



## Limits and Abilities

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### Convincing Others or Myself

Tauru Chaw

I've flown across the Pacific Ocean many times and know that Tokyo's Narita International Airport is a hub for connecting flights to other parts of Asia. I also know that certain parts of the airport are so dim that I often fall behind the trail of people who are also making their connections. The mood lighting that usually eases a person after a long flight seems to have the opposite effect on me. Instead of a soothing, comforting feeling, I get anxious because I can barely see. Not only do I have to find my connecting flight, but I also have to find my way through the airport's dim labyrinth.

So for the first time ever in my life, on a recent trip to South Korea to visit Christi, I asked for blind assistance. The flight had a connection through Tokyo. I knew that, should push come to shove, I could find my way through Narita as I've done many times before; but for once I accepted the fact that I couldn't see well.

I felt awkward at first because, according to me, I could see. I could see well enough, I thought. In some ways I felt guilty for "taking advantage" of a service I wasn't sure I needed.

When we arrived in Tokyo, a wheelchair awaited me at the gate. They insisted that I sit in the wheelchair. Again, I felt awkward because I was healthy and strong enough to walk. They wheeled me along with a group of old folks in wheelchairs through the security checkpoint. At the transfer counter, they asked me to stay in the wheelchair and wait until they sorted the details

of my connecting flight. I looked around and wondered how I would be doing had I not asked for blind assistance.

Eventually, the Japanese lady behind the counter asked in a very polite way, "Welcome, sir, to Japan. May I ... (she hesitated) ask you, sir, ... (again, she hesitated) ... why ... why you need assistance?"

I wondered myself, but told her I couldn't see well. She quickly apologized and resumed getting the details of my connecting flight.

It felt strange because even I wasn't convinced I needed assistance. I saw myself sitting there in the wheelchair looking around and looking at things. I even picked up brochures on the counter and browsed through them as I waited. I could see. Really, I could.

I bring up this story because it's something I still grapple with every day. I know I'm visually impaired, but am I really? To what extent? Most people I meet on a casual basis can't tell that I'm visually impaired. I don't use a white cane, and I can focus on the person I'm talking to. But I know I can't see well. I bump into things all the time and I'm practically blind in the dark.

Light transitions when moving in and out of buildings completely blind me. It's really bad! When I walk into a store, I have to wait for minutes for my eyes to adjust. And when I walk out, it's so bright that I have to close my eyes. (I used to care what people thought when I'd stand there like some strange person, but I don't anymore. If they were in my shoes, they'd understand.)

One of the criteria for being legally blind is to have a field of vision less than 20 degrees. I think I have less than 4 degrees according to a visual test I did recently. Maybe that's too extreme because I certainly don't think I see like this. Or maybe it's true but I don't even realize it because it's all I've ever known.

To my understanding, the reason I can't see well in the dark is that the same photoreceptors in my retinas that allow peripheral vision also enable night vision. Since I don't have peripheral vision, I don't have night vision. So the dim lighting in certain areas of Tokyo's Narita International Airport is cause for anxiety.

## Believing is Seeing

Christiana Bruchok

In March, after completing a one-year contract teaching English in South Korea, I boarded a plane alone and headed for Southeast Asia. By myself.

I had been on many planes before, and in fact, I had been to Southeast Asia a number of times already. But this trip was different. This was to be the culmination of everything I had been working toward. This was a test of my abilities to do things independently.

In the past, when I was required to fly on my own, I most often requested assistance from the gate agents to get around. But do I need to? The fear is that I will not be able to read the gate numbers or the concourse maps. Traveling often presents a lot of unknowns, and flights are usually scheduled so close together that if the airport turns out to be difficult to navigate for me, I would surely miss my flight.

But this time, I had an eight-hour layover in Beijing. I felt comfortable knowing that eight hours was more than enough time to get lost and found again several times. As this was the

In a different story, I gave an example of how I see (You Don't Miss What You Never Had, April 2011): stretch your hands out in front of you and make a circle with your thumbs and index fingers. This is the 4 degrees or so that I see. Over time, this gets worse.

