>> We're on WXXI news, it's 1370 connection.

[Music] I'm Bob Smith and this hour meet Ryan Knighton. He'll tell you he's vision impaired but a lot of people who read his work will say he sees things more clearly than people with so called, "normal sight." You're going to meet him tonight at eight at Webb Auditorium on the RIT campus as part of the Caroline Werner Gannet Visionaries in Motion lecture series and you're going to meet him right now here at the WXXI studios where he will discuss his works including his best selling memoir, Cockeyed, and other works and Ryan great to have you with us, thanks for joining us today, welcome.

>> Yeah it's nice to be here.

>> Now the cover of Cockeyed is an interesting statement in itself, it shows you standing in black slacks, a black shirt and jacket wearing dark sunglasses and carrying a white cane of the kind that people often associate with the blind, is that in a way sort of in your face declaration about that one aspect of your life?

>> You know what you might be the first person that told me what my book looks like...really that's the cover?

>> And incidentally you're standing against an iridescent chartreuse background.

>> Well there you go.

>> Or something like it.

>> A little color to at least lighten it up.

>> There sure is and I mean a lot it just bang, hits you right in the retinas there.

>> I think it was my Canadian addition, that's the American addition but I think my Canadian addition, by Penguin they first approached me with a cover and they said, "Okay this will be really great, it's going to be the title and your name and a memoir and it's all going to be done from really big letters to really tiny ones like on those eye charts...what do you think of that?" and I said, "Oh my God you couldn't sell me a box of eyeballs if that was the cover."

>> That sounds kind of hokey.

>> That sounds horrible, they said well what about a picture of you, so I was sort of okay...well what they went with was because I don't know if you could tell on that cover but the tip of my cane at that time was a great big eyeball that I actually used to roll on the ground and grind the hell out of it just out of revenge and it was made by a former student of mine who was a special effects designer.

>> I see that now I hadn't noticed it before, I wondered what that was and now I come zeroing in on it and I said yeah that's right it is an eyeball, it looks like a big giant blue eye.

>> It is, it is and it's even sort of lacquered so it looks slightly wet and she made one for me and she gave another one to a friend of mine, an American novelist and memoirist name Jim Knipfel out of New York who also has the same eye disease that I do and so we thought well this is great, we'll walk around New York and Vancouver carrying our eyeball canes and people will start thinking it's a revolution, that something's coming but it was really just to two of us. Yeah, the cover I mean it's sort of...it's funny people ask me about the tattoos, they ask me about the whole look thing and for me it's really just...you know just because I'm blind doesn't mean I don't get to have an image.

>> Right.

>> And but luckily I have a wife who actually you know picks my stuff and black is good because you can't mismatch it, so...

>> You have actually...how long it has been since you've actually...I hesitate in a way to ask this but it may be revelatory about your perspective on things. Most of us when we get up in the morning to shave we look in the mirror and we say oh my God I'm getting old.

>> Right yeah, yeah.

>> And oh my God I'm starting to lose my hair, both of which I've said to myself with honesty and you begin to think boy I sure don't look like I used to.

>> Right.

>> In a way you've never had to deal with it because I gather you have not actually seen your face in the mirror clearly in some years.

>> Probably about ten years now, you know, I was diagnosed when I was 18 and I started losing my sight probably when I was 14-ish and it took you a good ten years but there is no specific moment, it wasn't like I woke up one day and said, "Oh my God I'm blind." It's sort of like you're a blinding man you just continually lose a little more and you think God it can't get worse than this and then one day it does and it's like oh it couldn't get worse than this and two years later it does so when I last saw my face, I don't really remember, I'm starting to forget what I even look like but I still have some people in my mind's eye from when I was younger that I remember faces of so I still see my wife as when she was 23, which she loves you know she's never aged in my minds eye. But then I have other people that I've met since I was 30 who I have no image of so I have this sort of strange bifurcated gallery of some people with faces and some people without.

>> Now if I were to tell you right now, and I've got to...this was my first impression of you on meeting you, I thought to myself am I meeting Ryan Knighton or am I meeting Vin Diesel, the movie star from Fast and Furious...because I got to be honest, you do look a lot like Vin Diesel.

>> I'm glad you didn't say he looks a lot like Paul Giomotti plus 200 pounds, you know.

>> No you do look a lot like Vin Diesel.

>> Not that Paul Giomotti looks bad I think.

>> I got to be honest with you I can almost imagine you sitting behind the wheel of a Camaro, popping it into first gear and peeling off some where.

>> We're going to get the chicks out tonight, this is the hope right.

>> Yeah, yeah you never know but that is the look that you present.

>> Well, that's very kind.

>> Has anybody said that to you?

>> I don't think so, I've had people- you know it's funny my wife has said that you know I can go to a restaurant- here's a good story, I often stay at this one hotel in New York City when I go through and it can be a year between visits and the door guy, Rafael always remembers me and as my wife pointed out there's not many blind, bald, tattooed large men walking around so I suppose you just make an impression quickly and I only have to go somewhere once and people remember me it seems. They don't know I'm a writer or anything, it's not like I have any fame to claim with it it's just you're a memorable image. I haven't heard anybody say Vin Diesel exactly, no I haven't had that. The punk scene was good to me, I guess.

