

PHOTOESSAY

Healing Vision Without Spectacles,  
Contact Lenses or Refractive Surgery:  
A Personal Journey of Healing Vision

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Whenever I try to speak about my vision it becomes difficult, partly because my vision is constantly moving, shifting, and changing, so the act of description feels like pinning down and killing a butterfly, and partly because of the multitudes of metaphors in the visual vocabulary. What is your focus? What is your perspective? How is your sense of depth? Are things colorful for you? All of these are valid questions about eyesight but they also mean more. The discussions these questions can entail answers about relationships, direction, motivation, awareness, and all of life. When I speak about my vision, I am speaking about my life.

I was first given glasses for vision difficulties (myopia and astigmatism) when I was 3 years old. The strength of the glasses I wore increased until I was 22 and my prescription was over -10 dioptres. Glasses, contact lenses, and refractive surgery bend, twist, narrow, expand, and refocus light, altering the way that it enters a person. There is a change in the focus and the perceived size and location of objects when glasses are worn.\* There is also a change in perspective. This is illustrated by the common experience of difficulty walking up and down stairs soon after a new prescription for glasses is worn.

Each stronger pair of glasses that I received growing up was a jolt of detail, in which faces far away and blades of grass washed over me. It was wonderful. This was my experience of opticians and glasses until I visited Abraham Kirshner an optometrist who used a therapeutic approach to vision. In contrast to the increasing prescriptions I had experienced during the rest of my life, this time I was given a reduced prescription through which I saw blur in the distance. I was annoyed and angry about this. I went to get help with my vision and I walked out of his office seeing worse than when I went in. As well as my reduced-strength glasses I was also given a series of relaxation exercises to do and despite my reservations because of my decreased acuity I followed through with all his recommendations and was amazed at the results.

Within 2 weeks, the blur that I had been seeing in the distance with my new glasses cleared and I had regained clarity of detail but with weaker glasses. I could see signs in the distance and leaves on trees perfectly clearly, whereas 2 weeks before, there was only blur. This sort of change I had only ever seen by putting on stronger glasses. This time it was I who had changed not the glasses and it felt very empowering. On returning to Dr. Kirshner, he confirmed the improvement on the eye chart and once again reduced the strength of my glasses. I continued my relaxation practices and my exercises and my blur continued to clear.

I had started a process that I felt compelled to continue. Each time I saw a little bit more clearly I loved it! This was a completely new experience for me and I kept reducing the strength of my glasses to see how much my natural vision could change. For several years after I started working with

my vision, I was still completely dependent on glasses and wearing them full time although the prescriptions were getting weaker. I was not working with my vision in order to get rid of my glasses. I was continuing to work with my vision because I was discovering sensations that had been missing; the feeling of seeing.

After Dr. Kirshner introduced me to vision work, I met with vision therapist Aileen Whiteford. She became my main vision journey mentor and, while working with her, the holistic nature of vision work has become more apparent to me. Improving my eyesight meant and still means healing. Learning to see without glasses means learning to interpret very different patterns of light and navigating the world in a different way. It means a loosening of my focus and it means the need to address a wider perspective. It has to do with my body, my food, my relationships, my dreams, my home, my creativity, and my vision of life. Changing my eyesight means that all of this must change too. Wearing weaker glasses I saw a slight blur in the distance. Wearing no glasses at all, I saw a lot of blur everywhere and felt very vulnerable and insecure. As I continued clarifying my natural vision I started spending more time without glasses.

The process of this change has been and is a journey of discovery. There are times of grief, pain, anger, realization, and weeping. It is a detoxification and a process of maturation, growth, and emotional intensity. It also felt and feels very real. Hurt and anger are a part of it; a basis from which to heal. Part of my decision to see naturally is an acknowledgment that I grew up wearing glasses so I am developing a lot of my senses for the first time. The decision to take off my glasses involves a responsibility to nurture the new parts in order to actually see and not just take off my glasses and have a blur. There have been many people, places, and things that have helped me with these changes. CranioSacral therapy (Milne, 1995), the Alexander technique (Chance, 1999), aromatherapy massage (Vickers, 2000), Bates method lessons (Mansfield, 1992), and counseling have all been instrumental. So is confronting difficult situations, taking responsibility, and learning acceptance. I found that I could not strive for perfect sight but, when I pay attention to my health, my needs, and my intuition, then my clarity always improves.

