Sound: An Enrichment or State

by John Hull

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Editor's Note: It is quite impossible to represent in print the intonation of John Hull's voice, the expressiveness, the silences, the different speech rhythms. His tone of voice draws our ears to his words, creates an extraordinary listening atmosphere in the room, adds another dimension of depth to the word meanings. His is not a "print speech"—he is not reading from or basing his talk on a pre-written text. He is a true orator in the aural sense of the word. He speaks from his whole being. So, how on earth is it possible to reproduce this spirit in print? It is not. In fact, I believe that the spirit in his voice is removed to a large extent by transcribing the text to print. But one could perhaps say that—to a certain degree—it is reincarnated in your's, the reader's inner voice while you are reading the written text below. HW

I'm thrilled to be here. Indeed, I'm not only thrilled I'm stunned because I normally live and work with sighted people who have no particular sensitivity towards sound because sighted people don't on the whole live in sound, they live in sight and the power of sight is such that it swamps their other senses. So they simply don't notice the sounds around them. And for me, as a blind person, to come into the midst of a group of sighted people who are so amazingly sensitive to sound as you are has been already quite a shock (laugh). So, I'm very glad to be here and I'm learning such a lot from the conversations I'm having.

I don't study sound, I live in sound.

I will try to explain that. But I must first preface my remarks by saying, I cannot speak for anybody but myself. You see, blind people are as different from each other as sighted people are. The reactions of blind people vary widely. And, I live in a sighted person's world. I do know blind people. It's a wonderful relief in fact to have blind friends who do share my world, but I am conscious of the fact that we are all very different. So I don't know whether my experience is idiosyncratic. I suspect that a good deal of my experience does correspond to the nature of the body and to the phenomenology of human experience which is common to us all. But I can't prove that.

When you enter a hotel room at night, I imagine the first thing you do is to switch on the lights. It would be very strange I think for a sighted person to go into a room, at night, and not, first of all, to switch the light on. Indeed, I hear my sighted friends panicking when they say, "where's the light switch?" For myself, these little knobs on the wall make no difference. Since I have no light sensation whatever— I can gaze at the sun without blinking—and therefore I am not only *in* darkness but I am *beyond* light and darkness: in the sense light and darkness are antithetical—without one there cannot be the other—so my experience is not that of darkness. It is an experience of being in a world where the difference between light and darkness has become completely irrelevant. Indeed, I can hardly remember it because I have been without any light sensation at all now for approximately 17 or 18 years—having lost my sight 20 years ago.

When I enter a hotel room—whether it' s night or day makes no difference to me because I can't tell the difference except by observing my stomach—the first thing I do is get out my little portable radio set, which I carry with me almost always. And the first object I come to, which might be a bed, it might be a cupboard, it might be the place where you put your cases, I lay my little radio down and I turn it on. That is my way of turning on the light. That sound is the blind person's equivalent to light. And I suggest that that cannot be the case with sighted people, for whom sound I imagine, must be an enrichment of light but not a substitute for it.

Of course, many musicians have attempted in sound to produce the equivalent of light. I think, for example, of John Tavener's wonderful piece of music, 'the Icon of Light', *phos,* when he magically represents the sound of a ray of light, travelling endlessly through space, until suddenly it splatters on an object and sprays out in a wonderful strange chord. So, although these are dramatic attempts to create analogies, I think they are no more than analogous.

Why is thunder like scratching? If you can understand that, you can understand what sound is to a blind person. You see, a blind person lives in an infinite space. Not entirely infinite because there is always something underneath your feet—if there's not you've a hell of a fright! [laughter]. I have once or twice fallen from things [laughter] and of course you don't know whether you're falling 2 or 3 feet or whether it's a 30 foot drop, you don't know. So, it is actually quite alarming [laughter]. But normally there is something beneath your feet, but that's all. There is *nothing* above you. The blind person has no ceiling on experience. That's why I love thunder. And that's why thunder is like scratching. Your skin is the perimeter of your body. Most of the time you are not aware of your skin However, if you suddenly get itchy, then you're aware of your skin and the moment you touch your skin your body has a membrane. You are no longer a mind in space. You are an embodied mind, which has a membrane dividing it from the world. And that's what awareness of your skin does for you.