>> I guess but perhaps I wonder if somebody will say that or that's one of the reasons why they recognize you because they think you're the movie actor that they saw.

>> That's really funny, I've never seen him so I have no idea, I guess I'm going to have to get a new look because it's already occupied by somebody else.

>> You never know you may be able to trade on it but that might be an interesting source of material for an essay.

>> I could be his lame stunt double, you know I just bump into things slowly

>>Actually to tell you the truth you both have similar voices.

>> Now there's some sort of genetic cloning has happened and I'm just the...I was the one they sort of threw in the garbage can and said, "Oh that one didn't work let's try again."

>> I don't know he probably can't write a good essay to save his life who knows but you can obviously so I mean we'll start with that but I want to...

>> This is the best interview I've ever had, we get to dissect the life of Vin Diesel in my parallel universe.

>> Perhaps so but I mean you've operated for both sides of the sighted and non-sighted wall, do you still have clear memories of the time when your eyes...I guess your eyes were never super great...

>> No they were just like I needed glasses when I was a kid and stuff like that but you know the longer you spend in blindness the harder it is to remember sights even if you had them when you were ten or twelve it doesn't matter your

sort of visual cognitive architecture atrophies in a way, it's just never exercised so like I don't really remember what it's like to fully see a visual field but that doesn't mean my mind's eye is dead, I still want to fill it with things and there's sort of two jobs that happen in my writing life, one is writing my little comicky essays about the misadventures of a blind man the world, if you read those you'll see they are driven a lot by ideas and language and dialogue and sort of metaphor but there's not a lot of descriptions of anything of course, yeah because I don't know what my hotel looked like in New York I just know that the door guy thinks that...he remembers me all the time. But on the other side of my writing life when I write movies it's to give my mind's eye something to see because now I can actually exercise describing stuff and it's because I get to make it up instead of...you know you would have a hard time believing my memoir if I described what the building looked like I walked into, you'd say well there goes the blind memoir it's got to be fake right. So I sort of have these two different writing modes and they really center around one I give my mind's eye something to look at and the other I am who I am and perceive things the way I actually do perceive them.

>> And sometimes it could be both hilarious and scary, I mean as you're growing up through your teens and you have all these misadventures on the job and on the road and yes on the road is included in all of this in Cockeyed I think to myself yeah I can really relate to that, how did he keep from getting killed.

>> Fortune, misfortune, I don't know I mean I wrote about three car accidents I had that were part of my diagnosis, I don't think I was really diagnosed by a doctor I was diagnosed by my father's 1982 Pontiac Acadian it sort of told us there was something wrong and not because I crashed the car because teenagers are very good at doing that, I just happened to crash my father's car in all these sort of inexplicable ways. Like I wedged it up on rock once that was on the side of the road and it just seemed like an impossible thing to do but the one that really sent me to the doctor when they said okay we got to figure this out was because I put my father's car in the ditch at about 3 miles an hour and it was because I could not see where this turn was and I thought I saw it and I turned and sort of parked the car in the ditch.

>> Because you thought...oh that's a dark place.

>> It's a dark spot.

>> You seemed to go in a straight line that's got to be the asphalt, that's got to be the road.

>> That's right and of course what teenager plows their father's car into a ditch at three miles an hour, right. If it had been 55 miles an hour it might have been a normal teen thing.

>> Yeah but the thing is we might not be talking to you today.

>> Exactly so you know what actually stood out was I was just so ridiculously bad at driving, at ridiculously slow speeds. Now I know people will call and say how did you not know you were going blind, it's sort of like if you...I don't know if you wear glasses I can't tell but...

>> No I don't but I probably should.

>> Okay.

>> I'm kind of near sighted these days and getting more so progressively with age, I'm 58.

>> Well, people who get glasses go through this moment like I remember when I was 8 years old we went to the eye doctor just about glasses stuff and I went and it turns out I needed glasses, everybody in my family wore glasses, we all had Coke bottle lenses and I remember getting the glasses and walking out side of the mall and looking up at the north shore mountains in Vancouver and realizing oh my God there's trees on the mountains and I hadn't known that,

>> Why didn't I do that before and I'm going to admit I'm just about at that stage right now where I figured out I still get by but I probably ought to start wearing.

>> Right, right, I think you're right, I think people go through that, it's hard to let go of your old self and you don't want to be the one whining saying boy it's really hard you know. I was a teenager I had just gotten my driver's license there's no way I was going to go in and hand it over four months later and say you know I really don't think I can drive.

>> No you're not going to do that.

>> No, no.

>> I should have thought of something like this, I think we all do when go to get our driver's license renewed and we yeah we get through the eye test okay unaided but it might have been a closer call than it was before and I guess it was a close call right from the get-go for you.

