Torch Trust

Sight Loss 101.

In conversation with Mike Townsend.

Hello I'm Tim Jeffery, and after many years working as a leader in the charity sector I've recently been appointed as Chief Executive of Torch Trust which is a charity for blind and partially sighted people and so here I am a sighted person with very little experience of sight loss leading a charity whose main purpose is entirely focused on people with visual impairment so one of my first tasks is to develop a better appreciation of what it's like to be blind or to be losing your sight and what better way than to do that but to have conversations with a variety of people who've got different first-hand experience of visual impairment. Now as all this is happening during lockdown I can't actually go out and meet folk face to face to have those conversations so I'm having to do it remotely via Zoom. I suspect though that I'm not the only person who wants to learn more about what life is like with sight loss so I thought why don't I record these conversations and put them out as a podcast series for others to enjoy with me.

So welcome to Sight Loss 101!

Today I have the great pleasure of talking with Mike Townsend who incidentally is the chair of the board of Torch Trust.

Mike thank you so much for agreeing to do this. Mike can you give me a kind of a brief biography of your life and particularly how sight loss and blindness has figured in that?

Oh, a brief biography... I've got many a long year Tim but I lost my sight seriously when I was eight years old. I'd started to work as a blind child learning maths and reading and all the funny squiggles that sighted people look at but then I did have trouble with my eyes and they did want to improve them so I underwent an operation and unfortunately the operation I've discovered since was experimental and the experiment failed and so when I was eight years old the sight went in one of my eyes and as so often happens with eye issues it can then sympathetically (not a very good word for the process) make the other eye go bad as well, so I lost the sight in the other eye. So I had to go off to a boarding school for blind and partially sighted children and it was an absolutely dreadful place, it was horrendous and well it was proved later that there were things going wrong over embezzling of funds and also with the children it was a bad place but when I got there I knew I had to learn braille to communicate and read and you know the squiggles were no longer available to me so whilst I was on my back in hospital hoping that my sight would come back I learned to really get up to speed with braille and then I went to this school in Bristol and I roared through the books and I learned to read very easily and I also realized I had to be able to communicate with these funny sighted people who couldn't read braille so at nine years old went to a typing class and with these 18–19 year old secretaries and things and the mischievous young monkey learning to type on the old clattery typewriters but some teachers at the school saw some benefit and ability I think in me.

In my determination I realized that the only way I could get away from this school was bypassing this exam to go to this better school, a nice place, and I had to work to get past this exam entrance exam scholarship and things and they helped me and I do believe looking back that they were Christians but they did help me and encouraged me so at the age of 11 I took that examination having spent most of my school year with 16 and 15 year olds and up in the top classes of the school and praise God although I didn't say it at the time I actually got past the exam only seven out of a thousand probably passed the exam each year so it was a big change and going to Worcester College for the Blind I've said it's like going from hell to heaven because I went out of this dreadful school to an absolutely wonderful school and I got the best education I think I could ever have had and it was, they called it, the school for blind sons of gentlemen, well I'm afraid my mother was a single mother not a gentleman at all but she was a very far-sighted woman and this is a piece of advice that I do give to everybody involved with particularly bringing up blind children, she knew that I had to survive in a sighted world and look after myself and so when I was nine she said 'Mick', don't you dare call me it, but she said 'Mickey, you've got to cook the dinner tonight' and I said 'what what' and I cooked steaklets with peas some Birdseye frozen peas and mashed potatoes and she loved them and I must say they were tasty. And so do make sure that independence is put in to the upbringing of blind and partially sighted children.

I was talking to someone whose nephew just lost his sight the other day, an eight-year-old. I said 'that's the same age that I lost it, make sure that he is brought up to learn braille.' That guy is a doctor; he said to me 'we don't want braille these days when we've got speech.'

I said 'no, 90% of those who are in successful employment as blind people use braille, so let him learn braille, and the younger the better. And secondly, make sure that he learns to be independent, don't shield him from the things of life and the things that he needs to do.'

So I succeeded. It was a rough time because my parents split up and my father was a violent man but I suppose I was relatively shielded from that in going to a boarding school and it was a wonderful school. Last year at school I thought the best thing in life was to make a load of money so I thought I would go and study economics and I applied to the London School of Economics and I also applied to Cambridge and anyway I got accepted in both places and I actually chose to go to the London School of Economics.

