



Quyn Lê Erichsen,
her husband Hans,
and Celine, Quyn's
now-retired guide dog.

“The politically correct terms are *visually impaired* or *sight impaired*. I use *blind* because I am totally blind — no sight at all — but also because I am comfortable using that word now, whereas I wouldn't have been before. I think it conveys my sense of self-acceptance.”

— QUYN LÊ ERICHSEN

EMBRACING LIMITATIONS

Using self-compassion to turn personal and professional challenges into strengths

BY QUYN LÊ ERICHSEN, RCC

In Vietnam, being blind means being among the underprivileged, the voiceless, the uneducated, the invisible, and the outcast of society. Often regarded with shame and rejected by their own families, blind people in Vietnam are commonly either begging or selling lottery tickets on the street. I was born in Vietnam and, at age two, a high fever led to the total loss of my sight.

Fortunately, my parents rejected the status quo for blind people in Vietnam; they refused to let this be part of my life path. Instead, they decided to flee Vietnam to seek a brighter future for all of us, especially for me, their blind daughter. They wanted to come to a place where freedom, security, education, and personal and professional opportunities are the norm rather than the exception.

My parents knew we had to give up everything we had in Vietnam: our

extended families and friends, our culture and homeland, the life we had worked so hard to build, and, possibly, our dignity and safety. Imprisonment was a risk, as escaping Vietnam was illegal. Even if we survived the voyage — and many Vietnamese boat people lost their lives in the deep, dark, blue sea — there was a risk we would encounter pirates, who, at best, would rob us of our valuable possessions and sexually assault the women and, at worst, would kill us all.

Most of these fears came true for us. We landed in prison when I was seven years old. Two years later, in 1989, we left Vietnam in a small, rickety fishing boat that drifted aimlessly on the Pacific Ocean for 10 days, because severe storms and merciless waves wiped out the boat's engine. One hundred and twenty-six of us struggled with hunger, thirst, seasickness, and total exhaustion. Pirates robbed us of our possessions and sexually assaulted

some of the women on the boat. Convinced death was near, we felt completely helpless, powerless, and hopeless. Just as we were about to give up, a group of German men from a big ship came to rescue us. We spent the next five years in a refugee camp in Indonesia. In 1994, we arrived in Canada.

SCHOOL YEARS

I was 14 years old, with grade-two education and very basic English, when I started school in Canada. Because of my age, I was placed in grade nine. I told myself the only way to succeed as a blind person, a refugee, and a woman was to obtain a very good education. I knew a BA wouldn't be sufficient because it wasn't enough for many sighted people. I had also developed an interest in counselling, and as my passion for the profession grew, I imagined myself becoming a therapist someday.

FACTS ON BLINDNESS IN CANADA

In 2006, the most recent year for which there are Statistics Canada figures, approximately 3.2% of Canadians aged 15 and older reported having some type of seeing limitation, ranging from difficulty even while wearing glasses to legally blind.

21.5% have limitations considered severe

20.1% held a college or non-university diploma/certificate, 12.6% obtained a trade or registered apprentice certificate, 9.0% held a BA, and 3.5% obtained education above a BA

34.5% said they discontinued their formal education because of their condition, while 32.9% said it took longer to achieve their current level of education

22.3% had to change the course of their studies

36.3% of those aged 15 to 64 said they were not in the labour force, while 34.7% were employed, 20.5% were retired, and 7.2% were unemployed

67.6% of those not in the workforce stated that their condition prevented them from working

56.1% of employed people aged 15 to 64 with a seeing condition stated their condition limited both the amount and type of work they could perform

50% of those employed experienced difficulty changing or advancing in their current job

—STATISTICS CANADA (2006)
FACTS ON SEEING LIMITATIONS

However, there were many obstacles ahead of me. I worked extremely hard to improve my English, and it took three attempts to gain entry to university. While doing my BA in psychology, I had to take courses that were very visual in nature, such as calculus, statistics, biology, and neuropsychology. Some academic advisers recommended I give up psychology and consider social work or sociology instead. I almost took this advice, but deep in my heart, I loved psychology; I knew there must be ways for me to overcome the obstacles. Ironically, as it turned out, I achieved A's and A+'s in calculus and statistics and earned a place on the Dean's honour list.

The real challenges came during my master's-level training as a counsellor. It is widely known that 70 per cent of our communication is non-verbal, and my inability to track body language was a disadvantage. I also struggled with performance anxiety during role plays and videotaped sessions and was considered one of the worst students in terms of

A BLIND, IMMIGRANT, ASIAN WOMAN IN CANADA

While vastly better than in Vietnam, the situation for blind people in Canada is still challenging and is not very empowering. High levels of unemployment and reliance on social assistance are the norm, and blind people who obtain higher education often don't find work that matches their qualifications.

Add to that the challenges commonly faced by newcomers to Canada. Employment for many refugees and first-

generation immigrants is blue-collar or intensely laborious. Many newcomers hold two jobs simultaneously to make ends meet. Due to the language barriers, many are underprivileged and marginalized and frequently remain uneducated. And some may experience discrimination and prejudice.

