



And There Was Light

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With today's sermon, I sketch the life of a great soul, Jacques Lusseyran. Born in 1924, in Paris, the "City of Light", he lost his eyesight at an early age. Yet he never lost the inner light that continued to shine for him and to guide him in his living. I strongly recommend Lusseyran's autobiography, *And There Was Light*, which describes the first twenty years of his life.

When the Nazis occupied France, and Lusseyran was only sixteen, he became the center of a youth-based movement of resistance. He handled the delicate and dangerous work of recruiting new volunteers with gifts of empathy and emotional intelligence, the same gifts that would allow him to survive his eventual betrayal, incarceration at the Buchenwald concentration camp.

As a child, Lusseyran was blessed with a comfortable home, and two parents who were devoted to him. Though he had his share of sadness and struggle, he was shielded from the duplicity and evil in the wider world until much later. He writes,

When I think of my childhood, I still feel the sense of warmth above me, behind me, and around me. (6)

He was always fascinated with light, which seemed

not like the flow of water, but something more fleeting and numberless, for its source was everywhere ... Radiance multiplied, reflected itself ... became part of me. (10)

Lusseyran was blinded at the age of seven, in an accident at school. As the children were rushing out for recess, one of them knocked him down. He fell and struck the corner of a desk, and the impact forced his eyeglasses into the soft tissue of his eyes. Both of them had to be removed.

The experience was life-changing but not catastrophic. Lusseyran credits the resilience of youth, and his still-growing body,

infinitely supple, capable of making just the movement the situation calls for ... ready to settle with life as it is, ready to say yes to it. And the greatest physical miracles can follow from this acceptance. (14)

At first, Lusseyran tried to adjust to his condition. Lacking the use of his eyes, his movements were tentative and clumsy. Then something shifted for him. It had to do with “where he looked”, he said, and he started looking

not at things but at a world closer to myself ... Immediately, the substance of the universe drew together, redefined and peopled itself anew. I was aware of a radiance emanating from a place I knew nothing about, a place which might as well have been outside me as within. But radiance was there, or, to put it more precisely, light. It was a fact, for light was there. (16-17)

This experience of an inner light was strange to Lusseyran. But he came to know it as a trustworthy guide to the world around him, as well as within him:

Being blind was not at all as I imagined it; nor was it as the people around me seemed to think it. They told me that to be blind meant not to see. Yet how was I to believe them when I saw? (15)

The light could fade for Lusseyran, when he became impatient or angry or afraid. Thus at a young age he learned to be peaceful inside. He learned the power of love that drives out fear.

When people lose their eyesight, they tend to compensate with the other senses such as hearing, touch and smell. This was true for Lusseyran, who felt that he was really hearing, really touching, really tasting the world for the first time:

It was as though my accident had thrown my head against the humming heart of things, and this heart never stopped beating. (23)

He had to re-learn the use of his body. Whereas before, the eyes took the measure of an object, now the hands and fingers worked in independent ways:

At first my hands refused to obey ... fortunately, before long I realized that instead of becoming useless they were learning to be wise. (26)

The world itself behaved differently now, without the mediation of eyesight.

Being blind I thought I should have to go out to meet things, but I found that they came to meet me instead.

Encountering an apple,

I didn't even know if I was touching it or it was touching me. As I became part of the apple, the apple became part of me. And that was how I came to understand the existence of things. (27)

Lusseyran's parents took his discoveries seriously. They did not want to send him away to a special school. They advocated for him in the regular school system where he sat among his peers, surrounded by Braille books and a special typewriter. A gifted student, he aspired to be a teacher someday.

Lusseyran had a way with people. Not limited by his eyes, he could see inside them. He made many friends, including a few very close ones with whom he shared everything about his life.

Lusseyran describes how he and his friend Jean would hike in the woods and mountains. Jean provided a pair of eyes. They would communicate by subtle signals of touch.

Speaking of Jean, Lusseyran writes,

Comparing my world with his, [Jean] found that his held fewer pictures and not nearly as many colors ...he used to say, 'which one of us two is blind?' That is why when I asked him to see, he was willing and really looked ... and when my turn came to say, 'I have seen the forest, I see the sun setting', he believed me. (91)

Life changed drastically when the Nazis invaded France, occupying the North and creating a puppet government in the South. Lusseyran sensed the grinding fear and deprivation that sucked the life out of the people in the city. They avoided going out in public. They stopped writing letters. There many rumors, but a lack of solid information. Nobody knew who to trust. Food and fuel were exported or diverted to the German army. There was no coal for heating in winter. Lusseyran writes:

Paris under the Occupation looked to me as if she were praying. She seemed to be calling on someone, but hers was a voiceless cry. (135)

It was the youth of the country who heard and responded to this cry. Imagine being a teen once again: your strong body, your emerging self, your ideals, everything about you aching to engage with life. As yet, you have no job, no house, no kids, no debts, no job to protect – all those things which the authorities could use as leverage to control you, as an adult. It's no coincidence that four-fifths of the Resistance in France was the work of people under the age of thirty.

