The 4 Ps: Life, and the Federation

By Patti Chang

Undoubtedly some of you have attended Washington Seminar. You have been at our Great Gathering in and heard John Pare talking about the 4 Ps. Every time he recites those I think about life and the Federation. They inform good conduct. They’re even a recipe for success. With the 4 Ps we can do anything. So you are probably thinking, “what are the Ps? What is she talking about?”

How do the Ps, being polite, patient, persistent, and persuasive influence life?

Let me tell you a little about me. Growing up Rural, my mom and dad were young parents. They were teenagers when I was born. They had little education. My law degree came before their G E Ds. We lived on my grandparents’ dairy farm when I was a baby in a little trailer. I was even named after a milk company that hauled our milk to market. It was called “Patti Sue’s Dairy.” My mom used to carry those milk jugs atop her belly when she was carrying me. When she was in the hospital after giving birth, my large family was arguing about what to name me, Mildred, Hildred, or something equally wonderful. She looked out the window and saw Patti Sue’s Dairy. They were delivering milk and that was it. She told the family to get out and named me Patti Sue.

When I was born. The doctors in their infinite wisdom told my parents that I was totally blind. They wondered for a while. I seemed to react to colors and chase things that did not have much nonvisual appeal. We went back to the experts. Doctors decided that mom and dad were probably suffering from a case of wishful thinking. They patiently watched me. But when I continued to respond to visual stuff They politely persisted with the medical profession and persuaded them that they were wrong and I could see. Oh wow! She is only blind in one eye. She will have vision but not depth perception.

When I was 12, I began to see halos around lights and have headaches. Again we travelled to the doctors. This time it was all in my head. I was suffering from hypochondria. You see my parents were getting a divorce and the doctors couldn’t diagnose me so it must be all in my head. My headaches persisted and we patiently and persistently kept going to doctors. Finally, we went to Ann Arbor where the University of Michigan is. My memory of this is crystal clear. We saw an old doc named Henderson. He had a pack of residents and interns in tow. When he decided to test me for glaucoma it went really quiet. His residents thought he was nuts. No children ever got glaucoma. This was back when you had to drink this bright green thick liquid to be tested for glaucoma. Before you started they told you if you didn’t keep it down, you would have to drink it again. I kept it down. Yep, I had glaucoma. But it was treatable. We can stop the vision loss they said.

At that point, we decided that the experts had no clue and I started Braille and cane training. My most recent revisiting of the 4 Ps centers on my becoming totally blind two or three years ago. Now I was in good shape. I knew it would happen so I did all my reading, working, cooking, cleaning, and so on through nonvisual means. Except for one important aspect of my life I was all set. I had never learned to keep a straight line and to totally rely on my other senses for travel. What to do? I went back to training. Blind Inc. was good enough to provide me with great travel instruction. I was able to take double travel lessons in the mornings for four hours and work in the afternoon and evenings. Rob Hobson with the 4 Ps taught me during those double travel lessons each day. I now travel regularly alone with confidence.

Over the past couple of years, I see that public reactions are different. We all just love the airlines. I asked for white wine on a flight recently and the flight attendant gave me a napkin and the bottle. Since he forgot my glass I asked if I could please have a glass. He said no because he would not have time later to come back and pour my wine. Hummmmm… I guess I was expected to drink my wine from the bottle like many drink beers. Now I am a red neck but…

People grab me much more often than before. I find I leave planes and discover wheelchairs I did not order way more often than ever before. I keep reciting in my head polite, patient, persistent, and persuasive. Sometimes it is my mantra.

My educational experiences illustrate the 4 Ps even better. Junior High involved a bit of a step back. It was tough in some ways. a couple of my teachers still thought I was faking. It took decades to persuade them that I was not faking but eventually even Mr. Flynn, my 7th grade social studies teacher, acknowledged that I really was blind. Mr. Flynn routinely called on me in class to read aloud knowing that I could not read Braille yet. He assumed that because I could see where things were and what people were wearing that of course I could see the print. It didn’t help that my vision fluctuated. The inconsistency was clear proof that I was playing games.

