The Blind Leading the Blind:
How the author of *Follow My Leader* brightened the world

by Jenny Clendenen Walicek

*A leader is best when people barely know that he exists...when his work is done, his aims fulfilled, they will all say, "We did this ourselves."* – Lao Tzu, Tao te Ching, Ch. 17

Type the children’s book title *Follow My Leader* into any search bar, and you’ll be seeing stars. Lots of them, representing five-star reviews on notable book sites, with enthusiastic snippets from ardent fans. The 1957 story is about an 11-year-old boy blinded by a firecracker accident who regains his independence with the help of a guide dog named Leader. It’s a heartwarming, well-written book with likable characters. As with all great books, though, it’s the underlying message that resonates across the decades.

Published in an era when the well-intentioned often saw the “different” as pitiable and deserving of help, *Follow My Leader* presented a clearer view. Although the blinded protagonist has very human moments of anger and petulance about his loss, it’s his determination and capabilities that stand out. Jimmy’s return to self-sufficiency demonstrates equality and empowerment, leaving readers in awe of, not sympathy with, the vision-impaired.

Reviewers write of the sheer respect, intrigue, and even envy they felt for Jimmy. Many who read the book as children blindfolded themselves to experience his world, as my sister and I did back in the 1960s. We were so affected by *Follow My Leader* as kids that we chose to “live” the book as one of our LitWits sensory workshops this year. As we expected, it proved just as powerful to our three dozen students as it had been to us.¹

*Follow My Leader* continues to alter the world as only great books can – by influencing character, inspiring tangential learning, and even launching careers. A typical Goodreads reviewer, “Myra,” writes that “It’s a book I’ve never forgotten. Because of it, I tried to learn to read

¹ To see how LitWits brought *Follow My Leader* to life, and to get our sensory enrichment guide and free resources for reading and teaching this wonderful book, visit [www.litwitsworkshops.com/free-resources/follow-my-leader](http://www.litwitsworkshops.com/free-resources/follow-my-leader).
Braille. I visited a large school for the blind, with thoughts of working there. It also led me to several books about Helen Keller and her teacher, Annie Sullivan. And, it led me to explore the work of guide dogs.” “Crosby” remembers that “it helped develop in me a sense of compassion, empathy and understanding of others which has served me well over the years.” These kinds of comments are echoed by more than a hundred on Goodreads alone, and more passionate fans abound on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Sonlight, and Google Books.

Though it’s clear that his tale and its themes are still treasured, author James B. Garfield seems to have managed the unthinkable: near-complete Internet absence. Enter his name in a search bar and you’ll get nothing but an orange cartoon cat and an assassinated president. One single article, published in The Blind American in February 1962, exists to shed light on the man who wrote this well-loved, transformative book.2 But that one article is truly – well, eye-opening. It’s quite evident that Garfield was a man whose life and legacy should not be left so under-acknowledged. In fact, he should be memorialized.

The Blind American article, and a post on Amazon by the Garfield’s granddaughter Amy Lazarus, led to some enlightening conversations with her and her mother (the author’s daughter Carolyn) and to the wonderful photographs included here. These sources reveal a man who contributed far more to humanity than just his beloved book. James B. Garfield lived an intensely industrious, philanthropic life of almost 103 years – the final 43 of which were dedicated to lightening loads and enlightening the public on behalf of his fellow blind.

Yes, his fellow blind.

The author, like his presciently-named protagonist Jimmy Carter, lost his eyesight in his late fifties and was forced to adapt to permanent darkness. And, like the assassinated president for whom he was named and the future president who bore his protagonist’s name, James Bandman Garfield Eichberg3 turned out to be an eminent, active leader.

He wasn’t born a leader, though. In fact, on September 19, 1881 -- the day of President Garfield’s assassination -- he followed eight siblings into the world. Having dashed his mother’s hopes for a baby girl, she kept James in kilts and long curls far too long. This earned him a few taunts from the neighborhood boys and his brothers, and as a result he became “quite a fighter.”4 But his disabilities

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3 The author was born James B. Garfield Eichberg, but that fails to explain his mystifying absence from the Internet, as his birth surname is just as invisible there.
4 Carolyn Lazarus, April 4, 2013.
extended beyond his feminine styling. James had tunnel vision as a child, and the family doctor predicted that he would go blind very young.

