

A Walk in the Dark
By Curtis R. Taylor, Ph.D.

The chimes in the distant Bell Tower ring out quarter past the hour. The hour is 10 P.M. and I am cloistered in my office at the university working on a research paper. I am anxious to finish it -- publish or perish -- but the main reason I am at work at this hour is self preservation of another kind. It is my wife's turn to host the monthly meeting of her sewing group, and there are currently nine women perched around my living room engaged in needlepoint and girl talk. Although none of the nine husbands has a clear idea of just what girl talk is, each of us knows instinctively to clear out when the "Stitch and Bitch" is scheduled to convene at his house...

The phone rings. It's my wife saying that it is safe to come home at last and that she will pick me up near the Bell Tower in about 15 minutes. I hit the save button, shut down the computer, and drain the last few drops of the beer I have been nursing for the past half an hour. Texas A&M is a state university and alcohol is not permitted on campus, but I've just put in a 14-hour day and I don't suppose anyone will fire me for drinking one beer under the circumstances. Just to be on the safe side though, I tuck the empty bottle into my briefcase rather than putting it in my office trash.

I stand up, stretch, and listen for a moment. The fluorescent lights hum softly over head (I need to remember to turn them off as I leave); the early-spring breeze whistles faintly against the outside of the building (maybe I should put on the spare sweater I keep in my office); somewhere down the hall, three Chinese graduate students

are discussing a particularly nasty econometrics assignment (perhaps my game theory assignments are not tough enough). Deciding against the sweater, I walk to the door, flick off the lights, open my collapsible white cane, and set off down the hall toward the elevators.

I was hired as an assistant professor by the Economics Department at Texas A&M about six months earlier, in September 1991. I am 27 years old, I am totally blind, and this is the first “real job” I have ever held. After graduating from high school in Washington State, I spent nine years studying economics, four years as an undergraduate at the University of Washington and five years in a doctoral program at Yale. I certainly never planned to reside in College Station Texas or “Aggie Land” as the students call it, but I came here after receiving my Ph.D. because A&M was the only major research university to offer me a job.

The locals give the coordinates of Aggie Land as “southeast central Texas,” which puts it roughly 90 miles north of Houston and East of Austin. Together College Station and its sister town of Bryan contain about 120,000 non-student inhabitants. There are a few other small towns in the area, rustic places with quirky names like: Snook, North Zulch, and Dime Box, but for the most part Aggie Land is surrounded by mile upon mile of cotton farms and Cattle Ranches. It is a peculiar place to find a major research university with over 44,000 students, but in my first six months on the job, I have come to learn that Texas A&M is no ordinary school and the Aggies are not ordinary students.

The Aggies have their own unique university culture and traditions, mysterious rights of passage like: Fish Camp, Elephant Walk, and Ring Dance. When it comes to these sacrosanct traditions, the students like to say that you are either 100 percent Aggie, or you are just a 2-percenter. I attended several football games last fall and learned some of the unique yells that Aggie fans love to recite in unison at the top of their lungs, like “Chiffity, chiffity, chiff-chaff! Let's give 'em a horse laugh!” Yelling -- as opposed to cheering -- is an important part of being an Aggie. While most schools feature a cheer-leading squad of pretty acrobatic girls, the A&M faithful are lead in their taunts of opposing teams by a band of burley male “yell leaders” none of whom are pretty or acrobatic in any respect.

The Aggies have a deep and biding hatred for their arch rivals, the University of Texas Long Horns. The chorus of the Aggie War Hymn -- what would be called a fight song at any other school -- is three repetitions of the phrase “Saw Varsity’s horns off.” At football games Aggie fans stand and link arms while singing the War Hymn, swaying from side to side like a giant human saw. I sometimes wonder what the Aggies would do if there were no Texas Long Horns to hate, no enemy to give them a *raison d’être*. A&M was an all male military school until 1970, and there are still about 2500 students who belong to the Corps of Cadets and receive military training in addition to their regular college classes. My experience with the members of the Corps has been overwhelmingly positive. They are polite, honest, and studious. They are, however, soldiers at heart, and they need an adversary to give them purpose.

