

YOUR HEALTH IN SIGHT®

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VOLUME 2 ISSUE 1

PRESERVING EYE HEALTH: LIFE LESSONS FROM TOM SULLIVAN

A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Rarely do we have the luxury to take the time to step back and appreciate life's wonders with the full complement of all our senses. When it comes to eyesight, most of us usually don't go to an ophthalmologist or optometrist until we notice a problem.

As guest editor for this quarter's issue of the *Your Health in Sight*® newsletter, I have the honor of introducing Tom Sullivan to our readers. Tom is an accomplished actor, singer, entertainer, author, producer, and motivational speaker. Over the years, he has gained national prominence with TV appearances on shows such as *The Tonight Show*, *Designing Women*, *Highway to Heaven*, and *M.A.S.H.*, to name just a few. He's been nominated twice for Emmy Awards. In addition, Tom is an avid skier, marathon runner, and an excellent golfer—accomplishments that all of us would be proud to own, made remarkable by the fact that Tom is blind.

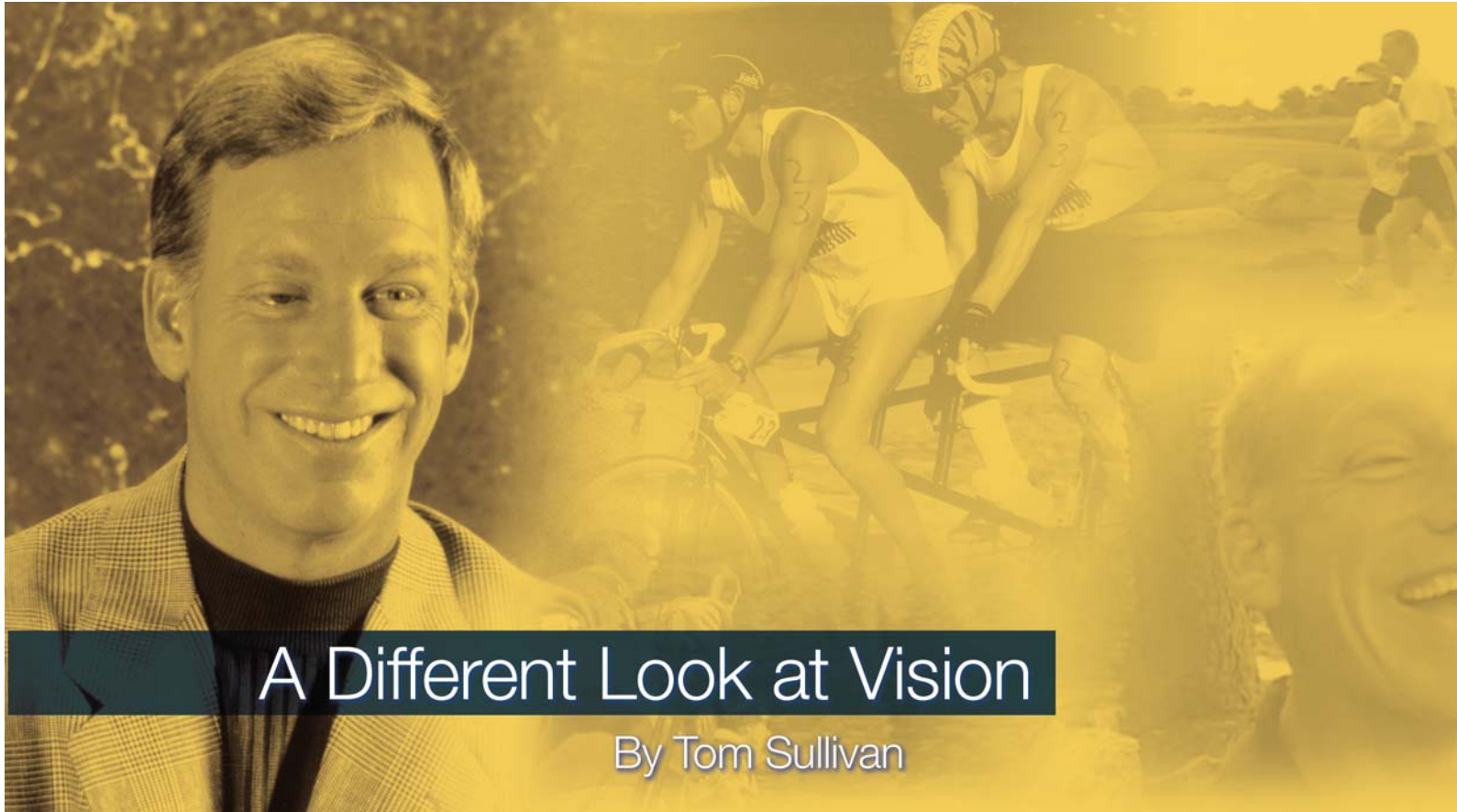
You may ask why a newsletter focused on eye-related health issues would feature an individual lacking sight since birth.

