Introduction

Longing for Light

Sight is a faculty; seeing, an art.
—George Perkins Marsh

I lost an eye so I might learn to see.

What makes this all the more striking is that I'm a photographer and someone who savors sight. I love art and the sheer visuality of the world. Here lies the paradox. I'm highly attuned to visual perception and quite well educated in the physiology, purpose, and pleasure of seeing—and I'm half blind.

At the age of thirty-three, I suffered an impact injury that resulted in the loss of my right, dominant eye. Fearing the loss of my capacity to see and photograph, and with all hope to the contrary, this blow helped to awaken my awareness. Losing an eye and facing the resulting need to learn to see again, this time as an adult, assisted the growth and development of my perceptual capacities—and helped me better understand the function and process of sight. Above all, I learned to not take vision for granted. It was a profound learning experience, one that continues to this day. The experience was traumatic and painful—like nothing else I have ever experienced—and a great privilege.

Our greatest strengths and most challenging obstacles often lie adjacent to one another. There is something of an axis of opposition between our gifts and our fears, a region of vibrating tension. They are two ends of the same stick. Here on this particular axis is the ground of our lives where we have something to learn and something to give, together as one. Often, I have questioned: Why did I need to suffer such a traumatic injury, removing part of my sight, to help deliver me to a new state of realization and understanding. I'll never know the answer, but as a photographer I've been living this question for thirty years.

Many of the questions and passionate interests that occupy my attention are related to seeing. Not just the seeing of our eyes, but the form of sight that involves the whole person and might be better known as awareness, or in its deepest form, consciousness. I have struggled to write about these matters for years, as I struggle now. These are difficult concepts and subtle experiences to articulate with mere words.

A clear intuitive insight persisted when I lost my eye; that the experience would help others as well as myself. How strange, I thought. How can I think of others in the midst of my own trauma? But this insight thrust itself into my consciousness. Fate can hold a greater intelligence than our rational minds can bring to bear, and providence may very well give us what we need for our own development and for our contribution to the world. Gurdjieff claims that fate affects the individual within the context of his or her place within the collective field. Our experiences and insights are not for ourselves alone. It wasn't until I began to write books in the late 1990's when I recognized that writing, not only photography, might be a vehicle to offer others the results of my experiences.

Through writing, I can speak more directly to you, the reader, about the creative discoveries I have made and the challenges I have faced.

In recent years, a wave of memoirs has appeared that relates to this unique axis of one's gifts and challenges. As an inspiring example, I find it remarkable that brain scientist Jill Bolte Taylor would have a stroke and be given the opportunity to study it first hand as it was happening. Her experiences gave us the memoir and highly popular TED talk, *A Stroke of Insight*. Similarly, it's uncanny that Neurologist Oliver Sacks would lose sensation and feeling, indeed most neurological impulses in his leg from an injury, making it seem dead to his perception and body-image. His well-articulated experiences gave us the instructive memoir, *A Leg to Stand On*. Both Taylor and Sacks are scientists who were given the opportunity to know their particular field of study through the learning found in direct, personal experience.

Likewise, I have wondered: why did I, a photographer and teacher of visual perception, need to lose an eye? Are these mere coincidences, or are we, by virtue of our identity and being, predisposed towards certain kinds of experiences that we need, that can inform our life lessons—that are given us by fate? Destiny weaves an implicit shape to our lives that we can only view in retrospect. I've been touched with gifts from teachers, insights that emerged from deep within, certain experiences that have shaped my orientation to the world, and events that I was thrust into unknowingly. All of these factors now begin to form a cohesive shape and have contributed greatly to my research into seeing and perception. Any one of these experiences and events can be viewed as merely the individual, and sometimes random, circumstances of my life. But together, they form an intelligent picture, one that seems to have some intended design in its

creation. I cannot say where the design originated, but the unity of it—as it fits together into a comprehensive, related whole feels remarkable. Many events, experiences, and people have taught me a singular, powerful lesson—to learn to see.

