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 need—doors, 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, 89–110) 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."

Chapter Two
Search for a Guide

"[A dog guide is] really like a car for sighted people. You drive it for a number of years and then get a new one. It's just like that."

—Staff member at a dog guide school

I LISTENED INTENTLY as I stood at the top of the stairway leading down to the subway platform. My right hand clung tightly to the metal banister as I felt for the first step with my left foot. The lighting of the subway station contrasted dramatically with the bright sunshine outside. It was dark. I could see only shadows.

I heard movement on the stairs. A rush of people ascended and I waited for the shadows and sound to disappear. In a few seconds it would be safe. I tentatively took the first step and proceeded down the stairs slowly, feet and right hand my only guides.

Suddenly I touched something with my left knee. It was a gentle touch, but a touch nonetheless. Just as suddenly, the voice of a woman: "No, out of his way. Come over here." The touch I felt was a child! The anxiety that rushed through my body froze me. I had almost knocked a child down two flights of stairs. There was no question now. I needed help.

Somehow I managed to get home. Still shaken, I told my partner Tanya what had happened. For some time now, she had been encouraging me to seek help in getting around. Every time I left our house, she would express concern for my safety. On this afternoon, I finally agreed. I needed help.

Since I did not want to use the white cane, Tanya began insisting that I acquire a dog guide. I had had dogs as pets before and she knew that I liked them. Tanya also liked dogs and suggested that a dog guide would not only help me get around but would be a great addition to our family, which at that time included Tanya and me and two cats, Jessie and Sugar. Reminding me of my "days as an athlete," Tanya suggested that a dog would be a much more appropriate guide than a white cane. A dog would be energetic and quick, like an athlete; a dog would be good for me. She began researching dog guide schools and brought home several books on dogs and their training from the library.

A few days after my experience on the subway, Tanya telephoned from the library and we arranged to meet at a downtown bar to discuss her research. As was my habit, I arrived at the bar early. Whenever I met someone I arrived early so that they would have to look for me and not the other way around. I made my way into the bar and down a short flight of stairs, found a table, and, hoping no one else was sitting there, sat down.

The waiter asked if I would like something to drink and I ordered a pint of draft beer. He said that he would serve me only coffee. I was confused, to say the least. Naively, I asked him if there was something wrong with the mechanism on the beer kegs. No, the kegs worked

fine. The look on my face must have betrayed my confusion. "I think you've had enough to drink," he said. My confusion turned to extreme embarrassment. I explained that I was "legally blind" and showed the waiter my identification card. His apologies only added to my embarrassment. He insisted that I have a beer and I insisted on coffee.

A few minutes later, Tanya joined me and I told her what had happened. We both recognized the comic character of the incident, but we also saw its tragic side. This sort of thing had never happened to me before, but it was yet another sign of the things I could no longer see. Things were changing quickly, and as she had many times before, Tanya said, "It's like you are going blind over and over again." Even though I felt uncomfortable, Tanya and I spent the rest of the afternoon in the bar discussing dog guides.

Our conversation led us in a direction we had not taken before. "Getting around" had always been the focus of previous conversations. Getting around without a guide was confusing not only to me but to others. Things were disappearing quickly and what I saw at one time, I could not see at another. Shadows confused me; I often saw them as objects and moved quickly to avoid them. Things I could see in twilight disappeared in bright sunshine. Children stood on empty stairways. I was "drunk," only to be blind a few moments later.

But now the need to "get around" led Tanya and me to recognize my need to "*be* around." "Getting around" was transformed from an abstraction into *my* very particular movement through *my* particular world. However I did it, I would have to get around as *me*, as *who I am.*

That afternoon in the bar, Tanya and I realized that our discussions about dog guides were discussions about *identity*—mine, hers, and ours together.

Who I was was someone going blind "over and over again." It seemed as though I was continually going blind but never quite getting there. I could not count on my little bit of sight, but I could not discount it, either. It was there in the morning and gone in the afternoon, only to return in the evening. Things appeared and disappeared right before my eyes. "Being around" in this way was as difficult as "getting around."

