blindness was perceived as a tragic handicap and that the blind were viewed as intrinsically different in ways bearing no relation to the loss of sight—

exactly as whites prejudged blacks to be different and “inferior” based only on skin pigmentation, which did not consider their qualities as human individuals.

There is no question that Griffin’s decade of blindness had a profound influence on his decision to embark upon the *Black Like Me* journey. “A man loses his sight then, but let it be understood that he loses nothing else,” Griffin wrote. “He does not lose his intelligence, his taste, his sensitivity, his ideals, his right to respect. One remains as much an individual as always.”

Jesus and the disciples encounter a blind beggar beside the road. The disciples want to know, “Who sinned? This man or his parents?” The disciples invite Jesus to impose meaning on someone’s suffering within a calculus that assumes a neat relation between suffering and guilt. Jesus refuses.

Where the disciples see suffering as a sign of sin, the Pharisees see a sinner who, because he is a sinner, has nothing to teach them. The Pharisees turn a blind eye to a man born blind who now sees. How can they do that? Their theology, their ideology, can’t accommodate the fact staring them in the face.

Who can ignore facts, obvious and irrefutable evidence? Almost anyone! We live in a world of assumptions built from steadfast convictions about reality, about people, about what can and cannot be. When something happens that does not fit into our ready-made explanations, we easily dismiss it as made up.

Where the disciples see a theological case study, where the Pharisees see a sinner, Jesus sees a human being in need and responds with compassion. Healing begins when we see, not the disease, but a human being just like us. Healing begins when we forego explanations of suffering and embrace the sufferer.