

Dans le Noir

There is a restaurant in London where dinner is served in the dark. Not dim light or occasional infrequent light, but absolute pitch black darkness. Apparently the aim is twofold; to better appreciate the quality of the food as the taste is all it can be judged by, and to appreciate life as a blind person. It was for the latter of these two reasons that a Sri Lankan medical retina colleague at Moorfields arranged for a group of us to attend this restaurant one evening after work. I had experienced on quite a number of occasions patients complaining that I "didn't understand what it's like at all" after I had attempted some medical school style empathy. I thought, therefore, that if I went and had dinner in this restaurant I could then respond "well in fact, I had massively overpriced food in the dark one evening for fun so yes in fact I know exactly what it's like."

That evening was a typical Moorfields evening in that clinic finished an hour and a half late and we had to run to the restaurant straight from the hospital. My Chinese friend and his wife had already been escorted into the dark room and the receptionist explained, after making us lock up anything that was even vaguely luminous into special lockers, that the waiters were "actual blind people" who were "fully adapted to functioning in the dark." I scoffed. Very few blind people actually have no vision whatsoever, I told myself, so this experience would be as artificial for them as it would be for us. Well, I told the group, not just myself, actually.

I set myself a challenge to eat my three courses and drink my wine flawlessly although things were not quite as easy as I thought they would be. The darkness was absolute. People were talking at volumes much higher than usual. Well either that or I was already starting to develop superhero style heightened senses. Varuni, my Sri Lankan friend, had

not met the Chinese fellow's wife before and meeting someone for the first time without the intricacies of body language and facial expression was interestingly awkward for both. Well, it was possibly that, or the fact that everyone around the table was listening.

The waiter arrived and told us not to move around the room at all as any accidents were his responsibility. The first course was served and although it was difficult to eat I managed after a fashion and announced this victory rather prematurely, as it then fell to me to pour the hideously overpriced wine. Determined not to spill a single drop of this precious fluid I decided the best way of ensuring the level in the glass was by holding my finger on the inside and stopping the pouring action when I felt the coldness of the fluid. I reasoned my finger was clean and that alcohol was a disinfectant of sorts so it all should work out okay. It did until the last glass, at which point I lost control. I only knew of this when I sat down and felt a cold wet sensation in my groin and worked out that I had created a water table of wine with a pool on the table that was slowly draining over the edge closest to me in a mini waterfall down into my crotch. I was glad at that point that I had black trousers on.

The main course was tasty and, although there didn't seem much of it, the time it took to consume was slightly greater than that of a normal meal. I heard my father's voice from deep inside my head telling me the reason it was dark was that they could serve you a lot less food and you wouldn't notice. Pushing him away for the moment we discussed the fact that we were getting better adapted to pitch black conditions although communication was hilariously ineffective as nobody was really sure who was talking to whom and all discussion became a group discussion of sorts. Every so often a glass could be heard breaking elsewhere and the atmosphere was increasingly riotous.

Not so much because of the wine I suppose as I had wasted a fair portion by pouring it all over the table. The general consensus was that we could all get used to being blind as we were already beginning to adapt.

Unfortunately, this was very premature as when dessert arrived I found to my horror that my spoon came into contact with precisely nothing and my bowl was empty. I called the waiter but after an embarrassing exchange it turned out I had been served dessert but had inadvertently pushed it all onto the table top. Evidently there was quite a lot of liquid as part of the dessert as I felt it shortly afterwards on my legs. I was very happy that nobody else could see this mess and tried as best I could to eat what remained directly from the table top. Luckily, attention was drawn away from my faux pas by the waiter telling off my Irish colleague for moving around the table without his permission.

After dinner ended we were introduced to our waiter with the light on and to my surprise he was indeed a person with no perception of light (NPL) vision. He explained how he had retinopathy of prematurity which had resulted in total blindness. Waiting for a taxi outside the restaurant I spied him smoking a cigarette and he performed all the intricate steps of lighting it in windy rainy conditions with his eyes closed the whole time and I looked at him with respect. I who had poured wine all over my legs and pushed my dessert onto the table top.

So what did I learn that evening apart from how nice it is to have dinner with fellow retina colleagues? It would be shallow and superficial to say I had a newfound understanding of the difficult lives blind people lead until that epiphanous evening. I did learn, however, that whereas I felt more comfortable performing embarrassing mistakes because all my colleagues were unable to see me fail at simple tasks, the blind are scrutinised in public and have

no such luxury. I learnt how much communication is dependent on body language and that there was no such thing as a private conversation when everyone is concentrating so much on listening to the world around them. I learnt how quirky restaurants with a single special selling point could quadruple their profit margin on food and wine. I learnt that were I to become blind I would probably lose quite a bit of weight though my dry cleaning bill would increase. But perhaps more important than any of this, I learnt how resilient the human spirit is to something as overwhelming as blindness and even under the most trying and adverse of conditions it does

not allow us as a species to give up bad habits such as smoking, and that flawless lighting of the cigarette in the wintry cold and rain by a blind person in strong wind should give us hope as well as despair.

Read more from Gwyn Williams in his book about the comedic misadventures of an ophthalmologist in training *The Last House Officer*, available from Amazon UK

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