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M. Miles

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ABSTRACT. These two radio ‘interviews’ depict a blind young man talking of his life in an Afghan village and later in town, and how he learnt something about the world, and gained skills to earn his living. They have been slightly revised and updated. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>>* © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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THE BLIND AFGHAN CHILD

Interviewer: Today we are going to hear the story of a young man who was born blind and who grew up in a village. Abdul Ghani, tell us your story.

AG: I am Abdul Ghani son of Abdus Salam. I have been blind from birth, and I am now 28 years old. I am working as a bicycle repair mechanic in this town. I grew up in a village where nobody knew how to teach blind children. By the mercy of Allah my family decided that I should be given the chance to learn a trade.

Once, as a child, I heard my grandmother tell my mother that I should be a beggar when I grew up. I did not know what a beggar was, because I had never

This was part of a series of radio scripts translated into Pushto and broadcast to Afghanistan and North-West Pakistan in 1986, to inform families that their disabled members could find ways of playing a fuller and more interesting part in the life of the community.

seen one. That evening when the family members were all present I asked, "What is a beggar?" From the silence I knew that I had asked an awkward question. If you are blind you listen closely to sounds. I knew that everyone in the room had stopped whatever they were doing. My father said, "My son, why do you ask what a beggar is?" I told my father that someone had said I should be a beggar when I grew up. Then my father was angry. I have never seen a man's face when he is angry, but it sounds as though his face must be twisted and his muscles stiff.

My father said, "No son of Abdus Salam will be a beggar. If Allah has sent you into the world without eyes, then He will give you more skill in your hands and ears. We will find a trade by which you can earn your bread. Never again say the word 'beggar' in this house."

Three days later my father and my uncles left the village. They walked for one day over the hills to the main road, then half a day's travel by bus to the city. My mother told me this later on, when I was older. In the city my father visited many teachers and doctors to ask about any trade or skill that a blind boy could learn. For days he went here and there talking to people without finding what he wanted. Finally he met an old doctor who had travelled abroad. That man had seen a school where blind children were educated and were trained to make baskets and to weave cloth and to repair cane chairs.

My father questioned the old doctor closely about how the blind children were trained. When he came back to the village, my father spoke to the whole family: "We have learnt that it is possible for a blind child to get training so that he has a trade. We did not find a teacher, but we understand the methods that were described to us. We will all take part in teaching Abdul Ghani. He will get his teaching and training right here in this house and in this village." My uncles all agreed with this plan.

Interviewer: Abdul Ghani, how old were you at this time? What had you done up till then?

AG: I was quite young, only 6 or 7 years old. Up to that time I had done nothing. I could feel my way around the house, but my family did not allow me to go outside, for fear that I might hurt myself or break something. I had learnt to express myself and say if I wanted food or toilet, but my family did not often talk to me. Many of the things they said were impossible for me to understand, because I could not see what they were talking about.

Interviewer: So how did you come to understand their words?

AG: My father told me about this later on. When he came back from the city he said to the family, "It is now clear what we should have done right from the

start, when Abdul Ghani was a baby. We have lost a few years, but now I know what to do and we will start today. We must all talk to Abdul Ghani, plainly and clearly, telling him what is happening around the place. He must listen to, or feel with his hand, whatever we are talking about. He must walk in every part of the house and every part of the village. We shall tell him whatever is there, and he shall hear and touch and smell and taste. When mother is making the bread, Abdul Ghani shall feel and taste the flour, the salt, the water. The name of each thing shall be told to him. He shall feel the dough and he shall help to press it. As his mother works, she shall say whatever she is doing.”

My father continued: “Abdul Ghani will come with us when we work in the fields. His brother will take care that he does not bump into things or fall in the ditch while he is walking. Also we will get him a stick with which he can feel the walls and the path. Whatever his stick strikes against, we will tell him what it is and he can feel it with his hand. When the path turns to the left or to the right, we will tell him. Together with him we will count how many steps there are from the house to the corner, from the corner to the bridge, across the bridge and to the field, and so on. If a dog barks or a bird sings, we will tell him the name of that animal and describe how it runs or flies.”