For me, thunder is a bit like that. I love thunder because it puts a ceiling on my world and prevents me from wandering in infinity, which is frightening and disorientating. When I lost my sight at first, I thought I would never again enjoy thunderstorms. Because of the lightning you see? As a sighted person the lightening was the dramatic thing and later came the thunder. But I discovered I was wrong. I've forgotten about the lightning. It doesn't

seem to matter that there isn't any lightning. Of course, I can still imagine it. But generally I try not to because I try not to live in a nostalgic world of visual memory. I try and live in the real world—the place where I *am.*

And therefore when thunder comes, I love it because suddenly there is something up there. You always have a blue sky up there, or in the case of England, generally a grey sky [laughter], but there's always something up there. Even at night, there's a roof—the stars. There's a horizon. There's a place where the land and the sky meet. Which means that your person, your body is located in a space which is made up by the ground, the horizon, the hills, whatever it is. To a blind person, none of this exists. There is no scenery. When you go blind scenery disappears. Of course, there are places you walk where it takes more effort because your feet are going uphill: that's the nearest you get to scenery. At least, so I thought, when first I went blind. Scenery goes, stars go, the heavens go, the roof goes. You are out there—a mind without a body just in space, very, very scary. Trees went. I thought I would never get over my grief at the loss of trees. Of course, suddenly trees would come back when I would walk into them [laughter].

Usually, when accompanied by a sighted person—people sometimes say to me, "oh John, you must be so trusting."

I said, "trusting? Hell, I don't trust anybody."

[laughter]

I always have my stick in one hand, if I'm on somebody's elbow on the other hand, because so often, you know, you're walking along—splat!—into a lamppost. [laughter]

"Oh, sorry John, forgot you were blind."

[more laugher].

Forgot I was blind!

"Sorry John, forgot to tell you that tree was there."

Ouch!

[more laughter]

However, those contacts with trees were in a way quite encouraging. I learnt to put my arms around trees—a slight strange, erotic posture which I didn't like to do too long in case people were watching me and thought I was creating some new kind of sardonic ritual [laughter]. However, I then discovered I was wrong. I had a wonderful experience which did not come all at once but came over years. You see, I'm a very slow learner, it took me years, *years,* before I realised that I was in a world of sound. Isn't that strange—why did it take so long?

Why did it take so long: because the shattering impact of the disorientation created by the loss of sight, is so primitive, requires such atavistic reconstruction, that it took me years to reassemble the basic schemata of my bodily life. But then I gradually discovered trees came back.

I found that in the winter—I live in Birmingham in the Midlands—in the winter the trees whistle, and they crack and the groan… In the spring they go all fluffy, with the little fresh leaves. In the summer they are like the ocean—rolling across like waves—wonderful! In the autumn they go tinkley. In the autumn they become useful, because as the leaves fall and the wind blows them along the road, it spells out the pattern of the road in front of me. I can follow the leaves. I can walk through the leaves. Of course, the leaves can also obscure my gutters and my pavements, if they're so thick and dense, which is a nuisance. But the wonderful thing is the *sound* of them, the way they go tinkley. I learnt that the trees change around the seasons. You can tell the seasons by listening to the leaves—although you'd certainly be working on a fairly slow timescale, if you had to tell the seasons by the sound of the trees [chuckle]. But it would be possible. And then I learnt, that this sound of the trees was infinitely fascinating, because I learnt how to listen to detail.

Let me now emphasize this as a basic principle: there is *nothing* a blind person can do, that a sighted person can't do. There are no amazing charisma, there is no fantastic memory. I think it is true, perhaps, that the brain reorganizes itself. It is true, perhaps, that certain primal bodily awarenesses—kinaesthesia, facial vision, maybe there is other primitive body knowledge which is subliminal in sighted people, and which becomes conscious again in blind people. But I am sure there are sighted people who are perfectly capable of rendering those primal bodily awarenesses into consciousness, through disciplined attention, making them liminal not subliminal. But for most sighted people who are asleep in their sighted world that is not the case.

