

EYES TO SEE

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I. Seeing Not

... because they seeing see not ...

Matthew 13:13

My first pair of glasses had green plastic rims and Coke-bottle thick, anti-glare-coated lenses, which reflected green light. In every fourth grade photo, my eyes hid behind a glint of green flashing fire, but I did not care because when I slid the glasses on in the doctor's office, the blurry rack of "For Sale" frames suddenly snapped into distinct lines and angles. I slipped the glasses off, then on again—watching the frames become blurry, then crisp again. Yet even knowing about the stunning change, I jerked to a stop outside the doctor's office door, my mom and the trail of siblings piling up behind me. I stared at the trees across the street. Angular leaves fluttered in the breeze, avocado undersides distinct from their forest green tops.

"Leaves?" I shouted. "Leaves? You see leaves on the trees at Sunset Elementary?" My mother laughed. I had forgotten that people see leaves rather than green smears on a fuzzy brownish trunk. Glasses fixed the leaves, and I loved them for making objects and people's faces snatch in their blurry edges, yet they couldn't halt the haloed lights and blurry vision, and new lenses were inevitable. Then came LASIK. When the doctor said I should leave my glasses in a little donation box before the fifteen-minute procedure that would give me 20/20 vision, I nearly hyperventilated. Feeling naked, I shifted from foot to foot and tried to force my hand to let go of my latest pair (wire-rimmed, thin plastic,

no reflection). After thirty long seconds, my sweaty hand released my glasses, hoping to bless the life of an orphan in Africa.

Without heavy glasses cutting the bridge of my nose, I discovered a new me. As a child, I had been scared of my family's dangerous sporting activities, and I unconsciously learned passive avoidance and trickery. I might, for example, "fall asleep" just before my turn to waterski on the driftwood-filled lake—because one overlooked log can hook your slalom ski and slam you into water hard as concrete. You whirlwind, slapping across the lake's surface in a flailing tangle of arms and legs and waterski. The next morning you wake up stiff and aching and find deep purple bruises on your arm and thigh, but you feel lucky you were not sliced by the ski's sharp skag. Pain is the consequence of not seeing driftwood while waterskiing—or of many other unseen obstacles—so I learned to "help" by babysitting the little kids at the winter cabin and to "like" doing dishes instead of working with heavy equipment and machinery outside. With six strong country sisters and one tough little brother, I became the "sissy," the "wimp" of the family. The degrading labels chafed, but family outings were not optional; I never considered refusing to participate. Instead I accepted the labels, believed them, even reinforced them.

But once I had LASIK eyes, I saw things differently. I truly am scared of the Snake River's Big Kahuna rapids, but it is in that spine-tingling, scary-movie-that-you-actually-love type of way. I adore waterskiing now that I can see driftwood, and I am always game for cliff jumping into Yellowstone's Firehole River. I stand on the edge shivering and nervous, but I know it is an adventure, a game. When I could not see, it was no game. You do not feel brave when you cannot see. Daring heroism does not swell up when you skid on wet mud and stagger over unseen roots and rocks, skinning your hands, scraping your shins, blundering and worrying that you are about to slip over the edge of the precipice. When I stand shivering at the top of a cliff and I know where the bottom is, the jump is a deliciously frightening thrill. Leaping into the unknown is petrifying. I spent most of my childhood petrified.

Writing this essay forced me to confront how my poor eyesight created an inaccurate and blurry view of myself. Lack of physical sight created hundreds of small situations in which shame and humiliation could flourish: I had summer-long, sweat-induced acne dotting my nose and cheeks, and I will never forget the day at the lake when I skidded the jet ski right up to the beach—only to discover that I was not parked next to my family; I was standing in my swimming suit, sopping wet, squinting at the wrong family on the wrong beach. In the winter, I got my snowmobile stuck more than my siblings as I peered through poor eyesight and foggy goggles, and every rider in Montana and Wyoming would have driven purposefully off the road to avoid me if they knew how little I could see as I whipped past them at seventy or eighty miles per hour in the unspoken, highly competitive family race back to the car.

I wove those embarrassing situations into my personality, and then I threaded strands of perceived weakness through my memories. I believed—and still do—that I am a fear-filled person. In the mirror I saw—and still see—anxiety prematurely wrinkling my forehead. But this is the irony: when I describe who I was in words and ink, I see a girl I do not know and one I do not remember being. That girl was scared because she could not see. The poor thing sometimes did what she could to avoid fearful situations, but often she threw herself into the blurry unknown alongside those who could see more clearly. That is not wimpy. It is brave. I see that now. But it is too late. A few thousand dollars changed my vision, but what can change the personality that the poor vision created?