A bus driver told Lusseyran how lucky he was to be blind; the he'd never have to serve in the military. But Lusseyran knew that France was his country too, and this was his war. He knew there must be a way for him to fight it.

On his daily walk to school, Lusseyran would be joined by one, two, several classmates. Pretty soon it would be a procession with him in the center. No topic was taboo in their conversations, except schoolwork. The students gave voice to the malaise around them, and their refusal to submit:

Let people be silent if they were able to go on living without speaking out. We were incapable of it ... In spite of everything we were going to give life a try. (146)

Filled with commitment and bravado, they did not know where to begin. It was their fortune to have a history teacher who kept them after class each day for additional lessons. To them he gave a full account of what was happening in Europe, the history of the nations involved, and where the conflict was headed. "Gentlemen", he said, "I ask you to listen to me, not to obey me. This land will surely perish if everyone obeys". (139)

It was here that Lusseyran had a glimmer of his calling. He could gather and propagate truth, at a time when reality was being fabricated with propaganda and rumors and innuendo. Where people kept quiet to maintain a status quo that would certainly destroy them.

Lusseyran confided his dream to his closest friends, and they confided in theirs. 52 schoolboys committed to be part of a network of resistance, to be named *Volontaires de la Liberté*, Volunteers of Liberty.

Within a year, this network had grown to 600 members. They distributed a newspaper, just a bulletin of two pages. Lusseyran was given sole authority to recruit volunteers, and to examine those who were sent to him, to discern whether they could be trusted. He could tell if they had something to hide, in the sound of their voices, or a thousand other non-visual cues, or the simple intuition that something wasn't quite right.

At the same time, Lusseyran maintained a grueling academic schedule in an exclusive upper track. Not many of these students would join his network, for all the typical reasons: apathy, denial and fear. What disturbed him more were the collaborators:

They symbolized the fact that Hitler could count cowardice without a country and without boundaries ... It was enough to cast a few handfuls of fear to windward in order to gather in the next season's harvest of treason and torture. (193)

Lusseyran was on track for his teaching career until the Vichy government threw up a roadblock. They issued a decree that specified the physical requirements for jobs in the public sector. People with disabilities, including blindness, would be excluded. Lusseyran noted the irony that among his partners in the Resistance, his blindness was a gift. It won the confidence of hundreds of people who risked their lives on the basis of his leadership. But for the Nazis and their puppets,

it was the very same blindness which, all of a sudden, had cut me off from society or, to put it in the most moderate terms, classified me as unfit. (231)

The Volunteers always sought to become more effective. But they had no way to connect other resistance groups who might be operating hidden, right alongside them. Then a man named Robert made himself known. He was engaged in helping airmen who had fallen behind enemy lines. Lusseyran's Volunteers created false identity papers to help get these people out of the country.

In turn, Robert introduced the Volunteers to a national network, Défense de la France (DF), which had its own underground paper. Lusseyran's team merged with this larger group. They took responsibility for distributing the underground paper. When they began, the circulation was 10,000 a month. A year later it was 250,000.

Lusseyran continued his dangerous role of recruiting. Even with his powers of discernment, it was impossible to avoid a mistake. One volunteer named Elio turned around and denounced them to the authorities.

Lusseyran and many of his friends were thrown in jail. While his case was being processed, he was interrogated thirty-eight times by the Gestapo. They always asked the same question: “are you the Blind Man?” Although it was obvious that he was involved in the resistance, at some level the Gestapo couldn’t get it through their skulls that a blind man could function at the top levels of leadership in a complex, covert operation. Through skillful parrying of questions, Lusseyran managed to find out things from them: the identity of the man who had betrayed his network. Which of his friends had been arrested, or were still free. And there was a part of Lusseyran the interrogators could never reach:

In the place which, thanks to blindness, I had learned to frequent, and where there is absolutely nothing but pure light – when this happened the SS did not wait for my answers; they changed the subject. (251)

The Germans sent Lusseyran to Buchenwald with two thousand other people. When the U.S. Third Army liberated the camp in 1945, he was one of just thirty survivors from that group.

How did he survive? Perhaps he lived a charmed life. But there are more obvious reasons: the childhood experience of unconditional love which formed the bedrock of his personality; the inner light that guided him. Lusseyran no longer identified with his own personal needs or immediate circumstances as he continued to dwell in the radiance of an inner light which came not from him, but through him.