When you take a photograph in a bar or in a dimly lit restaurant, a flash is needed, right? Without a flash, your photo is pretty much kaput. Well, I think that's how my eyes are. I need a beaming headlamp on all the time when I go into dimly lit places.

So, yes, it's true that I can't see well. And, yes, it's also true that I can see ...well enough.

commencement of my trip for independence, I did not request special assistance. Already, I was excited by the prospect of embracing the unknown, determined to conquer it.

As it turned out, the Beijing International Airport was quite easy to navigate, especially when following the line of people who've simultaneously deplaned. After flowing with the traffic up the stairs, through passport control, and up some more stairs, I did have one moment of confusion. Most of the crowd dispersed after passport control. The bulk of the passengers had moved in the direction of immigration and baggage. I was looking for the connecting flights link. This part of the airport had no signs. As I stood contemplating the dim lighting, the shiny floor, and the constant glass barriers placed seemingly at random, I started to question my decision to go it alone. I felt the anxiety building in my stomach. I thought, what if I am wrong? What if I really can't do this on my own? Is this limit a real limit after all, or is it really just mental?

As I stood there assessing my glass maze, I noticed a few German men who, upon closer inspection, looked every bit as lost as I felt. What a relief! I approached them, and before I could ask them anything, they asked me which direction to take for onward travel. I couldn't

help the smile that spread across my face – these guys could see just fine and were just as lost as I was. This was not a visual limitation after all. Relief washed over me as we made our way to the international concourse.

The rest of the journey went as systematically as you might imagine. With that eight-hour lay-over, I had a lot of time to contemplate why I'd always gotten assistance in the past. The simple answer is fear. There is a big world of “what-if’s” out there. My whole life I've been treated slightly differently from everyone else, whether it be receiving large-print books, having to leave class for Braille or mobility lessons, or being told that I couldn't try out for the hockey team – no matter the situation, I had a lifetime of constant reminders that I am blind and therefore need assistance. But do I?

After a seamless arrival in Bangkok, I headed directly from the airport to the bus station. This involved transferring buses. As I sat on the first bus waiting for it to fill up, I reflected on my experience with buses. Where I grew up, the only buses that rolled through town were yellow school buses. The university I attended was in a city, so bus travel was imperative. I was comfortable riding it with friends, but I was particularly anxious about riding on my own. How could I know where to alight? Buses didn't always announce the stops, and I wouldn't be able to see where I was to know when to signal for a stop. In the decade since then, I've learned to ask the driver to let me know when we arrive at a particular destination. Sometimes they remember to do so.

When we pulled away from the Bangkok airport, I told the lady who took my money where I was heading. Perhaps it is easier doing this in a country where I, the tall blond foreigner, stand out and look helpless regardless of my vision. Indeed, she kindly let me know when it was my time to disembark.

But now I had a new challenge. There I stood, on the side of some street in a part of Bangkok I had never been to, waiting for another bus that I would never recognize. One of my biggest challenges with buses is seeing the numbers; if I see them at all, it's not until the very

minute the bus is in front of me and passing me by. But experience and lack of options has taught me to be bold in these situations. There were a few other people awaiting buses. I approached a man, who luckily understood a little English. After some exchange regarding my destination, he confirmed the number I needed. When that bus came, he notified me of its arrival and even told the driver where I wanted to go. And that was that: scary bus transfer – easy!