“In this family there are 11 people, and 10 of us have eyes. Whatever we see with so many eyes, the same will be told to Abdul Ghani. When we speak to him, we will first say his name so that he knows we are speaking to him and not to another person. When we say the prayers at the proper times, we will show him what movements and positions we adopt, and he will say the prayers with us.”

Interviewer: Abdul Ghani, how did this work out?

AG: I don't remember much about what happened to start with. It was like a flood of words hitting me. I became confused with being told too many things from every side. Several people started speaking at once. I was taken outside the house and there were many unfamiliar sounds and smells and voices. So I became afraid and tried to cover my ears and face with my hands, to protect myself. Then my uncle Usman understood what the problem was, and he spoke to my father. He told him that my training should go step by step and that they should not tell too many things all at one time. A few things should be told until I understood them, then more things could be told.

My uncle Usman is very kind to me. He wanted to know how the world seemed to me, so he tied a bandage over his own eyes for one whole day, and moved around the house. Then he began to understand some of the problems I faced. It was he who found a long stick for me, of wood that is light but strong,

which I can easily balance in my hand, which tells me where I am along the road.

Later on, when I became more capable of moving about, I used to play a game with my brothers. In the evening when we were at home, we would pretend to be walking from the far end of the village, and we would count the number of steps and describe from memory every sight, sound and smell at each stage on the way home. When I had practised this game, I could remember things that they did not notice, like the sound of hens clucking as we passed one old woman's house, the smell of spices at the grocer's shop, the feel of one loose plank as we walked over the bridge.

Interviewer: So you came to understand everything that your family said?

AG: Not everything! My little sister used to play tricks, like this: she would give me a big orange and a small grapefruit and would ask me which was which. I could not be sure from the size and feel of them, but my nose would tell me which was which. Then she asked, "Which one is yellow?" That I could not tell her, because I cannot tell what is the colour of anything. My uncle Usman tried to explain colour like this: even if two people say exactly the same thing, their voices have a different sound, which is like having a different colour. In the same way, two things may be exactly the same, and feel exactly the same, but the eye can see some difference in that one object is red and the other is black. But I have never seen this.

Interviewer: I would like to know more about how you developed your skills and what advice you would give to a family having a blind child. Will you return next week and tell us more?

AG: I shall be glad to do so.

BLIND YOUNG MAN

Interviewer: Last week we talked with Abdul Ghani son of Abdus Salam, who has been blind from birth. He is now working as a bicycle mechanic. When he was younger, his family decided to help all together in his education and training. Whatever they saw and whatever they were doing, they used to explain it to Abdul Ghani. He would also feel everything with his hands. So he came to understand the world. Abdul Ghani is here again today. Abdul Ghani, how did you come to be a bicycle mechanic?

AG: I did not immediately become a bicycle mechanic. First, I used to help my brothers crop farming in the fields. My father marked out an area and placed rows of small stakes in the ground three metres apart. Pieces of cord were tied to each stake. By using my stick I learnt my way around this area. I knew where to make the ridges of earth for the crop seeds, and I could feel with my stick if weeds were growing. I started with a very small plot of land. I ploughed and shaped the ridges and furrows and planted seeds. Then my father put stakes and cords over a larger area. To tell the direction from where I stood, I asked for the cords to be tied at different levels on the stakes, some higher and some lower and some running diagonally. By tapping the cords with my stick I could understand where I was and I knew what work to do in each place.

Interviewer: Did you meet with any problems?

AG: Of course, I did not learn all this in one day! It took a lot of hard work. Often I stumbled and fell down. Once I broke my wrist in falling. Then my grandmother said to the family, “Why are you forcing the boy to work in the fields? Now he has injured himself. If it was the will of Allah for Abdul Ghani to be a farmer, he would have been born with eyes in his head.” This caused a great argument in the family. Finally my uncle Usman said, “Nobody is forcing the boy to work. Nor does religion say that the blind person must not work. It is a matter of choice. What does the boy himself say?” Then I took courage. I told my family that I wanted to work, and nobody in the world should stop me working.

Interviewer: What did the other people in your village think?