My cultural background presented its own challenges. Born into a patriarchal culture, we Asian women are taught

skills. Moreover, my inner chatterbox was so overwhelming, it was difficult for me to listen to my clients. One of my professors bluntly said to me, "If I were your client, I wouldn't come back." I felt as if my dream had shattered, but I didn't give up. Instead, I persevered. I watched videos of great psychologists and visualized myself in their roles. I read more books about psychology and attended conferences. I talked to mentors, and I received a lot of concrete emotional support from professors and peers.

ENTERING THE COUNSELLING PROFESSION

By the time I was looking for work, I had experience in quite a few settings, but it wasn't easy for me to find jobs. Many potential employers were reluctant to hire me, as they were concerned I couldn't perform the various aspects and responsibilities. Eventually, someone looked beyond my blindness and youth and saw my determination and passion as gifts. And though I did struggle with my first job at the beginning — as anyone in a new job would — I was able to do powerful work with terminally ill patients and bereaved individuals.

to be submissive, please our men, and put our families first, even if it means sacrificing our own needs. Often regarded as men's property, we are valued for our motherhood, wifehood, and outer beauty. Historically, education, empowerment, and career success were not considered the norms for women in Vietnam. Sexual abuse and domestic violence continue to be significant problems, and women often feel shame about their sexuality and even menstruation.



VIETNAMESE “BOAT PEOPLE” IN CANADA

Between 1975 and 1976, Canada admitted 5,608 Vietnamese immigrants. In 1979 and 1980, another 50,000 people from Vietnam, refugees who later became known as the “Boat People,” settled in Canada.* The next phase, including people from overseas refugee camps, began in 1981 and has decreased since 1991.**

*MULTICULTURAL CANADA. VIETNAMESE BOAT PEOPLE.
**CANADIAN ENCYCLOPEDIA. VIETNAMESE CANADIANS.

Initially, I was afraid of being judged by others. I was afraid my clients would think me incompetent because I am blind. I was afraid my English wouldn't be good enough for me to come across as an articulate therapist and to understand deeply what others said to me. I was afraid that other people wouldn't respect my Asian background and petite appearance.

Since then, I have worked with hundreds and hundreds of clients from all walks of life and in different settings, including palliative care, private practice, rehabilitation, domestic violence, trauma, and addiction. And I did overcome my fears.

MOVING BEYOND BARRIERS

Being compassionate toward myself helped me face my own fears and embrace all my gifts, as well as my limitations. Blindness has taught me not to be afraid of the dark and has shown me how to navigate with my clients in the dark without being enveloped by it. I am not distracted by outer appearances and can help others look deeply into their minds, hearts, and souls to find their true gifts and their own answers. And blindness doesn't deter me from tracking non-verbal language: I have learned to detect the nuances in voices, words, body movements, and more. When my mind is quiet, my heart is open and my soul

is calm and wise, and I can even sense the moods and energy of others.

Being a bi-cultural person has helped me to appreciate the strengths and challenges of both collectivistic and individualistic cultures. Collectivistic cultures in the East teach us to put others first and forget about ourselves. Individualistic cultures in the West teach us to honour our needs regardless of what others think. In the space between dependence and independence — interdependence — we can integrate both cultures and live authentic lives by honouring and living according to our own needs while honouring and taking into account the needs of others.

And finally, being a woman from a patriarchal culture has given me a deep understanding and compassion in issues relating to gender hierarchy and domestic violence.

OUT OF THE DARKNESS

Our clients can be extremely skilled in convincing us of the hopelessness of their situations. Because I have faced my own physical and emotional darkness, I have a deep appreciation for our resilience as human beings. In my personal and professional life, I have had the honour of witnessing how others have found their way out of the dark. And no matter how hopeless my clients' situations seem to them, I have an innate faith that they can make it if

they receive lots of support and if they don't give up. Believing in others and bearing witness to their suffering can become a compelling, motivating factor for them to go on. My belief in them serves as support.

Because adopting unconventional ways of doing things has helped me find my own path, I encourage others to explore non-traditional ways of looking at their challenges and embracing their uniqueness.

What are your personal and professional limitations? Have you embraced them with self-compassion? What are your strengths and gifts and how can you use them to rise above your challenges? And what helps you have faith in your clients and believe in their ability to overcome their challenges?

If it weren't for my parents' decision to leave Vietnam, if it weren't for my mom's perseverance despite the hardships, I wouldn't be here today. I wouldn't be a therapist, speaker, and radio host. Most of my blind friends from elementary school sell lottery tickets on the streets in Vietnam in conditions that are dangerous and difficult even for sighted people.

Here, my blindness can serve as a symbol of adversity, humility, vulnerability, hope, and triumph. I wish to help others around me understand that we don't have to be perfect. Our imperfections can help us find a path and live a life that is perfect just for us. ■

Quyn Lê Erichsen, RCC, earned a bachelor's degree in psychology at McMaster University and master's degree in counselling psychology at Simon Fraser University. She is a Sunshine Coast-based psychotherapist and inspirational speaker and also hosts a radio show (www.bbsradio.com/quynempowermenthour), interviewing well-respected psychologists and therapists on various psychological topics. Contact Quyn at info@quynle.com. www.quynle.com