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## Three Days to See

By Helen Keller

*Helen Keller (1880-1968) became blind and deaf as the result of an illness when she was 19 months old. She learned to communicate through sign language and later through voice lessons. She also communicated quite effectively through her writing. In 1902, she published her autobiography, The Story of My life. She also published several overbooks and many essays. As you will discover when you read this essay, Keller had an exceptional insight into people and the world around her.*

All of us have read thrilling stories in which the hero had only a limited time to live. Sometimes it was as long as a year; sometimes as short as 24 hours. I speak, of course, of free men who have choice, not condemned criminals whose activities are strictly limited.

Such stories set us wondering what we should do under similar conditions. What should we crowd into these last hours? What happiness should we find in reviewing the past, what regrets?

Sometimes I have thought that we should live each day as if it were our last. Most of us, however, take life for granted.

The same casualness characterizes the use of all our senses. Only the deaf appreciate hearing. Only the blind realize the blessings that lie in sight. It's

the same old story of not being grateful for what we have until we lose it.

I have often thought it would be a blessing if each human being were stricken blind and deaf for a few days. Darkness would make him appreciate sight. Silence would teach him the joys of sound.

Now and then I have tested my seeing friends to discover what they see. Recently I was visited by a good friend. She had just returned from a walk in the woods. "What did you see?" I asked. "Nothing in particular" was her reply.

How is it possible to walk for an hour and see nothing worthy of note? I cannot see, but I find hundreds of things that interest me. I feel the delicate patterns of a leaf. I pass my hand lovingly about the smooth skin of a birch or the rough bark of pine. In spring I

touch the branches of trees in search of a bud. I feel the velvety texture of a flower. Occasionally, I place my hand on a small tree and feel the happy quiver of a bird in song.

At times, I long to see all these things. If I can get so much pleasure from mere touch, how much more beauty must be revealed by sight. Yet those who have eyes see little. The panorama of color and action which fills the world is taken for granted.

If I were the president of a university, I would set up a course called, "How to Use Your Eyes." The teacher would show his pupils how they could add joy to their lives by really seeing what passes unnoticed before them.

Perhaps I can best illustrate by imagining what I should most likely see if I were given the use of my eyes, say, for just three days. And while I am imagining, suppose you, too, consider the problem. How would you use your eyes if you had only three more days to see? How would you spend those three precious days?

I should want most to see the things which have become dear to me through my years of darkness. You, too, would want to let your eyes rest long on the things that are dear to you. Then you could take the memory of them

with you into the long night that loomed ahead.

If by some miracle I were granted just three days to see, I should divide the period into three parts.

On the first day, I should like to see the people whose kindness and friendship have made my life worth living. First, I should gaze long upon the face of my dear teacher, Mrs. Anne Sullivan Macy. She came to me when I was a child and opened the outer world to me. I should like to see in her eyes that strength of character and compassion for all which has revealed to me so often.

I know my friends from the feel of their faces, through the thoughts they express to me, and through whatever their actions reveal to me. But I am denied that deeper understanding of them that I am not sure would come through sight. I should like to call my dear friends to me on that first day of sight. I should like to watch their eyes and faces react to expressed thoughts and events. I would look long into their faces, imprinting upon my mind the outward evidences of beauty within them. I should also let my eyes rest on a baby. I wish to see the eager, innocent beauty which precedes the awareness of the conflicts which develops later in life.

On that busy first day I should like to look into the loyal, trusting eyes of my dogs. I should also want to see the simple things in my home. I want to see the warm colors in the rugs under my feet. I want to see the pictures on the walls. My eyes would rest respectfully on the books in raised type which I have read and eagerly pore over the books that seeing people read. During the long night of my life books have built themselves into a great shining lighthouse. Books have revealed to me the deepest channels of human life and the human spirit.

In the afternoon of that first day I should take a long walk in the woods. I would try desperately to absorb in a few hours the vast splendor which is constantly unfolding for those who can see. On the way home I would stop at a farm so that I might see the horses plowing in the field. (Perhaps I should see only a tractor!) And I should pray for the glory of a colorful sunset.

When dusk had fallen, I should experience the double delight of being able to see by artificial light. In the night of that first day I should not be able to sleep. My mind would be too full of the memories of the day.

