

**Closing Lecture presented at the
22nd International Conference for Holistic Vision
held at Sol Cress in Spa, Belgium,
by Esther Joy van der Werf.
Sunday 1 November 2009**

Relax into Seeing ~ Relax into Life

In this lecture I'd like to talk about how letting go of tension in our eyes affects more than just our vision ~ it affects our whole life.

In the past few years my understanding of the Bates method has changed, and this has changed how I teach and has increased the effectiveness and success I have with my students.

Like many other vision teachers, I ended up looking for something more after my training, as I found that there were many people whose vision I could not help as much as I'd like. Instead of going away from the Bates method and add another technique, I started looking at the original materials from Dr. Bates.

I had myopia myself for 16 years, and had been given glasses for that. However, I could not get used to the glasses, they gave me a feeling of having a barrier between me and the rest of the world. I had hoped they would make me look more intelligent, but that didn't happen, so I ended up throwing them away and just dealing with the blur. At the end of those sixteen years I had given up my job with Nato; I had left the rat-race, and was traveling and living a healthier lifestyle. It was at that time that I came across Tom Quackenbush' book *Relearning to See*. I was curious about what this book might teach me, yet also skeptical as I had once tried eye-exercises which did not work for me. I bought it and began applying the methods. I replaced my staring habit with a blinking habit, stopped squinting so much, and after two weeks found that I had regained 20/20 vision, or 100% acuity. This was really nice! I liked my better vision and color perception.

It was also very easy. All I needed to do was change some physical habits of strain into relaxed habits of using my eyes. So I thought that vision improvement was purely a matter of undoing physical strain.

However, I found it is not that easy for everyone. I soon learned that the mind is very much attached to those strained eye muscles. Dr. Bates said that sight is largely mental, and some say the mental side represents as much as 90% of our vision. Our mental attitude, outlook, beliefs and feelings all affect our vision.

I was once invited to work for 2 days at a cancer clinic in Florida. The doctor who invited me was not the doctor who owned this clinic. That was a lady who was very skeptical about how my work of eyesight improvement could possibly benefit her cancer patients. But after two days she did a 180 degree turn around. She told me that cancer patients are very much tired of people telling them what to do. Take this pill, do this, go there, have some rest, etc. It is even hard to get them to relax. She said my approach of relaxation, using eyesight improvement as a reason, worked surprisingly well; major shifts in perception had occurred, physically as well as mentally.

So blurry vision tells us something about mental strain, but we usually don't know that. What do we typically do when we first experience blur?

[Audience – “Get glasses”]. Yes, but before that, what do we do?

[Audience – “Squint, strain, try to see”]. Exactly, we squint, we strain, we make an effort to see. Does that help?

[Audience – “No”]. No, it doesn't help at all, it tends to make it worse. So then we go get glasses. Does that help?

[Audience – “Yes and No”]. True, it does help, it helps us see clearer. But it doesn't actually help us overcome our blur, does it? In fact, we usually get worse. And then we return to the optometrist, tell him these glasses are no longer good, and we get stronger glasses. And we THANK him and PAY him!... There is something wrong with that picture...

So getting glasses is not the solution. The blur has something to teach us. It is a messenger of strain, both physical and mental. If it is messenger, it is a friend. When we can see it as a friend, we can stop fighting it, and start listening to what this blur is trying to tell us. Clear vision comes not when we fight the blur, but when we enter into a conversation with the blur. Blur thrives on fear, and it leaves when there is peace of mind, love and acceptance.

In order to make friends with the blur, we need to take our glasses off, or at least get a reduced prescription. That way we invite the blur back into our lives. The amount of blur we invite back is different for everyone. Some people are fine dealing with two or more diopters of blur, whereas others take small steps of a quarter diopter at a time. Everyone is different in that respect, but we all need to welcome the blur if we want to return to clear vision.

I received an email a year or two ago from a very skeptical chemist in Holland who had found my website. He said he was skeptical because he had not heard of the method before, none of his doctors knew about it either, and if this method was so effective, then “how come nobody knows about it?!” I wrote a nice reply back, explaining that I wouldn't be doing this for so many years if I didn't believe in it myself, but that I would not be able to convince him. I suggested that he'd try it for himself, and explained that basically it is all about relaxation, and that he would have to make friends with his blur. Another skeptical email followed with more questions. I politely replied again and did not hear from him for a while. He then wrote to let me know that he had not worn his contacts for three weeks, and that his vision had improved tremendously.