But in that last year I thought now what is life all about? I'd rather rejected Christianity because I'd been a choir boy, sung the Psalms and everything in Latin and all that, but it meant nothing to me, and so during the teenage years I rather rejected Christianity but then I began to realise that there could be more to life than just getting money and getting on, and a friend of mine was a Christian.

He said he knew Jesus and he said to me

‘You know Jesus helps me day by day.’

And I said ‘well, Peter, you know it doesn't work for me.’

But as I saw it, the way he lived, I could see that God did make a difference in the real issues that he faced. And he left a book in braille on the table – it was borrowed from Torch Trust for the Blind – and it was a book called Peace with God by Billy Graham, and I opened the book up and it said this is designed to tell non-Christians what Christianity really is about. Now I couldn't get much out of Peter, he wouldn't tell me much about it, but I read the book and I realised that actually the reason I didn't know God is because I was cut off from God because he is perfect and I’m not and I fail in all sorts of ways and the only way in which the gap can be bridged is by Jesus and his death on the cross and his shed blood for me and that would remove the barrier. And I said to Peter roughly that and I said ‘is that what it's about?'

He said ‘I couldn't have put it better, Mike.’

Now being a bit of a scientist (I was a physicist, I did succeed in lots of things at school and physics was one of them) I thought, well okay there's this barrier, is it going to go if I commit myself to God and am I going to get in touch with God? And I don't think many people have as powerful an experience as the experience I had. It was a Friday night and I said to God ‘I know that I’m cut off from you but you're perfect I’m not. I realise that I’m doing my best but I’m not going to make it am I? Please take away the barrier of my failure and my sin, take it away through the blood of Jesus Christ.’

And all I can say is the barrier went and I felt an overwhelming presence of God fill the room and fill my body and fill my spirit.

I’ve never ever doubted God because of that. I’ve experienced God in different ways down through life but that overwhelming first experience of the barrier going has been with me. My testimony is not historic it happens now. I can testify to things that God has done this week for me to his glory but I can always look back on that time. Anyway people said to me ‘well Mike now you've become a ‘Christian’ you don't want to go off to that place London School of Economics.’

I said ‘yes I do’.

But they said ‘oh, it'll ruin your faith, it'll fail.’

And I say well if it's that easily ruined let it be ruined, and I went off.

It was a place I learned a lot. I was in London, I got a good degree, I also was able to witness and be a Christian, living with a lot of hard-bitten people, people on drugs, people who hated Christianity, Atheists, Communists, but God helped us and I had some friends who came to know Jesus as a result of what we were doing there, and I was in a place where people like Dr Martin Lloyd-Jones, Jim Packer, Alex Matia, John Stott, I could go and talk with them, have lunch with them, find out, you know, the fundamentals of Christianity, and so not only did I get a good education but I got a good spiritual foundation. So I’m rattling on here Tim.

Well, Mike, it's fantastic. I don't want to interrupt but we probably need to speed up just a little bit or otherwise any listeners that have got this far will be switching off soon. But I’m finding it fascinating. It's always beautiful to hear somebody's life story and testimony of how God has worked in them, so, yeah, keep going.

Okay. So I was doing a good degree in economics and the last year I had to do economic stats and I could use one of these new-fangled things called a computer. So I thought wow, everyone else is using these electronic calculators, bang bang bang bang bang, and they took three days to put in their, what are called, multiple regressions. I was doing some very deep detailed stats but I could punch up some cards and run them through this computery thing, and in three seconds I get my results so I could change the patterns and the stats. They went three days doing it whilst I would get another one turned around two or three times a day, and I thought wow this is the future, computers are the future.

And I had two options leaving university, one was to become an investment banker in Paris. I got offered a place there and maybe I should have taken it because investment bankers do very well don't they, and thinking about my original aim to make a load of money, but I had a new guide dog. I loved my guide dog. He was called Beatle and he was called Beatle because he was paid for by the Beatles, yeah yeah yeah, you remember them? So I thought if I went to Paris to work then I could take my dog there but I could never bring him back into Britain. There were quarantine arrangements then and so if it didn't work out, if I didn't like it, then I’d have to leave my dog in France and go and try and get another one and so forth. So I took the other option. I was offered, to be a trainee computer programmer at British Gas, and I took that job in a big place in the West Midlands in Solihull, and I learned the programming and all my computing alongside sighted people, that's quite a novelty in those days. And I got braille programs printed out by the full stop on the big line printers that used to print out the gas bills, well they could print out my braille scripts as well, and I progressed through that and I worked my way up and I learned quite a lot there at the Gas Board, it was great. Braille again was key and I became a systems analyst, and they used to send me and the dog out to the really awkward old gas people that didn't want to change their jobs because of those new-fangled computers and they wouldn’t speak to any computer people but I’d walk in with Beatle and they'd smile and I’d get them chatting and I’d find all the information I needed out of them, so I got all the awkward jobs. And then I had a wonderful job, my job was, having got the results, I had to write a program to control the digging of holes across the whole of the West Midlands. It worked and we were able to control those holes.