The next day, the second day of sight, I should arise to watch the dawn.

This day I should devote to a hasty glimpse of the world, past and present. How can so much be compressed into one day? Through the museums, of course. Often I have visited the Museum of Natural History. I have touched with my hands many of the objects there exhibited. Now I would see the condensed history of Earth displayed there – all the animals and the races of men pictured there.

My next stop would be the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Here in the vast chambers of the Metropolitan is unfolded the spirit people have expressed in their art. Oh, there is so much rich meaning and beauty in the art of the ages for you who have eyes to see!

Upon my short visit to this temple of art I should not be able to review a fraction of the great world of art. Artists tell me that for a true appreciation of art one must educate the eye. One must learn to consider line, form, color, and composition. If I had eyes, how happily would I take up this study. Yet I am told that, to many of you who have eyes to see, the world of art is unexplored.

Sadly, I would leave the Metropolitan Museum, which contains the key to beauty. Seeing persons do not need a Metropolitan to find this key to

beauty. The same key lies waiting in smaller museums, and in books in even the smallest libraries. But naturally in my limited time of imaginary sight, I should choose the place where the key unlocks the greatest treasures in the shortest day.

The evening of my second day of sight I should spend at a theater or at the movies. Even now I often go to the theater, but the action of the play must be spelled into my hand by a companion. How I should like to see with my own eyes the actors moving gracefully or comically across the stage. I long to see the colorful costumes and scenery. I long to see how dancers move with rhythm and beauty.

How many of you, I wonder, when you gaze at a play or movie realize and give thanks for the miracle of sight that enables you to enjoy its color, grace, and movement?

So, through the evening of my second imaginary day of sight, the great figures of drama would crowd sleep from my eyes.

The following morning, I should again greet the dawn. I am sure that the dawn of each day must reveal a new beauty.

This is to be my third and last imagined day of sight. I shall have to no time for regrets. There is too much to

see. Today I shall spend in the workaday world of the present. New York City is my destination.

I start from my home in the quiet little suburb of Forest Hills, Long Island. Here I see green lawns, trees, and neat little houses. I drive across the lacy structure of steel into the city. Below busy boats chug and scurry about the river. I look ahead and before me rise the fantastic rowers of the city.

I hurry to the top of the Empire State Building. A short time ago, I "saw" the city below through the eyes of my secretary. I am eager to compare my fancy reality. I am sure I should not be disappointed. IT would be a vision of another world.

Now I begin my rounds of the city. First, I stand at a busy corner. I look at people and try to understand something of their lives. I see smiles, and I am happy. I see serious determination, and I am proud. I see suffering, and I am compassionate.

I stroll down Fifth Avenue. I see a seething mass of color. I am convinced that I should become a window shopper, too.

From Fifth Avenue I make a tour of the city. I see Park Avenue. I see the slums. I see factories and parks where children play. My heart is full of the

images of people and things. Some sights are pleasant. They fill my heart with happiness. Some sights are sad or ugly. To these I do not shut my eyes. They, too, are part of life. To close the eye on them is to close the heart and mind.

My third day of sight is drawing to an end. Perhaps there are many serious things I should study. Yet I should spend that last evening again at the theater. I should see a hilariously funny play.

At midnight, I would again be blind. Naturally in those three short days, I should not have seen all I wanted to see. Only when darkness had again descended upon me should I realize how much I had left unseen. But my mind would be crowded with glorious memories. Thereafter the touch of every object would bring a glowing memory of how that object looked.

Perhaps this outline of how I should spend my three days of sight does not agree with the plan you would follow if you knew you were about to become blind. I am, however, sure that if you really faced that fate you would use your eyes as never before. Your eyes would touch and embrace every object that came within your range of vision. Then, at last, you would really see. A

new world of beauty would open before you.

I who am blind can give one hint to those who see: Use your eyes as if tomorrow you would become blind. Use your other sense the same way. Hear the music of voices, the song of a bird as you would be deaf tomorrow. Touch each object as if tomorrow this sense would fail. Smell the perfume of flowers, taste each morsel, as if tomorrow you could never taste or smell again. Make the most of every sense. Glory in the pleasure and beauty the world reveals to you through your sense. But of all the sense, I am sure that sight must be most delightful.