

Jan 2 / 01

Dear Elizabeth:

I saw your request for feedback in the August newsletter but have been having some difficulty deciding what to say (and now that you've called, I really have to speed up the organization of my thoughts!) So much has changed since that fateful evening at the beginning of July when my glasses flew over the side of the boat and disappeared into the waters of Georgian Bay. As you know, that "accident" happened two days before I was to begin the exercises for Dr. Hochman's eight-week vision study. I decided to wait until the end of the study before replacing my glasses in case a miracle occurred and my prescription could be reduced. Since I still had my prescription sunglasses for driving, I knew I could continue to function correctly in the legitimate world. By the end of the 8 weeks, however, a miracle did occur. Not only did my vision improve but I tossed my prescription sunglasses and have no intention of wearing glasses again.

At the beginning of the study (July 3), I had no idea I was about to give up prescription glasses completely. I had worn glasses since I was 13 years old, so for about 30 years. It was only a few years ago, when I took your vision improvement classes, that I learned it was actually possible to function without glasses--at least part of the time. After that, I would leave my glasses off for a few hours every day. But slowly, my glasses-wearing time increased until last year when I was all the way back to using them first-thing-in-the-morning to last-thing-at-night. I suspect this had to do with spending a lot of time on the computer and I really noticed a deterioration in my eyesight during this time. I also noticed a considerable increase in neck and shoulder pain.

There is a saying that the process of learning is three steps forward and two steps back. This has certainly been my experience with vision improvement. After last year, I knew I needed to do something about my eyes if I didn't want to be stuck on a downward spiral of increasing prescriptions for the rest of my life. Yet I lacked the impetus to begin a solitary program of vision improvement or (yet another) series of classes. That's when your call about the vision study came. I jumped right in. Isn't it also said that when the student is ready, the teacher (or appropriate learning situation) appears?

While I wasn't prepared to conduct my own program of vision improvement, having to perform the exercises for a formal study provided exactly the stimulus I needed. During the eight weeks of the study, I did the vision exercises six days a week for about 10 minutes per exercise. Most of

the time, I tried to do them outdoors in a park or conservation area or at least in my back yard.

The exercises were simple but not always easy. During the Long Swing, I initially found it very difficult to stay present with the exercise. I had a tendency to space off into my thoughts and ignore what was passing in front of my eyes. As this was obviously part of my vision problem, I worked to remain physically conscious and soon found not only that I was seeing more, but that the exercise acted like a meditation in terms of focusing and relaxing me. There seems to be a real Zen component to most of the exercises, in that one has to continually "be here, now" while doing them.

The exercise I hated for about the first four weeks was Looking into the Distance. Considering my eyesight was myopic, this is probably no surprise. Now, I like to look into the distance and alternate between near vision and far, but in July, doing so made me uncomfortable, irritated and impatient. I also had some trouble with Shifting, which I thought ironic since I read so much. After a few weeks, though, I really began to notice how much more clearly I could read lines of print and see them from farther away.

About halfway through the study, someone who has never worn glasses told me I was squinting a lot. That was surprisingly discouraging, but then I thought well, so what--my vision hasn't corrected itself overnight but I'm not ready to give up yet.

I didn't always do the exercises perfectly. Sometimes I crammed them in right before bed, or after drinking some wine (not a recommended beverage for vision improvement), or only gave them a quick 5 minutes each. Despite this lack of total perfection, by the end of the eight weeks, when Dr. Hochman retested my eyes, I could read one line further down on the eye chart and my astigmatism had reduced.

That was very exciting to me since it proved in measureable, scientific terms that my eyesight could and did improve. I also found it curious that despite drinking wine and eating chocolate from the health food store (but chocolate nevertheless) during the 8 weeks, Dr. Hochman told me my liver was *less* swollen than at the beginning of the study.

Inspiring as these physical changes were, I now believe they were probably the least of what occurred overall. In his book, *Take Off Your Glasses and See*, Jacob Liberman talks about how children often get glasses within a year or two of some sort of major emotional stress and that the glasses can "freeze" the wearer into the emotions of that period or into a state of denial of or hiding from those emotions. I discovered the truth of this for myself during the 8 weeks of the study.

