

# Touching the Rock by John Hull

## Touching the Rock: An Experience of Blindness

### FACES

*21 June 1983* . During the first couple of years of blindness, when I thought about the people I knew, they fell into two groups. There were those with faces, and those without faces. It was a bit like wandering round the National Portrait Gallery. Here are rows of portraits, but here is a blank. You can tell where it used to hang by the outline of the wallpaper, and beneath the space is a little label giving the name. Perhaps this portrait is on loan elsewhere, or perhaps it is being repaired.

The people I knew before I lost my sight have faces but the people I have met since then do not have faces. I used to find the contrast between the two groups of people disturbed me. I could not relate one set to the other set. I knew how I knew the first lot—by their faces. How could I ever feel that I really knew the second lot?

As time went by, the proportion of people with no faces increased. Whole rooms are now bare, and the portraits which remain are covered with dust. Is it possible that some day I will come to visit the gallery and find the door locked, with a notice which says, 'This exhibition is permanently closed'?

It is three years now since I have seen anybody. Strangely enough, I have fairly clear pictures of many people whom I have not met again during these three years, but the pictures of the people I meet every day are becoming blurred. Why should this be?

In the case of people I meet every day my relationship has continued beyond loss of sight, so my thoughts about these people are full of the latest developments in our relationships. These have partly covered the portrait, which has thus become less important. In the case of somebody I know quite well but have not seen for several years, nothing has happened to take the place of the portrait, and when I think of those people, it is the portrait which comes to mind.

It distressed me considerably when I realized that I was beginning to forget what Marilyn and Imogen looked like. I had wanted to deny blindness. I had sworn to myself that I would always carry their faces hidden in my heart, even if everything else in the gallery was stolen.

If I do want to recapture the face of someone very close to me, I do it through visualizing a particular photograph, an actual photograph that I can remember very clearly from my sighted days. When I try to conjure up the memory of a loved face, I cannot seem to capture it, but the straight edges of the photograph seem to fix the mobile features firmly in my mind, so that I can imagine myself gazing at the image. Some people tell me that this is a happy situation. I will always remember Marilyn as being young. She need never be troubled by the thought that I will see her getting older. I am not so sure about this, since I find it hard to believe that ignorance can ever be better than knowledge.

The difference between those who have faces and those who do not becomes more poignant when I think of my own children. I have a lot of visual memories of Imogen, now aged ten, mostly based on photographs, but with the occasional vivid life situation thrown in. I have only a few rather vague impressions of the face of Thomas, now nearly three, which are based upon the first six or nine months of his life, while I still had

a little residual vision. Of Elizabeth, now sixteen months, I have no visual images at all. The place on the wall which should carry her portrait is completely blank.

What difference does it make? I am not aware of any difference in my present relationships with these three children which could be affected in any way by the fact that they stand in different relationships to my blindness. They are all alike now.

## RAIN

**9 September 1983** . This evening, at about nine o'clock, I was getting ready to leave the house. I opened the front door, and rain was falling. I stood for a few minutes, lost in the beauty of it. Rain has a way of bringing out the contours of everything; it throws a coloured blanket over previously invisible things; instead of an intermittent and thus fragmented world, the steadily falling rain creates continuity of acoustic experience.

I hear the rain pattering on the roof above me, dripping down the walls to my left and right, splashing from the drainpipe at ground level on my left, while further over to the left there is a lighter patch as the rain falls almost inaudibly upon a large leafy shrub. On the right, it is drumming, with a deeper, steadier sound upon the lawn. I can even make out the contours of the lawn, which rises to the right in a little hill. The sound of the rain is different and shapes out the curvature for me. Still further to the right, I hear the rain sounding upon the fence which divides our property from that next door. In front, the contours of the path and the steps are marked out, right down to the garden gate. Here the rain is striking the concrete, here it is splashing into the shallow pools which have already formed. Here and there is a light cascade as it drips from step to step. The sound on the path is quite different from the sound of the rain drumming into the lawn on the right, and this is different again from the blanketed, heavy, sodden feel of the large bush on the left. Further out, the sounds are less detailed. I can hear the rain falling on the road, and the swish of the cars that pass up and down. I can hear the rushing of the water in the flooded gutter on the edge of the road. The whole scene is much more differentiated than I have been able to describe, because everywhere are little breaks in the patterns, obstructions, projections, where some slight interruption or difference of texture or of echo gives an additional detail or dimension to the scene. Over the whole thing, like light falling upon a landscape is the gentle background patter gathered up into one continuous murmur of rain.