I have decided to shape my experiences and discoveries in the form of a memoir. Yet the danger of such style of writing is that it can all too easily slide into narcissistic solipsism that neither benefit the larger needs of the writer or reader. Like Jill Bolte Taylor and Oliver Sacks, I aim to use my very particular personal experiences to shed light on vaster, more universal aspects of the human condition.

Bill Clinton expressed concern that his memoir might be uninteresting and self-serving. He remarked that he wanted his book to be *interesting* and self-serving. This is the goal I hope to keep in mind. Memoir writing cannot help but be self-serving, but I sincerely hope mine can be both interesting and *illuminating* to others. I learned many things about life and vision through losing an eye. I view the expansion of consciousness that took place through this traumatic experience as a piece, maybe even a good size chunk, of my legacy that I wish to share. The education of any one of us can be become an education for all of us if we view ourselves as an integral part of the human family. Paul Theroux meditates on this phenomenon: "There is a paradox… the deeper I have gone into my own memory, the more I realized how much in common I have with other people. The greater the access I have had to my memory, to my mind and experience …the more I have felt myself to be a part of the world."

Three broad currents of my life intersect and intermingle in this memoir. The book follows a loose chronological narrative and explores my discoveries as a photographer, the experience of losing an eye and the incidents that frame it, and my

work with renowned photographer Minor White. I highlight my early experiences with sight and with a camera, and describe the personal shock of covering the Kent State massacre as a young photojournalist. Here I chronicle the great difficulty I found with the aim of impartiality taught by my journalism teachers. Later, I narrate the event of losing an eye and follow its threads through the years of recovery and fragile healing. And I also share a comprehensive teaching I received from well-known photographer Minor White on vision and awareness that took place years before my accident.

Following the narrative, an appendix contains two chapters offering specific tools and exercises designed to assist the reader in opening the gates of perception.

The genesis of this book began when, as a young twenty-five year old student, I was asked by Minor White to assist in the completion of *The Visualization Manual*, a manuscript detailing his teaching methods derived from over forty years of teaching photography and visual perception. I worked with White daily, proofreading the manuscript, sharing my experiences with the exercises that formed the content of the book, and having friendly arguments about punctuation. I liked commas; he did not.

Following White's death in 1976, and due to conflicting claims surrounding his estate, the completed, fully illustrated manuscript, which dominated the last year of his life, was never published. I felt at the time that someday it would be my job, my responsibility, to carry on this work. The circumstances of my life always seemed to be calling me toward this task, preparing me for this eventual effort, though it remained an unformed perception and I had no idea how it might take shape. This vague feeling persisted in the back of my mind, on the edge of my consciousness—until recently. Only now, do I feel the authenticity of my own experience, the richness of what I have learned

through my personal efforts towards awareness—enough so to write this book.

Thus I've woven around and through the chronological narrative a series of essays on seeing and awareness, many of them inspired by the teachings of Minor White and by what I was forced to face, the disruptive lessons that were given me by losing an eye. Its loss has taught me to face the paradox between the abject poverty of our automatic seeing and the lucent immensity of our human, perceptual capacities. I believe that the need that White was addressing remains valid and deserves a restating for our times. The essential task is to approach seeing as an intentional tool for cultivating a broader awareness of self, others, and the world itself.

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Why must we learn to see?

We have lost something very special: the ability to engage life richly and fully through a concentrated, directed awareness. I believe that the one of the most dangerous elements of modern life and of our contemporary educational system is found in the rapidly decreasing attention span in ourselves and our children. Modern culture often indulges and promotes inattentiveness: no worries, we say; that's cool. The media—journalists, novelists, and storytellers—rather than assisting in the development of our powers of observation and attention, encourages an ever escalating reliance on the sound-bite mentality, on the readily digestible concept, and on rapidly shifting scenarios, changing in a heartbeat, before the viewer can adequately examine, digest, or contemplate anything. It is a reductive mentality, where the entire world—big ideas,

complex issues, subtle interactions—is often brought down to a superficial level, to the lowest common denominator.

