

Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkTYY_izhJE

The Mind's Eye and Internal Imagery, Oliver Sacks, 2010

In all of us there are probably conversions and transformations from one sense into another. Certainly for myself, as I'm becoming somewhat deaf, I find I need to look at people. This sharpens my hearing. And I don't feel like I'm getting particularly a better visual picture. The added visual information is turned into, to hearing.

One of the people I interviewed, who had lost sight when he was at college, in his early twenties, he said that when he read Braille with his right index finger, he saw the raised dots in his mind's eye, that he didn't feel it in his finger. He saw it. And experiments have been done with functional brain imagery in people like this and it has found that not only the tactile parts of the brain but the visual cortex is being activated as well.

And the visual parts of the brain do not atrophy after one becomes blind. Paradoxically, they may become hyperactive and hyperresponsive partly to inputs from other senses so that they become available for touch, for hearing, for smell. And partly for internal imagery and also for converting things to imagery.

In fact, many blind children are verbally precocious and adept at visual description. So much so that they may deceive others, maybe to some extent to see themselves, that they are seeing. Certainly Helen Keller is a virtuoso at visual description. Arlene who sees what -- who sees a talking book as a line of print which fatigues her eyes, loves travelling with people and will have them describe what they are seeing in museums or buildings, boats, rivers. And she -- these immediately conjure up images for her and she may then ask questions based on the images and force the seeing people to see more.

I found myself wondering about the range of visualisation in anybody and the extent to which this might determine their reactions to blindness, whether they would keep it or lose it.

Studies were done on this in the 1880s by Francis Galton. He had a questionnaire in which he would ask people, "Visualise your breakfast table. What was on it?" And exactly where, "Where was everything?" And, "Can you visualise your wife? Have her sit in the chair, have her stand up. Have her move through a quarter of a circle, walk forward, walk backwards." And from this Galton thought that the range of visual imagery could go from almost zero to something which could be -- was so plastic that it could almost be manipulated, it was almost mistakable for reality and could be manipulated by people to form what we would now call a virtual reality.

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I do very badly myself on Galton's test. I can't visualise my breakfast table and I can't actually visualise anyone, let alone make them stand up and turn through a quarter of a circle.

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