Like many I was excluded from some classes like shop entirely, but the worst was gym. My mom fought to keep me in gym class. She wanted me to stay fit. and the teacher fought back by forcing me to sit out almost every day. But I persisted with my education anyway. I was admitted to all colleges I applied to and attended MSU. College was much better until it came to student teaching. No supervising teacher would take me at first and my advisor wanted to give me a pass. I politely refused and persuaded him to be persistent and to keep trying. Who would hire me if they saw I had not done my student teaching? I tried to patiently wait. It paid off. I have to divert and point out how much we can help others by living our lives. The teacher who did take me as a student teacher had dated a guy with a blind dad. So, she didn’t see what the fuss was about. That blind dad had worked and raised his family and apparently showed my supervising teacher what blind people could do.

While at MSU we got married. The wonderful man I married sees blindness as a characteristic, But his family did not. They disinherited him and they were not at our wedding. We had a large country wedding with 400 people but no one from his family was with us. I persisted in persuading my husband to keep in touch and be patient and polite with his parents.

Years later my mother in law came to live with us. Remember the same one who did not come to our wedding. She became ill in the states and I became her primary care giver. I patiently took her to every doctor’s appointment. I persistently cleaned and cooked. I politely ignored how they had treated me. She stayed with us for more than a year twenty years ago and is cancer free now. That and the birth of our kids changed my husband’s family’s minds.

The 4 Ps have impacted my life beyond education and family. Even my employment history shows how important they are. After law school I was hired by the City of Chicago. Glad to have the job and I made something of it but I think they expected very little. The rating of firms depends upon the ranking of the schools they draw from and I graduated from U of C. When I was hired they never thought that I would stay, serve on taskforces, be promoted and become an integral part of building and fire safety in the city for almost thirty years. But I was polite for the most part, persistent always and occasionally patient and many were persuaded that I was competent not through talk but by my living my life and doing my job.

When I retired from the City, I had trained almost half of the attorneys in the Dept. and I had been a supervisor for more than a decade. That promotion came about because people knew I could do the job even if they didn’t start with that understanding.

The Federation demonstrates the 4 Ps for me most of all. I like many grew up isolated from other blind people and kids. I met a few kids at camp and knew one blind woman who lost her vision late. She wanted me to teach her enough Braille to play cards in exchange for her teaching me cooking. But she didn’t get out much. She was past working age and she wasn’t much interested in rehabilitation given her health.

I won a scholarship. I did it backwards. I won a national scholarship and then a state scholarship. My first convention was empowering. Walking into that convention hall I found home. I became active in NFB leadership. Our student division elected me as treasurer. I was terrible and I promised myself that I would never ever deal with money again. Of course now I serve as our Illinois treasurer and a large part of my job is fundraising but I was never ever going to deal with money in relation to the Federation.

The NFB is where I really learned the 4 Ps. Our persuasiveness and persistence is obvious. Just look at some of our most recent outreach. We passed Marrakesh. That is the only treaty of its kind. We have seen more than 290,000,000 impressions on social media around our endeavor with Kellogg’s and RKT notes. The Baltimore Orioles just hosted NFB night. I could go on and on.

But we should take a minute and talk about the patience and politeness part of it. We all know that we need to be patient and polite when we are public facing but sometimes we need to learn the same within the Federation. We say we need to meet people where they are but what does that mean. Every affiliate has a range of abilities and experiences. It was hardest for me to work on being patient and polite with those “I thought should KNOW BETTER.” Many of you know Ronza Othman. Ronza Othman worked with me at the City for a while. When I met Ronza she did not use a cane. Since she is very talented and a bright lady I thought she should “know better.” I walked with Ronza and I arrived at the corner first and waited. We repeated this scenario together. Ronza decided after while that she needed a cane too. Besides being bright and talented, Ronza is also a stubborn woman. If I pushed would she respond. Sure she would. She would have left. Instead I patiently walked with her. She proudly uses a cane now but we had to meet her where she was. We have to understand that rigid rules and conformity drive people away and stifle our organization. Communicating even subtle disapproval hampers our efforts and teaches nothing. I hope that we all use the Ps with the public but most of all remember to use them within our family. We can persuade best by example. Be persistent with respect. We should always be patient and polite with one another.

With our Ps inside and outside of our family, we can do anything. Reflect on how you incorporate patience, persuasiveness, persistence and politeness into your life today and how you can do so going forward. I am going to close by asking each of you to weave the 4 Ps into what you do each day and into what we do together always. If we do with love hope and determination every blind person will live the life, he or she wants and our movement can raise expectations to turn dreams into reality.