

Blindness is just another country to see



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--Janie Dodson

World traveler Janie Dodson never packed fear into her suitcase when she set out in life. With one foot firmly planted in Blackstone, where she taught school for 42 years, the other foot roamed the earth: Europe three times, South America, Australia, Alaska, Hawaii...Miss Dodson wanted to see every thing there was to see and being alone never stopped her.

To teach, to travel, to see...these were the loves of Miss Dodson. And everybody she taught love her back. Once introduced as a teacher who has “taught everybody in Blackstone who is less than 100-years-old,” Miss Dodson saw the faces of her fourth grade students—now grown up—everywhere in town.

Then suddenly in 1983 her passport to travel abroad and even at home was taken away.

“Something seemed strange in church that morning but I thought no more about it. That afternoon I put my hand over my left eye and I couldn’t see out of my right eye!”

The next day an eye specialist told her she had a degenerative disease of her central vision and that there was no cure. For the next five years her vision continued to get worse until in 1987 she was declared legally blind. In August of that year, she drove her car through the school grounds where she taught for most of her life (she only lived a block from school). Then she parked her car for the last time.

She stood at the gate of a strange country, one she had never studied a map for. It wasn’t scary: “It was traumatic! For a whole

year I was depressed...I just didn’t live that year,” she recalled.

Her impairment had made simple acts like walking difficult because everything was waving like a TV image gone mad. The house she lived in for 41 years became a foreign land. She couldn’t even operate the stove, write a check, and forget about reading letters or the Bible.

But there were guides she found out, to help her through the transition from light to darkness and then to light again. She talks of Dr. Epes Harris, who died in 1988, and his minister Rev. Charles Hoffler with great affection. The support of these two men and her friends gradually brought her through, she said.

The memory of her beloved doctor was not to be erased either. Next to her phone was an antique school slate that her father had used over 100 years ago. Written in letters, which she couldn't read, was Dr. Epes Harris and his phone number.

But Miss Dodson was a teacher, so she began to teach herself. "I've learned to cope with so many things," she said, drawing on her teaching and travel experience. And, after all, traveling alone was something she was used to. It would just take more courage now than she had ever needed before.

The first step on her journey was the kitchen. "I'll never forget when I found out how to turn the oven on," she said. Her voice still carried the excitement of the discovery. And she got up to demonstrate with a flashlight and magnifying glass, which she bent over until her face was within a hand's breadth of the gauge.

And like any traveler, her mistakes and upsets have become part of the adventure. "And then I almost burned the place up the first time because I let something in the oven while it was on." Unable to see anything but the dim contour of the flaming pan, she dragged it out and over the country to the sink and put water on it. She could cope, she found out.

And she could still laugh. One of her funniest experiences was when she put toothpaste on her face thinking it was face cream. And she said she never knows when her ear rings are mismatched. But it was these little unplanned events that made traveling so much fun.

But she still couldn't read. That is, until last year when she acquired a reading machine, which was now a major appliance in her life. "I tend to my business on this machine," she said proudly. Next to the monitor were her necessities: a 50 year-old dictionary, a Bible, and she demonstrated how she could write checks and read recipes and cooking directions. "When I write a letter I can see enough to stay in the lines, then I put it in my machine to correct the mistakes." As she wrote, the image on the screen was blown up 45 times its original size.

And she could still travel. "At first I just did without. I wouldn't ask people to help. But now I work out my trips. I go to get my hair done tomorrow and my beauty operaot gets me. And because I can walk down the Main Street I work out all the things I can do there and I end up at the bank and call my neighbor to come for me...I'm so thankful for life and what I can do," she said. Her constant smile proved this as much as her words.

"When spring comes I'm going to try to cross the street," she said looking forward to conquering this barrier of stubborn fear. Confidence was her friend now.

She laughed at what was once a cause for tears. She said she still catches herself going to the door with the idea of driving somewhere.

"I say to myself, Now you know, Janie, you can't drive that car."