Accomplishments aside, Tom's messages of turning disadvantages into advantages and getting the most out of life every day are truly inspirational. His message of not taking any of our senses, such as sight, for granted and for taking personal responsibility for our healthcare needs applies to all of us, regardless of age or disability.

On the topic of personal responsibility, one of my favorite acronyms from Tom is **PRIDE: personal responsibility for individual daily effort**. We all lead busy lives; however, the importance of having regular eye checkups cannot be overlooked.

Many of my colleagues and I have met Tom and have been fortunate to have the chance to work with him on a regular basis. I have heard Tom present to groups of coworkers as well as groups of ophthalmologists and optometrists. He is truly a remarkable individual, and I hope you enjoy his message.

—Randy Adams, *Guest Editor*



A Different Look at Vision

By Tom Sullivan

My friend, Joan, and I sat on a beautiful beach in Southern California discussing what it was like to be blind. You see, I had been born with that condition, and Joan had lost her sight somewhere along the way. I sort of figured that not being able to see was much easier for me than it was for my friend, because I had never known any other way of living and was very healthy and happy in that state of being.

Joan surprised me when she said, “You’re wrong, Tom. I’m the lucky one, because I still have all of the memories that were a part of being a sighted person.” Then she stopped, reconsidering what she had just told me. “Actually,” she said, “maybe we’re both right. I mean, you know how to live as a blind person, and I had to learn. But the most painful part of losing your sight is not the adjustment—I mean, the physical adjustment—but the emotional one. I remember how I felt the first time I couldn’t picture orange.”

“Orange?” I asked. “What do you mean?”

“The color orange,” she said. “When I couldn’t hold it in my mind, I was very sad, and gradually all the rest of the images faded.” She teared up and began to cry softly.

I waited. And eventually she went on.

“It was when I couldn’t see my daughter’s face; when I couldn’t picture what Joyce looked like; that’s when life got tough.”

There’s so much we take for granted, most particularly, our physical abilities; and yet, when we have a friend who has an accident and becomes disabled, we are shocked and sometimes even outraged. For all of us, the preservation of vision has to become an ongoing part of our lives. Simply put, each and every person has to become responsible for his or her own eyesight. Once-a-year examinations by an optometrist or ophthalmologist need to become something we just have to do—like paying our taxes.



I have many friends who struggle with conditions such as **retinitis pigmentosa** and **retinopathy of prematurity**, along with **diabetes** and **macular degeneration** (see box to right).

So often, these people are in complete denial when it comes to dealing with vision loss.

I have known many who literally are legally blind and will not face the reality. They constantly place themselves at risk and deny their worsening condition.

What is

Retinitis pigmentosa?

A genetic disease that damages the rods and cones in the retina. Vision loss is gradual and is usually characterized by night blindness and tunnel vision (a loss of peripheral vision).

Retinopathy of prematurity?

Primarily found in children born prematurely, retinopathy of prematurity (ROP) occurs when abnormal and fragile blood vessels grow and spread throughout the retina, with the potential to leak and create scar tissue that can lead to a detached retina. ROP is one of the most common causes of vision loss in childhood.

Diabetic retinopathy?

In diabetic retinopathy, the blood vessels that nourish the retina are affected by high blood sugar levels, leading to the growth of abnormal blood vessels or blood vessels that swell or leak fluid in the retina.

Macular degeneration?

The leading cause of blindness in America, macular degeneration affects the clearness and sharpness of images when the macula (a part of the retina) experiences changes.

Some of the statistics might surprise you. In the United States, there are approximately 10 million blind and visually impaired people. Of that 10 million, an estimated 1.3 million are legally blind. In 2001, about 169 million Americans corrected their vision with eyeglasses or contacts. Consistent attention and early intervention, along with the application of medical techniques and good medicine, can literally change these disturbing trends.

