

On Living Blind
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This thought is a movie recommendation and a report on the personal meaning I gave the film, and it is a commitment to do some work on myself. The report on the personal meaning I gave the film underscores a point I've made several times on this site, that art involves an exchange between a work of art and the person experiencing that art. What somebody takes from art has to do with what he or she is about as much as, if not more than, what the art is about in the eyes of its creator. So what I made of the film, which I go into here, possibly, probably, has more to do with me than what was on the screen.

The film is "Blind." 2014, Norwegian. Written and directed by Eskil Vogt, youngish, mid-thirties I would suppose from the pictures I've seen of him. This is his first full-length film. The central character, Ingrid, late thirties, blond and tall and model-esque beautiful in a classic Nordic way, married to a successful architect, has very recently completely lost her sight, we aren't told why. She has retreated to her apartment and spends her days sipping wine and tapping the keys of her Apple laptop. After a time, we realize that the events depicted in the film other than Ingrid's life, all of which look very real, are actually stories Ingrid has been producing on her MacBook Air.

I found "Blind" to be a superb film—engaging, intelligent, thought provoking, visually striking, the performances uniformly top-of-the-line. If you are familiar with the screenwriter and sometime director Charlie Kaufman--"Eternal Sunshine for the Spotless Mind," "Adaptation"--this film is in that ballpark, and too, it rings of something a contemporary Ingmar Bergman might do. Consider this a strong recommendation if you like art house type films.

I'll leave the film review with that--yes, check out "Blind" if this is the kind of thing you might take to. What I want to get into

here mostly is what I took from the film personally and what I intend to do about it. I assume my response doesn't align with the filmmakers' intentions, or perhaps to some extent it does, I'll never know. What I do know is I was taken with the central protagonist Ingrid's basic life choice, I guess you could call it, her response to her disability. Or was it her response to her personal make-up, history, and/or current overall circumstance? Anyway, how she is now coming at life. To that, I linked the stories she created, which were in effect a screenplay because we see them portrayed in the film. I put all of that together—the way Ingrid spends her days, the content of the stories she writes—and thought about how it informs how I might move forward in my own life, and then decided that, at least for a limited time, I will move forward in life in this way.

Words that come to mind with reference to Ingrid: inner, self-contained, autonomous, flawless, inaccessible. She is remarkably physically fit and perfectly groomed and dressed; she moves gracefully, like a dancer. Her surroundings, the apartment--she leaves only for brief forays to practice using her white cane--is beautifully furnished, aesthetically appealing, and immaculately clean. Her computer looks spotless (in contrast to mine, the same exact Apple she uses, which is invariably food stained and dirty). Ingrid majestically sips what I'm sure is expensive red wine in a fine wine glass (unlike the sour-tasting, low-rent, super market version of the same I guzzle in a K-Mart juice glass) and types out her stories. I presume no one ever reads what she produces; it doesn't seem as if she would feel pressed to disseminate her stories publically, or share them at all, even with her husband. She lives in her own private world.

Ingrid is learning to cope with her new limitation—e.g., technology that allows her to tell colors; “green” announces a computer voice when she presses the device into fabric and pushes the button--and to navigate her immediate surroundings, albeit amid banging into things and bruising her forehead and shins. Day after day, she goes nowhere, despite the beseeching of her husband

Morten. Morten, whom in voice overs she refers to as “boring,” appears to have a greater reality to her as a character in her stories than as a physical presence in the apartment when he isn’t at work or out somewhere for the evening.

It struck me that Ingrid’s blindness can be taken as a metaphor for any physical or personal handicap or injury, psychological or physical, or obstacle or challenge. Her stance can be viewed as a basic choice of how to live in the short run while recovering from, or adjusting to, one’s current personal state or circumstance, or even a permanent way to live. Ingrid’s example demonstrates, at least to me, that if you can financially afford it, and Ingrid obviously can, and I can, you don’t absolutely have to engage and try to affect the world “out there.” You don’t have to chase anybody or anything down, win the day, go over with anyone, make a point, or produce or change anything. Indeed you may do that, but you don’t have to. You can just be: in this case, sit on a couch and write stories no one will ever read. You don’t have to explain or justify doing it to anyone, or get anyone’s OK to do it, even your life partner’s. (Just now, I flashed on Emily Dickinson, alone, dressed pristinely all in white, which I understand she most often was, thinking her thoughts and writing her poems and putting them in a drawer.)

