

Citation for published version:

Hull, JM & Hayhoe, S 2019, Touching the Rock: An Experience of Blindness (1990). in G Thomas Couser & SB Mintz (eds), *Disability Experiences: Memoirs, Autobiographies, and Other Personal Narratives, 1st Edition*. 1 edn, vol. 2, Macmillan, Farmington Hills, MI, pp. 759-762.

Publication date:
2019

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

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Unspecified

This is the author accepted manuscript of a chapter published in final form in Hull, JM & Hayhoe, S 2019, Touching the Rock: An Experience of Blindness (1990). in G Thomas Couser & SB Mintz (eds), *Disability Experiences: Memoirs, Autobiographies, and Other Personal Narratives, 1st Edition*. 1 edn, vol. 2, Macmillan Reference USA, Farmington Hills, MI, pp. 759-762 and available via:
https://www.cengage.com/search/productOverview.do?N=197+4294921852&Ntk=P_EPI&Ntt=46451897913091060613172535481579171035&Ntx=mode%2Bmatchallpartial

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TOUCHING THE ROCK (1990)

An Experience of Blindness

John M. Hull

Anglo-Australian theologian and educator John M. Hull's autobiographical reflections during the three-year period after losing his sight were transcribed from his audiotaped diary entries.

OVERVIEW

Touching the Rock comprises the autobiographical reflections of Anglo-Australian theologian and educator John M. Hull in the period shortly after losing his sight, from summer 1983 to summer 1986. In the book, Hull discusses coming to terms with his impairment, his loss of memory of the visual, his damaged recollection of those things that were once familiar, and the diversity of reactions from those around him. *Touching the Rock* is a transcript of Hull's taped diary entries on various topics related to his blindness, including dream analyses; altered practices with familiar objects and the environment; reflections on sections of literature, including the Bible and other religious texts; his trials while forming a young family as a man without sight; and the kindness and cruelty of people during his initial three years of living in complete darkness.

KEY FACTS

Subject:

John M. Hull (1935–2015)

Occupation:

Theologian and educator

Nationality:

Anglo-Australian

Genre:

Memoir

Time Period:

1980 to 1983

Historical Context:

The earliest days of the social model of disability

As Hull did not record the entries at regular intervals and they were often of varying lengths, there is little cohesive narrative in *Touching the Rock*. The most straightforward story in the book is Hull's description of his earlier sighted life in the introduction. However, the patchwork of accounts, taken over three years, make up a composite portrait of his feelings and opinions about his new world as well as his experiences of an altered and then completely new identity. In this way, *Touching the Rock* can be read as a series of interconnected stories of conscious metamorphosis, with powerful reflections on the human experience of a supposed disability.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Hull was born in 1935 in Corryong, Australia, a small rural town in the state of Victoria, one of the country's smallest states, located in the extreme southeastern corner of the mainland. Until his mid-twenties, Hull moved around Victoria and to the neighboring island state of Tasmania; six years of his childhood were lived under the threat of bombing and invasion during World War II. His transient life was due in part to the religious vocation of both his father, Jack, an English émigré, and his mother, Madge, who was from a family that settled in Victoria in the nineteenth century. John was the second of their four children. Jack Hull had arrived in Victoria in 1918 and began working in a series of itinerant laboring jobs before he met the deeply religious Madge, who was a local school teacher. Her religious convictions were later shared by Jack, who eventually trained as a Methodist minister at Queen's College, Melbourne.

Influenced by his father, Hull's early ambition was to be a Methodist minister, although he decided to teach before joining the ministry, hoping it would give him an understanding of the community he would serve. He studied for a bachelor of education degree in Melbourne and taught in a private school in his early twenties. At the age of twenty-three, he

