

Vision Quest

by Dara Lurie

Winter 2009

My eyesight has never been great, but when I began experiencing eye strain, headaches and occasional blurry vision a few years after turning 40, I went in for a series of eye check-ups at the Optometric Center in New York City. After a rigorous two-hour exam involving endless measurements and invasive probing, the diagnosis boiled down to "It's normal for eyesight to get worse in your forties. You need a stronger prescription." I wasn't convinced; I felt that something more complex was afoot, but what?

In the mainstream approach to eye care, vision is treated as a static condition to be measured and corrected through lenses and, sometimes, vision therapy. As a young child, vision therapy helped me correct a wandering eye, but had done nothing to resolve the essential imbalance between my eyes, with one twice as strong as the other. Modern holistic or behavioral optometry, less well-known and less frequently practiced in this country, has roots in early Egyptian and Greek ideas of vision as a dynamic exchange of energy between the observer and the observed. Holistic optometry also has a strong affinity with traditional Chinese medicine, which is based on the idea that no single aspect of health can be understood except in relationship to the whole.

Unlike any eye exam I'd previously experienced, the tests performed by Dr. Marc Grossman in his New Paltz office sought to determine not only the mechanical level of my eyesight, but the overall *qi* or vital energy present in my vision and entire body. In one test, I stood in front of a full-length mirror and covered first my right, then my left eye. "Are you looking at the image, or is the image looking at you?" Strange as the question sounds, I understood exactly what he meant. With my left eye I had the clear, confident sensation of looking out at the image, but with my weaker right eye, it was a struggle to look out with the same sense of confidence. Viewing the reflection through my right eye, I felt an equal and uncomfortable push back, as if the image were looking at me. "Patients who feel the image is looking at them often tend to feel that the world is looking at them as well. This is a typical pattern for nearsighted patients who develop their myopia before the age of 13," Dr. Grossman writes in his book, *Greater Vision*.

More than 80 million people in the United States are myopic (shortsighted), yet only five percent of children are born that way. By the age of 18, 40 percent of Americans are myopic. There are a number of reasons why people's eyes go bad. Among those reasons, genetic predisposition is not the most widespread. "In my practice, 50 percent of vision problems are functional—coming from how the eyes are used," Marc Grossman says, "and 75 percent of my patients' problems derive from both a functional and psycho-emotional basis." According to Dr. Grossman, a child's eye-brain system is not ready for the sustained close work of reading before the age of eight or eight and a half years. "Kids who love to read, and are reading a lot by first or second grade, are likely to develop vision problems," Dr. Grossman maintains. In Waldorf Schools, where vision screening is practiced regularly, less than ten percent of students are nearsighted, compared with 30 percent nearsightedness among students in public schools.

Early onset of myopia, Dr. Grossman explained to me in my first visit, may be the result of an emotional withdrawal from the world. He finds that children who have experienced divorce or a traumatic change in their lives literally begin to blur out the world when the world becomes too threatening. Following in the steps of early holistic optometrists such as William Bates, Dr. Grossman believes that the emotional condition of patients plays an important role in their vision health. Dr. Grossman identified in me a condition of adrenal exhaustion which could, he explained, have a negative impact on my vision. One cause of this, he said, was the perpetual strain of keeping my right eye from wandering. "Your adrenal glands are like your batteries, and you've been draining them." Because his holistic approach to vision often reveals energy blockages at psychological or the deeper somatic levels of the individual's mind-body system, Dr. Grossman often refers patients to such complementary healing modalities as craniosacral therapy, psychotherapy, chiropractic adjustment and biofeedback training among others. Yoga and meditation are also often beneficial.

Approaching my vision health from a holistic perspective has improved and expanded the range of options available to me. Now, instead of waiting for the next increase in my prescription level, I take proactive measures to actually decrease or, at the very least, maintain my current prescription. How is this possible? First, I am supporting the health of my adrenal and central nervous systems through dietary measures, including plenty of green leafy vegetables like spinach and kale, both high in Lutein (an antioxidant that supports retinal health), and a high-quality B-vitamin and omega-3 fatty acids (flax seed or fish oil) into my diet. I am also experimenting with different supplements that contain herbs such as ginseng, Gotu Kola and Astragalus that support adrenal function and strengthen the immune system.

Next, I am trying to address the underlying causes of systemic stress. Eye muscles are not genetically designed for sustained, close-range viewing. I may not be able to reduce the time I spend on the computer each day, but I can take short breaks and snap my eyes out of their close-range focus. I enjoy working with the *Magic Eyes* book of three-dimensional pictures, and even simple eye exercises such as eye-rolls, or tracking the four corners of a wall, help relax my eye muscles.

The best candidates for vision therapy are those with Eye-Teaming difficulty, an onset of near-sightedness after the age of 14. I do not fall into that category. Rather, I will always have what I think of as impressionistic vision. By addressing the underlying stress conditions of my vision system, however, I find I can relax my vision in both near and far range in a way that allows me to fully appreciate this glorious gift of sight.

Dara Lurie (www.Transformative-writing.com) is a writer, workshop leader and manuscript coach.