After watching “Blind,” I thought to myself, what if I did Ingrid, at least for a while, and perhaps forever? (My forever, that is—the world goes on very nicely without any of us being around.) I’ve spent so much, too much, of my life coming up short trying to, as I put it in a thought for this site, “charm the uninterested” (April 2011). I’ve tried so long and so diligently, too long, too diligently, and unsuccessfully, to impress people (see “On Unimpressives,” March, 2012). I’ve run after an indifferent, and at times, negating and even hostile world seeking to be included in the scheme of things and accepted and affirmed, and attempted to make a positive contribution to situations and people, but if anything resulted from that you could, as my mother phrased it, put it in your eye. I’m sure this sounds gloomy and defeatist and over-stated and self-

pitying, and perhaps it is all of that, but that's how I'm seeing things these days. Actually, I'll have an easier time living Blind than Ingrid did. She had to deal with her husband. I don't have to deal with anyone; I'm alone here in the apartment.

And yes, I'm handicapped. Not blindness thank God, what could be worse, but I'm deaf and my back is really bad--I can stand for only short periods of time and I can barely get around-- and I'm coming off hits in my professional life and personal life (I get at this in a number of places on this site, including an indirect reference to it in a recent thought about a Paul Simon song lyric, "On the Boxer" (August, 20)). Plus I'm geriatric old and very, very tired. Being exhausted from the time I get up in the morning until I go to bed at night is the biggest change I've noticed in old age. And one more thing now that I think about it: I just don't give a damn about public affairs these days. Somebody else can be concerned with what happens in the Middle East and with the state of race relations in the U.S. Not me, not anymore. My concerns are very personal these days—how my eleven-year-old who lives in another state with her mother is doing and how I'm doing, that's about it.

Anyway, I'm thinking how about if I get in the best physical shape of my life, and get rid of these old frayed clothes hanging in my closet and get some new ones, and get this apartment as neatly arranged and spotlessly clean as I possibly can, and wipe down this dirty laptop I'm typing on right now, and trade in the cheapo wine in the refrigerator (and clean the refrigerator while I'm at it) for some 2005 Bordeaux, which I hear is supposed to be good? How about that as a project? Money's OK; I don't have to hustle a dollar. I can do it if I choose to do it.

Yes, how about if I just let cool out. Drop the act, quit the hunt, or as I put it in a recent thought for this site, retire from the ring. (See, "On Losing My Mind," January, 2015.) I've taken enough punches. Quit checking my messages all day every day. Quit trying to connect with anybody or anything outside these four walls (face reality at long last—with the exception of my eleven-

year-old, nobody is interested). Stop competing with my natural sedentary bent and preference for an inner, subjective, private existence; I'm just not an outgoing sort. Face the fact that I really don't care if I see the Grand Canyon or the Pyramids. Traveling is great, but I don't feel like it. Sit here in peace, as much as I can muster, on this black leather couch (clean the food stains off it, please) and type out my web site material that no one reads. And it is just fine that nobody reads it, it really is, and really, seriously, that people don't read it, or like it or get anything out of it if they do somehow happen to read it, doesn't necessarily mean it is without merit, or maybe it does mean that, but so what, I'm doing what I believe in doing and I'm doing the best I can with it, and I get gratification from doing it and I'm at peace doing it, and it's self-educative, and that's enough, that's plenty. Read the best books I can find and stream and watch DVDs of the best movies I can find and eat the best food I can find (as I put it in a recent thought, "On 'Cache' and Quality," (August, 2015) use quality as my guiding criterion in deciding what to do with my time), and then go to bed, and get up in next morning and do it again. One day at a time—AA has a point--the best I can, with the most integrity and honor I can bring to it. And speaking of bed, make sure I make my bed precisely the first thing every morning. Let that action be a message to myself that I live with self-awareness, self-control, and self-respect and dignity even if there is no one around to notice it.

If this pattern is temporary, that's good, and if it is permanent, that's good too. There are all sorts of ways to live, including, call it, living Blind. If things change up the line, including as a consequence of backing off and doing things this way, do what makes sense in that time. (I realize I should find another label than Blind for what I'm getting at here. Living Blind has the opposite connotation to what this is really about. Living this way isn't living life blindly in the conventional meaning of that term but rather as directed by keen, accurate perception. Until

I come up with something better, I'll capitalize Blind to remind myself that the referent is the film.)