But God was blessing me through church work as well and I praise God that I went to a church where it was a church where people had opportunity. It wasn't a church that was very rigid, so if you wanted to share something that God had laid on your heart or some teaching, you could just get up and do it. Thanks to the knowledge I’d gained in London I used to preach and take services all across the West Midlands, about 40 to 50 churches across the West Midlands. I’d go and preach and take services and Bible studies. I ran youth groups there and had great fun with the youngsters and things. So that was a real growth time but I did realise that Torch Trust was a bit old-fashioned, everything was done by hand and handcrafted and it also needed a bit of leadership to bring it in to the 20th Century.

I went and I helped to computerise the processes, both looking after the clients and everyone involved and then we automated the production of braille and large print and I was involved in writing the software and developing those processes within Torch. I also ran the Torch group in Birmingham, the fellowship group, and was very keen to get that concept rolled out all across the UK so I was very involved in the fellowship group development during the last half of last century and so that was very exciting, so my areas of work were in the leadership of Torch, promoting Torch, the computerisation and the technology and also the development of the fellowship groups and also because of other roles I had I was a very international person. I was on the European Blind Union and I also was on the Board for many a long year of RNIB and Guide Dogs, the two key charities that run things for blind people in the UK. So I got a lot of experience in running charities big and small and my consultancy work with Microsoft and Google and Apple and more recently with Amazon, to try and help them to understand what it's like not to be a real whiz kid at technology but to be blind or partially sighted or just not understanding the jolly things very well. To develop ways of working with technology that means that actually a lot of us can use them now and not just blind and partially sighted people but older people too and even some of the things I’ve done have actually helped like the doctor I was talking to about his son whose nephew had lost his sight, I helped him to understand even something that he couldn't make, so I’ve been involved in technology and I’ve been an advisor to the World Blind Union and all of these technology organizations, so that's my bag.

That's amazing. That's a very rich story.

As I have got to know you over the last months and worked with you a little it amazes me some of the things that you're able to do as a sighted person.

I am just amazed at some of the ways in which you were able to navigate life and and do things so well.

Are there things that frustrate you about your visual impairment, about being blind? What are those? What should I know about what frustrates you?

So there's not a lot really that frustrates me, Tim, about being blind.

I’m a world traveller. I’ve been to 130 countries. I’ve got my wife [Edith] with me who describes everywhere, and I really wear her out, but she gets a bit lost if she's not with me when she's visiting somewhere, she starts describing it to people!

So I do miss out, I do remember seeing views before I was eight, like hills and lakes and forests and also faces and pictures I used to love.

I used to paint and I became a sculptor afterwards. I’ve done sculptures, there's one of my sculptures in the Birmingham Museum but I suppose I miss seeing things like that. But I was talking with a friend the other day about the most important things. Some people say 'oh, you must want your sight back.' Well, I don't particularly. That may sound seem rather strange because I do very well. In fact I do better than most without it, so okay, I do get very frustrated when people treat you like an idiot. I do have a PhD and when start talking to me as if I’m right on the bottom rank of understanding stuff I find that very frustrating.

I do find it frustrating when people ignore the standards for making things accessible and so things that I should be able to do on the web they've made inaccessible because of this crazy way that they've done it. That annoys me and I do get upset if people talk to others about me when I’m there. There's that cliché ‘does he take sugar?’

‘No I don't!’

So if people sort of by-pass you that does frustrate me. But I was talking to another friend and she's not worried about her sight either. We function and have done exceedingly well as totally blind people. Now, there was a lady I met in California doing some work on computers. She was blind and she had a teenage daughter and she was working very well with Jaws [the accessibility app for computers] and looking after her daughter extremely well, despite being a single lady.