The dog guide, we thought, would go a long way toward solving these problems. A dog would get me around safely. Everyone would see the harness and know that I was blind, not drunk. My journey to blindness would be over—I would finally get there. I had no idea that the acquisition of a dog guide would mark the beginning of a never-ending journey with blindness, and I did not realize how many "blindnesses" the dog would guide me to.

As we spoke in the bar that afternoon, Tanya and I grew more and more excited about the prospect of a dog guide. Tanya even raised the possibility of "enjoying" blindness. Though I was skeptical, I did understand that a dog guide would somehow place blindness squarely in our life. Sight had always accompanied me as I moved through the world. I would now be leaving sight behind and accepting blindness as my partner. I would still have my "little bit of sight"; I could still see shadows. But sight would no longer be an essential, defining feature of *my identity*. A dog guide would *make* me blind.

The relationship I had always assumed between blind-

ness and sightedness was quickly losing its cogency. I no longer thought of them as strict opposites, or even, necessarily, as antithetical. I was not sure what their relationship was; it was more complicated than I'd thought, but its exact nature eluded me.

The connection between blindness and sightedness is located somewhere in the murkiness of our social identities. It lurks in the nexus of our natural and social being and in the relationship between nature and society. It is natural to see and unnatural not to. But what do these terms mean?

I wanted to take a closer look at the connection between seeing and not seeing, between what is natural and what is not. I began with the work of David Michael Levin.

THE GIFT OF VISION

> Vision is nature's gift of a possible *adventure* in the social, or cultural order. . . . What we do with our natural endowment—how we respond to the gift of nature—constitutes the *character* of our vision. Whether, and how, we take up our visionary project: that is the measure, the test, of our character, of our development of self. . . . For the most part, our vision conforms, conforms to the gaze of a social order which reflects and multiplies our fears, ignorance and passions, and which extinguishes many of the sparks that might otherwise kindle some effort of vision. . . . The loss occurs because curiosity is the arousing of desire, and it is desire which brings about the more restricted form of vision, which is more interested in the objects brought forth by the

> lighting of the field than it is open to the enchantment in the presence of the lighting itself. (Levin 1988, 56, 59)

Levin's work implies a distinction between sight and vision which suggests that sight *alone* does not really *see*. Sight is nature and *only* nature. As such, it sees nothing, not even itself. It is the social order that enables sight to "see"; sight is socially organized. Sight represents the possibility of vision but is itself not vision. Vision is a natural endowment, a gift from nature which requires development. How we look and what we see is our response to that gift. Every life is a "gifted life" insofar as it is naturally endowed with the gift of vision. It is also a "gift of possible adventure." Adventure becomes possible in the *mixing* of the natural and social orders. What we make of our natural endowments in the context of social life is a measure and test of our self-development.

Nature gives us vision at the moment of our immersion into a social and cultural order. We see in and through this order on each and every occasion of our looking. Nature enters the realm of the social whenever it gives the gift of vision, whenever we look. When we look, nature *offers* us the gift of a possible adventure. The *character* of our vision is determined by our response to this gift. The gift of nature is expressed in the dialogue between nature and society and our possibility of adventure lies in whether, and how, we enter this dialogue as interlocutors. This is what Levin calls the "visionary project."

But Levin also warns us of vision's tendency to conform. It conforms to the "gaze" of the social order. Conformity always presupposes complicity. When it conforms, vision complies with the gaze of social order; vision looks at

what social order provides for it to see. It then reflects and multiplies our "fears, ignorance and passions," and thus sustains and reproduces the social order as the "paramount reality" (Schutz 1973, 226f).

Conformity to the social order "extinguishes many of the sparks that might otherwise kindle some effort of vision." Looking and seeing only in socially and culturally prescribed ways is to reject nature's gift. It is to reflect the gaze of social order and that gaze only. Levin suggests that when vision conforms, as it usually does, it sees only "the objects brought forth by the lighting of the field" but misses "the enchantment in the presence of the lighting itself." Conformity restricts our "field of vision" and requires no effort on our part. We see what is there to see and nothing else. We see only what is already lighted. What is "natural" about vision, in this sense, is that it reveals the social and cultural order as the "natural" order of things.

VISION LOSS

Vision conceived in this way has consequences for those of us who are blind. To be blind is to be born without the natural endowment of vision or to lose it at some point in one's life. Those who are congenitally blind were never given the gift of vision; adventitiously blind persons were given the gift only to have it revoked, usually by nature.