As I embark on this path, I need to keep in mind that living Blind involves more than simply making a decision to do so. I have to earn it. It takes hard work. Ingrid's stories, depicted in the film, make that point. They involve three main characters—Einar and Elin, both presumably fictional, and her husband Morten.

Einar, a high school classmate of Morten's, hangs out with porn, which fatigues, depresses, and isolates him, and makes him disdainful of himself. From the looks of his bloated stomach, he has consumed more than his share of take-out pizza. He demeans himself by making tentative and pathetic advances toward women in super markets and such absent the slightest cue from them that they are inviting his attentions. He meets Morten, his old high school classmate, by chance and smiling, deferring, and with zero prompting from Morton, suggests they meet the next week for a movie and in the process sets himself up for being stiffed. There's Einar in the movie lobby holding his ticket in his hand waiting forlornly for Morten, who of course never shows up. That episode prompts more porn and pizza and the cycle continues. That isn't living Blind.

Elin, a single mother, kids herself into thinking it is going to work sexting a man she's encountered online and then giving up her body to him an hour after they meet. The result, it should be no surprise to her, is a pregnancy and being told abruptly to go away: "Take a hint. Nice to have met you. Have a good life." That's not living Blind either. You have to play by the rules of the game of life to live Blind, and deep down you know what they are, they are no big secret. You can't violate those rules, which are bigger than you are, and get away with it, even though for an hour or two, or day or two, you live with the delusion that you can.

And Morten, Elin's sexting and tryst partner and Ingrid's husband, has numbed himself to reality enough to believe that two minutes after he scores with Elin he is going to be anything other than disappointed, even disgusted, with himself and the person he

is with and experiencing a powerful impulse to run, escape. A telling image in the film: just after climaxing, Morten pushing Elin's foot away from his face. You have to stay awake to live Blind.

I'm going to try an experiment. I'll do my very best to live Blind for forty days and see what results from it. I read somewhere that it takes forty days of doing some regimen to lock it in place and to see its effect. I have no idea whether there is any validity to that claim, but it's good enough for me, it gives me a number to work with, so forty days it is. Today is January 12th, 2016, a Tuesday. Forty days from now will take me through February 20th, so I'll take stock on what, if anything, came out of living Blind for forty days in the morning of February 21st.

The living Blind project will involved making progress on getting in the physical shape Ingrid is in, and flowing rather than darting from here to there as I do. Clothes clean, me clean, the apartment spotless. Good food, good wine (in limitation), good books, good films. On my MacBook Air, write what is there to be written and put it on the site, and if there is nothing to write, that's OK too. One newspaper a day in the morning, that's it, no Internet surfing, no checking the Dow and the sports scores. No initiatives toward anybody or anything (one exception: my daughter). And so important, do nothing that I know from experience diminishes me and makes me unhappy in the least—little things add up to big things.

I'll add a postscript to this thought on February 21st reporting what came out of this, which could be that I wasn't up to pulling it off. Maybe I'm so habituated to my usual act that by noon tomorrow, if not before, I'll be firmly and mindlessly back into it. But that's part of the experiment, to see whether I own my life enough to say I'm going to do something and then actually do it.

Postscript: It's February 21st. How'd it go? The forty days just ended confirmed that the Blind living pattern is, indeed, a valid personal response to some life situations, including mine at the

moment. Breaking from old ways is far from easy; that became clear these last nearly seven weeks. But it is do-able: I wasn't as successful as I would have like to have been living Blind, but I did well enough with it to realize that, yes, it is possible, and yes, it is right for me now, and yes, I can do this if I am resolute and put my mind to it. The experience underscored that this orientation requires a clear sense of its possible rewards and being firmly grounded in a commitment to exist in this way in order to attain these rewards. It takes mental focus, awareness, moment-to-moment attention to one's purposes, one's intentions. And it takes hard work: success in anything comes down to doing whatever needs to be done, paying the price for success, not letting excuses and reasons substitute for actions directed at accomplishing favored outcomes.