Since I was no longer wearing glasses (except to drive, so only for brief periods daily), I lost the barrier and borders to my external and internal worlds glasses provide. On the one hand, this allowed me a tremendous amount of freedom and I discovered I loved doing things without glasses clamped to my face. On the other hand, I suddenly found myself experiencing terrible and sometimes indefinable fears. There was one day in the middle of the study when I spent several hours in the grip of such terror, I actually thought I might not survive it. Yet it passed, and has never returned.

As I said, some fears were indefinable and I don't know what they were about except that they were lodged in my cellular memory and must have been released when I began to change how I used my body, including my eyes. Other fears had to do with specific emotional and family situations that now came clearly into focus(!) and could be resolved.

And then there were fears which other glasses wearers might also experience, such as the fear of being hit in the eye by a tree branch or other object if one is without glasses. After a month of living glasses-free and going to parks and hiking trails almost daily, I realized this fear had simply vanished. I suspect there is also commonly the fear of being seen and for many of us, to be seen is to be judged. No glasses are strong enough to keep other people from looking at us. For me, one consequence of living glasses-free was that I pretty much stopped worrying about what other people thought of me and what I looked like, possibly because I stopped being quite as judgmental of *them*. As a result, I have found myself enjoying social events much more, since I no longer feel the need to engage in that competitive "measuring-up" stuff that used to seem so important.

During the 8-week study, I became aware that two of my dominant emotional states as a glasses-wearer were fear and anxiety. I noticed how much time I spent feeling as if I'd done something wrong and no matter what I did, I could easily find something to criticize myself for or feel guilty about. Once I noticed how this self-critical tendency pervaded my life, I realized how exhausting and pointless it was. Without glasses locking me into that state of constant attention to every picky little detail, I began to move away from it.

Physically, I noticed how my anxiety, fear and self-criticism manifested as hunched shoulders, tightened muscles and held breath. Just noticing these things has helped me to stop doing them--when I catch myself, I consciously lower my shoulders, open my chest and *breathe!* I have noticed while cross-country skiing that by lowering my shoulders, I use my triceps instead of my neck muscles to push on my ski poles. It's much more

relaxing! (And my triceps are suddenly getting the workout they've been missing all these years.) Something else I've noticed while cross-country skiing is that my balance and coordination have improved tremendously and I've basically lost my fear of falling. I think several factors have contributed to this, including NIA (Neuro-Muscular Integrative Action) workouts and Mitzah bodywork sessions, but mostly I suspect it has to do with no longer being located primarily in my head. The combination of no glasses and the vision improvement exercises seems to have extended my physical consciousness and helped me integrate it with my movements. In other words, I'm now more present in my body and can ski better.

Without glasses, I initially tended to crane my neck when looking downwards at an object instead of simply lowering my eyes and chin. It took me four months before I was able to stop this automatic hyperextension, so these learned behaviours can be unlearned. (I keep recalling that book you once said you were thinking of writing to show people how to move correctly and without stress in daily activities--I could use a copy of it.) Two forms of exercise that have helped me change these physical patterns are yoga and NIA.

Since losing my glasses, I've become more aware on some levels yet I think I'm now much less self-conscious. This has opened up the creative side of my life significantly. I have many goals that are important to me and, ironically, now that I no longer wear glasses, I feel less driven about them but more confident of achieving them.

Some funny--or curious--things have happened in the past few months. Once, I was out on a drive in the country with a friend who has better than 20/20 vision, the kind of person who can spot a hummingbird in the middle of thick woods three fields away. As we drove along, I saw a partly inflated white plastic shopping bag up ahead on the road. My friend gasped with horror and said, "Don't look at that!"

"Why not? It's only a bag," I said.

"Oh." She looked at it again as we went past. "I thought it was a dead white cat."

I found it tremendously encouraging that a person with such superior eyesight could mistake a plastic bag for a cat, especially when I--with the "inferior" vision--saw it for what it was. This experience validates Liberman's observation that vision does not simply exist in the eyes but is a combination of many factors, since my friend saw what she was afraid *might* be there instead of what was really on the road.

