



Painting by Gloria Alford

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## John Moir

### A Second Chance at Second Sight

The morning of August 15, 2012 could not have gotten off to a better start. My wife and I were indulging in a short getaway at a Northern California inn that had clusters of cottages situated on an expanse of well-kept grounds. I awakened early, rested and relaxed, and walked to the 25-yard-long pool for a swimming workout.

Except for a lone maintenance worker wiping morning dew from the chairs, the pool area was empty. As I slipped off my sandals, I noticed a makeshift sign with the hand-lettered words: *Pool Closed*. I asked the worker what had happened.

"I was just going to take down that sign," he said. "Yesterday a kid had an accident in the pool, and we treated the water with chemicals. But it's good to go now."

"I'm going to swim laps for 40 minutes."

"Hop in," he said. "It's totally fine." He removed the sign.

I rinsed my goggles in the water and strapped them over my eyes. The pool appeared normal: clear and odorless. I slipped in and pushed off from the wall.

Toward the end of my swim, I noticed my goggles fogging up—which was unusual—and felt a mild stinging in my left eye. When I completed my last lap and removed my goggles, I was dumbfounded to discover that the fogginess remained.

I could no longer see.

By now the worker had left, and I was alone. My eyes were starting to burn, and it was hard to keep them open. I managed to make my way back to our cottage. The peaceful morning that my wife, Ellen, was enjoying ended abruptly as I burst in the door with my hands over my eyes. We discussed what to do. I started by calling the front desk to report my injury and to tell them that the pool's chemical level was unsafe. A hotel manager came to our cottage and suggested I go to a nearby emergency room.

My condition deteriorated rapidly. By the time Ellen guided me into the ER half an hour later, my eyes were aflame.

"On a scale of one to ten, how bad is the pain?" the receptionist asked.

"Nine," I said. "Maybe nine point five."

Within minutes a nurse administered numbing eye drops, a huge relief. I spent the morning in the ER, alternating between flushing my eyes with water to clear the pool chemicals and using drops to fight the pain.

The doctor who examined me had both good news and bad.

"You have significant chemical burns on both corneas," he said. "But the surface of the eye heals fairly quickly. I think you'll probably get your sight back, but it'll take three to five days. However, corneas are rich in nerves. It's going to hurt."

He gave me Percocet, and Ellen packed us up and drove us on the two-hour journey back home. Later that afternoon I saw my regular eye doctor, who confirmed the diagnosis: severe chemical burns to both corneas. To facilitate healing, he started me on round-the-clock lubricating drops and an antibiotic. The burned corneas not only left me blind—about 20/200—but made me highly sensitive to light.

On that first night after the injury, sleep proved impossible, and the following day I could do nothing but remain in my darkened bedroom. The next day, my condition did not change.

\* \* \* \*

Vision was foremost on my mind as I lay on my bed, trying to remain optimistic over what the future might hold. My thoughts turned to the Robert Louis Stevenson novel *Kidnapped* that I had read the day before I was injured. It had been a delight immersing myself in this tale about the Scottish Highlands that featured locations where my ancestors had once lived. But in thinking about the novel, I realized that its story held an intriguing perspective on my vision loss.

Stevenson's book touched on an interesting element of Scottish culture: the belief in extrasensory phenomena. In particular, for centuries many Scots have identified two types of vision: "first sight" and "second sight." First sight is our normal vision, where we use our eyes to perceive the world. The other vision type, second sight, is possessed by only a few. Those with second sight can sometimes have visions about events in the future or in faraway places.



John Moir is an author and environmental journalist whose special interest is the preservation of biodiversity. Moir's articles have appeared in publications such as the *New York Times*, *Smithsonian*, *Washington Post*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Outside*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Birder's World*, *Orion*, *Audubon California*, *High Country News*, *Birding*, *Writer's Digest*, *Poets and Writers*, *Catamaran Literary Reader*, and elsewhere. His narrative nonfiction book, *RETURN OF THE CONDOR: The Race to Save Our Largest Bird from Extinction*, tells the riveting and controversial story of one of the most dramatic attempts to save a species from extinction in the history of modern conservation. In addition, Moir is the author of the nonfiction book *JUST IN CASE* and has contributed to three anthologies. Visit John's web site at [jmoir.com](http://jmoir.com).

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John Moir

Unlike first sight, these second-sight visions are not controllable. They arrive, if they arrive at all, unbidden.

On my better days, I like to think of myself as a practical person who uses empirical evidence to make decisions, a science writer who deals with evidence-based data. Second sight certainly falls outside that realm. Normally, I would dismiss it as being as unlikely as seeing the Loch Ness monster.

And yet . . .

My forebears certainly believed in what is known in Scots Gaelic as *An da shealladh* or “The two sights.” And there are reports of second sight experiences that seem credible. No less of a scientific-minded person than conservationist John Muir, whose family came from the same area of Scotland as mine, reported several instances of second sight, including foreseeing the deaths of both his parents.