✦ Key Concepts

Blindness

Awareness of the personal experience of blindness

Psychology of blindness

Nonvisual sense perception and memory

Religion/spirituality



PRIMARY SOURCE

Excerpt from *Touching the Rock*

RAIN 9 September 1983

I think that this experience of opening the door on a rainy garden must be similar to that which a sighted person feels when opening the curtains and seeing the world outside. Usually, when I open my front door, there are various broken sounds spread across a nothingness. I know that when I take the next step I will encounter the path, and that to the right my shoe will meet the lawn. As I walk down the path, my head will be brushed by fronds of the overhanging shrub on the left and I will then come to the steps, the front gate, the footpath, the culvert and the road. I know all these things are there but I know them from memory. They give no immediate evidence of their presence, I know them in the form of prediction. They will be what I will be experiencing in the next few seconds. The rain presents the fullness of an entire situation all at once, not merely remembered, not in anticipation, but actually and now. The rain gives a sense of perspective and of the actual relationships of one part of the world to another.

If only rain could fall inside a room, it would help me to understand where things are in that room, to give a sense of being in the room, instead of just sitting on a chair.

This is an experience of great beauty. I feel as if the world, which is veiled until I touch it, has suddenly disclosed itself to me. I feel that the rain is gracious, that it has granted a gift to me, the gift of the world. I am no longer isolated, preoccupied with my thoughts, concentrating upon what I must do next. Instead of having to worry about where my body will be and what it will meet, I am presented with a totality, a world which speaks to me.

Have I grasped why it is so beautiful? When what there is to know is in itself varied, intricate and harmonious, then the knowledge of that reality shares the same characteristics. I am filled internally with a sense of variety, intricacy and harmony. The knowledge itself is beautiful, because the knowledge creates in me a mirror of what there is to know. As I listen to the rain, I am the image of the rain, and I am one with it.

SOURCE: Hull, John M. *Touching the Rock: An Experience of Blindness*. London, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1990, pp. 22–24.

immigrated to England to study theology and philosophy at Cambridge University in preparation for the ministry. During this time he met Daphne Brewer, who became his first wife. After gaining his degree and traveling in Europe and the Middle East, Hull decided to continue teaching rather than going into the church. He taught in a high school in England until 1968, when he began teaching religious education as an academic subject, first at Westhill College of Education in Birmingham, then at the University of Birmingham. He earned his PhD in theology from the University of Birmingham in 1969.

Hull's career blossomed in the 1970s—he was appointed lecturer in religious education at the University of Birmingham—but his life outside of work was less comfortable. Soon after the birth of their daughter, Imogen, in 1973, Hull divorced his first wife. His eyesight, which had been deteriorating since childhood, continued to worsen. In the late 1970s, Hull met Marilyn Gasson, a head teacher in Birmingham, and they married in 1979. A year later Thomas, the first of his four children with Marilyn, was born. That year Hull was also registered blind, though he retained light perception. It was only in 1983, when his residual vision finally disappeared, that he started recording his diary for *Touching the Rock*.

An important influence on *Touching the Rock* was Hull's early intellectual environment, which was affected by his illness and disability. Two days after he was born, he was diagnosed with chronic eczema, a condition that caused his skin to become itchy and inflamed. Although he fondly remembered playing with his sister at home and in local vineyards as a child, his condition, which was exacerbated by allergies, often restricted opportunities to play outside with his siblings and friends. His father's role as a Methodist minister also meant that much of Hull's early life was spent attending church with his parents, focusing on his education, and studying the Bible. He became a voracious reader. At the age of thirteen, Hull was diagnosed with cataracts, which left him with dark black circles in his central vision and, after a botched corrective surgery for a series of retinal detachments, blindness in one eye. He underwent a series of corrective surgeries for his deteriorating eyesight, but his condition continued to worsen. Near the end of his time as a sighted person, he could only read with increasingly powerful magnifying glasses and, finally, not at all. In this respect, the context of Hull's diaries in 1983 was not the beginning of his journey into blindness, but rather the end of a personal and social history of visual impairment and medical treatment.

