

Question: Tell us about a person who has had an important influence on you. What qualities in that person do you most admire, and how often have you grown from knowing that person?

The Gift of Insight

She is gazing at me with ardor and admiration. Her delicate face exposes a perfect set of pearly-whites, which are reflecting the sun's glares as she laughs. I feel her little palm in mine and her fingers are clutching mine instinctively with an innocent need for security. I almost wish that I did not have to take her to the starting line of the obstacle course. I reluctantly tell her that we are about to begin. She abruptly turns to me with an anguished look. Her blank, colorless eyes seem to stare at me, pleading with me to help her. I know where this look of fear comes from: Gabrielle is blind. And she is about to embark on a daunting journey by climbing over walls, running through tires and swinging on monkey bars.

Gabrielle is seven. The only two English words that she speaks are "Hello" and "What?" Her native tongue is French. I met her earlier this morning here at the Blind Olympics. I am here to assist one child through all the events. When I was first assigned to Gabrielle I was presented with a challenge; we would necessarily communicate in French for the entire day. I had studied French for ten years, longer than Gabrielle was alive, but my French seems sophomoric compared to her extensive vocabulary and impeccable pronunciation.

After getting through our first obstacle course, the language barrier, Gabrielle and I are both pleased until we approach the next obstacle. As we stand here, her voice chokes up and she tells me why she is so frightened. The year before, her chaperone had been aloof and had not been paying attention when Gabrielle crashed into one of the walls of the course. I empathized with her because I too have counted on others who have led me astray. I have my doubts and I am tempted to let her sit this one out, but the director of the program suddenly signals me to guide her out to the dark green line of tape: the starting line. I have butterflies in my stomach. Gabrielle's hand is sweaty and she is clutching my hand so tightly that I feel needles begin to prick the tips of my fingers. Her fear is running through me. I only hope that I can help her through this course without her getting hurt in any way.

Silence hangs in the air until a sharp splitting noise of the whistle . . . , pierces the stillness. I find myself urging Gabrielle on with the most soothing words I can muster in French: "Ne t'inquiète pas. Je suis là." She conquers the first wall. We're doing well. She crosses the monkey bars and runs through the tires with

amazing agility and speed. Gabrielle finishes with a competitive time. I am somewhat shocked because she ran the course as if she could see exactly what lay ahead. As I congratulate her in French, “Tres bien ma petite amie. Tres bien,” her tear-stained cheeks break into a cherubic smile of delight. She did it. She conquered her fears. I too feel a sense of accomplishment and I am proud of her. I shamefully begin to wonder how I ever doubted that she would complete the obstacle course.

Two hours later, I am sitting on the bus returning home. Gabrielle and I have said our “au revoirs” and I promised her that I would return next year. As we drive under an overpass of the freeway, I begin to recount today’s events. It occurs to me that I am the one who is blind and that it is Gabrielle who has helped me to see ... something about myself. Clearly I see that I need to take challenges presented to me, even when there are obstacles blocking my path. Gabrielle has helped me see that I am blessed and that I often take what I have for granted.

When I finally get home, I take out my cello, which has been sitting collecting dust for some time. I sit down on the cool black leather stool and grip my bow with a certain enthusiasm and determination. I find the worn page of music that I have long been practicing, but never able to play well. I sit here for an hour and play it over and over, until the rosin flies off my bow. I play until I get it. And I feel content with myself, with playing the song and with having been able to help a child realize her own inner strength. Or did she teach me these things?

I understand now that Gabrielle does not see with her eyes, but with her heart. This in-sight give her courage to conquer her fears. And she has given all of this to me.