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# The Two-In-One

Walking with Smokie, Walking with Blindness

In the series  
*Animals, Culture, and Society*,  
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# The Two-In-One

Walking with Smokie, Walking with Blindness

Rod Michalko



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*For Smokie*

*For Cassis, Jessie, and Sugar*

*For Bess and Jennie*

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## Acknowledgments

The writing of this book was inspired by my experience with my dog guide, Smokie. Soon after meeting him in April, 1993, I realized that Smokie was giving me a great deal more than safe and efficient mobility. He gave me a different way to understand my blindness, a unique "look" at my world and he gave me a sense that blindness meant something more than the inability to see. This book is my attempt to capture the story of blindness as it came to me through the harness Smokie wears when he guides me.

I am especially indebted to Clint Sanders. He encouraged me to submit a manuscript for consideration for inclusion in a project on the human/non-human animal relationship which he was working on together with Temple University Press. Clint read drafts of chapters and provided me with insightful comments and suggestions throughout the writing of this book. Most



importantly, Clint demonstrated an unequalled sensitivity to the particular relationship I have with Smokie and to the need to see the lessons inherent in this relationship.

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Most of all, I am indebted to Smokie. His paw prints are all over this book. I entered the dog guide school with the expectation of receiving a guide to mobility. But then I met Smokie. He is a guide to mobility, but he has given me much more than safety and efficiency of movement. Smokie has taught me that far from being a handicap, far from being an impairment or a disability, blindness is an occasion for me to make a place in the world and to be decisive about it. As Smokie and I work down a city street, I often forget about my blindness and focus on where he is guiding me and the world he is showing me. At the same time, Smokie compels me to experience my blindness and to treat this experience as an occasion to think about what is important. Smokie is my guide, my partner, and my friend. More than anything else, however, Smokie is my teacher. He guides in the true and ancient sense of that term; Smokie teaches as he guides. I will never be able to repay the debt I owe him. My gratitude to Smokie is as eternal as my love for him.

# Chapter One

## Introduction

I have been blind most of my life. The onset of my blindness occurred when I was a child. At that time, and for many years hence, my visual acuity was approximately 10 percent of what ophthalmologists refer to as "normal." Ten percent visual acuity falls within the legal definition of blindness and so, from the point of view of ophthalmology, I was blind. But from the point of view of my experience, I was not. After all, I could see not much, but I could see. I could no longer play baseball, see the chalkboard from the back of the classroom, or recognize people from a distance but I could see well enough to get around on my own.

As a child, I could not understand what was happening to my eyesight even when ophthalmologists or my parents explained it to me. I was confused and afraid. I did not know what was happening to me.

My eyesight stayed about the same until my late twen-

ties, when I began to notice a gradual decrease in acuity. Even though I was no longer able to read print, I still had complete mobility without the use of a white cane or any other device. My life had not changed in any significant way.

The last five or six years, however, have been a different story. Unlike the gradual vision loss I experienced earlier, this most recent loss has been dramatic. It is as though I see things disappearing right before my eyes. As my partner Tanya puts it, "It seems as though you are going blind everyday. It is like you' re going blind over and over again." Today I can distinguish light from dark, and what I do see, I see in the form of shadows.

Needless to say, my ability to "get around" has been severely hampered, and about five or six years ago I realized I would need help. I do not know why, but I did not want to use a white cane, so Tanya and I began to investigate the possibility of a dog guide. After researching several dog guide schools in both Canada and the United States, I chose a Canadian one. Two days after arriving at the school, I was introduced to my dog, Smokie. Smokie was fully trained and knew what he was doing. The same was not true of me. I spent a month at the school learning how to work Smokie. More importantly, Smokie and I spent this month getting to know one another, a process that continues to this day. Because the school was relatively close to our home, Tanya visited us a couple of times a week, and Smokie came to know her as well.

I was amazed at Smokie's abilities back then and I still am. He guides me everywhere safely and with a speed I have not known since my "10 percent days." Smokie knows how to find everything I needdoors, chairs, es-

calators, telephones, stairs. He guides me down busy city streets and I rarely even rub shoulders with another pedestrian. I do not take Smokie's abilities for granted, even after five years. Smokie's seemingly effortless ability to distinguish left from right still makes me smile with admiration. Getting me safely where I want to go is what Smokie has done for me, and this is important. But even more important, Smokie has re-introduced me to my blindness.

I had certainly been introduced to it before. Losing most of my eyesight when I was a child, and most all the rest of it in adulthood, was quite an introduction. Ordinary life was no longer ordinary; everything was wrapped in a cloak of anxiety. Before losing the rest of my sight, I used to do things the way everyone else did; I just did them. I just walked around, just played sports, just read, just met people at cafés, just looked and just saw. I didn't have to think about it.