II. Perceiving Not

*“And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith,
By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand;
and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive.”*

Matthew 13:14

I struggle to recall what I ate for breakfast and how old I will be on my birthday, but I do not forget January 9, 2010. On that day, I was tucked

in my bed with a warm blanket, supposedly having a nap, but actually reading the second book in a fantasy series. The last page crackled as I turned its well-read edge—adding up how much “nap” time I had left and glancing at the stack of four library books on my bedroom dresser. I could not see. I stared toward the stack of books, then down at my still-open novel. The pages were not blurry, but they were not right, so I reached my arm, brushed the book with my fingertips and felt its distance. I blinked a dozen times, snatched my eye drops from the bedside table, and drained them into my eyes. A voice in my head insisted that I should take that nap, telling me that I would wake up, flick open my eyes, and see. I opened my eyes fifteen minutes later, but I could not see.

Even now, years later, I do not know how to explain what my world looks like. I see colors, objects, sizes, and everything around me, but my eyes skid off objects of their own accord. I can casually survey the scenery as if I am meandering down a country road, and everything seems normal. But when I try to look straight at a light switch or my child’s face, my forehead ricochets with pain. If I try too long, my body contorts, my legs and ankles strain at odd angles, my neck pulls to the right, and my body slumps to the left as it twists to compensate.

At the onset, a few doctors told me I needed a psychologist, not an MD. One ophthalmologist shined his bright light in my eyes and announced in a nasally tone, “You’re fine. Come back in a few months if it doesn’t clear up.” He slid his rolling chair backwards, stood up, and leaned against the office wall, arms folded. I blinked and tried to unfold myself from the chair, but dozens of light spots danced, remainders of the glaring beam he had shot in my eyes. I wavered and plopped back down, lightheaded and nauseated. The doctor glared at me, “hypochondriac” emblazoned in the rigid cross of his arms and the disdainful mask on his handsome face. He rolled his professional eyes upward at my apparent antics, reached behind himself to jerk the door open, and marched to his next examination. The nurse looked at the floor, as if doing so would hide the upturn of her red-lipsticked mouth.

I have to admit, it sounds ridiculous. *You say you cannot see, but you read the 20/20 line on the eye chart? You cannot see “right”? Do you see two objects or one?* Simple questions. But, a few months later, when the one-of-a-kind neuro-ophthalmologist at the university’s eye center asked about double vision, I hesitated, then blurted out that I “thought” I was seeing a single white star on a black background, but could not be sure because the star “wanted to split.” I sounded insane. Did I believe the star on the chart had intelligence and thought cloning itself was an ethically viable option? I could not find words to describe what I saw in front of my face.

I still cannot. Do I see single or double? I do not know.

Parkinson’s disease turned out to be the curveball creating my vision problems. The disorder tends to be worse on one side, so, as the disease progresses, eye muscles no longer move together with synchronicity: my right eye hesitates, lagging behind the left. This particular side effect of the disease can present as convergence or divergence insufficiency. I have both. When I found a friend with the same problem, relief swept through me like a whoosh of fresh air. She said she struggles to decide “which eye to look at” when she is speaking to people, and I confided, “On bad days, I cannot focus on my own eyes in the mirror to put on my makeup.” My typical alto sounded like a slightly hysterical soprano, but my friend nodded vigorously, both of us laugh-crying.

It’s an odd irony. For reasons God alone knows, I am back where I began, lacking in sight—not that leaves are blurry this time or that I am blind. I can see with near 20/20 vision out of either eye, but I also cannot see, and this time I know that I cannot. I cannot look you straight in the eyes or read words on a page for any extended length of time, and I have learned to descend stairs like a princess: head up, neck straight, eyes looking horizontally ahead. I do not look down. Distance is a tricky thing when your eyes do not work together; stair steps move and the ground shifts dangerously.

Today, just like every day, I wake and find my hand searching my bedside table for the glasses that I no longer need nor use. I remember that I do not have glasses, and I smile, sleepy eyes still shut. Then I shiver and squeeze my eyelids tight, wrinkling my face. What if today is the day? What if I open my eyes and actually see double? What if my whole world has split wide open?

III. Being Blessed

“But blessed are your eyes, for they see”

Matthew 13:16

One random day nearly forty years ago, my mother was bent over her sewing machine, threading the metal needle with expert fingers and one eye shut. Her mother-in-law entered the room, noticed my mom and her squinted eye, and cried, “Oh, Yvonne! Save your eyes for the scriptures!” We have laughed for decades about my grandmother’s instinctive outburst, humored that a fabulous seamstress told someone not to sew and touched that her spontaneous exclamations only showcased a deep love of the Lord and his word.

