



Jane Eyre Questions Fund Raisers

by Thelma Fayle, October 2013

Coincidentally, four of the five members of our book club are blind. That might explain why our long chat over pizza and beer kept moving back and forth between our focus on the fictional Jane Eyre and the cnib (Canadian National Institute for the Blind).

In 1847, when Jane Eyre was published, most blind people lived in squalor often begging to survive. It was still 33 years before Helen Keller was born and would begin to exert her profound influence on the world. And Louis Braille's famous code for the blind was still in its infancy of use.

You would think almost a hundred years of fundraising on the part of one of the oldest charitable organizations in the country, would have served to change reality for working-age blind Canadians. The truth is, it hasn't changed a whole lot for the blind; although you would think otherwise given the mere mention of the cnib that elicits a predictably trained response from most sighted Canadians.

The quintessential 'anything-but-blindness' fear among the general sighted public remains pandemic. Most blind people are still perceived as being charity-takers; and even worse to many blind people is the label, 'charity-deservers'. This pity-perception is a grave problem in the blind community.

According to my book club members, blind people have been oppressed and diminished by the prevailing, condescendingly sympathetic attitudes about blindness.

We wondered what has shaped most sighted peoples' fear of blindness that causes them to shiver and shake in their boots, at the very thought of being blind? We wondered if it was time to shed the lifetime-sum of heart-wrenching advertorial images that have trained Canadians to this conditioned response?

Could the cnib have played a role in creating such perceptions in Canada in these last almost hundred years?

We could understand how making blind people appear incapable would seem to fly in the face of a mandate of caring for blind people; but creating a fearful and pitiful perception does seem to generate dollars. We wondered if some questioning might be healthy.

But, according to my book club members, if you even dare to question the cnib, you will quickly recognize their untouchable-sacred-cow status. They tell me the cnib goes unchallenged by donors, legislators and sighted Canadians in general. It is hard to imagine any other medical issue so fully directed by a charity agency!

At the start of the famous Charlotte Bronte tale, Jane Eyre makes a forceful, honest speech to Mrs. Reed, her guardian and somewhat cruel aunt. As a reader, you can't help but stand behind the sense of justice in the brave girl's words in the same way you would stand behind the words of Nelson Mandela. Truth is truth.

Based on the personal experiences of three particularly riled members of our book club, we decided to playfully imagine how the fiery-spirited Jane Eyre might have addressed the current cnib board of directors.

The lively book club conversation went something like this:

CNIB Board Chair: Ms. Eyre, what insights can you bring to us from the 19th century?

Jane Eyre: To begin Sir, I am surprised. Why are there so few blind people on your Board?

But to focus on the point Sir, my message is rather simple. The blind should be treated with some modicum of equality with the sighted population.

Board Chair: Don't you think we are aiming for exactly that?

Jane Eyre: Last year, according to your own website, you spent a substantial portion of millions of dollars received on fundraising and image-building, rather than on direct services helping the blind. This is an inappropriate use of donated money, Sir.

Board Chair: Ms. Eyre, perhaps your lack of respect for this esteemed board is inappropriate.

Jane Eyre: Your reputation is stellar mostly in the sighted community Sir, and I believe your sanctimonious fund raisers are not working in the best interests of blind people. I scorn the fact that you are not providing blind people with the blindness skills they need to participate in the world as equals.

I think you get the drift of our book club conversation.

Many blind people feel that working-age blind Canadians who most need the perpetually abundant donated dollars for skills training are not getting them. Jane Eyre may have been shunted off to the lonely isolation of an orphan boarding school, but at least she had the opportunity to learn useful skills that led to an ability to create a better life for herself. This brave conversation sent her on her way:

Schoolmaster to young Jane: Are you not grateful to your aunt and benefactress for your keep in this fine home?

Jane (about her neglectful aunt): If that is a 'benefactress' Sir, a benefactress is a disagreeable thing.

Our book club members decided that in this century, in Canada, blind people need dare question the "benefactress", the way Jane did.

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