While I am uncertain if second sight—such as what John Muir experienced—exists, I do know this: in my writing process, there are occasional flashes of creative vision that arrive unbidden and that are so prescient that they approximate the second-sight experience.

Most of the time when I am working on an article or book, the writing depends on showing up each day to do the hard work of putting words together. But on rare occasions, I’ve had a vision float into consciousness that is so startling, so outside the realm of anything I am contemplating, that it does not seem like my own. In an instant, a new way to frame a book appears, or the solution to a knotty structural problem becomes obvious. When these visions arrive unannounced, it is as if they come *through* me and that I am simply taking dictation.

These creative breakthroughs happen most often when I am very relaxed, such as just before falling asleep. Exercise can also bring on moments of insight. On occasion, I have interrupted a gym workout to race to my car to scribble down an idea. These visions barely peek their heads over the horizon of consciousness, and if they are not written down immediately, they slip away like the wind through your hands.

\* \* \* \*

The third day after my injury brought a major breakthrough: my right eye began to clear. But the left eye, which had sustained greater damage, remained clouded.

“I’m seeing progress,” my eye doctor told me, after an examination with a high-powered magnifying lens. “The damage in the left eye is right over the pupil. That’s why you still can’t see.”

Each morning I’d arise, rinse my face in the bathroom sink, and then turn my head toward the plug outlet a few feet away. The three-pronged sockets became my informal Snellen chart. With my right eye, they now looked sharp. The sockets resembled a pair of little faces, one on top of the other, each with two eyes and an open mouth like the figure in Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*. But with my left eye, I saw only a smudge of faint streaks.

One morning I awoke from a dream in which I gazed upon a wall covered with words. Soft light illuminated the flowing serif typeface. I don’t know what the words said, all I remember is how crisp and radiant the letters appeared and how I looked at them with longing.

\* \* \* \*

As I struggled to recover my vision, time slowed and warped, leaving me adrift in a separate reality that seemed detached from ordinary life. Perhaps that’s why I found myself thinking so much about those second-sight-type glimmers of revelation that occasionally elevate my writing. Despite the fact that science cannot yet fully explain this phenomenon, many people who work in creative endeavors know exactly what I’m talking about and frequently describe similar experiences.

Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat, Pray, Love*, gave a TED talk explaining how these creative breakthroughs arrive from “distant and unknowable sources, for distant and unknowable reasons.”

Paul McCartney describes how he awoke one morning with the melody for “Yesterday” playing in his head. At first, McCartney was convinced that he was remembering a tune he had heard some time in the past. For two weeks, he played the melody to others, asking if they recognized the song. At last, it dawned on McCartney that the tune was *his* song and that it had arrived fully developed.

\* \* \* \*

Ten days passed and still the vision in my left eye remained a stubborn blur. If the cornea failed to heal, there were additional procedures that could be attempted, but they sounded both scary and painful. My eye doctor started me on a new eye gel to see if that might help.

With sight in only one eye, I still could not read or write. I listened to audio books and talked for hours on the phone. Friends came by to bolster my flagging spirits. My eye doctor provided a steady presence: He called me at home, he saw me on the weekend, he never seemed hurried, he listened.

Through it all, Ellen was steadfast: “It’s going to be okay,” she said. “It’s going to be fine.”

I needed her reassurance because in the middle of the night I would sometimes awaken with goblins chattering in my head about a life with diminished vision. My second-sight flashes of inspiration depended on having enough first sight to read and write. As one who works with words, I wondered what would be left of me if both types of vision were impaired.

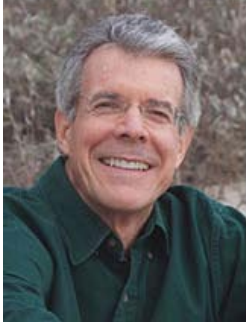
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Perhaps it was time passing, perhaps the new eye gel helped, but as the two-week mark approached, a small arc of clarity appeared on the very edge of my left eye’s vision field. At first, it seemed no more than a mirage. Every few minutes I checked it again. *Still there!*

Slowly this crescent moon grew gibbous, and finally there came a morning when I awoke to find the plug faces were in focus with *both* eyes. I spent the first part of the day euphoric, but by mid-afternoon the stress of the past two weeks caught up with me. I ate three bowls of Honey Smacks, with enough sugar to send a diabetic into convulsions, and fell asleep.

A few days later, my eye doctor confirmed that both eyes looked normal. A bit of residual scarring on my left cornea was out of the vision field and not a problem. As a precaution, I needed to continue using the gel for several more months, but I walked out of my eye doctor’s office fully recovered.

I have not forgotten those two weeks of partial blindness. Not a day passes that I don’t feel grateful that I have been given a second chance at both types of vision. It takes only a moment, but each morning I still close first one eye and then the other and focus on that wall socket. And those two beautiful little plug faces stare back at me—so sharp, so clear.

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