AG: In the early days I heard several different views. Sometimes people give their views when I am present, as if I were not there or as if I were a child. Then they are surprised when I speak for myself! Some people used to laugh when they saw me tapping the cords to find my way around my piece of land. They did not think I could grow anything.

I asked the names of those people. My brothers told me the names, and they wanted to go and pick a quarrel with those people. But I said, “No, leave it to me.” After I had learnt to farm my land, when harvest came I sent a gift of my crops to every person who had not believed that I could grow anything.

Interviewer: Well done! And what did they do?

AG: They gave a feast in my honour! They announced to the elders of the village that Abdul Ghani son of Abdus Salam has become a farmer who pro-

duces crops and gives out gifts. But I said to them, "Let us give praise only to Allah. By the will of Allah, I was born without sight. My father and mother and uncles and brothers have all helped, and by the mercy of Allah I am now able to work."

Once, some boys altered the cords on the stakes, to confuse me. If you are blind, you learn to tell your direction by several ways. I feel the sun on my face. I hear the crows cawing in a clump of trees. I feel the direction of the wind. Thus I knew very soon that somebody had altered the cords. My brothers caught those boys and wanted to beat them very hard. But I said, "What use is it to me if they are beaten? Tell me, have they been to school and can they read?" Two of them could read. "Very well", I said, "You will come every day in the evening and read to me from your schoolbooks. I will learn more about the world, about my country and my people." So I had no more trouble from the boys, because I had saved them from a beating. They read to me everything that was in their books.

Interviewer: Is that how you now come to be working here in the town?

AG: My uncle Usman saw that I wished to learn more, so again the family had a long discussion about what I should do. My father and uncles again made a journey to the city and I went with them, to ask about work for blind people.

Interviewer: What was wrong with farming? You learnt how to do that work and to grow crops.

AG: Yes, and still now I have a small garden in my uncle's house in this town, in which I grow vegetables. But my father said, "The world is changing. Up to now we have lived like our grandfathers and great grandfathers. But for our sons and grandsons, life may be different. Many will go to the towns and cities. They will see and do things that were never seen or even thought of. So it is good for Abdul Ghani to learn some sort of modern trade. After twenty years have passed, all our neighbours will be ploughing with tractors, but it will be hard for a blind man to drive a tractor. Let us find a modern trade, so that he will be able to earn his bread throughout his life.

Many things were suggested. I believe now that I could have learnt any of those things. In the Western countries, blind people operate computers and the most advanced equipment. There have been teachers and professors and politicians who were blind. But I am an ordinary person and I simply want to earn my bread in an ordinary way. In one of the books read to me by the schoolboys there was a chapter about bicycles. The bicycle is the transport of the ordinary man. So I said to my family, "Let me learn to be a bicycle mechanic. This work

can be done sitting in one place. The tools are not expensive. I will learn the shape of every part, and how each part is fixed.”

So I sat together with my uncle Usman, taking an old bicycle to pieces and putting it together again. It was harder than I expected. I had felt bicycles with my hands, but I did not know that there were pieces hidden inside. There are ball bearings inside the moving parts. There are tubes inside each tyre. It took me several months to learn how to do this work. For example, when the pedal of a bicycle is jammed and will not turn, I unscrew the pedal. I have many small wooden trays arranged on the floor by my side. In one of them I have pliers. In another box I have spanners. In another I have screwdrivers. When I take the pedal to pieces, I lay out the pieces in order, counting them as I do so. By this means, when I have cleaned and adjusted and oiled the pedal, I put it together again, counting every piece so that I do not miss out any ball bearings, nuts or washers.

People who have brought their bicycles to me for repair have found that my work is good. They have told their families. So I have become well known in this town. Now I have gone into partnership with another young man, whose legs are paralysed. He sits on a trolley and works with his hands. We have plenty of repair work to do. As we sit in this place every day by the roadside, we talk to a lot of people and learn about whatever is new in the town. This way, we also keep up with anything else that may need repair. We have begun to repair other small machinery because people know that we have the skill and patience and tools to do this.

Interviewer: Abdul Ghani, whenever my bicycle needs repair, I will certainly bring it to you!