And so I learnt to listen to the detail of the trees. On my walk home from my office, a walk that takes me exactly 20 minutes—because I can't go any faster, it would be dangerous, I can't go any slower, I would loose my way, so I just have to go at exactly the same pace, more or less—there's a place where I go through a little copse of trees. Maybe there's a dozen or less, I'm not sure. But I like now to pause as my path goes under these trees. I like to pause there and I sometimes stand under those trees, and I listen. Particularly in the summer. But it's also true in the autumn. In the spring it's not so easy because the fluffiness is too ubiquitous. The tinkling of the autumn is distinguishable, by its nature, the sound being prickly. It is possible to listen to the sounds rather than the sound. So in the autumn and the summer, when the sound of the trees is myriad, then I find it very beautiful to stand and listen.

Actually, what taught me to listen was not the leaves. My discovery of the trees, as I have said, took time. My first discovery of the beauty of sound was with the rain. …And this opened up to me a world of beauty I had never imagined. You see, when I first lost my sight I was deeply conscious of aesthetic loss. There is of course a knowledge loss and a competence loss, and many other kinds of losses. But the loss of beauty was one which afflicted me quite seriously, and it was a grief. …I've already mentioned the loss of the stars, the loss of the mountains. …the loss of women—I mean that you couldn't stand on the street corner and watch the girls go bye, you know. I guess to most men, and I'm a very ordinary man, I found that a loss, an impoverishment of life that I couldn't enjoy women's beauty. And of course, most of our experiences of beauty, you know, you imagine, shafts of light coming down through forests, and sunsets, and all that stuff.

The way I rediscovered beauty again was so slow.

I learnt to listen to the sound of the rain. I learnt this first I suppose, through depression. I experienced some times of prolonged and deep depression, when I made an important discovery: that there are feelings so deep that you can't feel them. And I can remember times when, in my study at home, I would become conscious that there was a storm going on. I would forget about my disorientated and vacated interior and would become aware of the wind, thundering upon the corner of the house, whistling through the eaves. And then I would become aware of the rain, splattering on the windowpane. I would stand up. I would press my nose hard against the window. And gradually it was as if the glass disappeared, because now my consciousness extended out from my nose pressed upon a panel of glass until it became unconscious, and I became aware that the sounds of the rain on the surrounding panels—it was one of those windows made up of those little panels with beading between them—that the sound on the different panels of glass was different. Each tiny panel gave a different sound. And as I concentrated now on this sound—I don't mean to say I tried to concentrate, I was too depressed for that—as the sounds of these panels of glass became noticeable, became impossible *not* to notice, then it was as if my conscious-

ness gradually spread out: first, the differentiation between the little panels of glass around my face, and then the wider sound of the panels of glass where the rain hit them on the edges of the windows, and beyond that, I realised I could I hear the rain hitting the wall. It was different, where it hit the wall from where it hit the window. Where it hit the window it reverberated with little echoes. Where it hit the wall it was dull. But then I realised I could hear the water running down the wall. And now I became aware of a distant rushing sound-a spout from the corner of the house, and the water was gushing down it. Beyond that something else…yes..the rain was falling upon a large bush, I could detect it. And what was this between the bush and the spout?…Yes…there was a different sound where the rain was hitting the lawn, from where the rain was hitting the path. I listened more acutely… 'swish', 'swish' …I could hear cars going past in the road.

The rain had turned the light on.

I listened yet more intently. Was it possible that I could make out the rain falling on the houses on the opposite side of the street? That I could not be sure of. But certainly, beyond all of those details of the immediate and the surrounding world, there was a distant roar of the rain falling upon the world, upon the city. And as I listened to this, I realized I was no longer listening, because the rain was not falling into my ears, it was falling into my heart.

Gary Ferrington

I have discovered many things since becoming blind. Oh, these are things that many sensitive sighted people know already but I couldn't learn them until I became blind.

Most of us think that the senses are specialised because we are taught that we've got five senses. We learn that there are parts of the body corresponding to each of these senses; you smell with the nose, you hear with the ears, you taste with the mouth, you feel with your skin. But this is only partly true. I learnt that you don't actually listen with your ears. You couldn't listen *without* your ears, I grant that. Nevertheless, when you are really listening, you are not aware of your ears, let's put it like that. Your ears disappear. Just as when you are seeing. Don't you agree, as sighted people, you don't exactly see with your eyes. Because the eye is not conscious of seeing. You can't see your eye. You just live in the world of sight.