We need to reach upward to seek knowledge and understanding, to accept and cultivate a state of inquiry and not-knowing; to live in question. Our minds and our senses are designed to be educated and stretched, to be used and developed—and this means much more than a rote gathering of facts or a highly-distracted seeing of the world. Our brains are highly plastic and can grow through stimulation, challenge, and effort. In losing an eye, I directly experienced the neuroplasticity of the brain and its remarkable ability—over a short six months—to forge new connections in the act of perception based on monocular vision, inner sensations, and sound. The yearning for vision of itself opens the door to new neural and cellular connections. We need to look far, look wide, look inward while looking outward, and to question and scrutinize, examine, seek out and take in all of those impressions that reach our senses from a large variety of sources.

From birth to death, we use our eyes constantly and unceasingly. For the most part, this is an automatic activity. As we grow from childhood to adulthood, the process of socialization and the development of our personalities are based chiefly on the acquisition of knowledge and the development of our unique talents or worldly skills. We learn the labels of things, how to read the world through vision, how to navigate through space and through our lives, but we do not fully address what happens at the point of intersection of receiving an impression. Moreover, this impression taken in through vision may be received only in part through our eyes. It may be an impression that is initiated through the eyes, and is realized through feeling, empathy, or intuitive insight.

Or, it may be an impression of ourselves in the midst of our lives—self-observation. The gift of observation, of the inner and outer worlds and their profound relationship, can be cultivated—indeed, must be—if we wish to live full and authentic lives, sensitively receiving and richly giving to ourselves and others.

To see implies conscious intent—the ability to direct our attention, to focus our gaze, and to concentrate our energies in a desired direction. We know and sense, from rumblings deep within and confirmed by our life experience, that this full, enveloping quality of concentration is the paradoxical heart of what brings us into a deeper relationship with ourselves and the world around us. It is paradoxical because this single-pointed concentration is like an hourglass; as we focus intensely on a single factor, something widens, opens, and deepens. The world is revealed in a single shape, a single gesture.

I have found much richness and joy through striving towards lucid sight. Just looking at the world and its many details gave me great delight and satisfaction. I learned about nature, things, and people through direct perception. I hungered for moments of deep communion with the world through sight, where life's unity is revealed and the boundaries of things dissolve. I was not alone. During the Woodstock era, many of us started to recognize the illusion of our separateness and seek universal, impersonal love. However, we were not well grounded and our experiments with expansion of consciousness often took place on a false foundation with drugs and collective Dionysian experiences.

While my generation needed more sobriety and impeccability, today's world is crying for a vision. Modernity is in desperate need of the re-enchantment of life, to honor

and search for one's own natural wisdom and the luminous realities beyond the material world and its superficial pleasures and pains. We are often blind to the essence of things in themselves. We live perpetually in a partisan state of not-seeing the truth of what is. Minor White taught that "your own thoughts, desires, current problems, especially the trivial problems" are a "deep stain" on our sight. He continues: "'Seeing' pertains to looking at anything with the intention of understanding it fully for its own sake. Fulfillment of [this] intention is a matter of degree, from the planting of the seed to the eating of the fruit, from awareness to enlightenment. … Can you look at some insignificant object right now, so intently that it seems to come alive."

I believe that the act of seeing represents a profound answer to the problems that vex us and confound our efforts toward understanding ourselves and the world. When we begin to see ourselves clearly without our dearly held illusions, we can start to see and feel the contradictions that exist within all of us. In seeing our own conflicting impulses and hypocrisy it is possible to discover real empathy toward others as we realize that contradiction is inherent to the human condition.

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Can there be such a thing as true, expansive sight? Many students ask me this question. Can truth even exist since each perceiver comes to each moment in a relative fashion, based on one's experience, background, and genetic code? The world is seen through one's own opinion. Our lives become something of a constructed fiction. Our vision serves to support and uphold the illusionary nature of our highly personal,

conditioned reality. Our viewpoint narrows in proportion to our constructed nature, according to our unique experiences and what we have been taught to believe. The suchness of things in themselves escapes our subjective, shallow sight.