Let me see if I can better frame an appropriate perspective for all of you with sight. Sitting on the beach that day, I asked Joan if she could remember what a sunset was like.

Tilting her head back and feeling the late afternoon rays on her face, she said, “Wow, Tom, that’s a tough one.” Then she snapped her fingers. “If you took a beautiful crystal vase and dropped it from the roof of a building, when the delicate glass hit the ground and shattered into thousands of fragmented pieces, that might give you a perspective on the way the colors interact when a perfect sunset touches the water.”

I was awed listening to my friend, thinking about all of the things I wish I could see. How long I had wanted to take in nature’s beauty; how much it would mean to me to see my children or to experience the look of love in the eyes of my wife, Patty, when she looked at me. I know there’s nothing more beautiful than the sound of a smile, but it would mean so much if I could just see one, even if it were only once. And the rainbow—I’d travel to Oz to experience that possibility.

It’s true that I’ve enjoyed a world of incredible senses. On that afternoon, Joan and I both noticed that there were at least 15 different kinds of waves we could hear coming in on the shore, and walking home we probably stepped over 10 different kinds of sand. The ocean smells were fantastic, and the sound of many different kinds of birds soaring above was delightful. But there is no question that for most of us, sight is the lead sense. *If you can see it, you can believe it.* We’ve all used the phrase. If I can see it with my own eyes, I know that it’s the truth.

For all of you, sight dominates your perspective on the world. It frames the majority of your awareness and understanding of your surroundings and of the people you come to know. It creates our principal impressions; frankly, not always the right ones. But as my kids say, sight rules. I have learned to take in much of the same information with my other senses, but it has become clear to me that all of you depend largely on your sight. I understand completely that as your primary tool of awareness, the loss of vision can be devastating.

Let me put it to you this way: I would trade places with any of you at any time if I were allowed to see. I'm not complaining about my life; it has been a wonderful one, but you have experienced the world in ways that I will never be able to appreciate. It's my hope that after reading this article, tomorrow you'll make an appointment for an eye exam; you'll watch your diet and work to avoid conditions like diabetes; you'll not be afraid of using appropriate treatments for glaucoma and dry eyes, like eye drops or prescription therapies; you won't lie to yourselves about the state of your vision; and you will be vigilant when it comes to the preservation of your sight.

My friend, Joan, really gets it. She grasps the significance of what she had and the devastation of what she has now lost. It's said that the eye is the gateway to the soul. I'm not sure that's true, but it is clearly our most significant connection to the world and each other.

Preserve your sight. Preserve the quality of your life.

To learn more about Tom Sullivan, visit:

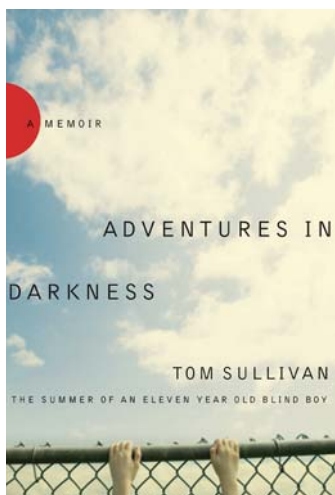
www.sullivanspeaks.com

To learn more about the eye diseases mentioned, visit:

- American Academy of Ophthalmology
www.aao.org
- American Academy of Optometry
www.aaopt.org
- American Optometric Association
www.aoa.org
- All About Vision
www.allaboutvision.com
- National Eye Institute (NEI)
www.nei.nih.gov
- National Women's Health Information Center
www.womenshealth.gov

To learn more about blindness, visit:

- American Foundation for the Blind
www.afb.org
- National Federation of the Blind
www.nfb.org
- Prevent Blindness America
www.preventblindness.org



Enjoying what you read here and want to find out more about Tom's life and philosophy? Tom's new book—*Adventures in Darkness: The Summer of an Eleven Year Old Blind Boy*—is a heart-warming tale of his eleventh summer, highlighting his determination to realize his dreams of a “normal” life.

Published at the start of 2007 by Nelson Books, Tom's latest book is also available in an abridged CD version to reach and inspire the vision-impaired and those with eye health limitations. For a brief synopsis of the book and for purchasing information, visit www.thomason.com.