

WEDNESDAY
JUNE 30, 2010

COMMENT

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THE ASPEN TIMES.COM • POSTINDEPENDENT.COM

Amazing grace — I was blind but now I see

I've worn reading glasses since I was 14, got what I call my "seeing" glasses in the '70s, had a brief stint with contact lenses ("Your eyelid isn't stronger than your hand, Su," my daughter Hillery quipped), was night-blind by the '80s and until last week I was juggling reading, seeing and bifocal glasses — two pair of each for home and work. By then I was reading small print with a magnifying glass and the world was a blur.

Amy Cecil, my dear optometrist, said maybe it was time for cataract surgery. She couldn't promise anything because I am also showing signs of early macular degeneration (lordy lord), but it might help.

So off I went to an ophthalmologist in Glenwood Springs, Dr. Matthew Ehrlich, in a direct response to the ad he has been running in The Aspen Times (he is new to Glenwood), relieved that he wasn't as young as he appeared (12) in his ad photo.

I have had babies without any drugs and cannot even begin to list the dental horrors I've endured, but I am very jumpy about my eyes and start blinking like Nixon telling a lie when anyone comes at me with eye drops, much less bright lights or watery suction cups to take a sonogram.

By the end of the exam, Dr. Ehrlich and his assistant Johnna concluded that I would have to be knocked out cold before he would be able to literally stick a needle in my eye. I dread being put "under," but I could hardly mount a credible dissent.



SLUMMING
SU LUM

I liked Dr. Ehrlich a lot and felt I was in competent hands. Degrees and honors covered the wall and he told me, without bravado, that he had done thousands of cataract operations. With cataracts your lenses get cloudy, and the operation is the cutting off of your lens and replacing it with a plastic one that is said to last forever.

Surgery was scheduled for the following Thursday, 11 a.m. in Rifle, be there at 10 with no food after midnight and no water after 6. This was the hardest part since I slept through midnight and when I woke up at 7 I was starving and my soft palate felt like a piece of cardboard.

My friend Hilary drove the hour and a quarter to Rifle, helped me into a complicated, soft, paperish disposable gown (not the crackly kind) and socks with paw prints on them. Thus attired, into a little cubicle on a comfortable gurney to get my vitals checked — I felt calm but my blood pressure was way up there.

Eye drops (blink blink blink) to dilate the eye, more drops to numb it, then a very small piece of what looked like gauze was to be placed under the bottom lid. The gauze was saturated with more numbing solution and acted like a time-release. I saw those tweezers coming at my eye and almost levitated off the gurney with the vigor of my blinking. "Yep, you'll have to be blocked," the nurse said, their word for "knocked out."

Dr. Ehrlich and the anesthesiologist came in at 11:30 — green caps, green scrubs — with an assistant I recognized as the woman who had stayed with me and Hilary almost a decade ago to give my dachshund Trudy a wake-up shot following her MRI at Aspen Valley Hospital.

I was second in line for the seven operations Dr. Ehrlich did that day, including five cataracts.

One second we were all talking, the next second we were talking again but the numbing shot into my eyeball was over. I had dreaded "going under" and the grog of "coming back," but there was none of that, it was just a slight, barely noticeable pause.

I was wheeled to the operating room, wide awake and after quite a bit of sterilizing my face and taping my head to the table, I watched a very interesting show with a white round light the size of a dime, surrounded by halos of color, and Dr. Ehrlich said, "You're doing great, the

lens is off and we're almost done," and then I was rolled back to a different cubicle with a wodge of cottony material taped over my eye, to be removed after three hours.

Hilary appeared, the IV needle was taken out, I pulled on my clothes while the nurse kept taking my blood pressure until it went down enough that she could release me and we were back in the car and off to Kentucky Fried Chicken by 12:30!

When the numbness wore off that evening, my eye felt a little scratchy, my vision was a little blurry and everything was very Bright. The next morning my friend Jack drove me to Glenwood for a check-up and Dr. Ehrlich was excited that my vision in that eye was already 20/25 and said I could have the other eye done in two weeks.

I thought I might wait until the middle of July when Dr. Ehrlich will be doing cataracts at Valley View Hospital in Glenwood, but decided the hell with it, get it over, so I'm getting the left eye done on July 8. Stay tuned.

Su Lum is a longtime local who forgot to say Dr. Ehrlich also took a tuck in her eye to cure astigmatism (do you want fries with that cataract?). Her column appears every Wednesday in The Aspen Times.