As I walk down the hall to the elevators, tapping my white cane from side to side in front of me, I notice that there doesn't seem to be any one on the fourth floor of Harrington Tower besides me and the three Chinese students. I stop for a moment and listen to their animated chatter drifting down the hall. I do not speak or understand a word of Mandarin, but just about every sentence they utter contains a technical econometrics term like "heteroskedasticity" or "multicollinearity" that I can pick out. I know it is rude, but I am a shameless eavesdropper. My actual hearing is no better than a sighted person's, but years of relying on my ears allows me to hear and interpret things that most sighted people would not notice. I can often hear when there are large objects such as parked cars or telephone poles obstructing my path. The ambient noise echoes off these objects creating what is known as "sound shadows" that a blind person's well-tuned ears can frequently (but not always) hear. It is not the same as actually "seeing" the object, but sound shadows can be very useful for navigating in unfamiliar places.

A few years earlier – when I was working in Washington D.C. as a congressional intern for the summer – I met and became friends with a student at Gallaudet University, named Earl, who was profoundly deaf from birth. I was intrigued to learn that Earl used his eyes to compensate for his lack of hearing in much the same way that I used my ears to compensate for my lack of sight. Earl's three older sisters had spent countless hours with him when he was a young boy teaching him to read lips and to speak. Although he spoke with what sounded something like a Russian accent, Earl could carry on a very natural conversation so long as he was able to see the face of the person with whom he

was talking. He had trouble following discussions in group settings because he could not anticipate who was going to speak next, and therefore, did not know whose lips to watch. On the other hand, I found it uncanny (and a little alarming) that Earl could read the lips of a speaker who was standing on the other side of the room. I ran into Earl once at a crowded and noisy party where we were both somewhat disoriented, albeit for different reasons. I mentioned to him that I was able to overhear the conversations of the three groups of people in our immediate vicinity. “Big deal,” Earl replied in his funky Russian accent. He then proceeded to tell me what the couple 30 feet across the room was arguing about.

Earl had a driver’s license and I occasionally bummed a ride with him. He and I devised a way of carrying on a conversation while I was riding with him. Earl would tap me on the arm when he decided it was safe to watch my lips in the rear-view mirror and then tap me again when he needed to concentrate on the road. At first this seemed like a good scheme, but after he swerved and braked abruptly several times during our conversations,

I decided it was safer to keep my mouth shut. After all, I could hear the other drivers angrily blaring their horns, even if I could not read their lips or see their hand gestures!

In my first six months at Texas A&M, I have managed to get lost walking across campus about a dozen times. A&M is a huge sprawling university, one of the largest in the country. It has scores of buildings connected by an intricate network of winding concrete paths, and though I travel reasonably well with my white cane, it is easy for me

to miss a critical landmark or fork in the walkway and find myself floundering in unfamiliar territory. Getting lost is an inherently frightening and humbling experience for anyone. Human beings have a primal need to know where we are and where we are headed. Many of our oldest myths and legends involve travelers who lose their way. Getting lost is, however, a fairly regular occurrence for me and I have developed a routine for dealing with it. The first step is to admit that I am lost; the second step is to take a deep breath and tell myself to stay calm; and the third step is to find someone to ask for directions. None of these steps is easy, but for a male of the human species (blind or not), the third step is definitely the toughest. There is just something about the male ego that does not want to admit that we do not have control over the situation. Fortunately, the route I am traveling this evening, between the Economics Department and the Bell Tower, is one that I have walked twice a day for the past half a year, and I could almost navigate the 250-yards in my sleep.

The red Teflon tip of my cane strikes the door of an elevator shaft making a hollow metallic sound. I shift the cane to my left hand and run my right hand over the wall between the two sets of doors. I locate the down button and press it. The elevator on my left begins to whirr as the electric motor raises the car from the first to the fourth floor. When the doors slide open I step inside and grope for the control panel. As in most modern elevators, it is located about three feet off the floor. This is, of course, a great convenience for people in wheel chairs, but it is a real hassle for blind folks. It is almost impossible to hold my hands at waste level and read the Braille labels on the buttons with the front of my finger tips. The best location for an elevator control panel

from my prospective would be about six feet off the floor. At that height it would be possible to feel the Braille labels without dislocating my wrists. In unfamiliar elevators I am usually forced to kneel on the floor in front of the control panel in order to read the buttons, which is a bit embarrassing when another passenger gets on. (“Don’t mind me...I was just praying to the elevator gods...Blind people do that sort of thing...”)

Having ridden this elevator over 300 times, however, I do not need to read the labels. Instead I count four buttons up from the bottom -- alarm, door open, door close, first floor – and push. The doors slide shut and the elevator descends back to its resting place on the ground floor. When I emerge from the elevator I turn left and walk through the deserted lobby of the building and out the main doorway.