Somehow, he retained his sight for decades. His daughter believes sheer willpower might have been a factor, as he was determined to act onstage. James dropped out of high school, dropped his surname, and picked up a Broadway role. Though his eyesight was poor, it served him well enough to get him on the stage of which he had dreamed,⁵ and then into the Great War, of which he most certainly had not.

Once the war and his role as a sergeant-major in the Air Force were over, his theatrical inclinations branched into radio. In 1926 his wife, Edith Weil Eichberg, gave birth to Carolyn (for whom Jimmy’s sister in Follow My Leader was named), and four years later the family moved to Hollywood. As a freelance radio artist, James wrote dramas and would eventually act in over 2,000 soap operas.

Edith was not in good health, and James needed someone to help care for their child. The little girl was sent to a boarding school where most of the students went home at the end of the day. Carolyn, now 86, remembers being utterly miserable. “Everyone else got to go home,” she says, “but I was left there alone each day.” After a few months the school contacted James to advise him of her misery. He promptly pulled her out and sent her to live in Georgia with his sister Ruby, who raised her. In 1937, when Carolyn was only eleven, her mother passed away in California. And another darkness was encroaching upon her father, who had enjoyed a decade of success in radio there: by 1940, he was completely blind.

But James B. Garfield, at sixty, had only just begun to serve. He acquired the first of his guide dogs and worked in an aircraft plant, where he became acquainted with other blind people and their problems – such as being laid off after World War II, when the defense plants closed. Wanting to help, he attended a meeting of the LA County Club of the Adult Blind (an affiliate of the California Council of the Blind) – and was offered its presidency that very night. His acceptance, in his mid-sixties, marked the beginning of the second half of his life. It was a post he would hold for 12 years as he zealously pursued rights for the blind. His efforts would include thwarting the 1947 attempt to amend the constitution that would have threatened the Welfare and Institutions Code of California. He was also instrumental in the creation of the State Board of Guide Dogs for the Blind that year.

⁵ Garfield also organized the first professional actors’ organization, “White Rats,” in 1910, later absorbed by Actors’ Equity.
His original career as an actor and radio dramatist segued into a teaching position at a radio dramatics school founded by the American Federation of Radio Artists, where he helped World War II veterans brush up on their skills to return to broadcasting. One day one of his students, Paul Lukather, took him to his horse farm, where James asked to ride. “You’re going to ride blind?” someone asked, aghast. James gave a characteristically isn’t-it-obvious reply: “Well, I’m blind, so if I’m going to ride, I’m going to have to ride blind, aren’t I.” It’s the same sort of scene that played out when he swam, a scene recreated for Jimmy in Follow My Leader. Like his namesake in the book, James didn’t ever let blindness prevent him from doing what he wanted to do. He strongly believed in the ability – and worked for the rights – of the blind to do anything they wanted.

To publicly emphasize the equality, humanity, and rights of the blind, James began his own program in 1947, “A Blind Man Looks at You” on KGFJ in LA. For fifteen minutes once a week he raised awareness about the needs and goals of the blind – the most important, of course, being understanding. The show would run for twenty years, and James would receive many awards and honors for his role in raising awareness about the blind.

It was during this time that James wrote his first book, Follow My Leader, the story of a blind boy and his guide dog. Though a second book, They Like You Better, was published two years later, it’s Follow My Leader that baby boomers and their kids remember and love. The book draws deeply on Garfield’s own experiences, from the protagonist’s name and guide dog acquisition, to the way in which Jimmy and James swam blind in streams.

Carolyn was in her thirties by the time it was published, but Amy, the youngest of his two granddaughters, first read the published book as a third-grade class assignment in the 1970s. She remembers being proud that her granddad had written it, but what stands out most in her memory is her reaction, the same one of kids across time: the impulse to close her eyes and pretend she was blind, and the relief that she could open them and see.

Though most of Carolyn’s childhood was spent far from her busy father, she visited him while attending UCLA, where she majored in commercial art. Clearly influenced by her father’s humanitarian bent, she made a shift from one field to another to serve the disadvantaged. After returning to Georgia and finishing her degree, she did social work for the Atlanta Traveler’s Aid Society, where she helped runaways, and then she went to New York to serve as a medical social worker for the New York state hospitals.