>> Well, this was the horror I learned afterwards that you know the way my pathology works is you first lose your night vision, then you slowly lose your peripheral vision and then it sort of tunnels in to a pin prick. Now I was at the point where...and the way it starts by the way is you actually get these little holes in your visual field around say the middle band of a bulls-eye and they eat out until the band together and that's how you lose the periphery. So imagine I went for my eye test, now I didn't know at the time that I was losing my sight, they flash a little light on either side to test my periphery, well I had stuff there and then they asked me in the dead middle can you read these letters and yeah I can read that but it was everything in between that was missing and so that's why I'd be driving along and say suddenly there'd be a stop sign at the corner of my eye and I'm like why didn't I see that prior as I'm rocketing across six lanes, right.

>> And this at the same time when you'd see the signal lights if there were any up ahead, you wouldn't miss those.

>> No, but if you had to hit them dead on, if you looked slightly to the right of them they disappear and then if you even further right they come back into the corner of your eye so there's a middle range that's missing and boy you can hide a lot of semi trailers in that middle range and a lot of pedestrians and other things. To scare everybody in public here, this is the common way people with my eye disease are diagnosed is by car accidents so drive carefully out there because there's a lot of blindos going around that are not aware they are blindos.

>> I had some interesting news that I will share with you at this point, the regulatory system for automobile license renewal in New York State has changed so that when you file for a renewal of your driver's license, presuming your appearance hasn't drastically changed and you don't need a fresh photo, you can do it on line without having to go through an eye test.

>> Well, then watch for cars embedded on rocks because there's going to be more of them.

>> There's going to be a lot more in New York State.

>> A lot more and tell them Vin Diesel sent you.

>> Then they might pay attention, that is the awful part of it that we are really in a sense not attune to the premise that an awful lot of people have because there are millions of people who struggle with there vision or don't have it any more right.

>> Well you know and vehicles are a funny thing, I love this conversation because we're just like cars right. Vehicles are a funny thing, you think about you're hurling through space at 50 miles and hour in this thing that has two little lights on the front and that's it and they never really kind of improved on that, they've never made it a big monobrow of lights, they never put like a big spotlight on the front and cars just seem to me to be ultimately threatening by their very design. Even worse I got in this little puddle jumper plane a while ago to go and do a gig in some small town on the coast in Canada and it was great. Got on this little plane that seats about ten of us and I got in the front row and the pilot came in, and I could hear him jingling his keys. Now to think a plane, a pilot and he's got like keys on a key ring, like does he have a fob and a rabbits foot on it too and he put in the key and he turned on the plane and I thought this is just too low-fi to believe and worst of all then he turned on the windshield wipers and I had to lean to the person next to me and said do they actually need windshield wipers on planes, I guess so.

>> Only if they are flying low through clouds.

>> I guess so but I just you know "zzz, zzz" that didn't sound reassuring when you're up in the air.

>> You thought you were getting into the back seat of a Buick.

>> Or at least just press a button and it takes off and then it lands, something that relinquishes itself to the programers instead of keys and you're just shy of winding up the rubber band at this point and letting it go.

>> We are talking with essayist Ryan Knighton, the author of books including his memoir, Cockeyed and other works that he's going to share his perspectives on his world this evening as part of the Visionaries in Motion lecture series, Caroline Werner Gannet series at RIT at 8 o'clock in the Webb Auditorium, he's here with us right now on 1370 Connection from WXXI, I'm Bob Smith if you would like to take part in our conversation join in 263-WXXI, 263-9994 or write to us, asktalk@wxxi.org is our in studio e-mail address all open during the course of the entire hour here on 1370 Connection. Now I mean when you got through your driver's test and yet within months there you were confronted with the realization that you have a disorder, retinitis pigmentosa is the name for it and I had heard of it previously because there are public service announcements calling people's attention to it and telling people to get diagnosed for it.

>> Because we don't want those cars up on those boulders.

>> That had to be scary, I mean how do you adapt to the realization that gradually the world is not going to be the same to you, that there's going to be a crucial dimension of your sense that's going to be pretty much closing down.

>> Yeah and especially when you're an 18-year-old man and the last thing you want to do is think about the future, you're really just thinking about how you're going to drunk on Friday so the idea of somebody saying you know you might go blind, it might stop at any point and it could be two years, five years or twenty years. Something might happen we're not sure what. It's sort of like they tell you a boogie man story.

>> That's what they basically told you.

>> That's it and so when I left I didn't feel any different I was still the same guy who walked in there so you actually don't really believe it initially with the force of other moments, like I do remember picking up a white cane for the first time reluctantly and it wasn't because I needed the cane all the time it was because I needed it in case I did anything where I needed to explain myself. But you know most of the time I could just by and you wouldn't have known. You know but I think the way you get through it, I mean I get a lot of people asking me, the parents particularly of young men and women going through this stuff and sadly they read the books like Cockeyed and Come On Papa and they want their kid to arrive at where I am now at this sort of affable ease with the whole thing but you can't just adopt that you have to go through kind of a long grind and the only advice I can give them is let your kid fail a lot, you know failing at a lot of stuff, struggling with it and finally relinquishing yourself to it is the trick and you can't just do that over night, you have to actually kind of suffer it for a while.

>> By the same token at the end of it if things progress the way they did for you, you end up in a good place with a satisfying life, personal life and...

>> Totally.

>> And creative and professional life.