Unfortunately when I went back a year or so later she'd gone to pieces.

She said 'Mike, I’ve got my sight back'

'Oh yeh, great, great.'

'But I can't cope!'

And I said ‘oh, what's the problem?’

‘Well I can't read books like I used to, my daughter runs amok all around me, I can't hold the job down, I just can't see what's going on on the computer.’

And I said ‘well’ – and God really I think put this into my mind – ‘go back to doing the things that you did the blind way, use Jaws, control your daughter in the way you used to, look after your kitchen in the way you used to, and maybe sight can help as a supplement.’

And then I went back a year later and she was back on top of it. She says ‘Mike, that was the best advice you could ever have given me and it's all working now’.

So, Mike, on the other side of the frustration coin I wonder what you feel are the kind of particular gifts that being blind has brought to you?

I suppose we have an understanding of a lot of situations. I don't get distracted by a lot of visual stuff so when I’m concentrating on things probably I might concentrate a bit more. However, if it's a boring sermon or something I’m liable to go to sleep because visual stimulation for you guys can keep you going. So that's why I have my little braille machine sometimes and if you see me flicking through it during a boring service that's what I’m doing, keeping myself going. Things like that they can be frustrating. And the gifts, yeah, I can listen to a document at 600 words a minute and take it in and understand it and structure it in my brain because I believe that the way I was educated, non-visually, it built different ways of processing stuff inside your head and so, therefore, I can hold things structurally very well in my head and I can structure things in my brain. I can give a whole lecture without notes even.

Wow.

That's an advantage.

I think I’ve got a good 3-D visualization; for example we've got a manor house we used to train blind people in. I could understand where every piece of that was just by having walked around it, whereas Edith could not imagine what was through a solid wall. I could say ‘oh, no that room’s further down that level.’

So I can visualize without actually seeing.

I don't know what other advantages there are… I suppose as I go in with my guide dog there's a wow factor like with those gas men!

That's fantastic, but I wonder you mentioned then something about what other people say to you.

I wonder if there are particular things that sighted people tend to say that frustrates you or that you particularly kind of struggle with?

Okay, so this is for all disabled people really, the words that you use. I do not mind if you say ‘did you watch television last night?’ or ‘did you see this or whatever?’

I don't mind but I have picked up that the survey done by Scope shows that 75% of people are reluctant to talk to disabled people because they might use the wrong words, and I find it very frustrating if people struggle around with the words. Just talk! Communication is much more important than getting the right words. Now some blind and partially sighted people get upset about them and I think you should be sensitive to that if you pick it up, but just talk, communicate. Don't worry about it!

Thank you. Mike, you've mentioned several times and it comes out of you in so many ways about you being a strong Christian. I wonder as you reflect back on your life how being a Christian helps you to deal with your blindness, with all the many challenges that's brought. How has your Christian faith helped you in that process?

So I lost my sight when I was eight and I wasn't a Christian, so I’ve been a Christian as a blind person so I don't really know that being a Christian has helped me as a blind person particularly, it's just helped me as a person.

When I first became a Christian, last year of school, I could not get a Bible. I could get bits of it but I couldn't get the whole Bible and it was huge so that was a frustration. But I did get given an old King James version then by a lady and I read it one volume a week. I realized that having missed out on Sunday School and so forth I was really behind on the knowledge of the Bible so I read a volume a week and God fed it into my head. Praise God for that. So God has used the tools that I use like braille and computers and things but I think being a Christian helps you with all the traumas of life and the joys of life. Edith and I often reflect on how we would cope with certain situations if we didn't know Jesus. Edith went through breast cancer back now 18 years ago. I don't know how we'd have coped with that without knowing God. There have been other ups and downs in life but the one thing that God does promise us is that he's with us. It doesn't take away the problems although there are answers to prayer and I can really tell you about a lot of a number about those but he's with us and that's the most important thing to me as a Christian. Not the theology or the theories or anything like that, not even the church although that's important and I’m a church leader. No, it's that God is with me. Like my friend Pete said right at the start of my Christian journey. I could see it made a difference to him and I know it makes a difference to me.

Mike, thank you, this has been a fascinating and beautiful conversation. Bless you for being willing to open up in that way and thank you on my behalf and for whoever else ends up listening to this.

Thank you.

Bless you.

Thank you for joining us in Sight Loss 101.

For more information on Torch call 01858 438260.