Vision that conforms to the social order takes the reality of what is seen as fixed and final. It approaches the possibility of vision loss with fear and anticipates the result of that loss as ignorance. Vision loss is understood as the physiological loss of sight, of the ability to

see the "objects brought forth by the lighting of the field." When we cannot see those objects, we stumble on them—we do not know them; we are ignorant.

Blindness, conventionally understood, means the fear of stumbling through the world in ignorance. How, then, could it possibly be conceived as a gift of nature? To see is to live in full knowledge of the world; not to see is to live in ignorance. To see is to be guided through the sights and objects of the world; not to see is to stumble. To see is to be guided into full participation in the world; not to see is to be denied access. It is no wonder that vision is considered a gift. It *is* a gift; it is the quintessential "guide" that opens the world to us and presents us with "possible adventures," our response to which tests and measures our character.

Blindness means facing the world without benefit of a guide. Without it, the possibilities of movement, knowledge and participation are threatened. The fundamental problem of blindness thus becomes the search for a guide. Blind persons must find a way into the horizon of possibilities ordinarily and "naturally" provided by the gift of vision. Whether and how blind persons take up this quest is the measure and test of their character and self-development. Embarking on this quest is the blind person's "visionary project."

Like sighted people, blind people must pursue this project in the context of their society and culture. "Actual blind persons"[1] find themselves always-already immersed in socially organized meanings that depict *what* blindness is and *who* blind people are; Durkheim (1915) called these social meanings "collective representations." The quest for a guide takes place within these "collective

representations" and, following Levin, it is certainly an adventure.

THE NECESSITY OF GUIDANCE

After my experience in the subway and after being mistaken for drunk in the bar, I finally agreed with Tanya. I could no longer continue with blindness alone. I needed a guide not only to get around, but also to "guide" others to the understanding that I was blind. This realization came somewhat more slowly to my friends than to Tanya. Since I did not use a white cane or dog guide, many people were not aware that I was blind. I never disclosed my blindness to people upon our initial meeting. If our relationship continued or the situation warranted it—for example, if I was looking for a book in a bookstore—that was different. My friends and coworkers certainly knew that I was blind but most others did not.

My blindness usually remained unspoken, even in my interactions with friends. But the more sight I lost, the louder my blindness spoke.[2] I met friends in neighborhood bars and cafés and told them about the difficulty I had getting there. Many of them adopted a strictly pragmatic approach. One evening, for example, having a beer with two friends at a neighborhood bar, I went to the men's room. When I returned, I said, "Jeez, I couldn't see a thing." My friend Gord replied, "Well, just get one of those white sticks."

The more my friends and I spoke about my blindness, however, the more confusing our interaction became. For a long time I had had little difficulty getting around, but this had changed rapidly. Previously I had been defined,

both by myself and by others, as someone who could see, even if not very much. Now, however, I could see even less than that. Friends often forgot this. I would ask where something was and someone would point. I would say, "What! Are you pointing?" The friend would reply, "Right, I forgot. Next time tell me." People would often say, "I forgot you were blind. You have to remind me."

I often did the same thing. I "forgot" I was blind and acted like someone who could see. This forgetting was the result not so much of a faulty memory as of a confused and confusing identity. My identity was in the process of being transformed; I was in a "grey area" both literally and figuratively. Part of this confusion stemmed from the absence of a visible sign of my blindness. Since I did not use a guide, there was no outward indication to serve as a reminder to others. I usually met friends in familiar places where I knew my way around fairly well. Even so, my blindness and my need for a guide were becoming more apparent.

The form a guide will take depends on how blindness is conceived. The first response to blindness is always curative. Can the blind person's sight be restored? If not, what can substitute for sight? How can she move through the world now that she is missing sight? The form of a blind person's social adventure depends on how these questions are answered. How we answer them shapes our conceptions of blindness and our relations to it; it defines our social relations with blindness. How we conceive of and relate to blindness reveals, as Karatheodoris (1982) says, an answer to the question, "What is blindness?" All interaction with blindness simultaneously poses and answers this question.

A blind person's search for a guide, then, is always con-