

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE: THE QUESTION

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At the beginning of a new year, it's perhaps appropriate to pause for a little reflection. It's customary to do what I have done before with this column and look back at the preceding year and ahead to the next one. I am not going to do that! Instead, I want to offer some of my answers to the question I get asked more often than any other as president of the American Council of the Blind. Can you guess what the question is? What does the ACB stand for? What is ACB's philosophy? What makes the ACB different from the NFB? Though this question has been posed in three different ways, it's really the same question.

I have often thought of dealing with this issue here and have avoided it because many will disagree with whatever I say. Disagreement is good! One of ACB's hallmarks is its tolerance for people with divergent notions of who they are and what ACB is! That, in fact, is one of the organization's characteristics! It is a fluid set of beliefs and assumptions that changes from state to state and from time to time. But, for me anyway, there are some core values that are at the heart of what the ACB is! Here are some of them!

It is OK to be blind! That's a big one! It carries with it a whole set of other ancillary values. First and foremost, people who have meaningful vision loss are blind. Blindness is much more than just a nuisance. Blind people can and should expect society to make changes that facilitate the inclusion of people who are blind. These last two values may be areas where members of the National Federation of the Blind would not agree with us!

Another core value of the ACB relates to expectations! We are absolutely convinced that there is not a one-size-fits all "blind person" or that there should be! I believe that ACB values diversity and is tolerant of people who are at various levels of independence. Does that mean that we don't champion good training or expect a lot of our members? I don't think so! It does mean that we embrace people at various levels of competence and try very hard not to be judgmental about where people are! In a very real sense, I think that ACB has almost instinctively adopted the "People First" model by placing individuality far above other values in seeing each other.

And then there is democracy! ACB, as most of you well know, was formed, in part, because those who created our organization believed that states and individual members alike had to have substantial autonomy to express divergent opinions without being penalized. So, another core value of ACB is the notion that there must be room for a broad range of beliefs within our organization. If this is a core value, and I think it is, it goes a long way toward explaining why we have never been able to produce the kind of coherent, easily portable creed that all of our members must accept.

All of the divergence I have talked about so far has some real drawbacks. It truly has impeded coherent, centralized decision-taking and probably always will. That divergence has also made it difficult for us to arrive at positions sometimes. Where there is disagreement, we debate. This debate can often take many years and can cause us to take positions that may seem somewhat ambivalent to those who do not know us well. I choose to use a different word! Our positions validate divergence by creating a place where the majority of our members are comfortable.

What I have written about here does not constitute a complete list of our core values. It may well not be your core our fundamental beliefs, list of But there is one more core value I think we can agree upon! That is that the ACB is much more than just a group of blind people

meeting and working together for common goals! It's much larger than the sum of its members! It's a hug when you're feeling sad! It's a belly-laugh at those in society who just don't understand! It's arms around each other when we lose someone! It's a place where you can feel safe! It's anger distilled into action as people die falling off subway platforms! It's people arguing and hugging afterwards! It's 1,500 people singing the national anthem! It's help and hope and hands and holding and happiness and hilarity. It's us, alone and together, divided and united, men and women, young and old! And it's the American Council of the Blind!

So when someone asks you what the American Council of the Blind is or any of those other questions, you can show him or her this column! Will it tell him or her who we are and what we believe? Not really. It might help, but ACB is not a philosophy. It's a dynamic never-ending experience, and the only way you can truly understand us is to plunge right in among us and become us! And then, if you fully understand who we are, tell me because I would like to know too!