>> Oh, totally.

>> I'm sure an awful lot of people envy.

>> Oh, no I'm scratching my head, I'm a Hollywood screenwriter, I write books, I travel the world, I've got a wife, I've got a beautiful daughter, I've got a good life. I mean it is not what I thought I would get when I was 18, I thought I was going to get the opposite and that's...I luckily was diagnosed at the right age, it's not like I made any choices yet, I mean I know a guy in his forties who was diagnosed with it quite late and he was an electrician. Now to go back and rebuild your life at 40 with a family now that's a different world than the one I had, I was at cross-roads anyway where I was making my choices and I luckily had a facility with language and made the right choice to follow it but you know if I hadn't gone blind I wouldn't have become a writer and I definitely wouldn't have gone to the university, I would have just kept driving forklifts poorly.

>> What do you think...yeah poorly pretty much describes it, doesn't it?

>> Yeah, yeah.

>> But what do you think...that's an interesting thing, if this hadn't happened to you do you think today of what your life might be?

>> I often think of it because you know when people say, "How are you?" often, just say, "fortunate," because that's sort of it.

>> Because it almost forced you into making choices that turned out good for you?

>> Well, you know I think it's because you're shoved into a world which is so horrible and is the realization of most people's deepest fear of losing one of their senses like deafness or blindness or being wheelchair bound losing your mobility that it really forces you to question what pleasures will I hang on to and how will I hang onto pleasures and so your really undergo a kind of grueling self scrutiny of what it is to be yourself and how you're going to live in the world and what will sustain you through all that and I love words and you know I tend to do things I shouldn't do, that's part of my pleasure thing. I have driven a car since I went blind. Four years ago I went and drove a car in a race in Quebec.

>> Now how do you do that first of all?

>> Well...funny story, there was this...there's a race in Quebec every year a guy told me about and they get 40 blind people on the track with sighted navigators, so they put the sighted navigator in the passenger seat and they can tell you what to do but they can't touch the wheel or anything and it's 40 cars put on the speedway circuit and it's a race to see who can complete ten laps first. The first thing of course they do is they wave the green flag and nobody moves and then the shoot the gun and we all go and it's like cholesterol we all just pile up in the middle and then we start trying to pull ourselves apart and go around and you know I was doing like 30 miles and hour and with my passenger saying, "left, left, left, hard left, hard left, hard left!"

>> I'm imagining this is a scene from that show Top Gear on the history channel.

>> They should do it if they haven't done it because it was a great time and this was at an actual speedway track at Quebec and it was part of the four races that night and it was a thrill man, it was also kind of boring because I

couldn't see the mayhem around me so really it was sort of like factory work after a while where my passenger kept saying, "left, right, left, straight, left, right, straight," and after a while I'm like yeah, yeah I can do it myself and really meanwhile he was completely green because we had already demolished his entire side of the car and I think five cars were left that could actually move by the tenth lap.

>> So this was a demolition derby.

>> Yes, but with purpose, you know we're trying to get somewhere.

>> And so I know that the people who believe that NASCAR racing is simple because all it is a lot of left turns around the track.

>> That's Ponzi, blind yourself and drive a car that's real, that's a real challenge.

>> Okay, all right I'm sure there are people that would probably take issue with me.

>> That was just to stir the pot then.

>> I'm not going to have a conversation with Jimmy Johnson any time soon so...

>> I'll challenge him to a blind folded race behind the wheel.

>> I suspect he wouldn't take you up on it but there you go. We got to take a short break then we're going to get to the phones at 263-WXXI, we are talking with author Ryan Knighton, the author of Cockeyed and other stories about his life and his perceptions on life, he's going to talking tonight at the Caroline Werner Gannet lecture series, Visionaries in Motion, Webb Auditorium at RIT at 8 o'clock, he's talking with us right now. I'm Bob Smith it's 1370 Connection back in a minute at WXXI.

[Music]

>> 1370 Connection continues on WXXI, I'm Bob Smith we're talking with writer Ryan Knighton, his books include Cockeyed, he's going to be speaking tonight at 8 in Webb Auditorium on the RIT campus as part of the Caroline Werner Gannet, Visionaries in Motion lecture series. Talking with us in this hour at 1370 Connection, let's go to the phones at 2630-WXXI, going to hear from Bernard on the line. Hi Bernard, you're on the air with us.

>> Hi, Bob I can really identify with this, my RP was diagnosed when I went to get my pilot's license.

[Laughter] You can imagine what that would have been like.

>> Okay.

>> The specific question that I had for you is my experience is that since I'm aware that I'm going blind, I'm not absolutely blind now, I'm legally blind, I think that one of the advantages that I have is that I pay attention to what I do see, so for example you know I pay attention to the way my grand kids look, my kids look and so forth so when I do go blind if that should occur, I think

that I'll have some very good memories, maybe even better memories than what they will actually look like so I was just wondering how you felt about that and I was also interested in the fact that you write screen plays. Do you call on your visual memory to do that or do you just make it up as you go along, any way good story, thanks Bob, bye, bye.

>> Hey and my pleasure, thanks for calling.