I've decided to give living Blind another go, forty more days of living Blind. My commitment is to learn from what went right and what went wrong this first go-round and to do the very best I can with it this next time. A key, I've decided, is to understand that there is nothing in living Blind that is beyond my capability. I don't have to fail with any of this. If I fail, if I don't keep the agreements I have made with myself, I have chosen to do so. I need to take full responsibility for my thoughts and feelings and actions, not pawn off how I am and what I do on something or somebody else. Failure, if that is what results, in part or in whole, will not be in the stars, it will be in myself.

The forty days will take me until April 1. Again, here, I'll report how it went.

Postscript two: Today is April 21st, three weeks past the April 1st date I had planned to do this follow-up. Why late like this? I think it gets at something I need to work on: living consciously, in awareness, grounded in what I'm about, trying to get done, at this time in my life. I went on automatic pilot some these past weeks, lost contact with the living Blind experiment; I need to work on that. One way to do that is to remind myself every morning when I

having breakfast and thinking about what I'm going to do with my day, "I'm living Blind today" (or whatever else I'm taking on) and to periodically during the day, repeat that reminder to myself.

These few weeks affirmed that living Blind involves *affirmation, high standards, and hard work*. It isn't the protagonist of Anita Bookner's novella I read recently--*At the Hairdresser's* (Amazon Digital Services, 2011)--old and alone, whose life is going shopping, getting her hair done weekly, and feeling regret about being retired and "left to her own devices." Living Blind is about affirming the possibilities in the present, not bemoaning what seems to have been lost from the past. And it is about setting the highest standards for oneself, a commitment to living a high quality existence; a life centered getting one's hair done and ruminating about what has been lost and being unhappy and unfulfilled in the moment doesn't make it in that regard. Living Blind involves hard, albeit immensely rewarding, work. It's too easy to show up at a hairdresser's once a week and sit there while someone provides you a service (or something similar). That's not how to feel good about your life, whether it is living Blind or in some other way.

Living Blind means really, no kidding, getting your mind and body and surroundings in the best possible shape. Nutrition, exercise, weight management, yoga, meditation, retreats, daily walks, personally uplifting study, religious and spiritual practice--whatever best hones your being. It's doing what it takes to become as healthy, calm, centered, clear, and effective as you can. It means attending to personal grooming and clothes, and getting your house or apartment in prime condition, and keeping your car maintained and clean and waxed. It means fine books and films and art, and to the extent that other people are in your life—and they don't absolutely *have* to be; that's a central idea in this living Blind construct--being with those who celebrate and support and expand you rather than bring you down or keep you stuck. Living Blind involves getting to your place—literally, geographically: where on this planet is *your* place. In the best sense of the word,

living Blind is *work*, good work, productive and personally satisfying work.

Living Blind is a way to bring our minds and bodies into a harmonious whole, and to live now, consciously, in this moment, all the while being aware of the past and the future. In a book I read these past few weeks (*You are Here*, Shambala, 1994), the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh put it this way (p. 43).

“I am here” means my body and mind come together. . . .
When you achieve that, your presence is genuine and you are truly alive.”

Living Blind is a way to be *happy*, in the sense of feeling a pervasive sense of being satisfied with your life. A key to happiness is living with *integrity*—in accordance with one’s nature and highest values, including moral values, one’s sense of what is right and decent and proper. It is being *in control of one’s life* enough to live that way. To be in control of one’s life, the captain of one’s ship, one must *feel free, be free*. All to say, happiness and freedom are linked. Again, Thich Nhat Hanh (p. 42):

Freedom is the basis of all happiness. Without freedom, there is no happiness. This means freedom from despair, freedom from resentment, freedom from jealousy and fear. Genuine practice is practice that helps you become freer and more solid. . . . If your practice does not bring you freedom, it is not working.

It must be kept in mind, however, that freedom is an allowing condition, a means to an end. Freedom provides but an *opportunity*. One must have the *power* and *wisdom* and *determination* to make use of the opportunity that freedom provides to *live well*. At the core of living well (I’m trying to get more and more basic here) is *honor*. So it seems now, our personal challenge is to define and live *an honorable life* in the limited time we have allocated to us on his earth. And what’s an honorable

life? It is one where, deep down, we are *proud of ourselves*. Thus something that we are so often admonished to avoid, pride, is the very thing we should pursue. At its heart, then, living Blind is a way of achieving pride in oneself. What can you do that will make you truly proud of yourself?