“It is unbelievable, but my vision is improving daily. I have been going without my contact lenses for nearly three weeks now, with incredible results. The odd thing is that I didn't do anything for it, other than looking around in a relaxed way.”

Once we invite the blur back into our lives, we need a new way of dealing with it. The typical first thing we hear about when we learn that eyesight can improve is eye exercises. I searched through the Better Eyesight magazines, and found some other contributors used the term eye exercises, but Dr. Bates rarely, if ever, did. When he was asked what he called his method, he was embarrassed to say that he did not really have a name for it, other than that it was nature's way, the way the eye is meant to be used all day long.

Bates early writings show how he went from the medical model to the use of physical relaxation techniques. He put people in dark rooms, got them palming, and blinking, and shifting and using Central Fixation. He became well known for helping people to overcome their need for glasses, yet he was still wearing glasses himself for presbyopia. A friend of his made a sarcastic remark about that at one point, and said no-one would ever believe him if he was wearing glasses for something he claimed to be curable. So Bates set out to cure himself. At first he saw no improvement at all, until one day, with the help of a friend who used the retinoscope on him, he was looking at a picture of the rock of Gibraltar. Gibraltar is like a big white rock, a small mountain, and it has darker areas on that white surface. Bates imagined the dark areas were caves with people walking in them. His friend said his eyes accommodated at that point, so Bates took the picture in his hands and again imagined the black caves with people in it. His eyes accommodated again and he was able to read the caption beside the picture. Later when he tried to repeat this, he could not do it. Mainly because he tried too hard. When he relaxed and

was not making an effort, he suddenly was able to imagine the black caves and his eyesight improved again.

This is how Bates discovered that imagination, and the mind, have a big influence on vision, and that you can't force them.

Bates learned to connect the eyes and mind in a clever way.

He knew that clear vision cannot be forced. For example:

- Natural shifting happens 70 to 100 times per second. You can make your eyes move left to right and do exercises in all directions, but you can't consciously force your eyes to move that fast. You have to develop a curiosity and attention for detail in order for the eyes to naturally move that fast.
- You can't force blinking. You can make your eyes blink, but that is usually far from a natural blink. You can however become aware of times when you do not blink, and then simply thinking of blinking will allow it to return easily.
- You can't force Central Fixation. You have to let go of trying to see one point best, and open up to the less clear peripheral vision. Only when you relax like that can Central Fixation just happen by itself.
- You can't force Memory either. It's like when you have someone's name on the tip of your tongue but you can't quite remember it. Uhm, Uhm..., You know that you know the name, but it just won't come. Until you stop trying so hard, and then it simply pops up in your mind instantly.

We remember best without effort, like we see best without effort.

Regarding memory, I'd like to quote Dr. Bates here, as he puts it so well. This is from *Better Eyesight* magazine from February 1929

One of the quickest cures of imperfect sight has been gained through the use of the memory. When the memory is perfect, the eyes at once become normal with normal vision. A perfect memory changes the elongated eyeball of myopia into the shorter length of the normal eye. No matter how high a degree of myopia one may have, when he has a perfect memory of some one thing, he is no longer myopic, but has normal eyes with normal vision.

That's quite a statement. A perfect memory brings perfect vision. So how can we improve our memory?

Bates had two main techniques for that. The first one is the easiest; he called it the Foundation Object. This is not in his book, it is not even in his magazines, he only mentioned it once in his articles. The title was Memory as an Aid to Vision. It was published in the *New York Medical Journal* of 24 May 1919. Let me read a small part of this out to you:

A familiar object, or one with pleasant associations, is often easier to remember than one which has no particular interest. One patient was cured by the memory of a yellow buttercup, and another was able to remember the opal of her ring when she could not remember a period. Whatever the patient finds easiest to remember is the best to remember, because the memory can never be perfect unless it is easy.

So let's try that. Please take your glasses off if you are wearing any. Close your eyes, and think of anything that you can easily picture. What is it that instantly comes to mind? It does not

have to be a picture, it can be a song too, or simply a color. For some people it is the smile of a child, or the eyes of a loved one, or, for men, a part of their car.

Whatever it is, let it just come to you, don't try hard to see it. Notice that it will fade rather quickly unless you pay attention to one detail, and shift around from one point to another.

Now open your eyes but keep the image of your foundation object in the back of your mind. Notice if that changes anything for you.

For me, my foundation object is a small white teddy bear that I received when I was born. I don't remember that of course, but an aunt bought it for me then, and I've had it my whole life. It has long since lost one eye, and my mother sewed a small piece of black felt in its place. She sewed it on with green thread, I know it that well. And the felt is not perfectly round, it has an irregularity, that I can picture perfectly. I'm probably the only person in the world who thinks this teddy bear is adorable. ♪ So that little teddy bear, or actually its one black felt eye, is what I remember well, and I relax as soon as I think of it.