Once outside, I stop for a moment to get my bearings. The campus is quiet this evening. The only sounds I hear are the early spring breeze blowing through the trees planted 30 feet to my right and the drone of the ventilation system for the Academic Building 100 feet ahead of me. It is cotton-planting season, and the breeze blowing in from the fields carries the unmistakable scent of fertilizer. I laugh softly to myself thinking that in spite of all the B.S. I encountered in graduate school, Yale never smelled quite like this.

I square my heels flush with the door behind me and set out to cross the courtyard between Harrington Tower and the Academic Building. Generally speaking, navigating an open space like a field or a courtyard can be difficult because it is hard to walk in a straight line for very long without veering to the right or left. The courtyard I

am crossing now, however, is paved in square-cut flag stones. This is convenient because I can feel the seams between the stones with my cane and use them to keep me on course. My mind wanders as I walk. I'm a little hungry and I wonder if there are any Kolaches left from my wife's and my Sunday-morning visit to the bakery in Snook. Southeast central Texas was originally settled by Czech immigrants. A Kolache is a traditional Czech pastry usually filled with cheese or fruit. A town nearby annually hosts a Kolache Festival to honor Czech culture, featuring: basket weaving, egg decorating, and polka music. The only problem with the festival – besides the polka music -- is that it is held in early September when the average afternoon temperature in Aggie Land is in the mid 90's and the humidity is typically 80%. There is nothing very Czech about that kind of weather, and I remember feeling sorry for the folk dancers performing in their traditional costumes with long sleeves and knitted wool vests. Kolaches are apparently unknown in the rest of the country, but residents of Aggie Land know them well and know that the best ones come from the old Czech bakery in the tiny town of Snook.

The tip of my cane slides off the edge of the flag stones paving the courtyard and into the soft mulch of the garden bordering the Academic Building. I turn 90 degrees left and follow the edge of the garden as I traverse the far side of the courtyard. It is a clear breezy evening and it feels good to be stretching my legs after sitting at my desk for so long. I begin to hum my favorite Van Morrison song and kick up my heels a little. "Well, it's a marvelous night for a walk with the stars up above in your eyes." I tap my cane on the flagstones in time with the jazzy beat of the song as I saunter along the edge of the courtyard. I reach the concrete path fronting the Academic Building and pivot

right to follow it toward the Bell Tower. “And all the night's magic seems to whisper and hush. And all the soft moonlight seems to shine in your blush.” I take five steps along the path and freeze in my tracks; the chorus of the song sticking in my throat.

There is something blocking my way 10 feet ahead. I sense its sound shadow. It is large and soft. Hard objects produce echoes, while soft ones absorb sound. I stand dead still for a moment, trying to figure out what it is. Mixed with the smell of fertilizer in the breeze, I now detect the cent of cologne, and my straining ears pick up the sound of shuffling feet and rustling clothing. It is a group of people on the path in front of me, but I cannot tell how many they are or what they are doing. They must see me standing here, and anyone -- except for my friend Earl -- would certainly have heard my musical approach, but there they stand, blocking my way, not saying anything to me or to each other. I do not think I can go around them without straying from the path; so I move forward slowly, trusting that they will yield the walkway to a man wielding a white cane.

“Good evening,” I say as I approach. They do not answer but do step out of my way, some to the left and some to the right. Still I cannot tell how many they are, anywhere from six to sixty. As I move among them, they do something strange and alarming. The first few people who stepped out of my way now step back onto the path behind me so that I am completely surrounded. At this point I feel more than a little uneasy, but I decide that the best strategy is to continue on my way. To my consternation, the ring of silent people surrounding me also moves, keeping step with me. I can hear them walking in front, behind, and on both sides just out of range of my cane.

I begin to wonder what I have stumbled into. Am I being harassed? Hazed? Mugged?

It is deeply woven into the moral fabric of our culture that hassling a blind person is an unpardonable sin. I have walked alone through many dangerous areas with impunity, trusting in the conscience of even the most callused and desperate of thugs. As a teenager I would occasionally slip out at night and roam the downtown streets of the city where I grew up, walking among bums, drug dealers, and prostitutes. I spent five years in New Haven Connecticut, traveling alone on foot through some of the most violent neighborhoods in the country. It seems ridiculous that I might be mugged for the first time walking across the campus of a land-grant university set among the cotton farms and cattle ranches of southeast central Texas.