After several years of wearing progressively weaker lenses and with a sense of experimentation and adventure, I took off my glasses with the intention of never putting them on again. This was horrible. My lifestyle had to change; for example, I stopped driving but, more than this, I now had nowhere to run when I could not see. No glasses safety net. There were times when I was bewildered and lost in crowds, confused at railway stations, and stranded at bus stops. Within my blur, there was, at once, not enough information and too much. The experience would often overwhelm me and I would retreat home to bed unable to cope

Bambridge A. An Investigation of Myopic Visual Function and the Effect of Holistic Vision Therapy. [M.Phil. thesis]. Glasgow: Glasgow Caledonian University, 2001.

with the cacophony of signals, signs, colors, textures, and movement that I just could not interpret.

The Bates method of vision improvement is one of the main techniques that I use to nurture, encourage, loosen, and strengthen my vision. The main principle of the Bates method is that good vision will follow relaxed fluid movement of eye, body, and mind and all the techniques of the method are based on this. One of these techniques is palming. This is the practice of sitting or lying and with the arms comfortably supported covering the eyes with the palms of the hands. In times of retreat, be it minutes or days, palming calms me down. When I am panicking and it is all too much, palming turns things around. After dedicated times of palming as long as 7 hours in a day, I have had permanent jumps in improvements in my vision (Bambridge, 2002). Palming is my sanctuary, a place to notice how fast or slow my thoughts, are how hot or cold my feet, and how fluid my imagination is. For me, it is respite, meditation and a place to heal.

And why did I continue? Why did I persist in keeping my glasses off when it was difficult to see, when it was painful, when I had trouble recognizing people, and when everything had been just fine before while I was wearing glasses? Why, when faced with opposition to my dedication to natural vision, did I steadfastly defend my decisions? Well, within the insecurity and bewilderment and chaos I discovered other things that were very important to me, for example, trust. When going out I could no longer easily spot my friends in a crowd and seek them out. I had to trust them to come and say hello to me. I soon found out the strength and value of my friendships. At bus stops I could not see the numbers of the oncoming buses and would have to ask for help, not something that was easy for me. When I was stressed or tired, my vision would immediately plummet, driving me home to rest. All of these and others were badly needed lessons that I cherished.

When faced with blur and confusion, rushing and planning ahead became impossible. I was thrown into a more immediate timeframe in which I lost the ability to chase after things and had to deal with things as they came to me. This change entailed a more meditative quality to living and the paradox here is that the times when I relaxed and accepted that all I could see was blur were the times that my vision changed and I saw clearly. Seeing clearly that I could not see well helped my vision to improve.

Seeing naturally was new to me. The first time that I saw completely clearly I was struck with fear. It was only for a few moments while I was out on a walk by myself but it is a sharp memory. As I come to see clearly more often and for longer I am learning to negotiate the intensity of feeling that comes with the clarity. There is a fluidity in the clarity that makes moving in the world feel like floating. I also find a rapidity of synchronicity that is at once exhilarating and terrifying.

As my vision has been changing so have been my body and my perceptions. Tension locked in knots in my back, shoulders, and neck that I had been aware of for years and that no amount of massage and yoga had ever been able to

touch started shifting and releasing. This was golden to me. I also experienced a reversal of the difficulties of walking on stairs with new glasses. I had to learn how to walk downhill again and with each step I took it felt like the ground was a bit further away from where it should have been. Each step entailed a trust that I would actually land and that my expectation of where the ground was was wrong. My legs seemed to stretch and grow with my perceptions too. At first, a walk down a simple path would bring tears of fear to my eyes but now I can confidently run down rocky slopes smiling. I feel an ease, grace, and accuracy of movement that I never had before.

Every day since I started working with my vision, I have seen a little more clearly and this is still amazing to me. My experience from seeing naturally is completely different from seeing through glasses. My perceptions of shape, color, and movement and my sense of perspective have all changed and I can see, feel, and think more clearly and accurately. My imagination, thoughts, and feelings have also started unlocking. I improvise music by ear instead of following written music, I have discovered I enjoy writing poetry, I explore drawing pictures and, through these expressions, I always find more vision. The most precious sensation, however, that I have gained from following my natural vision is a feeling of participation in life and an inner engagement with what I see that motivates and nourishes me. I continue negotiating situations I do not comprehend, witnessing changes and acting on what I see. How is my vision now? What is my focus and perspective? How deeply do I see, how bright are my colors? I am looking out for the answers.

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