The sense does not become conscious of itself because it lives in the world of which it is conscious.

In the case of the ear, I learnt that you don't actually listen with your ears, you listen with your whole body. And the same is true of sight. There was a stage after I lost my sight, when I became aware of the fact that I'd become a primitive organism, in which the organ of sight was no longer distributed in the head but was distributed throughout the body. Like an amoeba, which has no special organ of sight, but which responds to its environment with the whole of its body. So it was with me. I began to say of myself. "I'm not blind. I'm a person with a generalized sense of sight. I'm a person in whom *perception* has become generalized throughout the body." In that sense, I have become a kind of primitive organism. I suppose I was rather primitive to start with but I've now become conscious of becoming atavistic biologically, because then I learnt to see with the whole of my body. Blind people do see—it's just that they see with their skin. I should say that they *perceive*. Their perception becomes organic.

And the same I think is true of sound: the ability to hear becomes organic in the body as a whole. I don't know anything about the biology of this, I'm sure there are lots of people here that do—I suppose it's true that the sound must vibrate in your lungs and in your body and in your stomach in different ways. And so your whole body does respond to sound, not just your ears.

It's also a form of identification. The senses tend to establish a subject/object division. But when you *really* see, you are no longer conscious of seeing because you are absorbed in what you see. So it is when you hear, when you listen. You no longer are aware that you are listening, because you have become absorbed in what you are listening to and so the subject/object distinction disappears. In other words, you hear with your heart, because you become one with the sound. The sound is in you, is you. And blindness taught me that, and I was grateful for that.

I'm going to go back for a moment now to the disorientation of losing the visual, because I think that is one way of focusing attention upon the nature of the sound world. …Let me talk about the human person. …When I lost my sight I became painfully conscious of the fact that I had lost the human face. And here is a good example of the fact that touch and sight are incommensurable: People will sometimes say to me, "Do you want to feel my face?" well, whatever turns you on baby! [laughter] People sometimes say, "Would you like me to describe the scene?", and I say yes, you know, I mean I'm a friendly guy, if you want to describe the scene I'm interested in you and your feelings, I like to know what it is that's apparent to you. So, I like that. But you see, I can stretch out my fingers and feel your closed eyelids, the ball of your eye. But the feel of the eye is nothing like eye contact, is it? It is incommensurable. That's why I don't approve of those projects where pictures, artistic works—paintings—are turned into tactile facsimiles, by introducing layers which are supposed to represent perspective. I do not agree with those, because it doesn't seem to me that there is any continuum between the tactile character of those representations and the paintings that they purport to represent. Now, somebody at breakfast was telling me of a thing where they produce an acoustic facsimile of a picture. Not an attempt to render the picture tactile through space but an attempt to create an acoustic image of a picture. Now that, *that* interests me because there, one is not attempting to create a literal analogue. One is creating, I suppose, a dialogue between the two senses which, I think, is more interesting.

Anyway, to come back to the face…

The face no longer had an environment. Sometimes, when I got home in the evening Marian would say to me did you see 'so and so' today, and I would say yes. And then it would suddenly occur to me that I did not know whether I had spoken to my friend over the telephone or had been in my friend's presence, and I would search my memory. When you are asking yourself, 'when did I see you last', you probably carry a photograph as it were—a visual memory—in which you now perceive this person standing against the bookcase or outlined against this tree. The person appears against a background and you remember the whole visual constellation. But when there is no background, indeed when there's not even a voice, because don't forget clothing disappears—that's actually not as exciting as it sounds! [laughter]—and so individual differences disappear.

The whole body disappears. People don't have body any longer. People have voices. And I used to find it very disconcerting listening to voices, and not knowing, exactly, whether, when I traced that voice back to where it was coming from I encounter a human pair of lips—and the voice says "what are you doing, John"—or I trace the voice to its origin and there's a loudspeaker. Very eerie. And after all, what did it matter? It didn't matter whether it was a loudspeaker or a face. That disorientated me and bothered me.