>> As far as hanging on to images of people and sort of looking at them harder, it's been a long time since I've seen, I mean I'm 39 now, I haven't seen my own face in ten years so for me it's sort of like I let go of really giving much consideration to that stuff, sort of the sighted world teaches you that, that is some how the most important thing to hang on to the images of people, that's why we take photo albums right. We don't take audio albums in the same way. But I've moved over to the other world where I hang onto things my daughter says, I mean I'm always telling stories about things she said to me because they're my snap shots. So I don't really feel this sort of aching loss at the sight of people for that reason because I've just found another way to hang on to my version of their image which is just what people say to me. As far as the screen plays go it's...yes I have to use my visual mind of it to a degree but the great things is you don't really want to step on cinematographer and director's jobs so you know a lot of what you write is dialogue and then some of the action but they really flush that visual element of it out and it's an ironic thing that I discovered screen plays are a very amenable form for a blind person to write because what you're doing is you're describing a movie to somebody who can't see it. So you're really empathetic to the difficulties of communicating a picture in words and doing it efficiently.

>> Does it change the kind of movie that you would write, in other words are you going to gravitate toward the kind of film that's heavily dependant on conversation, either one on one or group talk?

>> Right, I mean might my chops tends to lead towards the comic, I mean I just wrote...I just wrote an adaptation of a memoir by a standup comic who had cancer, I wrote an adaptation of his life into a film for some producers and that was very dialogue heavy, it's very, very much in the repartee but I've just started working on a script for Chris Wedge who made the Ice Age movies, those animated films. He's doing a film or wants to do a film based on the life of Alberto Santos-Dumont who was a 19th century balloonist who flew balloons around the Eiffel tower and was racing the Wright brothers now that is...you know dialogue is going to be part of it but you can imagine there is a lot of spectacle in that. But we all have to imagine it right, I mean there really isn't the film footage of it so what are we going to do well we all kind of fill our mind's eyes with the fantasy of what that must have looked like and I can still do that to a degree.

>> What would it look like to try to fly a plane around the Eiffel Tower or something like that, that's what popped into my head right away.

>> Yeah and what would it feel like to be up in that basket and in a funny way part of the training of being a blind guy for screen writing for me has been, I'm chronically in a position of trying it empathize what it must be like to see something I can't see so I imagine what it's like to be in the basket of a balloon at the height is no different then me trying to imagine what it must be like to be behind the wheel of a car in downtown New York right now, it's just

as alien to me but I'm always trying to imagine what the visual world is like, I'm chronically in that space and that's all screen writing is at a certain level is imagining a visual world that doesn't exist yet.

>> Well you talk about, by that way, that previous play that you've written is it with a particular individual from real life in mind, is it going to be a biopic or something...

>> The adaptation of Cockeyed do you mean?

>> No, I'm talking about the screen play that you talked about...

>> Oh, the pilot, the balloon pilot that one?

>> Yeah, is it also going to be...and previous to that you talked about a screen play with a guy who was ill.

>> Yes, yes, I just finished the drafts of that, it's with...the producers are a woman named Ann Carrie who did the American with George Clooney last year and then the director is a really fantastic young guy named Matt Aselton who did a film called Gigantic so they're trying to get cast now, it's all about part but it was a lot of fun to write and part of my fear in screen writing was I didn't want to be the go to guy for we've got a disease movie could you make it a bit funnier, because that's your wheel house isn't it. But I took this one because it was just such an amazing story of this guy who was diagnosed with cancer and his wife was eight and a half months pregnant, he was given three months to live and he just couldn't tell her so he started chemo and tried to fight it without telling her and he faked that he didn't have cancer for a while and it's pretty...and he did it in a very hilarious way too, it's really black comedy.

>> At the same time of course you can make...as I was reading Cockeyed, I thought of how you could interestingly enough adapt it to either a mini series or a film and I imagined it seemed like it had...I don't know whether I'd call it a Seinfeld sensibility but a certain kind of ironic detachment at the same time.

>> Yeah.

>> You know what I mean?

>> Yeah, yeah because it's told in hindsight, I mean Woody Allen's, A Tragedy Over Time is just comedy, you know tragedy is tragedy in its moment, it become comedy over time and Cockeyed is me looking back at what happened to me, I couldn't have written it funny at the age of 21, I can do it now.

>> And the stuff you do to try to compensate...it feels like a comedy of errors.

>> It is a comedy of errors and at the time it was panic, it was trauma but in hindsight it works as comedy and I think because there is something innately in slapstick, you know slapstick is violence that's funny, slapstick is trauma that's funny. Tragedy and comedy are somehow born in the same spot, they are...they share the same DNA at some level and we did adapt Cockeyed. I mean it was the first screen play I wrote, I wrote it at the Sundance Labs at Robert Redford's Sundance Labs and we had Jodie Foster attached for two years as the director until she had to move on to other things and so I developed that script

with her for a long time and it was a fascinating process...you know writing a book about your life is one thing and then converting it into this tiny form like a movie which is a very small thing it was a totally different set of skills.

>> So how would you cast it as a comedy, as a sad story because there are some sad...there are some sad episodes in your life involving loss of people close to you.