THEMES

The primary concern of *Touching the Rock* is the alteration of Hull's life, his impressionistic reflections on seemingly mundane issues as they occurred, and the change in his concept of the world around him in comparison to his previous sighted life. Two primary themes are his relationship with his wife and children and his early career as an educationalist and Christian theologian. Hull reflects on his previous life, his regret at not seeing his first child, Imogen, as frequently as he would have liked, his grief at letting go of his old life, and the new meaning he found in his faith. He writes, "while I cannot simply accept blindness, I must not reject it either. I must integrate it. I must try to relate blindness to sight, consciousness to unconsciousness, God to the devil, the life of

humanity to the cosmos, the powers of creation to the powers of destruction.”

Practical issues are also important in *Touching the Rock*. While recording his diaries, Hull lived about ten minutes’ walk from the university, and he discusses reexamining his physical environment through a new conceptualization of time and space. He continued to attend his local church regularly, and the book reflects on the changing attitude about his life exhibited by his fellow congregants. In particular, he feels that his increasing disability placed importance on the need to continue socializing as he had when he was sighted. He notes an increasing reliance on routine, and how it has changed his approach to his life and career: “it is as if I know that playtime is now over, and a sequence has begun which I can handle.” Hull also describes an altered self-awareness, affecting his communication and use of information—he notes feeling “starved of information,” and running “short of facts.” He explains the difficulty he felt in reimagining emotional relationships with those close to him because of his blindness, and his diaries often reflect his need for a fatherly relationship with his sighted children. He suffers cruel prejudices, some from supposedly well-meaning faith healers and another from a stranger he encounters in the street while walking home from work; he also records the kindness of a stranger who witnesses him being verbally abused.

The vignettes are asymmetric and have an unplanned quality. Hull spends little time characterizing his family, colleagues, or friends, instead simply analyzing their behavior and relationship to himself. As such, figures move in and out of his narrative with only a passing significance to the overall presentation of his life. In this way the form of the book shows the influence of Bible verses, parables, and other religious texts that influenced his early life, with different characters and stories serving as vehicles for deeply personal philosophical reflection. As they were recorded in real time, the entries exhibit freshness and have a sketch-like quality, in contrast to the smoothness that characterizes more typical autobiographies on blindness, such as Helen Keller’s *The Story of My Life* (1903) or Georgina Kleege’s *Sight Unseen* (1999).

CRITICAL RESPONSE

Certain aspects of *Touching the Rock* have limited its circulation among scholars of disability studies and other fields. The recording took place in the earliest days of the social model of disability, and the book is deeply personal, with little reference to others with disabilities or the disability rights movement. Although Hull was a respected philosopher, there is also little academic debate on the nature of the epistemology or ontology of blindness in the book, nor any accounting of how his experiences could add to knowledge of this

subject. Furthermore, despite being an academic educationalist, Hull did not take the opportunity to discuss how his experiences could lead to the improvement of education for students who were blind in this era. *Touching the Rock* was a precursor to Hull’s further work on theology and disability, most notably the book *In the Beginning There Was Darkness* (2001), which is an analysis of the Bible informed by his lack of eyesight. This book was written to persuade his fellow Christians about the moral equality of people with visual impairment.

Touching the Rock has, however, had a significant influence on awareness of the personal experience of blindness. As a real-time narrative with the quality of a research diary, its contents have been used as data for later works on the psychology of blindness. For instance, many of his descriptions of nonvisual sense perception and memory were cited by the neurologist Oliver Sacks, most notably in *The Mind’s Eye* (2010). In that book, Sacks wrote that “being a ‘whole-body seer,’ for Hull, meant shifting his attention, his center of gravity, to the other senses, and these senses assumed new richness and power. Thus he wrote of how the sound of rain, never before accorded much attention, could delineate a whole landscape for him, for its sound on the garden path was different from its sound as it drummed on the lawn, or on the bushes in his garden, or on the fence dividing the garden from the road.” As Simon Hayhoe explained in *Blind Visitor Experiences at Art Museums* (2017), blindness has been understood as a hindrance to aesthetic engagement, creating difficulties in comprehending space and place. Through his reflections on his experiences of nature and his altered understanding of the world around him, Hull suggests that cultural engagement and spatial awareness can also be experienced through adjustments to the external and internal senses.

Simon Hayhoe

*Lecturer of Special Needs and Inclusion
University of Bath (UK)*

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