And then I suppose, gradually, voices took on fresh character. Now here again, I must emphasize my basic thought—there's nothing a blind person can do that a sighted person can't do. I'm just reporting my own experience. I discovered that, at first, I was very conscious of not knowing what people looked like. And people would say to me, "do you wanna know what I look like," I'd say yes. Sometimes, when I'd interviewed a candidate, when the candidate had gone, I'd say to my sighted colleague, "what did he look like, what did she look like? Give me a visual run down." It worried me that I didn't know if a woman was pretty or not in the conventional way that we talk about pretty women. It worried me. But gradually that concern disappeared. And, for a while I passed through a period, where not only did the individual *case* disappear but the *category* disappeared. And when people would say to me, "do you want to know what I look like?" I would feel an urge to say, "what do you mean, look like?" What is this 'look like'. And I would then have to struggle to realize that there is something they call 'look like', which was very important to these people. Indeed, that they actually spent a lot of their time worrying about what they looked like. And, I had to struggle to realize this. And when that happened to me, I knew I was far, far away. I was really, actually in a different world. And there was a time when I was in-between these worlds. I knew I had lost the world of sight—it had gone irretrievably. I was conscious of these faces disappearing. But I didn't know that there was another world, a world not yet born, into which I was to be born, to be re-born.

Gradually voices came back to me. Gradually, all of the power of personality which is in the face, was transferred to the voice. I learnt to judge people by their voices. Not deliberately but, you know, you make do with what you've got. I learnt the person's ages, people's experiences. The voice is a fingerprint of sound, in which the history of the person is encoded, just as sighted people say it is in the face. It's the same in the voice. I learnt to transfer the erotic into the voice. And I learnt to respond to a woman and to a man by the intelligence, the articulation, the self-mockery, the fluency. All those qualities which are in the human voice. And then I got onto computers.

It was in March of 1993, that I got my first Kurtzweill Reader—the wonderful text to speech computers. It's like a small photocopying machine: you lay the book down, you press a button, out comes a voice and reads it to you. When I first discovered this I was overwhelmed. I couldn't get over it. For years I'd been listening to recorded books on cassette. And now I had something different. Every recorded cassette book has it's own erotic character. Every human voice has its own distinct charisma. I found that here was a voice which did not breathe. Which did not cough, splutter, which did not turn up with a runny nose, which was never late, which did not apologize when it made mistakes, which was remorseless and tireless. I never found a reader who could tire me out. Reading a Ph.D. thesis I'd get them started at 9 o'clock and work in hourly shifts right around the clock 'til I'd done it. They'd start to cough and complain, and go hoarse, and want drinks of water. But now, *now,* I was confronted by 'the Eternal'—a voice stronger than me, greater than me—and I had a mad desire to control it. The first day I got it working I had the mad desire to grab some pornography and force it down its throat! [big laughter] The thing had a whisper as well as other voices, you see? [more laughter] I wanted to make it read in the voice of 'Whispering Wendy' and force it to read all this filth [laughter]. And then my heart full of compassion, I said, no I mustn't do that, no that would corrupt it. I'll make it read beautiful medieval mysticism, that will enlighten it and inform it. I grabbed old books off the shelf, books I hadn't read for fifteen years. Put them on just to read a page. I rang my wife up, I said, "darling, books are back." I shall never forget it.

And then of course, the Internet and the wonderful pleasure of inviting my tough female professor to send me an e-mail and having her read it out in the voice of 'Huge Harry'! And the change, the mental change, in reading in space, to reading in time! After all, sound is always in time. At first, I thought I'd become an adult illiterate. I was promoted to a Readership in my university and I guess I was the only illiterate Reader in the United Kingdom. Because although I was a Reader, I could neither read nor write. But then I found gradually that my mind shifted. And previously reading only in space through a printed text, I now found there was no difference between books and speech. It was just one huge universe of speech, that's all a book was—a voice talking. The whole world was turned into a world of speech and that was a wonderful thing. The fluidity of the speech, the way you couldn't stop it: you see, when I read books before, I would put rings around key words and underline things, cross reference them in the margin. But now, the way it kept coming at me, coming at me, I couldn't stop it. Of course, I could slow it down. I could make it read by the line, by the word, by the letter. But I could never still it. If I stilled it it disappeared. It stopped. And I grew to love that.