>> Oh, yeah, no it's a comedy that has some dark left hooks and I just don't think you can tell comedy without tragedy or vice-versa it's like trying to do a painting without shadow or light, you need both. The question is what is the rhythm and what is the ultimate feel of it and it isn't a sad story because I am where I am now, it's a good thing but...and there's a lot of very strange stuff, like you know I lived in South Korea for six months pretending I could see, you know, I head out and ostensively taught children English but I don't really know what I taught them it was something like English. They would just make words on the scrabble board and I would just say yes and I'd draw something on the board and so there's probably children running around right now that think a huslborg [phonetic] is a forklift.

>> And forklift I don't I'm giving away too much have a place in your life too.

>> They have a place in my life.

>> A pivotal place in your life.

>> They have a very dear spot in my heart, yes.

>> You get the feeling though that a lot of people around you...my heart went out to your parents, they seem to be people who tried the best they possibly could.

>> Yes.

>> To help their kids through life but there was a lot of trial and error there, a lot of error too.

>> Yeah, but we weren't the most cooperative kids on the planet.

>> No.

>> You put three boys in a bedroom together they are bound to sort of screw up anything the parents are trying to do and it was a good working class family, I mean I give all my success to them I mean you know I was not born to be a writer I don't think and when...I remember when I went to college, I went to a community college because it was the only thing I could get into with the grades I had coming out of high school and I had no plans to do this stuff and I remember taking an English course, my first one and having to write an essay and the skills that got me through it were really dinner table with six people who were loud and fast and if you wanted to be heard you had to be quick and you had to be one up on everybody else and I swear that dinner table repartee and story telling is ultimately what I built all my life on. So you don't know how these things are going to play out but those moments were probably my main education.

>> I felt sad when I read about your brother and what happened to him, it seemed like he passed as a result...my sense of it what I came away with was it was a very inadvertent, unintended accidental, bad drug either over dose, bad reaction or something just went wrong.

>> Something went totally wrong.

>> Something went totally wrong but it wasn't meant to happen, wasn't intended by anybody to happen including your brother.

>> Yeah, no we've never called it a suicide and it was...I think the term they use is death by misadventure.

>> Which is exactly what they use in Britain exactly how they described Jimmy Hendrix's passing.

>> Yes, yes and it was...he took two pills and they weren't the two pills he thought they were, they were something else his girlfriend at the time had stolen from a doctor's office because she was having her own issues.

>> She was a total mess.

>> She was a total mess and my brother always gravitated towards people who were a total mess because he wanted to save everybody and you know he was bipolar and he had his own challenges and the thing that was interesting for me in this story was when I finished this book there was no chapter in there about my brother and about his death and my editor came back to me, she was in New York, and I didn't know her very well, I mean she was just my editor but being an editor of a memoir is kind of like being your therapist and she said you know there's this weird thing when you get back from Korea everything is really bad and then suddenly about five years later everything is good and something got left over there and I told her what actually happened and she said, "Well why isn't that in the book?" and I said well this is a book about me losing my sight and kind of getting through that and I feel like if I throw that in there, A, it's unrelated and B it's sort of pornographic, it's like a circus of traumas that you're throwing in and she said well it might be convenient for you to think that it's unrelated but you don't know that. So she said write the chapter and just see what happens and I wrote it and the book really came together when I wrote it, I didn't know that it was...his death was pivotal in making me the blind man I am now because ultimately when he died it was just like...I realized everything I was fighting against really wasn't that big of deal, I put my sword down, it was like this is silly, so he sort of made room for me to grow in a weird way.

>> And then it's after that, that a lot of good things happen, you're writing gains respect and obviously family happens for you.

>> Yeah, yeah, my next book after Cockeyed was the memoir about being a blind dad because just when I thought I had it all licked, you I just sort come to terms with being a blind guy and I was pretty good at it and I had it down and I could go find the bread at the grocery store, suddenly they strap a baby to me and say do it again. It was totally like starting over because now I had to be blind but responsible for somebody else's well-being and the way I got through most of my blindness was being okay with my recklessness and I had to stop doing that so yeah it was...you strap a baby to a blind man you got a book.

>> Yeah, you got somebody struggling to make sure he doesn't really mess up this time.

>> I do remember...you know there's a line in the book about...this is Come On Papa and I came outside...I remember coming up stairs with the baby carrier the first time and my baby was about four months old, my daughter Tess and I said to my wife Tracy I'm going to take the baby for a walk and she said I'll go with you and I said no I want to do it by myself, I haven't done anything by myself with her yet and I could just feel the air leave the room and I realized oh my God my own wife doesn't want me to take care of our baby. So she let me go through it, we had to right and strapped the baby on like dynamite and I went out the front door and I made it about 20 steps and two women walked past us and I heard them talk to each other because people have this illusion that when they get beside you, you can't hear them any more and they were just passing me and I heard on say to the other, "Jesus that's got to be tricky."

[Laughter] And it took us an hour to get around the block.

>> You exercised extreme caution from that point on.

>> I swung my cane like a land mine thing.