I stop abruptly, and the silent ring of people surrounding me also stops. I can feel my heart pounding in my chest. I turn my head slowly to the left and then the right, hoping that I am making some kind of eye contact with my unwanted escort. “What’s going on?” I ask in the calmest voice I can manage. I am answered only by their silence. I pull my cane up and plant it defiantly at my side. Again I look to the left and right. “What’s going on?” I repeat, this time unable to keep the anger and fear out of my voice. A gust of wind passes over us; I hear a faint metallic clink somewhere behind me; my heart pounds out 20 beats. Then a male voice from someone on my right finally replies curtly with three words.

“It’s all clear,” he says in a steady almost mechanical monotone. There are at

least six people surrounding me, and it feels anything but “clear.” Still, I am somewhat reassured by the reply and I take it as my cue to proceed. I begin to move slowly forward again, my circle of uninvited companions walking along with me. The Bell Tower is beside the road somewhere about 150 yards ahead. I pick up my pace hoping to reach it and the security of the car as soon as possible. My silent companions match my pace, marching along with me through the breezy early spring evening.

Then – miraculously – the people in front of me step to each side and, as suddenly as it began, my unwelcome escort is over. I am walking alone again, the group now standing behind me on the path. I take a dozen more steps; breathe a deep sigh of relief; and then fall involuntarily to my knees as three large explosions tare through the night.

Rattled but unharmed, I get back to my feet with my ears ringing. Just as I begin to wonder what has happened, a chorus of bugles sounds out behind me and in an instant everything becomes crystal clear to me. There are six buglers playing something that sounds a little like Taps played backward. The sweet doleful melody of the horns echoes off the surrounding buildings, giving the illusion of hundreds of trumpets playing from all corners of the campus. I have just walked through one of the oldest and most sacred of Aggie traditions, Silver Taps.

On the first Tuesday of every month during the school year, the Aggies pay tribute to any student who has died during the preceding 30 days. The friends and family of the deceased student stand silently in the area between the statue of Lawrence Sullivan

Ross and the Academic Building, while the elite Aggie honor guard, the Ross Volunteer Company, march slowly to their appointed position in front of the statue. After standing at attention for several minutes of silence, the Ross Volunteers fire off a 21-gun salute in honor of the departed. Six buglers then play three rounds of the haunting arrangement known as Silver Taps, first to the north, then to the west, and finally to the south.

The Ross Volunteer Company, which is composed of specially selected junior and senior members of the Corps, is arguably the best rifle drill team in the country. They march as a single entity and perform intricate military drills with exacting precision. Aggie legend maintains that the Ross Volunteers never lost a drill team competition and that the reason they no longer compete in them is to give other squads a chance to win.

In my journey from the Economics Department to the Bell Tower this evening, I arrived on the walkway between the Academic Building and the Sull Ross Statue just as the honor guard had completed its march and was standing at silent attention. I had not been surrounded by a ring of people who walked along with me. Rather, I had unwittingly plowed into the end of the rifle line. As I approached, the Ross Volunteers stepped out of my way in perfect military precision -- the first man taking one step forward so that I passed behind him, the second man taking one step backward so that I passed in front of him, and so on down the line: forward, backward, forward, backward... As soon as I passed, each man smartly resumed his position in the ranks, standing at attention as if nothing had happened. What a bizarre and unexpected drill the Ross Volunteers were forced to perform this evening, "the Blind man in the Bubble Routine."

The only trouble was that I had stopped to ask what was going on right in the middle of the formation, and it was clear that I was not going to move without some kind of answer. This must have posed quite a dilemma for the poor Aggies. They could hardly proceed with their 21-gun salute with a blind man standing obstinately in the middle of the rifle line. On the other hand, they were also supposed to maintain total silence. Bless the soul who gave me the laconic, "It's all clear." I hope he didn't get in too much trouble.

I turn back and face the group on the path with my head bowed as the buglers play their mournful tribute. It is both beautiful and sad. When it is over, I turn around and walk thoughtfully the rest of the way to the road. The Aggies and I have a lot to learn about each other. I arrive at the Bell Tower just as my wife pulls up in our car. As I open the door and get into the passenger seat she asks, "Why are all the lights on campus off? It's so dark I can hardly see to drive."

"It's Silver Taps tonight," I answer. "Are there any Kolaches left?"