

Honorable Mention

Redwood Writers 2015 Non-Fiction Contest

"LIFE AFTER CATARACT SURGERY"

Kay Mehl Miller

Cataract surgery was miraculous to me. Sure, I saw well enough with my contact lenses, but the difference in sight after cataract removal and lens implant was so dramatic, I wanted to stop everyone I now saw so clearly and tell them: “You’re beautiful!”

Restored sight is almost passé; cataracts are very common. By age eighty, 70 percent of white Americans, more than 50 percent of blacks and 60 percent of Hispanics develop cataracts, according to the U.S. National Eye Institute.

I expected to see well again after my cataract surgery. Great sight was my goal, but what I didn’t expect were the numerous adjustments I’d make to my life afterwards. The first surprise came after my right eye, the close reading eye, was done. I opted for monovision in the surgery—my left eye sees distance, my right reads. Since my doctor did not prescribe an eye patch, I sat down to watch television that evening with my distance contact lens in my left eye and the new intraocular lens implant in my uncovered right.

Due to the trauma of surgery, vision in my right eye was cloudy as expected; it would clear in a day or two. As I watched the TV screen, I sensed my whole vision field as well- balanced even through cloudy sight. I was amazed. I *felt* better vision than when I had worn a reading contact in that right eye. Already, both eyes were working to give me the best vision possible. Interestingly, I could even see a little distinction among people and objects with my reading eye where before, looking at the screen with that eye, I'd see only blur. On the other hand, my near vision, tested on a book, was cloudy but perfect.

My vision was surgically corrected with toric intraocular lenses, a costly (\$4,000) decision for me because Medicare doesn't pay for special lenses to correct astigmatism. I'd happily worn monovision contact lenses for over 20 years. As my cataracts developed, my vision declined so gradually that I didn't realize the number of adjustments I had made in my life just to be able to see.

That night, I took out my left contact lens and reached up to extract the right one. Startled by nearly touching my eye, I remembered and rejoiced that I didn't have to do that anymore. After 50 years of wearing contacts, it is difficult not to think about taking out lenses at night. When I think of settling down to relax in the evening, my brain clues me to take out my lenses and give my eyes a rest by wearing glasses. Now, no such option exists. I feel a little fearful. Is there such a thing as seeing too much? I realize that particular fear is irrational. Still, I am a little nervous and close my eyes. In that moment, I realize that simply closing my eyes is how I used to rest them decades ago before I wore contacts.

Several days after surgery on the other eye, I sat with my pastor at a meeting in a coffee shop. As I looked at him, I was embarrassed. However, the sight and insight were too exciting not to share. "You look so handsome!" I told him. He blushed. All the people I looked at that day were truly three-dimensional. Not that they weren't three-dimensional before, but my new, unambiguous vision had put their body lines in sharp focus for me. Men really looked handsome and women beautiful. I saw interesting lines and wrinkles in faces, and I could read body language more accurately. A small line of worry creasing a forehead might have gone unnoticed before the surgeries. Now, I could better relate, and adjust my conversation, if necessary. I also knew that I could more easily read character in faces now.

I didn't notice that colors were brighter, as most post-op cataract patients say. For me, it was the focus that caught my attention. When driving the first time after surgery, I marveled at individual clumps of white roses on a fence, rather than a blur of white flowers. License plates became readable once more. I now can identify the make of cars because I clearly see the name plate logos on the front of approaching vehicles.

Detail is all around me. Walking in the open air, I see the awesome filminess of immature rain clouds. Because I see well, I sense the immensity of the earth around me. No longer do I strain to take in the whole of what I am seeing.

Driving at night now is an absolute joy. With my new eyesight, the first time I took a poorly lighted back road I discovered my car's headlights were perfectly adequate at low beam! Not so before; then I used the high-beam lever and considered getting even brighter lights installed. Traffic markings in the roads are easily seen now. Car headlights do not glare or flare into light bursts anymore.

Playing games at the computer, I noticed I was leaning in close to the monitor. The keyboard shelf was shoved in so far I continually had trouble manipulating the mouse. The whole procedure seemed normal to me and then, tired, I casually sat back in my chair and looked forward. Amazingly, I could see the screen of the monitor just fine! I eagerly freed my keyboard, pulled up my chair, rested against the back rest and began playing a game. Still, I caught myself leaning in several times—the inclination to do so being strong.

Cataract surgery is the most common procedure performed by ophthalmic surgeons. In 2015, it was expected that 3.6 million cataract procedures would be performed in the United States and more than 20 million worldwide, according to Dr. Richard Lindstrom's article in the March, 2015 *Review of Ophthalmology.com*. The day I had my second eye procedure, my doctor and his colleague had seventeen procedures scheduled.

In time I will adjust to my new vision. My game playing and my writing may improve. Certainly, my posture will. I'm eager to find out what other surprises are in store. Maybe the profiles of the men in the AARP dating site will be more interesting now. Hmmm. I should go take a look.