

One of the things that we can all sometimes want in our lives is control.

There's having control of a career; the control that comes with being able to plan your day or your life; or just the control of being able to see and hear what is all around you. And somehow not having control can be a very frightening proposition.

But what if you were in the darkness, and unable to see or hear? How would you learn to gain control when you were seemingly helpless? What would you do?

In the late 1950s, a young actress named Patty Duke got one of her first big roles, to play Helen Keller. But in reflecting back on this role, she says that one of the most important life long lessons she learned from studying Helen Keller was how in her own life to trust in God.

For 18 months she had been coached and drilled to act deaf, mute and blind to audition for the role of 10-year-old Helen Keller in the Broadway play, "The Miracle Worker," which opened October 19, 1959, and enjoyed a run of 719 performances.

When they told her she had got the part, at first she was overjoyed. But the next day when she thought about it, she became afraid. How could she tell anyone that practicing to play a blind girl on the stage somehow had made her deathly afraid of being blind?

Part of the fear was because of the big fight scene in the play. It was full of violence. The blind Helen is like a wild little savage. She does everything to oppose the efforts of her teacher, Annie Sullivan.

In the fight scene at the breakfast table, plates, cups, saucers, silverware, even a chair and a pitcher full of water are thrown about.

During the early rehearsals Duke choked on the food, cut her hand, chipped a tooth and had her head banged against the door jamb. It could have been worse. She fought down her fear as best as she could.

One night after the play had opened, she was in her usual place backstage, waiting for her cue. The stage manager had just called, "Places, please!"

In a few minutes the curtain would go up. She would hear the words for her entrance, and then for the next two and a half hours she would be groping, falling, and stumbling about the stage, acting the part of a blind, deaf mute.

As she concentrated on the feeling of being sightless one of the four blind girls in the cast came by. She greeted Patty with her usual cheerful, "Hello."

Patty looked up to return her greeting, and felt a sudden twist inside herself. There was a welt on her forehead, one of her cheeks was bruised and the other cut just below the eye.

"What happened?" She stammered.

The blind girl reached out for her, grasped her hand, and laughed.

"Nothing, Patty, really. I had a battle with a clothes hook in our dressing room, and I lost."

Patty tried to think of something to say, but she couldn't. She felt numb.

"Your cue, Patty," she said quickly.

Patty pressed her hand very hard once, and shuffled on stage. Her arms were outstretched before her and her hands were “feeling” her way. For now, Patty, too was “blind.” But it chilled her.

How could anyone want to go on living with blindness she thought to herself.

It became almost impossible to erase these thoughts from her mind. She began to wonder, more and more, about a world where such tragedies could happen. She wondered and she was drawn more and more to the four blind children in the cast.

One night Patty asked her mother about blindness. She said not to worry about it because sometimes God takes something away with one hand, then He gives with the other. The blind often see things more clearly than people with perfect eyes.

But Patty really didn't understand what she meant.

She found herself joining more and more in the games with the four blind girls. Jumping rope was one of them. Two of the blind girls would turn the rope and when Patty yelled, "Now!" a third would hop in and begin to jump.

As the rope turned faster and faster, their yells and laughter became louder and louder.

But somehow Patty could not laugh.

"Would you like to play ball with us?" they asked her one day.

Patty couldn't believe her ears. But then she saw how they did it: they used a fairly large rubber ball. A blind child would stand at bat, facing the pitcher. The pitcher would get direction from the voice of the batter.

The batter would listen for the sound of the ball bouncing, and the "assistant batter," who was sighted, would yell "Swing" just as the ball came over the plate. If the ball was hit, the assistant would grab the batter's hand and lead her running around the bases.

On the day before Easter an egg hunt was held in the theater. Eggs were hidden around the stage, backstage and about the wardrobe room. To make it fair, the sighted children were blindfolded.

When the game started, they had to go down a flight of stairs, and with her blindfold on she held back. “Too fast,” Patty shouted. All she got in reply was laughter. The blind children took her hand and led her!

Through narrow passages, over wire and cables, under low-hanging pipes, Patty’s blind friends led her. She reflected that it was like being in the scary black darkness of a “Fun House” in an amusement park, where you don’t know what terrifying thing might happen to you next. She was scared—and ashamed of it.

After the performance that night, Mr. and Mrs. John Ross, who had coached and managed her in the theater since she was eight and have been like second parents, asked why Patty why she was so quiet.

“Anything wrong?” Mrs. Ross inquired.

“No,” Patty answered, “nothing except in the middle of the fight scene I threw one of the spoons too hard and it bounced off the wall and hit me on the face..It came pretty close to my eye.”

“What’s really bothering you, Patty?” Mr. Ross asked.

Mrs. Ross took her hand.

Patty blurted it out, all about her blind friend and the bruises on her face and everything that happened in the games and the egg hunt and how she wouldn’t want to live if she ever became blind.

“That certainly would not be the answer,” Mrs. Ross said.

“Then what is the answer?”

“What did Helen Keller do?” Mr. Ross asked.

