

# I was blind to this vision, now I see

Deep in the dusk of the twilight  
Dim be the region of hope  
Will not the deepening darkness  
Brighten the glimmering star?

Then when the night is upon us  
Why should the heart shrink away  
When the dark midnight is over  
Watch, for the breaking of day.

BY LOUIS BENEDICT

These immortal words of one of history's most inspiring songs composed by Septimus Winner in 1868 guided me into the Sunday Times in 1991 after more than three years of a desert or wilderness experience. It involved a Gethsemane or Calvary experience where at one point the soul was crushed by sorrow to the point of death but in a mysterious way the potential calamity was turned into a blessing when it led to inner spiritual liberation.

Since 1966, I had worked at the Independent Newspapers Group where journalism was largely a profession with bylines or buy lines and a hidden if not deceptive desire for power, prestige and popularity. All this was in the inner nature of selfishness or self-centredness though like most people there was an act of working for high ideals and the common good. When Shakespeare said that the "world's a stage and we are actors", he did not mean Romeo and Juliet or Hamlet, but the omelette of life where we go on acting, though our external behaviour which appears to be good is not in harmony with our inner nature which is often self-centred, self-righteous and hypocritical. Others know we are acting, we know others are acting and the whole big act goes on towards the path of self-deception and eventual self-destruction.

After the three years in the desert and the loss of my eyesight, I joined the Sunday Times for the same work, but the profession was now a vocation with a vision and a mission.

Though I was visually handicapped, deep was the awareness and realization that in the vocation of journalism the vision is to be the voice of the voiceless people and an instrument through which the people exercised their fundamental right to the freedom of information and expression. Earlier I was blind to this. Now I see.

If people come into journalism with the intention of making money or buying prestige through bylines, it will be better for them to find another job rather than damaging the principles of a noble vocation.

In journalism we also need to make a preferential option for the poor. As part of that mission, we formed the People's Movement for the Rights of Patients (PMRP) for the implementation of the revered Professor Senaka Bibile's 'Essential Medicines Concept' to make available quality drugs to all the people at affordable prices. We also worked out a draft for a charter of patients' rights and responsibilities and a constitutional amendment to make health a fundamental right. These were intended to restore a health service where the well-being of the patient is given top priority. For about seven years the Government has been promising to implement the National Medicinal Drugs Policy and other provisions to



The writer at work: An inspiration to all his colleagues at the Sunday Times.

Pic by Saman Kariyawasam

restore a patient-friendly health service. But the promises have not been implemented, apparently due to pressure from vested interests which appear to have succeeded in making the private health sector one of the biggest profit-making businesses. Due to lack of regulation and monitoring by the Government, private hospitals are charging lakhs from warded patients with some specialists charging as much as Rs. 5,000 for a two-minute check. Professor Bibile warned four decades ago that if health was put in the market the poor would die. They did not listen. They are not listening still. Perhaps they never will.

Besides a vision and mission, journalism requires a command of the language, a balanced awareness

of national and international current affairs and a commitment to hard work late into the night. As Longfellow wrote, the heights reached by good journalists, reached and kept, were not attained by sudden flight, but they, while their colleagues slept, were toiling upward in the night.

Along with hard work, journalists also need to tap all five senses of the mind – memory, knowledge, intelligence, creativity and imagination. Often many journalists use only the first three senses and are not even aware of the creativity and imagination that need to be tapped to reach the heights of professional journalism. The new vision in journalism would also show that we need to be pro-active and not reactive especially in reporting. To be reactive means to just go and cover a scheduled event and sometimes it is sad to see two bylines being given for something which even a stenographer could do. To be pro-active means investigative reporting where the journalist goes out and digs deep to find the truth. As the famous publisher William Randolph Hearst said, news is something that is suppressed. The rest is advertising.

Journalism, as the Fourth Estate of the realm, is essential and needs to play a proactive role in maintaining democracy. The people of this country have a right to know what is really happening and who is doing or not doing what. If we as journalists fail in that responsibility and instead seek to achieve our own ambitions or agendas in deceptive ways, we lose the moral right to be journalists though we may keep on writing to impress while not realising that few people if any are impressed with our bombastic words or clichés.

As silver bells herald the jubilee of the Sunday Times – the largest selling and most respected English weekly – golden are the memories of the past 21 years though there are silver tears also while hope with a gentle persuasion whispers comforting words. "Wait till the darkness is over, wait till the tempest is done. Hope for the sunshine tomorrow, after the shower is gone."

## Lead kindly Light amidst the encircling darkness

Many have asked or wondered how a visually handicapped person could edit news reports or feature articles and write columns or editorials.

I also had fears and doubts about how to do this when I joined the Sunday Times in 1991 with my eyesight failing. But many colleagues and especially my dear friend Ameen Izzadeen helped to find a way, so much so that colleagues say the quality of editing and writing is even better than when I had my eyesight, apparently because the wisdom of two minds was much more than one. It is a miracle but it also involved determination, commitment and positive thinking that nothing is impossible if there is a will and a spirit of creativity and imagination.

A guiding factor in the daily work is best expressed in an inspiring song: "Lead kindly Light, amidst the encircling gloom, lead Thou me on! The night is dark and I am far from home; lead Thou me on! Lead Thou my feet, I do not ask to see, The distant scene; one step enough for me."