I think that this experience of opening the door on a rainy garden must be similar to that which a sighted person feels when opening the curtains and seeing the world outside. Usually, when I open my front door, there are various broken sounds spread across a nothingness. I know that when I take the next step I will encounter the path, and that to the right my shoe will meet the lawn. As I walk down the path, my head will be brushed by fronds of the overhanging shrub on the left and I will then come to the steps, the front gate, the footpath, the culvert and the road. I know all these things are there but I know them from memory. They give no immediate evidence of their presence, I know them in the form of prediction. They will be what I will be experiencing in the next few seconds. The rain presents the fullness of an entire situation all at once, not merely remembered, not in anticipation, but actually and now. The rain gives a sense of perspective and of the actual relationships of one part of the world to another.

If only rain could fall inside a room, it would help me to understand where things are in that room, to give a sense of being in the room, instead of just sitting on a chair.

This is an experience of great beauty. I feel as if the world, which is veiled until I touch it, has suddenly disclosed itself to me. I feel that the rain is gracious, that it has granted a gift to me, the gift of the world, I am no longer isolated, preoccupied with my thoughts, concentrating upon what I must do next. Instead of having to worry about where my body will be and what it will meet, I am presented with a totality, a world speaks to me.

Have I grasped why it is so beautiful? When what there is to know is in itself varied, intricate and harmonious; then the knowledge of that reality shares the same characteristics. I am filled internally with a sense of variety, intricacy and harmony. The knowledge itself is beautiful, because the knowledge creates in me a mirror of what there is to know. As I listen to the rain, I am the image of the rain, and I am one with it.

### 'BETWEEN YOU AND ME, A SMILE'

**21 March 1986** . Yesterday morning I was kneeling on the floor, helping Lizzie to get dressed. When she was finished, I stood her up in front of me and said, 'Now! Let's have a look at you.' I held her face lightly between my hands while she stood there, and gave her a big smile.

We remained like that for a moment and then she said, 'Daddy, how can you smile between you and me when I smile and when you smile because you're blind?'

I laughed, and said, 'What do you mean, darling. How can I what?'

With great hesitation, and faltering over every word, she said, 'How can you smile—no—how can I smile between you and me—no—between you and me a smile, when you're blind?'

'You mean, how do I know when to smile at you?'

'Yes', she said, 'when you're blind.'

'It's true, darling', I said, 'that blind people often don't know when to smile at people, and I often don't know when to smile at you, do I?'

She agreed.

'But today I knew you were smiling, darling, because you were standing there, and I was smiling at you, and I thought you were probably smiling at me. Were you?'

Happily she replied, 'Yes!'

So this little child, having just had her fourth birthday, is able to articulate the breakdown which blindness causes in the language of smiles. I noticed the fine distinction she made by implication between smiling at someone and the smiling which takes place between people. I cannot describe my emotions as I reflected upon the fact that she had had so many experiences of smiling at me, but that the in-between smile was, for her and me, not only a great rarity, but a puzzle. I had endured a terrible loss and been granted a wonderful gain simultaneously.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. How does the author 'view' the world?
2. What is the tone of 'Faces'? Why do you feel so?
3. How has the tone shifted in 'Rain'? Why?
4. The last part is written after almost 3 years. What is the author's attitude towards life now? Why?
5. What is the message Hull wants to convey to his readers? Explain.
6. What is the 'gain' that Hull speaks about?
7. How do you think does his daughter relate to him and his blindness? Why?
8. Do you think the text ends on a positive note? Elaborate.