Arriving at a crowded bus station where all the signs are in Thai would have been overwhelmingly stressful to me a few years ago. But Korea had prepared me for this part of the journey. I was also alone when I headed off to teach English. It was a calculated sort of alone, however. I specifically chose a school that was large enough to have a system for matriculating instructors and provided a week of training. I had even arranged to fly to Seoul with another teacher so that we would arrive together. But the part that I hadn't planned for was the trip from Seoul to Busan in the south after my training was completed. The school emailed me a train ticket, but the rest I had to negotiate on my own. I arrived at the Seoul train station with all the luggage that a working girl needed for a year. There were some giant marquee signs, but, in accordance with all my fears, the marquees were high in the air and the text was too small for me to see. I had no idea where to go, and I knew that my train was leaving very soon. The panic grew as I looked for anyone who spoke English. Seoul is not the travel hub that Bangkok is, so people aren't as likely to stop and chat with a random foreigner. Finally, in the nick of time, an older lady who used to be an English teacher humored me and helped me find my platform. The lesson here: be bold. People are kind and will likely give help, especially when it is easy to give.

Remember this, I thought, as I negotiated Bangkok's southern bus station. I inquired at various ticket counters where I might find the counter for my destination. They do have signs in English, but the print is quite small. It wasn't long before I had my ticket and was on the cor-

rect bus. Another easy transfer; another victory for my independence.

But the journey was far from over. Instead of dropping me off in town with the rest of the Thais on the bus, which is where I wanted to go, I was instead dropped off at a travel agent outside of town. This is because I was a foreigner and they wanted to help me with onward travel. However, help in this case meant that they wanted to charge me twice the price and make a commission. I declined services from this travel agent, but by now the bus was long gone and the sun had just gone down. Here, I was presented with a new situation. I had to walk a few kilometers into town as it was getting dark. This was made interesting by the fact that I had no idea in which direction the town was. I did, however, know that there was a train station there, so anytime I passed a local person, I asked the direction for the train station. Often, this involved acting out the role of “choo-choo” and making my arm go around in circles like the wheels of a train. That was universally understood, and eventually I found the train station, but I was still not at my final destination.

Because public transportation was not a part of my childhood, I long had a fear of taxis. I can't attribute that fear entirely to low vision. Visually, the problem I have with taxis is that I cannot read the meter and I'm often afraid of being robbed blindly, but most taxi drivers try to rip you off even if you can see. The general anxiety I had with taxis was the overall concept of getting into a car with a complete stranger and trusting that he will take me where I want to go. I finally did this a few times after I'd moved to Phoenix, and I rode in taxis quite a bit on my own in Korea; so luckily, I have mostly overcome that fear. But this next part of my journey involved taking not just any kind of taxi. I was to find a motorcycle taxi, which is common in Thailand. The good thing is that they do not have meters, so that part wasn't a worry. (Negotiating a rate is certainly a lot more challenging

than asking the driver to read to me what the meter says!) I had only been on motorbikes a handful of times, so it was a bit nerve-racking getting onto the back of a bike with my backpack and holding on for dear life as the driver zipped off into the darkness towards the pier.

I was dropped off at the pier where I was able to purchase a boat ticket to Koh Tao, an island off the east coast of the Thai peninsula. It was now nighttime, and so it was pitch black. I had to find the boat and somehow negotiate my way across a plank to the passenger deck. Yes, a plank! As I neared the boat and looked at the void before me, I knew this was impossible. I headed back to the counter where I bought my ticket and tried to explain my situation. She called out, and a man who had been arranging the cargo down below came and took my hand. The difficulty with requesting assistance from people to cross a plank in the dark is that they like to pull you along at a fast pace. My balance with regard to walking across boards is pretty bad in the first place, but keep in mind that now, not only could I not see, but I was trying to do this with a heavy backpack on my shoulders. But I did it!

Once inside the boat, I found a bunk, shoved my pack in the corner and fell asleep. The next morning, I awoke to a sunny calm over a beautiful, tropical island. I had arrived. Alone. Success! This was one small step for my travels, but one giant leap for my confidence. If I can travel independently in a foreign country, what else can I do on my own?

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Tauru Chaw and Christiana Bruchok are ***Two Blind to Ride***, a legally blind couple who plan to ride a tandem bike across the full length of the Americas starting January 2012. Join their adventures and help raise awareness about blindness and the abilities of the blind.