Then *blindness*, and with it, anxiety, fear, and confusion. I could no longer "just" do things; I had to think about every step and every move. Blindness took the "just" out of "just doing things." Some tasks I could no longer perform at all, while others required a complete re-education. I saw everything differently now and I had to think about everything in a whole new way.

There were those who helped me find new ways to do old things. This "help," however, came with a certain conception of blindness. Most people, including ophthalmologists and other professionals, think of blindness as a physiological phenomenon that has a negative effect on peoples' lives, Our society conceives of blindness in terms of "lack"lack of sight. But this conception does not really help us understand what blindness *itself* is. It

does not generate any curiosity about what blind people "see," since it defines reality in terms of the physical sense of sight. Whatever blind persons see is, by definition, a distortion of reality. They must therefore learn to "adjust" to reality as it is understood by the dominant culture. Sighted people seldom question these preconceptions. They take blindness at face value and assume that there is nothing more to be said about it or learned from it.

This attitude was one of the first things I confronted when I became blind, and I have spent the past decade examining it. My training in sociology helped me begin to understand that the common view of blindness is, in fact, a cultural construct and, as such, that it has limitations that perhaps can be transcended. I began to see both blindness and sightedness as "cultures" possessing different customs, norms, and belief systems. It was a small step from there to understand blindness in terms of the sociological dichotomy of deviance and conformity. Blindness is a culturally constructed concept even when spoken of as a physiological fact. I worked with this concept for many years.

Smokie, however, introduced me to still another way of looking at blindness. When he became a part of my life, I was encouraged to re-think both the prevailing view of blindness as a negative physiological phenomenon and my own conception of blindness as a form of "cultural deviance." I had thought that my own formulation was an advance, and that I needed only to continue my research along those lines. Smokie's presence in my life taught me otherwise. His approach to blindness is of a different nature altogether.

This book is my attempt to articulate that approach

and to describe what I have learned from Smokie about blindness and a great many other things. Through telling the story of Smokie and me, I will attempt to tell the story of blindness as it unfolds through the paradigms of personhood, nature, and society. This story is told through an "interpretive chain": it is about a relationship between a blind person and a dog guide, which is in the first place a relationship between a person and a dog but also a relationship between society and nature. This book is about *that* relationship.

The links in this interpretive chain are ontologically interdependent; they rely upon one another not only for their sense and meaning but for their very being. As an animal, Smokie symbolically represents nature while I, as a person, do the same in relation to society. The bond between Smokie and me may be understood as the bond between nature and society. Smokie and I do not merely inhabit a common natural and social world; we depend upon one another for our existence, and together we construct and re-construct the world. Smokie and I are, almost literally, extensions of each other, and the interpretive chain that we inhabit takes the form of a circle (Gadamer 1986) rather than a straight line.

This book explores the relation between nature and society that is presupposed in the partnership between a blind person and dog guide. It examines the choices we humans make in our relation to nature and attempts to draw out the practical implications of those choices. The partnership between me and Smokie is embedded in a much wider realm of activity and interaction. Through the lens of our relationship, I will explore the decision to use dogs for guiding work, the training of dogs as guides, cultural conceptions of blindness and of dog guides, and

the social world through which blind persons and their dogs move and live.

I begin in chapter two, "Search for a Guide," by examining the often implicit connection between the concept of "guiding" and the dog. Most of us conceive of blindness as an obstacle to full participation in social life that must be overcome or adjusted to. Blind people can come to know the world through senses other than sight and can participate in this world through a variety of techniques and technologies. Success at this depends upon the degree of vision loss, age of onset, historical time and place, and other social, psychological, and political factors.

All blind persons do, however, require some form of guidance. Its extent will vary from the simplest to the most complex, from asking the location of a telephone to learning subtle visual concepts such as where walls meet ceilings. The amount and kind of guidance needed will also depend on whether a person was born blind or lost vision gradually. Whatever the individual circumstances, guidance is an essential part of blind people's lives.

It is difficult to move through the world without seeing, or seeing very little. Most people take walking down the street for granted. Blind persons do not. We rely on our remaining senses to guide us. Some of us also rely on white canes; others rely on dog guides. All of us, from time to time, rely on sighted people for guidance. Guiding not only allows mobility but also implicitly imparts a conception of the world. The connection between blindness and guiding assumes the sense of touch as the "distance sense," and I will show how the senses are re-organized to allow touch its new status and how the sense of touch is enhanced by the choice of an appro-



priate guide. This chapter will also discuss how guiding has come to be connected with dogs and will explore the assumptions and presuppositions that make it possible to think about dogs as guides for blind persons in the first place.