Patty shook her head. “But I’m not Helen Keller.”

“You’re not,” Mr. Ross said. “But to play her you must get inside her, you almost must become her.

“You’ve done that with the wild young Helen Keller, but you must know how the child grew to be one of the world’s great women by mastering her handicaps and fears. Try thinking of yourself in this role too.”

“But how did she get rid of her fears?”

“She put herself in God’s hands,” Mr. Ross said simply.

“Why should she?” Patty asked.

“Because she knew that she was helpless to help herself. Helen Keller was desperately afraid, too, but she knew that if God, who created her, was a loving Father, He was surely going to help her if she asked Him to. And when she put herself in His care she found new strength.”

Patty sat silent; Mrs. Ross went on:

“When Helen Keller grew up and became a famous woman, she wrote that she made the most wonderful discovery of her life when she was 16. These are her words:

“We are never happy unless our hearts are filled with the sun which never dissolves into gloom. God is that sun, and if our faith in Him is strong, whether we are blind or seeing, He will somehow reveal our powers and brighten the darkest days with His divine beams.”

Patty took all that to bed with her to think about. And the more she thought, the clearer it became. The blind children in the cast were without fear because they trusted God.

Little by little Patty discovered that when she forgot herself and trusted a God who loves her, then she was not nearly as afraid as before.

And she also learned what her mother meant when she said the blind often see more clearly than people with good eyes. It's because they don't wait until the last minute to put themselves in His hands.

The first sacrament we celebrate in the Catholic Church is Baptism, where we place ourselves in God's hands. And in a sense all of the other sacraments do that too. We trust God loves us so we welcome Him in Communion; we trust His Spirit will strengthen us so we ask for the Holy Spirit in Confirmation; we trust He will be with us through our suffering in the Anointing of the Sick; and we trust He will always love and forgive us which is why we celebrate confession. Even our vocations of Holy Orders and Marriage take place in a church, before a cross, where we are surrendering to God and asking Him to guide us, even though we of course have no idea what the rest of our lives will bring. But one thing we do know for certain is that God is there, and always will be.

This is what Jeremiah stresses to us this week in the first reading. He exhorts the people to trust in God, for without God one is like a barren bush in the desert that enjoys no change of season, but stands in a lava waste, a salt and empty earth. When one trusts in God, he is like the tree planted beside the waters that stretches out its roots to the stream, and it fears not the heat when it comes for its leaves stay green, and in time of drought it shows no distress but still bears fruit.

Most of us aren't blind, but sometimes we are blind to the reality that on our own, we cannot find the way to the kingdom of Heaven, and it is so easy to become lost. Like Patty Duke and the woman she played, Helen Keller came to realize, God is there to fill our lives so we become like the tree besides flowing waters. So how does one learn to let go and let God?

The first step is asking ourselves a question which is who or what is it that we worship? Most of us might say God, but if we look deeper, sometimes our actions would point to something else like the ego, being a busybody, or being noticed by others. When Jeremiah says cursed is one who seeks his strength in flesh, he's getting at not literal flesh but anything other than God. Anything else we put our energy or worship into will leave us feeling dissatisfied, because eventually the money, the power, or being in the limelight will come to an end. God's love never will.

The second step is to have an ongoing relationship with God. We often sing at Mass the hymn "How Can I keep from Singing" with the lines "no storm can shake my inmost calm while to that rock I'm clinging." We cling to God by knowing we can always turn to Him. So that's why having the ongoing relationship with God is so important - going to Mass, praying

daily, coming to spend time in Adoration or celebrate the Stations of the Cross in Lent; and living out the faith through helping those in need. By going back to the well we can grow closer to God daily.

And lastly, all of us can be spiritually blind at times. Jeremiah was a prophet to his people who had lost their way. The young blind actors that Patty Duke worked with helped one another. And Anne Sullivan helped Helen Keller to learn and live. Guiding us through life are people God gives us. Sometimes through stubbornness we can fear asking for help or listening to others. But no matter what our age, it's important we recognize the prophets God gives us who give us guidance about what to do and what not to do, for they so often lead us through moments of blindness in life and ultimately can help us on our journey to heaven.

I remember growing up as a child there were moments where I couldn't wait to be in control of what time to go to bed, what to have for dinner, what to do with my day, when to clean the house and so many other things. As I've aged there certainly is a lot I do have control of as a grown-up, but also at times I can be blind to doing the right thing or knowing what to do next. Spiritual maturity means recognizing our blind spots; for a person can put

on a good show and appear strong and in control and focused, but without God leading them, they are ultimately always going to get lost and end up like the barren bush standing in a lava waste, a salt and empty earth. I know at times I will get lost again, and not see sin or bad decisions right in front of me. And I also know my future will have many valleys in it too and suffering which confronts us all. But what I remember is that grace has been given to me by God and has truly set me free and help me to see. Helen Keller is quite right when she reminds us that His divine beams brighten the darkest of days. So as both she and the woman who portrayed her learned to do, may we too let go and let God, realizing that when we do, ultimately no matter where life may lead us, He will help us find the way home.