The next step in developing the memory is the use of mental pictures. I'm going to quote Dr. Bates one more time if you don't mind. He's just so brilliant. This one is from *Better Eyesight* magazine, July 1929

I do not know of any method of obtaining relaxation or perfect sight which is as efficient and certain as the imagination of mental pictures. It should be emphasized that a good or perfect imagination of mental pictures has in all cases brought about a measure of improvement which is convincing that the imagination is capable of relieving organic changes in the eye more quickly, more thoroughly, more permanently, than any other method.

Let's try that. Again, close your eyes, sit up comfortably. Let your neck be loose. Become aware of your breathing. You can't force your breathing either, by the way. But if you can relax into a long exhale, then the inhale will become effortlessly deep. So breathe out slowly and easily, and then just wait for the inhale to occur. Don't do anything to inhale, just wait and let it happen. I promise you it will happen all on its own.

Now I'd like you to keep your eyes closed a little longer, and then do the opposite of a blink. Open your eyes very briefly, less than a second, and quickly close them again.

Do you now have a picture in your mind of what you just saw? [audience: Yes]

Do you realize that you did not have to do anything for that, other than briefly open your eyes?

Keep your eyes closed and move your head slightly in any direction. Now do this again, take another little 'photograph' by opening your eyes briefly, and quickly closing them again.

You now have a slightly different picture, things have moved in comparison to the previous picture. Something else is now seen clearest in the center.

Let's do that one more time. Move your head gently in any direction and briefly open your eyes and close them again. Another mental picture appears. Notice how it stays in your mind for a little while, and that you can look at different parts of it in your mind's eye.

Okay, now open your eyes again, and also remember your foundation object while looking around the room in a relaxed way.

Using the eyes in a relaxed way is not hard to do. There are three steps to it:

First you need an experiential knowledge of both strained habits and relaxed habits. A vision teacher will help you experience the difference.

Secondly you need an awareness of which you are using. Are you straining to see or relaxing into seeing?

And then it just becomes a choice between those two ways of seeing. All day long.

One of my students in California told me that he liked that his eyesight was getting better, but what he thought was even more important and what he felt was the true blessing was the calming effect that relaxing the eyes had created for him.

When I feel any strain coming on, I like to use my mind to return to relaxation. I often ask myself this question: "What would this be like if it was easy?" I don't even need an answer to that question, because the sense of ease that comes over me as I think about that, is all I really needed.

I am not saying that eye exercises are not useful, but, like Miko mentioned on Friday, eye exercises work best if the eyes are relaxed.

Vision improvement is not so much eye exercises as it is an awareness of habits and tendencies and underlying fears. We can choose to change. We can relax into seeing, and relax into life. Thank you, and enjoy your path to clarity.

[Organizer Marie Schills thanks Esther and invites the audience to ask questions.]

Q1. This is not actually a question, but I just want to say Thank You, for bringing it back to Bates. Well done.

A1. Thank you.

Q2. You mentioned that you read all the magazines that Dr. Bates wrote. Where did you get those?

A2. Ah, good question. When I took my teacher training with Tom Quackenbush, he was in the process of finishing the editing of his book on the *Better Eyesight* magazines. All the teacher trainees in my group received a large pile of papers and were asked to help proofread. It was a real blessing to have these magazines as part of my teacher training, because they are so inspirational. So that was my introduction to the magazines. I later received a copy of the book from Tom, it even has my name in it. Then from a friend I was able to get a copy of the original magazines, and when I compared the two, I found that Tom had edited a lot out of his version. So from then on I used the unedited and complete version. But those were mediocre photocopies in electronic format. Reading poor quality photocopies on a computer screen is not the best thing for my eyes... So, I bought an Optical Character Reader - thank God for modern technology - and converted all the magazines into a one large document. Now I have it on my computer and can type in any one topic, and it searches through everything Dr. Bates ever wrote and comes up with a list of every occasion that topic is mentioned. This magazine collection is also available for sale on my website.

Q3. What is your website?

A3. VisionsofJoy.org

Q4. You mentioned that Dr. Bates worked on his own eyesight. What happened with his vision?

A4. Thanks for asking this, I didn't finish that story. It took him six months to be able to read the newspaper comfortably again, and about a year before he could read diamond type at 4 inches. So he totally cured his own vision.