I grew to understand that mobility and movement had disappeared for me. I can illustrate that the way I did with a friend over breakfast this morning. You see, if you as a sighted person hold up a saucer, it actually changes shape as you rotate it in your hands, doesn't it. But to a blind person, saucers are always the same shape. Nothing changes shape. We live in an immobile world, a world of things which don't change, whatever way we touch them they are always the same. But now, through sound which is always in motion, then movement and mobility came back.

The title I had suggested for this talk was something like, 'Sound: An Enrichment or a State?'.

I do believe that the blind person lives in a very distinct world. Whether sound itself is a state, I'm not so sure. …But I am sure that *blindness* is a state, it is a world. Because, basically, we know with our bodies. We think we know with our minds but we don't. The greatest epistemic fact about us human beings, is that we know with our bodies. Our knowledge is a projection from the bodies within which we live. Sighted people live in a sighted world. Sighted people know of course that they are sighted, and give thanks perhaps for their sight, and regard blind people as being excluded from the world of sight. But very few sighted people

know that what they are living in is a world which is epistemically generated by their sense of sight: that sight is creating the knowledge world within which they live. Generally, sighted people don't know that. Similarly, they don't know, generally speaking, that there are other human worlds. And because they don't know that, they produce an unconscious domination—a hegemony of the sighted world—in which all other human states are simply regarded as exclusions.

What blindness has taught me is that there are many human worlds. There is continuity between these worlds—when you are holding the one you love in the dark, it doesn't matter that you can't see. Nevertheless, these worlds are sufficiently discontinuous to describe them as 'worlds'. And so, to be blind is to live in a *world*. It is an intact world, an autonomous world. It is not a world in which there is emotional deficiency. You must not think of the blind person as a six-cylinder car running on 5 cylinders. You must think of the blind person as a small car. I change the metaphor: you mustn't think of a blind person as a cake with a slice cut out. Rather, the blind person is a small cake. The personality regroups, the wounds heal, one reassembles around a new kinaesthesia, in which the world of sight, and of touch, and of smell are once again integrated in the most beautiful and deeply satisfying way. Of course, one would prefer to see. There are moments when one has a pang. There are moments when I go to watch my boys play football on a Saturday morning and somebody shouts out, "Goal!" and I say, "Who was that?" and the person says, "Oh, it's that young fella Hull," then I experience a pang—I wish I could have seen that. But generally speaking, I do not go around the place mourning over my loss of sight because I live in a new, a different world.

My wife—who has helped me wonderfully to work my way through this and is a sighted person—once put it so beautifully and poignantly to me, I have never forgotten it. She said, one day when we were discussing this abyss between sighted and blind people, she said to me, "you see my darling, the problem is not that you are blind, but that I have become invisible." With that sentence she turned the tables. My world was established as normal. She was the one that was excluded.

And yet through sound, we sighted and blind people are united. So, perhaps we could say that sound is symbolic of a corridor which links our two worlds. If that is so, we can expand our humanity through exploring sound and through exploring the different worlds of human-ness, within which these sounds dwell.

Thank you very much for listening. I hope there's some comment for a few minutes of reaction [applause, applause, applause].

Is there time for a quick comment?

Pauline Oliveros: How about the world of the deaf?

Well, you know, as I said, there are many human worlds. And the world of the deaf is another entirely different world. You know the works of Oliver Sachs? I'm sure you do. He specializes in the minute description of human worlds. And he has a wonderful book called, 'Seeing Voices—a journey into the world of the deaf', which is the best book I know on that question. And of course, the world of those who are both deaf and blind, which is as different from the world I live in, as is the world you live in from the one I live in. I can't imagine to be both deaf and blind: the most exciting thing that happens all day is that you have a pimple on your nose. Amazing. So, yes, thank you for the question. And my comment is that there are many human worlds. To enter these alternate human worlds requires tremendous empathy and discipline, because we so easily take our own worlds for granted. Another one?