>> But you know I've read you're writings on that and I get the feeling this is something I'm not a parent myself, at least not yet, and I couldn't help but thinking though about what my own parents have told me about their experiences of parenthood involving me and you know kids are not unchallenging to raise.

>> No.

>> And I thought to myself you know I bet every parent has been through in one way or another the same fears and the same problems. This is a little extra something added to the mix but they're all going to relate.

>> Well, you know I knew I had a book before Tess was even born because we went to the prenatal class and you know the prenatal class I was expecting in a warehouse you know, we were going to be on mats and do a lot of breathing and we went to this woman's house, we were in her basement and the first thing she made us do was she got all the guys to stand up because it was only guys there as dads and you know all the guys stood up and she gave us these little props and we were a cervix gallery, we had to dramatize the stages of effacement while our wives watched us and you know I had my little...I was the early stage of effacement and she actually asked me the question how big is your hole, which I've never been asked before and in my life this is what you do, you collect phrases you'll never hear again and boy did I get a lot of phrases that day...you know and I thought well it's only going to get weirder from here so I phoned my agent the next day and said I think I've got a book.

>> And you had indeed a book.

>> Yes.

>> And so...

>> It was a hard book, it was very hard.

>> And so in the end of course once Tess is born then the adventure just begins.

>> Well, you know here's the challenge you say you're going to write a book about being a blind dad then you realize that your other main character doesn't talk and that's a really hard book to write because babies don't have many verbs, right, they eat, they cry, they crap and you're like wow I have six verbs to make a book out of and I just kind of sit there over her sometimes saying can you do something or daddy's going to have to give back the advance. So at a certain point I actually felt the book was getting claustrophobic, even for me it was feeling claustrophobic because there were very small actions and small stories with big meanings but they were interesting and there was lots of funny, weird stuff happened of course but then I thought I got to blow this book open, I need to do like something bigger, I need to go somewhere, just open it up and actually think about fatherhood more then just being a father to my daughter. So I actually went to Kansas City and I went to the National Stay At Home Dad's Convention, which was great because it was all these stay at home dad who had gone out of town and left home to have a conference about how good they were at staying at home and it was amazing, it was just the strangest thing I've ever...

>> There's a contradiction right there.

>> Well, at the airport I said I'm going to an at home dad's convention, they said well shouldn't you be at home...like yeah but we professionalized it, we're getting together.

>> So the thing is then you got to decide okay am I going to schlep my daughter along with me through all of this and have her experience this along with me or am I just going to go and worry about how my wife is handling this back home.

>> And something better come of this or I've made her be a single mom for four days while I went out and just ate good barbecue.

>> And you're going to hear all kinds of growls when you get back.

>> Yes, and you know it was profound, it was very funny there was lots of really wonderful guys there it was really interesting, most of the at home dads I met were related some how to the silicon valley dot com bubble because when the bubble burst suddenly a lot of them were out of work the market was flooded with programers so they stayed home, and so it was sort of like the computer industry made all these at home dads. I met these interesting people and for me personally what happened was I came to this profound realization half way through that most of my anxieties about being a father came from the fact that I hadn't acknowledged yet that blindness took my dad from me. That the kind of father I thought I was going to be was a sighted father and I'd never really dealt with that because I never really kind of grieved the loss that, I mean I still had my dad but I couldn't be the same kind of dad and so I had no model that was sort of what I was struggling with.

>> How did he relate to all that you had written about, how did your parents relate, undoubtedly they've read it.

>> Oh, yeah no my mom is the...she's amazing about this stuff and they roll with it, they roll with it so well. My dad didn't read cockeyed for quite a while, he sort of avoided it for a while, I don't he wanted to relive a lot of that stuff

and I think it was maybe about six months after the book came out he read it and my mom said he read it over a couple of days and she said he would often put it down and have to go for a walk. So it think it was a bit harder on him to relive these things but I think...

>> He must of at the same time, at times just laughed out loud over it too, right.

>> Well, this is ultimately I think what happens is you know my mom has always really struggled with the fact that I went blind, like I mean you know what mom wouldn't but what greater gift can you give her than a book that says mom I'm okay. Yeah you can it to her...you can say that to your parents, I'm fine, I'm fine but they'll never totally believe you but when you have several books that testify and tell the story of how okay you are it gives them a lot of comfort, yeah.

>> And obviously at home now you've got your wife, you've got your daughter there and how are they going along and how has their life been different because of what's happened to you?

>> Well, my wife has become a literary character, you know that's sort of her strange affliction is that she's been in all these books and she's sort of used to it now and everybody thinks she's a saint because she is and it's funny I love it because I'll go to like say a literary festival and eventually somebody will come up to me and say is Tracy here and I'll say oh yeah she's over there somewhere and they'll say Barbara, the Tracy's here, the Tracy's here and they all run over to her and leave me alone, which is great for my kind of neurotic affliction anyway. So you know she did...she's had wonderfully strange moments like having dinner with Jodie Foster and talking about yourself in the third person, like I think Ryan and Tracy would do this at this point, that's a very strange experience to give you wife, talk about yourself in the third person to these other people.

>> And at the same time I suppose comparing notes about parenthood and all that because I know Jodie Foster has a couple of kids that she's raised.

