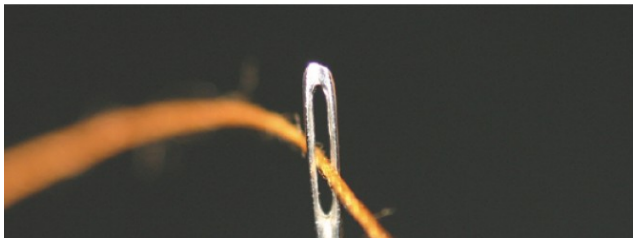


Eye: Essays by readers

We gave our readers a one-word writing prompt: “Eye.”

Readers Write in the [October 2022](#) issue



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*In response to our request for essays on character, we received many compelling reflections. Below is a selection. The next two topics for reader submissions are **Hunt** and **Wind**—[read more](#).*

In the first church I served, there was a big stained-glass Eye of Providence symbol over the communion table in the dark, Gothic-style sanctuary. The Eye, in its triangular frame, never blinked. On my first Sunday, when I sat in the pastor’s chair behind the pulpit in a new clergy robe (which was so uncomfortable), the Eye looked down at me, inspecting me and how I moved, what I said and how I said it. The Eye looked nervous to me then—as did the parishioners, who were nervous about their new Korean woman pastor with a strange name that was hard for them to say.

The ministry at this first church was not easy. I had to learn everything on the run without much trust in me from anyone, including myself. I shed many tears and lifted many prayers in that empty sanctuary after painful evening meetings, while the Eye just watched in silence.

I met my husband, who grew up in that church, under the Eye's unblinking watch. The Eye watched as we made our marriage vows to each other, he in Korean and I in English. The Eye heard the joyful news of our first pregnancy and the heartbroken news of the loss of it.

Through 24 years of ministry, 22 years of marriage, and 16 years of parenting, sometimes I hoped the Eye would shed some tears with me, like Jesus at Lazarus's tomb, or laugh with me, like Sarah at the good news of her pregnancy. I have preached that God has the full range of feelings and emotions as the Lover, Friend, and Mother as well as the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. I have preached that God sometimes changes God's mind, regrets God's own decisions, and rests on the sabbath. I have wished the Eye could be more like that.

But the Eye has been a constant presence as I walk through the dark valleys and cold wilderness like Hagar, who experienced El Roi, God who sees, in her wilderness journey. The Eye of El Roi opens my eyes to find water in the wilderness and to see beauty and hope beyond the pain and sufferings of humanity. I now truly believe that the Eye of God saw everything God had made and said, "It was supremely good."

Eun-Hye Choi
Glenview, IL

My mother's eyes turned yellow the day she died. After extubation, she stared behind me, seeing a light I couldn't comprehend nor understand. Alarmed or excited, I wasn't quite sure. The room smelled like bleach. A dialysis machine lurked in the corner, a big green reaper still dripping blood on the tile.

My grandmother died six months later. Her eyes were closed from the time she went into hospice care until she died. Or so I was told—I didn't get to say good-bye, though she'd been fighting Lewy body dementia for three and a half years.

My eyes are blue—a testament to recessive traits in a predominantly Indigenous family. They sit somewhere between cerulean and indigo. A friend once said she'd cut them out of my head, "they're so nice." I didn't know how to take that.

I don't know how to take most things. I am autistic. As a result, I do not make eye contact with anyone. It causes me pain, in my head, behind retinas, down through my jaw. I cannot make eye contact and maintain a conversation at the same time. I am still alive, though some days it's really hard to be.

The mirror is my enemy; I don't like my face or body, but they're waiting for me to see them each morning. And mornings are the hardest, especially with my family members gone. For the last four years, I was their caregiver. My mornings began with medication and low-sodium diets, telephone calls to various doctors and pharmacists. Now my mornings start with just coffee and *Golden Girls* reruns. I work from home, venturing out for food, cat food, my prescribed antidepressants, and not much else. Despite fancying myself a religious person, I haven't attended a service in over two years.

My mother was Catholic, my father Orthodox Jewish. I was raised in my mother's religion, though I've long since abandoned the idea of salvation through grace. As a neurodivergent child, I drew pleasure from collection and symmetry. My grandmother coordinated the adult catechumenate program at her church. I spent a lot of time in churches with stained-glass siblings, memorizing psalms from fat hymnals. One church had gift shops that sold rosaries. Around age six, I started collecting prayer cards of the patron saints.

I can't explain the appeal other than that they were shiny, stocky, and new. I spent countless hours arranging them in a deck, then lining them up on the floor of my grandmother's office. St. Francis of Assisi stood out, because I loved animals. St. Cecilia was pretty, and I enjoyed St. Lucy, who was condemned by fire but didn't perish from the flame. St. Dymphna was my mother's favorite, as she struggled with her mental health. St. Theresa was my grandmother's favorite. But I could never pick just one favorite for myself.