Hildegard Westerkamp: I have very much enjoyed the expressiveness of your voice whilst speaking…

Thank you.

[HW] And I was wondering whether you can describe the transition that you must have experienced between speaking publicly with print and what I would call learning to speak freely.

Yes. Yes, that's a very shrewd question. At first that used to cause me such anxiety. And I tried everything. I tried Braille notes but my Braille wasn't good enough. I tried keeping a summary on cassette recordings. I would make a summary on a tiny little cassette, hand-held cassette. One time I was doing a lecture tour of the United States, I was down in Houston, Texas. I was speaking to a group of teachers about 300 hundred of them in this huge auditorium. And I had perhaps a number of points to make, and at that moment I forgot my next point. That was in the days when I cared about such things [laughter]. I said to my audience, "Oh excuse me, I can't remember my next point, I'll just have to remind myself what it was." I held my tape recorder to my ear and pressed the 'go' button. The whole place was sunk in total silence [laughter]. I'm not exaggerating, you really could have heard a pin drop. To my horror, nothing came out [laughter]. I'd got it set wrong, or…you know, there was nothing. However, at that moment I remembered the point [laughter]. So, I put the cassette away on the table and continued my lecture. After the lecture three American ladies came up to me, they said "Professor Hull, your hearing must be absolutely wonderful. We were sitting in the front row and.." [big belly laughs from audience predicting punch line!] "…we couldn't hear a thing" [more laughter] "…but you obviously picked up your notes." I said, "Well thank you madam, you know, we blind people have remarkable…" [more big laughter] I'll tell you how it happened. So often these little changes in life happen through something that somebody says to you. That's another stunning thing about sound—our lives are punctuated by the occasional remarks that people make to us, isn't that true?

One day I was at a lecture down in Kent, in Canterbury—big international conference—I was dead worried about my speech. I was sitting in my room, going through my notes again and again on my tape recorder, and an old friend came to walk me to the lecture theatre. As I was leaving I picked up the tape recorder to take it with me. She said, "What do you want that for John?" I said, "Oh, Lynda that's got my notes. What'll I do if I forget them?" She said, "Put that thing down John!" She said, "Sock it to them in the power of The Holy Ghost!" [laughter] And ever since then, I've done just that!

Scott Hawkins : Can you just make a comment on technology and your relationship with that?

Yes, thank you. I did comment about my experience of synthetic speech. All over the place today, I meet blind people who say to me, technology has completely changed my life. There is no doubt that the technology is absolutely wonderful. I must take the occasion of your question to refer to AbilityNet. It is the largest organisation in the UK, possibly the largest in the world, which specializes in the provision of adaptive technology for disabled people. I'm one of the founding directors of AbilityNet. We started in 1992 with 6 members of staff. Today we have 54 members of staff. We have locations all over the United Kingdom and this is a wonderful organisation which changes people lives. We run a free telephone line of advice. You can get it by just inquiring about AbilityNet.

For myself, I do almost all my work on computer. Behind my keyboard there are two small speakers. There is a monitoring screen, it's about 6 feet away to the right. As a matter of fact, I'll tell you something funny. The other day, the monitoring screen wasn't turned on. And when one of my support staff came into the room, he said, "Oh John, your screen's not on." And I said, "Oh, so what Lee?" [laughter] Then I said to him, "Lee, you think I'm taking sneaky little sideways glances at that don't you?" [laughter] And we both roared with laughter. He said, "Well, it's so hard to kind of realize that everything you have comes out of those speakers," but that is right. My software is equipped with a program which suppresses the pictures so I don't have to wait for them to unroll. If it's a picture it says "image". If it's a pornographic site, is says, "image, image, image, image!" [laughter] So, I quickly turn it off and switch over to something more helpful like Greenpeace [laughter]. So that's how it works. I do all my own e-mail. You see, e-mail has restored me to literacy. Before, if you wrote me a letter in print, I had to get my secretary to read it to me, I dictate a reply, she comes back and reads it to me to check that it's right, and I sign it, she makes out an envelope, I mean all of that crap. Today, you see, I go into my office at 8 o'clock every morning. I open up my e-mails, I answer them then and there—nothing for her to do. So technology is absolutely life changing for blind people.