A blind person leaves a dog guide training school with more than a dog. She leaves with the school's conception of blindness, its conception of the dog, and its understanding of how the person and dog should relate. The blind person also leaves with her own interpretation of those conceptions, and the interpretive process continues throughout her life with the dog. Chapter three, "Is That One of Those Blind Dogs?", examines the particular concept of blindness held by those who train dog guides and deals with the training, application, and screening processes used by dog guide schools.

Dog guides are trained with an "ideal type" (Weber 1947, 89110) of blind person in mind; but most blind persons do not use dog guides, and not every blind person is accepted for training with a dog guide. All dog guide training provides an implicit answer to the question, "What kind of guiding does a blind person need?" By making use of my own experience at a dog guide training school as well as the experience of others, I will show the ways in which these schools answer this question. In the process, I hope to show how the person and the dog together constitute the various meanings and conceptions of blindness, and to explore the ways in which the dog guide "releases" blindness into the social world as the dog guide team moves through it. This will involve a discussion of Smokie as a particular dog, as well as a more general discussion of the dog's relation to human society.

Chapter four, "The Grace of Teaching," examines the dog guide's influence on the blind person's experience and conception of blindness. Dog guides are not merely functional; they are neither robots nor pieces of equipment like white canes. They are *guides* in the fullest sense of the word; they not only help take a person from place to place but also help direct her conduct or course of life. In their guiding, they are also constantly *teaching* the blind person both about the physical and social environment and also about what it means to be blind. More often than not, a dog guide changes a blind person's experience of blindness in fundamental ways.

A dog guide not only enables a blind person to be more mobile and independent but also when the two are fully "in tune" with each other to move through the world with a "graceful independence." This independence is achieved through the "togetherness" of dog and blind person, yet both also experience an "aloneness." I address this experience of a dog-guide team through a concept that I call the "alone-together."

Perhaps one of the most interesting things about having a dog guide is that it brings blindness to the fore in public places. Smokie and I are not anonymous travellers in our world. Everyone notices us. And when they do, they see certain things about us. When people notice Smokie and me they see us through their particular conceptions of blindness, of dog guides, and of the partnership between the two. Usually, however, people do more than notice us; more often than not, they talk to us, and that provides an education in itself. I have learned a great deal about people's conceptions of blindness from their comments on the street, and one of the things I have learned is the degree to which Smokie and I are pre-

ceded by our "reputation," People have concepts about us before they see us; in a way, that is what enables them to notice us in the first place. People are always talking either to or about us quite often, both. Chapter five, "The Power of Reputation," and chapter six, "Feel Free to Ask," describe some of this interaction and analyze the relationship between our identity and how we are perceived by others.

Whatever Smokie and I do, whatever kind of life we experience together and whatever else we mean to each other, we are "person and dog" sharing a life together. We are "human and animal" living in the world and moving through it together. I rely on Smokie for my safety, for my independence, and for whatever semblance of grace I may possess. Smokie depends on me for the provision of his basic needs food, water, shelter, and love. He also relies on me for his identity as a dog guide, as a working animal. Smokie's presence in his harness depicts my blindness to the world and my presence depicts his working identity. Our interdependence shows the world around us who we are and what we mean together; it allows, in Goffman's (1959) terms, the presentation of *our self* in everyday life. This is the nature of our bond.

More than this, Smokie and I represent the bond and relation that exists between human life and natural life. My life with Smokie has given me the opportunity to re-think this relation. Smokie's presence in my life has reminded me that "nature" is as much a cultural construction as "blindness" is, and that distinctions like human/animal, society/nature, nature/nurture are themselves human inventions. By explicating the assumptions and presuppositions that underlie the distinction between the social and natural worlds, I will show that such

distinctions, together with the relationships that follow from them, are the result of implicit interpretive choices.

The concluding chapter, "The Two-In-One," is a reflection on what my life with Smokie has taught me about the nature/nurture distinction as it exists within me, the individual. Blindness itself expresses this distinction. Blindness is physiological insofar as it expresses itself within the paradigm of the "natural function" of seeing. Yet we, as individuals in society, *make* something of blindness. We endow blindness with meaning through the ways we think about and interpret it. The shifting and ever-changing character of human concerns, purposes, and interests makes blindness something which itself exhibits a variety of meanings. The same is true of nature and of the connection between nature and society. The aim of this chapter is to interrogate the society/nature distinction.

Shortly after I had completed this book, we moved from Toronto to Antigonish, Nova Scotia. Toronto has a population of over two million, while Antigonish numbers approximately 5,000. This is an incredible difference! I have addressed in an epilogue some of the significant implications of this difference for Smokie and me.

This book is my attempt to capture and depict the experience of moving through the world with a dog guide, and to examine my reasons for writing it in the first place. My need to think about blindness and about my relation to nature and society has led me to explore the collective representations of nature with which this society makes sense of itself. The result is a narrative account of what I have learned about myself and my world with Smokie as my guide. We invite and welcome readers to "our world."