On another occasion, I attended a seminar where printed information was projected onto a screen behind the presenter. I had brought along my prescription sunglasses and sat near the front of the room. When the first slide came on, I glanced at the screen briefly and saw blurry lines of print, so I put on my prescription sunglasses. To my astonishment, the print remained just as blurry! I took off my glasses and relaxed, and found I could pretty much decipher what I needed from the screen with my unaided eye. In fact, I noticed partway through the class that the person next to me (with no glasses) was sometimes taking notes from my page.

I must admit, I'm curious about what vision actually *is* and why visual acuity is measured by printed letters. When I'm out on a hike in the country, I can see an individual leaf on a branch 15 or 20 feet above my head. I may not be seeing it as sharply as a camera might, but it is a distinct leaf and not a blur mixed into a blur of other leaves. Yet I don't see letters clearly at the same distance. I notice how much difference light makes to my visual acuity--I see more clearly on bright sunny days, although as time goes on, my vision on duller days or at twilight seems to be improving. Without glasses, colours look much brighter and stronger.

I also notice I see better when I open up my visual field rather than trying to focus intensely on one thing. In fact, *trying* to focus doesn't seem to work at all, and it hurts, whereas spreading out my vision to include the periphery seems to immediately relax my eyes and make it easier to see.

Because most people in my family wear glasses, I once accepted the medical model as the norm. Yet now I wonder why we have this fixation with having to see so "clearly". What are we all afraid of? Are we afraid we might miss something or not be able to keep up with the machines we have invented? Why does the focus of corrected eyesight have to be in the head? Corrected vision seems very much to identify with the Cartesian split between body/empirical science and mind/spirit.

I once watched a futuristic movie called *Cherry 2000*, in which a man hires a tracker to drive him through a dangerous, uncharted territory. When they enter the territory, the tracker turns off her headlights, although it is night. Her passenger exclaims, "What are you doing? How can you drive without lights?!" and the tracker answers, "I drive by feel."

"By *feel*?"

"Mostly."

I think vision is a lot like this and probably much less "technical" than Western science makes it out to be.

While I haven't taken your advanced class yet so don't know what you recommend in this area, I have developed some methods for working at the computer without glasses and without pain, which I'll share in case they're helpful to anyone else.

1) Make the font (the size of the letters) on your document as large as you need. Use 24 or even 30. You can shrink them back down to 10 or 12 when you're saving and/or printing your document.

2) Do the following for a few seconds every few minutes. Look away *often* and blink rapidly. Look as far away as possible. Look at a picture of a natural scene (proven in hospitals to speed healing). Look out the window. Look away and put your palm between your eyes to block your central vision so you can only see peripherally. It's amazing how refreshing this is (since looking at a screen really concentrates your central vision).

3) Shake up your shoulders, head and if possible hips to keep your neck loose. Twist your head to look behind you in either direction as far as it will go.

4) Massage around your eyes, jaw hinges, forehead and cheekbones with your fingers.

5) Go outside after you spend time on the computer so your eyes can spread out to their widest and farthest range of vision. Some simple exercise like walking or stretching will help bring more oxygen to your eyes.

I have not continued the same regimen of eye exercises since the end of the study but I do pay attention to how I use my eyes, observe what affects them and plan to continue working to heal my vision. Since losing my glasses, I can remember only three occasions when I mentally reached for my glasses and wished I had them to wear. Twice it was because of apprehension, which could not have been resolved by putting on spectacles anyway, and once it was because I was tired and had to force my eyes (and the rest of me) to overperform instead of being able to rest.

Although one might think *not* wearing glasses would be a way to avoid real life, my experience is the opposite. I have found that without glasses, I am continually present in my life and emotional reality in a way I could formerly avoid. I think it is not an exaggeration to say that losing my glasses was probably one of the best things that ever happened to me. The truth is, even though I had always been extremely careful with and protective of my glasses, that July night when I saw them disappear into the dark water, I felt not even the slightest regret. If anything, there was a little thrill of excitement. Oh boy, I thought, Here we go!

I have to thank you for inviting me to participate in the study. The discipline of obligation to a commitment and the planned program of exercises made me work with my eyes as I wouldn't have, left to myself. And learning from Dr. Hochman that I had achieved a measurable vision improvement convinced me that I really could change my eyesight for the better--it wasn't just endless practice with no results. How eye-opening!

Hope this is helpful. All
the best for 2001!

-Karen