>> Yes, yes and you know it's...I think Tracy is a rock, she's just rolled with it and lots of people ask her...how do you get...are you okay with him doing this stuff, you know he goes off and drives in a car race...I'm doing a travel book right now called nothing to see here and it's putting me in a lot of precarious things. I went cold water surfing with a deaf guy, which was hard because I'm like "help!" and he's like "what?" "I'm over here!" "what, where are you?" Tracy just rolls with it, she's just sort of like used to this as my MO and she just assumes I'm fine and what wouldn't work is if she hung onto me all the time and steered me everywhere and fond over me and tried to protect me, that would be the recipe for disaster. That's no fun. No, she just sort of opens the door and says just try and get home and off I go, right.

>> And then your daughter at this point, has she gotten to the point where...where is she in all of this so far?

>> Well, it's fascinating, she's four and a half and I've been watching her sort of acquire the knowledge of my blindness which is really strange to watch a kid acquire because they don't just get it at once and it's a very complicated thing for a child to understand and I remember at one point I was sitting on the

stairs with her one day playing and she sudden said, "Papa doesn't see," and I said that's right and we're like, "yay, she got it." And then she said mommy sees and I said yeah, and then she said I see and she wasn't sure right like which one am I and I said yes, you see. Okay we got high fives, all done and about I didn't know about a week later she just of her own doing without me teaching her she would show me things and she'd say look at this papa and she'd grab my hand an put it on it like she understood that I saw with my hands.

>> It'd have to be tactile.

>> And I had not taught her that, she just sort of either had observed it enough or somehow by osmosis but that doesn't mean she understood it either because at the same time that day she was watching Sesame Street on TV and she said "Who's this papa?" and she put my hand on the TV screen.

>> We're not at 3-D yet.

>> That's right.

>> We'll get there.

>> And so it really showed me like what like it really is an amazingly complicated concept for a kid to wrap their head around because they have to understand seeing in all it's facilities and she's not quite there yet but she's got most of it.

>> By the same token of course she'll have to get to media literacy and understand that not everything you see on television is actually real and tangible.

>> Yes, I was saying earlier...

>> She'll get there.

>> She's...because she's in the second book we went on a book tour and she came with us, we travelled all around with her and it was great and she became enamored what you would call book parties because at the book party there is a stage and papa sits on it and I get to go up too. And she would always sit up beside me, she'd be quiet, she wouldn't talk but she insisted, like she had her own writer she said will I always have a glass of water like you...so she just wanted to make sure that she had that glass of water by the microphone like everybody else on the stage.

>> Even if she's not going to go on mic and talk about it.

>> No, just got to have the prop.

>> Do you realize she's a writer in training?

>> I think she is, here's the other thing I noticed people talk about raising kids and about them acquiring words, that's pretty cool, narrative is the real treat. Like when they start acquiring narrative it's something else and there was an amazing day where she said to us, tell me about your day papa, just out of know where at the dinner table and she realize that we had stories, like that our day was made of storied that we could tell her. A few days later I picked

her up at school and she said, "Papa I have a funny story," and I said, "oh great". She said, "Stella and I," who is her best friend, "Stella and I climbed up the slide and we went down it and it was dirty," and that was the whole story, it was a sentence but it was also a story.

>> Yeah.

>> And the thing that I loved about it was she realized her day was excerptable and it was portable so even when she was at school she could bring it home, so when we're apart we're still together. That's pretty great to watch.

>> You realize it's not that far from there to essay.

>> No it's not and I think this is...this is like it showed me something too that we are fundamentally story telling creatures, that it is one of the ways that we create community and connection in the absence of one another that we come back together from our different spaces but we bring back the past with us of our day or our week or our longer pasts and make other people as if they were there, you know.

>> Now every parent has in the back of his or her mind's eye what they think their child is ultimately going to be as an adult when their job they think is done and that child becomes a finished product, is an adult. Do you ever think about that day and what your daughter will be?

>> You know it's funny I really don't, I think as a parent right now I'm just so concerned with her being an individual and not letting that be taken away from her, you know like by institutions \...I'm still an old punk rock guy, I still don't trust anything so I still just want her to be her own creature and not to have a distorted notion of happiness, that happiness is much more complicated than having nice clothes.

>> So it's all about hoping that she'll find her own game and excel at it.

>> Yes, yes and embrace the conflictiveness of being a human being not just expect it to even out at some point.

>> It sounds like an exciting life ahead.

>> I think so, I hope so.

>> Well, thanks for sharing your life so far with us or at least this slice of it that you've been able to share with us this hour and of course everybody's going to be looking forward to hearing more tonight at 8 o'clock.

>> Thanks.

>> Our thanks to Ryan Knighton who is the author of books including Cockeyed and more he is the latest speaker of the Visionaries in Motion series, the Caroline Werner Gannet lecture series at RIT, he'll be speaking tonight at 8 at the Webb Auditorium in the RIT campus, we're grateful he was able to speak wit us this hour here on 1370 Connection. I'm Bob Smith, thanks for joining us, for Dave Campo our technical director, it's been a pleasure.

[Music]