Floris van Manen: John, you described yourself as being a smaller cake, why?

Because, that's just my picturesque way, Floris, of pointing out that we must not adopt a deficiency concept of disability. Many people think of disability in terms of deficiency: the main thing about a blind person is that a blind person can't see.

FvM: But aren't you advancing it in a favourite position?

Oh, I see you are talking about the smallness.

FvM: Well, a lot of people 'dress up', you know, to pretend they look different than they are. Whereas I can tell from the first sound that I hear from people who is in front of me. Well, the good thing is that people who focus on vision, forget about that feature, so they might dress up completely differently than who they are. You don't have that disadvantage I would say…

Well, you raise very interesting points…

[FvM] Of course!…[laughter]

Is it possible to deceive a blind person through disguising your voice? Of course, voice recognition takes time, visual recognition is instant. I often tell the people I work with, imagine you are always talking with me on the phone. There are 200 people in my building. Somebody passes me on the stairs and says, "Good morning," or "Good Morning John," and I say "Hi". Then they stop and say, "do you know who I am?" And I say, "no, you didn't tell me, who are you?" And they say, "surely you know my voice?" I have to say, "I'm afraid your voice has made absolutely no impact upon me" [big laughter]. People get slightly offended if you don't instantly recognise their voice. But to say, "Morning John," is not enough of a sample. Even if it's someone you see every day. At least that's what I find. Maybe I'm just not any good at it. I find I do need time to recognise voices and getting to know new people is very difficult.

[FvM] That's what I mean.

I used the expression 'small' because I think it is true that the world in which a blind person lives is small. Because, you see, we blind people live with tiny details. If I lose my way it's almost impossible for a sighted person to redirect me. Because I want to know where that little chink is out of the foot path, just about 6 feet from the corner. Because that's my marker. Sighted people don't notice those little details. They say, where are you trying to get to. I say, well, I'm going to such-'n'-such a place. Oh, well it's down that way. Well, what does that mean? You see, the demonstratives disappear. The very language changes, because the demonstrative pronouns disappear. So it's very hard for the sighted person to really orientate a blind person. It was for things like that I used the expression 'small'. But, of course, these things are all relative and its possible for a sighted person to live a very small life, and a blind person to live a very large life. That I think is true.

John Drever: Do you want to quickly say something about your new publication?

Ah, yeah! You bet. Oh, there's a man I like to work with [laughter]! This is not so much exactly about sound. When I lost my sight, I lost not only the human face but the printed page. And when I began to read the Bible, I was shocked, because I discovered the Bible was written by sighted people. Such an obvious thought but it had never occurred to me. I discovered the entire imagery of the thing was based upon the sighted world. Light was truth and God, and Darkness was sin and unbelief. And it was like that pretty well from beginning to end. And this made me feel deeply alienated. About 3 years ago I sat down and listened to the entire Bible from beginning to end, including the Apocrypha, and out of that I wrote a book about the Bible in which I interpreted the whole text from the blind point of view. As far as I know, it's the first time anybody has written a blind hermeneutic of any classical text, certainly of the Bible. The book is called "In the Beginning there was Darkness." (for further details please see p. 34). [Final applause]

An Australian by origin, **John M. Hull** has been Professor of Religious Education in the University of Birmingham, since 1989. He was Editor of the British Journal of Religious Education for 25 years, is President of the National Christian Education Council, and is joint founder and General Secretary of the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values. In 1992 he was granted the William Rainey Harper Award of the Religious Education Association of the USA and Canada for his services to Religious Education, and in 1995 was granted the honorary D.Theol. degree by the University of Frankfurt. His most recent publications are *On Sight and Insight: a Journey into the World of Blindness* (One World Books, Oxford reprinted 2001) and *Utopian Whispers: Moral, Religious and Spiritual Values in Schools* (RMEP, London 1998), and his new book *In The Beginning There was Darkness* published by SCM Press 2001. A practising member of the Church of England, he is also an Elder in the United Reformed Church. He is married to Marilyn and they have five children aged 12 to 27. E-mail: J.M.Hull@bham.ac.uk

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