I'd cross-reference my cards with my theological books. I found it odd at the time, but there's a patron saint of everything: murderers, ugly people, coughs. St. Jude, patron saint of cancer and lost causes, was a favorite. A medallion of his hands hangs alongside my mother's homemade rosaries. I see them every afternoon when

I finally limp into the kitchen for a meal, the last reminders of my family's faith on display. One card I came back to was St. Odile of Alsace, otherwise known as Ottilia. She is the patron saint of eyes, the blind or partially sighted, and good sight. Her prayer card was tawny and gold. I liked her name.

My mother's ashes are in my bedroom. The dissonance is staggering—seeing a box where a body once sat. I watched a video of a cremation on YouTube shortly after she and my grandmother died. I like to know what's going on; it's less scary that way. I force myself to watch fire take flesh and hair, return it to bone and dust. It hurts, but I watch. Years of caregiving, and this was the result. St. John the Evangelist, the patron saint of caregivers, was nowhere to be found when I needed him, and he's not here now.

For months after being orphaned, I closed my eyes and left them shut. I'd decided there was nothing to see. Then it was my turn to spend a week in the hospital, on what would have been my mother's 64th birthday. I might have liver cancer. Is there a patron saint for that?

St. Jude came to my hospital room in the form of a rabbi named Arnold. He turned on the lights in the room, sat with me and talked for a brief while. He left me with his number, written on the back of a prayer card that quotes Psalm 121: "I lift my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from?"

Anastasia Jill
Orlando, FL

Someone once told me that you can tell if a person's smile is genuine because their eyes will smile too, so I began to check for this in the people around me. As a sufferer of complex PTSD from a series of childhood traumas, I often find myself searching people's faces for signs of safety or threat. If the eye is the window to the soul, does this mean we could glimpse the depths, quality, and contents of another's heart by searching for a certain softness within their eyes?

I am the type who has adapted to act calmly in the worst of situations, which worked to my advantage as a frontline worker at the beginning of the pandemic. Despite my lifelong hypervigilance, I was surprised to find myself less anxious around others, not more, when everyone's mouths were covered with masks. Maybe for the first time in

my life, I recognized that others felt just as lost and helpless as I did when tragedy or disaster strikes.

Perhaps seeing mask-blocked faces broke me of the searching habit, as I was no longer able to look for something I couldn't see. Perhaps I was able to truly see another's eyes for the first time, discovering the humanity in those around me as their eyes reflected their fears and confusion over the pandemic. Certainly I spent less energy searching for danger in others, and I was renewed in the knowledge I wasn't alone.

It is impossible to know another's tragedy or suffering firsthand; we only know our own. However, a sense of unity can be found in shared experience, particularly when survival is at stake. In fact, one of the best known indicators for healing from or preventing trauma is the presence of a strong source of social support. Maybe on some level I was aware that I was welcoming others into the life of social distancing, isolation, and loss of physical closeness I was sadly long familiar with.

Underlying this was an acknowledgment that I, too, could learn to act with more kindness, more flexibility, and more appreciation of others. I discovered a deeper sense of interdependence. Despite the incredible challenges my family and I faced in the wake of the pandemic, focusing on the eyes of the strangers around me was a gift that reached my soul.

Nathaniel Thomas

St. Charles, IL

From Frederick Buechner (1926-2022), *Whistling in the Dark*:

To speak of heavenly music or a heavenly day isn't always to gush but sometimes to catch a glimpse of something. "Death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more," the book of Revelation says (21:4). You can catch a glimpse of that too in almost anybody's eyes if you choose the right moment to look.

When she was in her late 70s, my aunt was diagnosed with wet macular degeneration. The only treatment at the time was an ineffective one: using a laser to seal off leaking blood vessels, which left scarring that made her vision worse. She maintained peripheral vision but lost her central vision.

Slowly the world closed in on her as first one eye and then the other succumbed to the disease. She gave up driving and had to rely on my uncle to take her everywhere—she couldn't see cars, bicycles, or pedestrians crossing in front of her. She could only read using a machine that magnified each single letter to the size of a paperback book. She could no longer make out faces and could only recognize us by our voices.

One year, I drove up to see her at the lakeside cabin, built by her father in northern Wisconsin, which had always been a refuge for her. She asked me to hold her arm and guide her down the path that led to the beach. She could no longer see the spring flowers that were beginning to sprout, but she knew where each patch was located and asked me to tell her if the spring beauties were blooming yet or if the skunk cabbage had sprouted. There was a peace about her that made her vulnerability seem like strength. When my uncle died, she could no longer live on her own and had to move to an assisted living facility near her daughter's home.