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6 Carolyn Lazarus, April 5, 2013
7 James’ lifetime portfolio would include poetry, stories, and poems for juvenile magazines; plays and vaudeville sketches; more than 2,000 soap operas; two murder mysteries, a biography, a philosophical book of poems, and a book of philosophy.
No matter the distance between them, Carolyn always felt the bond her father had with her – and with his dogs. One day, as a college student, she took Midgie, his German Shepherd guide dog, for a walk when the dog pulled away and escaped. Carolyn gave chase, but Midgie, enjoying what seemed a game, evaded her. Carolyn had to return without the invaluable, beloved dog. “Dad,” she said, heart thumping, “I lost your guide dog.” He simply went to the door and whistled, and Midgie bounded over the threshold. When such misbehaviors occurred, his method of correction was to strike his own wrist — never the dog — with the leash. This act would horrify the dog, and correct the behavior very effectively.

James B. Garfield actively raised both funds and awareness, and was in constant demand as a speaker, either as an advocate for the blind or as the author of *Follow My Leader*. He continued to serve in official roles as well. In 1960, at age 79, he began serving his second term as secretary of the California Council of the Blind. And by 1962 the octogenarian, now working with Flora, his third guide dog, had been appointed to the State Board of Guide Dogs for the Blind by three consecutive governors. His work directly influenced the high standards held by California guide dog schools, as well as the passing of legislation that permits guide dogs to be present in traffic and on public transportation. He also initiated a fundraising effort for building the Atkinson recreation center at the Braille Institute of America, where he taught and advised.

Most people who reach their ninth decade with so many achievements behind them might choose to retire. But "There is too much to do yet," he said in an interview for *The Blind American* that year, "especially in the field of educational and employment opportunities for our young blind people. I intend to help until we gain a fair and equal chance in our society for these kids."8

James Garfield’s nature was deeply philosophical and nondivisive – he “voted the man,” and as for religion, he “believed in all of them.”9 His passion for learning was reflected in his acquisition of eight languages or dialects and his unflagging zeal for achieving his goals. “He had a wonderful zest for life,” Carolyn says warmly. Her daughters, Amy and Ann, seem to have inherited that zest, along with his intellect and integrity. Ann has a BS in management and is raising two sons, Ryan and Scott; she and her husband are actively involved in their sons’ scouting activities. Amy has a BS in industrial engineering, an MBA, and her granddad’s writing gene; she’s working on a legal thriller, and may soon, we hope, be editing and republishing some of his out-of-print works. Both daughters care for their mom and others in ways that would make their granddad very proud.

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9 Biography provided by Amy Lazarus
When James B. Garfield moved to Valdosta, Georgia under Carolyn’s care, he was over a hundred years old. But he still wasn’t ready to give up his independence. For at least another year he continued to live alone, with in-home help and his last dog, Coral. He was 102 when he moved to the Fellowship Home Retirement Community, where, though his mind was still sharp, pneumonia set in. In yet another characteristically wry response to the obvious, he quipped, “It wasn’t the cough that carried him off, it was the coffin they carried him off in!”

But even the most industrious and determined of men must eventually rest. In March 1984, this great humanitarian – a man who had given his gifts to audiences, his country, war veterans, the blind, his family, thousands of fans, and millions of readers to come – finally closed his eyes, facing the deeper-than-blindness darkness of death. But we who follow him see the light he left.

“Go to bed, it’s dark outside.” James B. Garfield once told Carolyn, when she was very little, and he still had two good eyes.

“What’s dark?” she asked, and he took her to the window and showed her the night.

“That’s dark,” he said quietly.

“Hello, Dark” she said. “Good night, Dark.”

And good morning to you, James B. Garfield.

Carolyn Lazarus, c. 1930. Photo courtesy of her daughter, Amy Lazarus.

The author would like to thank Carolyn Eichberg Lazarus and Amy Lazarus for so generously sharing their time, memories, and treasured mementos of their father and grandfather.

10 Interview with Carolyn Lazarus, April 5, 2013