We can learn to incorporate our own personal thoughts and feelings in the action of sight without being dominated by them; they too can teach us something about the object of our perception. But we also need to strive to see clearly and cleanly, apart from the filtering system of our likes and dislikes, passions and compulsions, personal circumstances and predisposed attitudes. Through attention, the object of our attention can shine forth with lucid clarity, while our own background and circumstances can become a part of our unique response, but only a part. The intrinsic nature of the object of our attention interacts with our own being through sight creating a living exchange with life and others. In our search for true seeing and heightened awareness, we must give up rigid opinions or tight agendas and simply be open—to experience, to exploration, and to discovery.

The search itself activates our minds and hearts, and will, in time, bring clarity. Rilke's advice resounds, like the lingering call of a bell in the still night: *learn to love the questions themselves.*

What can we gain through cultivating awareness? If we could truly open the windows of perception, our lives would be infinitely richer, finer, truer to the possibilities of the soul. We would become considerably wiser, in understanding and in action. We could occupy the moment more fully, and employ more of our latent capacities. We might begin to genuinely respond to life and to others, not just react. And our lives would

not fleetingly descend in a slumbering stupor of half-awareness from birth to the moment of death.

The senses would become instruments of delight and discovery, the feelings would become a refined way of knowing: weighing, evaluating, tasting the nature and substance of what stands before us. And the mind would be immeasurably enriched through the questions raised and the material gleaned through direct perception. The energies of life could pass through us, transformed by a resonant awareness into effortless action and generous kindness.

We could approach truth, not our subjective notions based on verbal concepts and mere opinions, but an unclouded apprehension of the always radiant and sometimes sobering facts of existence. States of heightened awareness, non-ordinary perception, where we directly perceive the energies behind phenomenal manifestation, could be voluntarily induced and may well become a consistent feature of our experience. We could simultaneously develop the capacity for sight that we share with all others and discover our own perceptual gifts, unique to our individuality.

We would deeply experience the outer flow of life through the senses, and we could directly observe the myriad, changing states of our inner world through the mind's witness. Our strengths and limitations, our sympathies and antipathies, our potential wholeness as well as our many contradictions would emerge under the lamp of impartial insight, engendering a humility that in its wake breeds compassion and empathy. We would gain a relational awareness, where we could perceive directly the interdependent unity, the one taste of life. The world would give way to our attention, and everything would be seen for what it is, in all its depth and coherence. The moment would slow

down, its inherent magnificence would be revealed in a single glance, and the world would be seen as different branches of the same stream, the everflowing infusion of spirit into form.

Seeing helps us make sense and find meaning in the world we inhabit. It can deeply assist us in meeting the collective challenges of the modern world. Direct vision can reveal something of the truth of oneself and others, and it can help us be responsible and responsive. If we wish to attain the great aims of knowledge and understanding, then we must develop the courage to see what is, ignoring neither its intrinsic complexity or its radiant beauty. The voice of conscience often reveals that the world and others need our deepest attention and care—our real seeing—as well as the actions that arise genuinely through moments of direct observation.

The phrase, "seeing practice," resonates with my view of the dual nature of our relationship with vision: that we can strive toward a fuller, more complete experience of our perceptions —and that seeing itself is a way of understanding, a direct form of knowing about ourselves and the world. It implies that an effort is required and it correlates seeing to a traditional discipline. Seeing is both an art and a science. Many texts currently exist on the physiology of human vision, the mechanics of using our eyes. Here I wish to emphasize the art of seeing, the creative movement toward deepening our perceptions and striving toward a full, in-depth contact with the multi-dimensional richness of our lives—a seeing practice. Please use these pages as a catalyst to stimulate your own explorations. Ask questions. Do not attempt to draw conclusions. Let your experiences unfold. Learn. Let your seeing grow, evolve, and inform you in ways, that at

this time, you cannot yet imagine.

It is my sincere hope that the challenge I am presenting—to see deeply, keenly, and clearly—will be undertaken by all who travel these pages with me.

We have only just begun to see.