I did not begin my reading life by following my grandmother’s example. I wasted my eyesight on fiction and fantasy, developing a sort of addiction to reading. I probably should have attended addiction recovery and introduced myself: “My name is Kylie. I read. I should let you know that I read in the car. I do not drive while I read, but most stoplights are at least a paragraph long.” A good book meant that I did not hear people walk into the room and speak to me, I was late to appointments, and I did not answer the door. As a child, I sometimes hid behind my bed so people could not find me; I have done this as an adult, too. I have read all night. I have ignored my children. I have forgotten to cook dinner. But January 9, 2010 changed my life. With limited eyesight, I realized my grandmother was right. I learned it the hard way.

In one of many healing incidents in the New Testament, Jesus Christ heals a man who was born blind. The disciples question Jesus about this man and expose a prejudice of the time period, saying, “Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?”¹ Christ answers that “neither” the man nor his parents sinned, but that the man was born blind “that the works of God should be made manifest in him” (John 9:3). Christ’s answer clarifies that physical disability is not a punishment for sin nor is it a curse, but that is not the end of the story. After the healing, Jesus uses the moment to teach again, explaining to the Pharisees that he came “into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind.” The Pharisees understand that they are being criticized, and they snap back at Jesus, “Are we blind also?” to which Jesus responds simply, “If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth” (John 9:39–40).

Jesus’ response flips assumptions upside down: those who believe they see are actually blind, while the blind man perceives far more clearly than the Pharisees. I like this scripture because of my struggles with physical sight, but it runs me in confusing circles. I did not know that I could not see before I got glasses, just like a Pharisee. When leaves snapped into focus, I thought glasses fixed my vision and that I could accurately see the real world around me. Years later I realized that the mere input of sensory data did not help me judge reality any better; I blindly believed the labels assigned to me, saw weakness in my mirror, and acted accordingly. Now my Parkinson’s eyes do not converge and diverge synchronically, and I perceive insufficiently. But I cannot tell you in words how what I see is different from what you see, and I have no idea whether the input of defective sensory data will help me perceive more accurately—or make me even more blind. I know I cannot trust my senses, and thus I ought not trust the conclusions I arrive at based on those senses. I am unable to rely on myself, my observations, or my

1. See Bible Dictionary, “Blindness”; John 9:1–2.

low-dopamine logic to know what is real. It is as scary as the monster under my bed, as humiliating as wearing my shirt inside-out in seventh grade, and as humbling as my first calculus test in college.

No one asked if I want to cliff jump off the precipice of Parkinson's disease, and when I look over the edge, I panic. I cannot see the bottom. I fear I will belly slap onto water hard as concrete, but I do not get to start on a lower cliff to see if I like it; there will be no passive "falling asleep" avoidance, and there are no glasses that will cause my life to snatch in its watery edges and create the illusion of sharply healed vision. I see my hand tremor a bit more than yesterday and the fear drips down my spine like melting ice water. I see my face in a photo and I cannot help but notice that my head is tilted to the side and something about my smile is asymmetrical, a hint of too-smooth, expressionless skin on the left side. I see the smiles on other people's faces when I cannot remember silly nouns such as "BBQ" or "clouds" or the names of my good friends, "Carolyn" or "Shannon." The people look down like the red-lipsticked nurse, but I see their laughing mouths. All of the realities that I thought I understood have blurred, and my insufficient eyes only see my neediness, lack, and utter inability to live this out. I cannot look straight at myself in the mirror, I never read for fun, and stairs are a constant hazard. If this is seeing, then seeing is a lonely, painful gift. I am not sure that I want it.

So I pretend. Daily I play like I cannot see my future; I do not allow my thoughts to wander to a shackled body that does not walk, eyes that do not see, and hands that tremor and cannot feed oneself. Instead, I make-believe that my insufficient eyes focus on a different face in my mirror, a regal woman who meets my glance standing straight-backed and clear-eyed. Obviously, this one is a cliff-jumper, the kind who shouts out all her fears and throws herself over the edge. I like her striking, pillar-like posture and her pride. But her image wants to split. If my eyes diverge, I think I see a simple, broken woman, sitting surrounded by the brokenness of life. Wrinkled by pain and aged by grief, her body

is twisted, but she is quiet, almost still as she fingers time's shattered fragments: dried green leaves and the memory of her mother; a pair of pink-rimmed glasses and a shard of driftwood; a bit of sand from the wrong beach and a reflection of the wrong girl; a ripped page from a tattered library book, and a pebble from a cliff at Yellowstone's Firehole River.

"Silly little things," I want to tell the broken woman. "Wreckages. Nothings. Everything is broken. Why did you save your eyes for the scriptures?"

Her hands hesitate on the damaged piece, almost as if trembling purposefully, and a smile ghosts across her elderly face. Her eyes flash green fire. Somehow all the little things have doubled.