Not long after our last conversation, I was on my way to work when I saw fireworks flash in front of my eyes. "Just one of those aging things," my ophthalmologist told me. But three months later, after losing more of my vision, I found my way to another doctor who provided the correct diagnosis: wet macular degeneration, the same condition that had robbed my aunt of her eyesight.

I was 59 years old, 20 years younger than she had been when she was diagnosed. All I could think about was what I would lose. But by the time I started losing my eyesight, an effective treatment had been developed. In the 12 years since then, I have developed the condition in both eyes, but injections every other month have preserved 90 percent of my eyesight.

My son and I visited an interactive Van Gogh exhibit recently. I surprised myself by bursting into tears when I walked into the rooms where starry skies and fields of golden sunflowers were projected on the walls, delighting adults and little children who ran across the vividly colored floors, screeching with delight.

When Van Gogh was at a low point in his life, struggling to understand why no one wanted his paintings, he is said to have told a friend that God perhaps made him a painter for the people of the future. How strange it is that the people of the past continue to provide light for those of us grappling with the present. Each spring, when I walk through the woods and see the tiny pink spring beauties dotting the moss beneath the oak trees, those ephemerals that live for such a short time, I feel my aunt's hand resting on my arm.

Pamela Todd

Howell, MI

My biggest fear as a child was going blind. As soon as I was able to read, I looked for books that explained how to get through the world if you could not see. How do you fill a cup of water without it overflowing? How do you clean your house? I still remember the answers. Helen Keller was my heroine. I would walk around the house at night or with my eyes closed to see if I could find my way. Somehow learning these techniques and getting my questions answered helped to allay the fear.

I was born with a condition called strabismus, an abnormal alignment of the eyes that prevents them from looking in the same direction at the same time. In my case, the condition was caused by a muscle weakness in my left eye. This made my brain receive a different image from each eye rather than the blended view most people have. To solve this problem, the brain takes the stronger image and suppresses the other—so my right eye became the dominant one, and I began to lose vision in the left one.

I had surgery at ages three, four, and 16 to lengthen and shorten various muscles and align my eyes so they could work together. As a young child I wore an eye patch over my “good” eye to make the other one stronger and did hours of eye exercises. Today no one knows this story unless I tell them, but as a young child I did not fully understand what my future vision would be. As a little girl, all I knew was that I had trouble seeing, and from time to time I needed to go to the hospital.

When I first came home I would have bandages over both eyes for a few days to be sure the newly treated one would rest. Then the right eye would have a patch over it so the left one could work to catch up. With each surgery my grandmother would give me a stuffed animal with a music box inside. Even when the bandages came

off, the eye patch and exercises reminded me of my fear.

I've worn glasses since I was three years old. I was fortunate, however, to have a good medical team that met my needs. I've been able to absorb the smiles of my children and the glories of fall foliage, to do intricate handwork, and—most of all—to know I probably don't have to worry about going blind.

*Elizabeth Closson
Allegan, MI*

"Keep your eye on the ball!" My dad had arrived at our Little League ballpark in time to catch part of the game on a Midwest summer evening. I was happy to know he had left farm chores early to be there, but I cringed when he bellowed at me or, worse, my teammates. If we swung at a pitch outside the strike zone or stood there without swinging as the ball went over the plate, his *Keep your eye on the ball!* was a stinging reminder of our failure to do so.

He was a good husband and father, a reliable neighbor, and a dedicated lay pastor. But in that moment, my 11-year-old heart longed for a quieter, less critical tone, an encouraging parental voice from the stands: *Eye on the ball, son. Eye on the ball. You've got this.* We automatically home in on those familial voices, like a penguin chick that can distinguish its parent's call among thousands of others.

About a mile from that ball field sat the church we attended—twice on Sunday, every Wednesday evening, and at Bible sSchool for a week every summer. We often heard a heartily sung children's chorus: "Be careful, little eyes, what you see. / The Father up above is looking down in love." Other verses admonished our hands, tongue, and feet to be careful as well.

That eye that looked down from the heavens in tender love was on me. God knew me, loved me. But, God's stern, all-seeing eye was also watching, always watching: "Be careful. Keep your eyes on the ball."

I play senior softball at this stage of my life, now in the Pacific Northwest. The only voice telling me to keep my eye on the ball is my own. "The eye with which I see and the eye that sees me are one and the same," wrote Meister Eckhart. The voices from the bench, even the opponents' bench, are words of affirmation: "Good eye, Brock.

Good eye. Make it be your pitch.”

I attend church a couple of miles from this ball field—once a week, occasionally twice. I go because that’s where I hear an ancient voice in ever new ways. That’s where I hear and see and touch and taste God—there, and then everywhere. I hear the voice that echoes across the millennia: “I’m doing something new right before your eyes” (Isa. 43:19). *Keep your eyes open. Keep your eye on me.*

David R. Brock

Redmond, OR