

## Gratitude

Harvey Grossman

I love reading, especially when one of my grandchildren hops aboard my lap and remains perched there while I hug and relate a story. Another dimension is when I am by myself and delve into non-fiction, another fascinating biography or a stimulating history. Maybe that explains why I am afraid of going blind. Whenever I receive a solicitation from my favourite charity for the blind, I immediately walk to my desk and reply with a cheque. The following year, I try to increase the amount.

I am not alone in my sentiments. Blindness occurs in older adults. A study recently cited in the New York Times reveals a dramatic difference by age, race, and socioeconomic group. The major cause among white persons is macular degeneration, a growing damage to the central portion of the retina. For black people, it could be glaucoma or cataracts. Those of working age, in their 40s to 60s, irrespective of race, is damage to the retina because of diabetes. Gender differences appear too, with white women more likely than white men to become blind. Regular eye checkups can prevent many of the causes of blindness. I, for one, have avoided blindness thus far by cataract surgery, a simple and common operation, and also by treating my eyes with daily drops to prevent glaucoma. Not worrisome, these are only a few of the practical and modern methods performed constantly.

Not so more than five hundred years ago, when these treatments were not commonly available. In 1466, King Juan of Aragon, at that time his was a separate entity in what became Spain, at the age of sixty-eight experienced cataracts in both eyes, rendering him blind. (King Juan was the father of the notorious Ferdinand who married Isabella, the warrior queen.) In that era, there were not the surgical skills which exist today, nor were there the antibiotics and the anesthesia. King Juan overcame any impediments in the course of his life through his implacable determination. He placed himself into the hands of Cresques Abnarrabi, a Jew and the court physician, before the mass expulsion, who operated on him for his cataracts. Learned in the ancient Hindu and Roman techniques, he inserted a sharp, red-hot needle into King Juan's eyeball. The King had jeopardized his health in order to regain his sight. The operation was a complete success. The risk had been overwhelmingly outweighed by King Juan's desire for sight.

On occasion, when I attend morning services in a synagogue, in a sequence of prayers of thankfulness to God at the start of worship, there is praise to the Almighty for giving “sight to the blind”. We have been asleep and, newly awakened, with the physical vision to see and the inner facility of insight, they are the *summum bonum*. One is thankful each day for these gifts which God blesses us with, grateful that we can renew our lives in good stead.

Life is the ability to carry on. Maybe that too is the reason why I have read and admired the essays of Helen Keller. Committed to blindness, by all accounts she saw more than we sometimes do. Born in 1880, at the age of 2 she became both blind and deaf. In 1904, she graduated from Radcliffe with honours and continued to make her mark as both an author and a lecturer.

Lacking the faculties of sight and sound, it was through her hands that she could discern expression. It is reminiscent of when, in Shakespeare’s play King Lear, Gloucester says of his son, “Did I but live to see thee in my touch, I’d say I had eyes again.” Helen Keller expressed her vision of the world with her three trusty guides, touch, smell, and taste.

Beyond touch was smell. She indicates this when she said “I can also smell the fire-pots, the tar and cement.” And, in another observance, “the air varies in different regions, at different seasons of the year, and even different hours of the days.” It reminds one of entering a bakery and relishing the smell of fresh loaves from the oven and bagels from the fire, and their tastes which linger.

Helen Keller brings us an awareness of the senses we do not always employ and appreciate but carelessly ignore. She was the perennial optimist.

Closer to us in time is Rebecca Alexander. Born with a rare genetic mutation called Usher Syndrome type III, she has been losing both her eyesight and aural capabilities. Informed that by age 30, she would probably be completely blind and deaf, now at 35, she is a psychotherapist, spin instructor, volunteer, and an extreme athlete.

With only slight vision, and the need for a cochlear implant for sound, she communicates in sign language, a form of speech used currently by about seventy million persons worldwide.

Rebecca has memories to look back upon, as we all do, and she is an example of the impermanence, the fluidity, of the life that her peers and we all lead. We cannot plot the future accurately. There are things we cannot change. Life is tenuous. We can only appreciate the little and big things in life which we do have.