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Looking at Life from the Outside In

By Ed Dunn

Thirty-six years ago, I began to lose the ability to see whatever it was I was looking at directly. I began to lose my central vision. As a college freshman at the time, new to the Los Angeles, California area from the hills and hollows of rural Western Pennsylvania, I was already somewhat overwhelmed by my "big-city" environment. To suddenly and most unexpectedly face the deterioration of my eyesight, after a life of perfect, 20/20 vision to that point, I must admit, I was completely terrified. How would I go on? How would I find my way with so much of life yet ahead of me?

Following a long journey of eye doctor visits and the related rigorous testing, the eye specialist who ultimately diagnosed my condition gave it to me straight; he

informed me that I had a rare retinal disorder known as Stargardt's Disease. He told me that Stargardt's was a disease that attacks the central vision, and is found in only one-in-fifteen-thousand people in the world.

The eye specialist continued by sharing that it was a rare event to see this vision condition in someone so young, and that, unfortunately, there was no cure nor course of treatment. Eventually, over a period of ten years or so, I would lose my central vision completely.

At first, I didn't care much for the direct manner in which the eye specialist was delivering my news. I had a hard time accepting what he was saying. At my age, what I was hearing sounded ridiculous to me. But the good doctor had a method to his madness. He wanted to make

sure that I knew clearly and without a doubt what I would be facing from the age of eighteen-years on. He wanted me to be quite serious about the changes I would need to make in order to function in life.

I learned that Stargardt's Disease is one form of macular degeneration. Most commonly, this affects the eyesight of much older individuals, people who most teenagers would think of as senior citizens. As the eye specialist shared with me, the disease attacks the photo-receptors in the portion of the eye known as the

macula. The macula resides in the center of the retina and is critically important for the function of central vision.

Almost overnight, I was forced to see the world around me in an entirely new way. I had to give up my driving privileges shortly after diagnosis. I had to begin to learn how to do everything in life—reading, writing, sports and interacting with others socially—using less-and-less of my central vision (my "inside" vision) and depending more on my *peripheral vision* (my "outside" vision). The change from looking directly at something or someone in order to see, to scanning—looking around, above and just slightly off to the right to see—took some getting used to, to be sure.

I was forced to use a hand-held magnifier in order to read my college textbooks and write

research papers. Reading, done at a cozy distance of a mere few inches from the surface of the page, came more slowly as the disease progressed.

Writing and typing research papers became more tedious as my sight deteriorated. I found I needed twice as much time to complete these types of academic tasks as I did previously in high school. Given the demands and pace of a new student life, time became one of the most precious resources I had.

Looking at life from the outside in, as I like to refer to my use of *peripheral vision* to see everything around me, did come at a cost. Living with a rare eye disease at such a young age led me to feel like something of an outsider, like someone who was “different,” “other” or even “odd” compared to the college students around me. I often felt *peripheral* to what was happening around me, as if I was on the outside looking in. As the eye disease progressed and its effects became harder to explain, I didn’t like to talk about it.

My Favorite Sight Story

I love the story of the man who was born blind, found in John 9:1-34 (NIV). John tells us that he was born blind so that the works of God might be displayed in him. Jesus healed the man by spitting on the ground, making a mud paste and then putting the mud paste on the man’s eyes.

“Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” was Jesus’ simple instruction. The man did as Jesus instructed and came back seeing. He then proceeded to get himself into a boatload of trouble with the religious authorities of the day (verses 13-34). I love this story for its utter simplicity and humanity. I love it for the elements used within. And, of course, I love it for the miracle at the end.

But this story is not my story. As much as I find deep inspiration

and more than a little humor within these verses, in my own story, I have not been healed. I’ve prayed for healing from the day of my diagnosis. I’ve asked many others to pray for and with me, as well.

I’ve tried special diets, handfuls of lutein and beta-carotene supplement regimens and homeopathic remedies of every shape and size. Nothing has worked to change my physical sight. To put it simply, it is what it is.

Spiritual Sight

Blindness is an unfortunate handicap but true vision does not require the eyes.

—Helen Keller

Everything that is made beautiful and fair and lovely is made for the eye of one who sees.

—Rumi

As a college freshman, I came across a thinker who inspired me deeply. The second-century Roman emperor, poet and warrior-king, Marcus Aurelius, is famous for saying: “What stands in the path becomes your path.” He is also credited with writing, “Accept whatever comes to you, woven in the pattern of your destiny; for what could more aptly fit your needs.”

Although I’ve never identified as a Stoic, these writings became a pair of lenses through which I could look at my life. These writings became a purpose statement of sorts, not only to accept my vision condition as it is, and the limitations I must deal with, but also to begin to use the condition for good. Perhaps my sight story and what has stood in my path may be an encouragement to others.

As Christ-followers we know that we live by faith and not by sight. We also know that, if we live long enough, we can’t escape this physical life without our share of hardship and heartache. It’s just life. It’s just the way it is. I’d like to believe the poet in Marcus Aurelius was right and what we face in our lives is all part of a plan that best serves us.

However, if I’m honest, much of the time I’m left not understanding the *how* or the *why* of what happens in life. As it pertains to physical sight, only hindsight seems to be 20/20.

What I do believe is that in Christ, we are never **looking at life from the outside in**. We are never *peripheral* to what is truly important—our relationship with Christ and in Christ. We are not outside of him—we are inside with him. We are included. We are central to him and he is central to us. When we believe that Christ lives his life in us and we then live from him, our lives are transformed.

We live in the reality of our own humanity and weaknesses yet in the richness of Christ’s indwelling divinity. The two realities work together to help us face our physical limitations. Christ living in us and we living in him is **never looking at life from the outside in**. □

Ed Dunn is the author of Peripheral: The Journey from Partial to Perfect Sight, currently in the process of publication.

