

CHAD E. FOSTER

## What a Sight

**O**UR ABILITY TO ADAPT to changes in circumstances determines to a large extent whether we survive and thrive, or wilt under new conditions. If resilience is so crucial, what exactly is it and how can we cultivate it? Although I have had the pleasure of studying with some of the world's best university professors and students, I actually learned the answers to these central questions the hard way—taking a crash course in the school of hard knocks.

Due to my inability to see at night, when I was three years old my parents discovered that I had a rare eye disease that the doctors said eventually would rob me of my eyesight. Their prediction came to fruition when I was attending the University of Tennessee. It was there when my eyesight took a turn for the worse. While in anatomy class, I realized that I simply could not see enough details in order to identify the parts of the cadavers. At that moment, my hopes and dreams for my future self were as lifeless and cold as the corpses that laid on the table in front of me.

It was as if a sledge hammer crashed into my chest—my emotional and psychological state staggered under the impact. A boa constrictor of hopelessness began wrapping itself around my body and started to squeeze. It was hard to move, hard to breathe. My deep feelings of hopelessness stemmed from the fact that I could not imagine a future blind self that was close to the future sighted self I once had envisioned.

We often ask children, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” None of them—and I mean none of them—say, “I’d like to grow up to be a blind person.” Still, in order to make change work, we have to figure out how to achieve, even in the midst of our unchangeable facts. I had to figure out how to make blind look good. The technical term is “cognitive reframing.” What that essentially means is learning how to create the stories that get us where we want to go. This first and foremost means we have to be able to visualize greatness within our conditions.

In order to do that, we have to know what is inside our sphere of influence and what is not. If it is outside of our sphere of influence, we have to accept it, embrace it, and paint a picture in our mind’s eye of how it can look good to us. If it is within our sphere of influence, we lay out a strategy, plan, and execution framework for influencing it to fit our vision for the future. This new vision becomes our blueprint for thinking. Every thought, conversation, action, and goal anchors off of that vision. How do we see ourselves? What are the stories we are telling ourselves?

For me, I could have told myself a story of, “Chad, well you have some terrible luck,” or I could choose to tell myself that, “Chad, this happened to you because you are one of the very few people on the planet with the strength and toughness to overcome it and help oth-

ers.” Technically, one could argue that both of these stories are correct. One sets me up for a victim mentality that serves no purpose other than feeding despair and the other frames up my unchangeable facts in a way that takes me toward my goals.

Since that moment in college, I started telling myself the second story—a story of my strength and ability to deal with my circumstances productively, successfully, and helpfully. I went on to relearn how to learn that year, and it turns out that I actually was a better blind student than sighted one. I earned straight A’s in my business classes, made the Dean’s List for the first time, and went on to become the first blind graduate of Harvard Business School’s Program for Leadership Development. Throughout my career, I have directed the financial strategy

decisions that resulted in countless jobs, billions of dollars in revenue, industry-leading growth, and best-in-class margins—all without being able to see my computer screen.

As a matter of necessity, I also taught myself how to engineer my screen-reading software, and I became so proficient that I was able to write code that created job opportunities for millions of blind people, by connecting the screen reader to a large customer relationship management system—even though one of the world’s largest tech giants thought it could not be done . . . but I already had done it.

We all are capable of much more than we give ourselves credit for. To maximize our full potential, we have

to open our minds and our hearts to accept our conditions, especially the things we cannot change. I have learned that my blindness—my life’s greatest struggle—actually is my greatest strength. The “gift” of going blind allows me to reach and help people in a way that would not otherwise be possible. I am a better person because of—not in spite of—being blind. I would be less successful if I could see.

If we can be intentional about creating our vision for our future self, we lay the foundation for a robust mental model that allows us to adapt and even thrive in the most-extreme conditions. With that, we then will start creating the stories of self-talk that propel us towards our dreams—and we all become the stories that we tell ourselves, which are linked inextricably to how we see ourselves.

Our self-talk becomes our words and conversations. Our conversations become our interactions with others, our decisions, our network of contacts, and our behaviors. Eventually, as these beliefs take root, strategy, planning, effort, and relentless determination can drive us to realize the outcomes we envision.

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