

# Seeing Really Is Believing

How cataract surgery changed my life.



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I had forgotten all about Charlie by the time the darkness started closing in.

We had been friends as kids. I liked to make him laugh. Once, hanging out in the biology lab after school, I borrowed the bow from Charlie’s violin and used it to play a hand saw — a weird vibrating music like something from a synthesizer or a theremin. I remember playing “Over the Rainbow” for him, while he looked on with equal measures of horror and wonder.

One time, he explained to me how he’d taken a household clock apart, gear by gear. “I like disassembling things,” he said, “and then putting them back together.”

Eventually, Charlie went off to Brown, and I headed to Wesleyan. While we were at college, his family moved away, and we lost touch. By the time I arrived in my 50s, I was living in Maine, teaching at Colby College. I married; we had children. I was, by some measures, doing just fine.

But sadness crept up on me now and again, especially as I got older. For a naturally gregarious person, I found it hard to talk to people sometimes. I had the feeling that the universe I lived in was getting smaller, and darker.

I’m describing my emotional state, but I’m also talking about my actual experience of looking at the world. Everything seemed draped in shadows.

One night, I took the lampshade off the light by my bed. My wife looked at me curiously. “It’s just so dark in here,” I told her. “Isn’t it?”

She wasn't sure what to tell me. She never had any problem with shadows.

Then, during a routine checkup with my optometrist, my doctor asked me if my cataracts were bothering me.

Cataracts? I said. The what's all this now?

Indeed, I had an early onset case of cataracts, a buildup of protein in my eyes that was keeping the light from getting in. I remember a sense of shock when I was diagnosed. I'm not crazy! I thought. The world really *was* getting darker.

Fortunately, cataracts can be treated, and not only that, but the surgery often means implanting new lenses which correct your vision. People who'd had it told me that it had changed their lives.

So I called up the Maine Eye Center in Portland and made an appointment. Which is where I met my doctor, Charles Zacks.

I hadn't seen him for 40 years, and his appearance had changed. But then, this could be said of me, too.

A few weeks later, an anesthesiologist was administering Versed, a drug nicknamed the "twilight sleep." I am told that while I was out, I asked Charlie if he wanted me to say the names of the presidents backward, and I did, only to pass out around Lyndon Johnson.

Then, 10 minutes later, I woke again, and picked up right where I had left off. This went on — the waking up, and nodding off again — for a half-hour. *Buchanan, Pierce, Fillmore, Taylor, Polk. ...*

He did my left eye, and then a few weeks later, my right; in the wake of each surgery, my eyes were bandaged. When Charlie finally removed the last bandage, I looked around. Everything was bright and clear. For the first time since third grade, I wasn't wearing glasses.

"This is very good," my old friend said, with the understatement and modesty I remembered from childhood. "A very good result."

"How did you do this?" I asked him, wonder-struck, although I already knew the answer.

"I've always liked fixing small things," he replied.

In 2015, more than 3.6 million cataract procedures were performed in the United States. For many Americans — including me — the procedure is covered by insurance. That’s a lot, but the American Academy of Ophthalmology estimates that more than 24.4 million Americans have cataracts, including half of all those over 70 years old. Surely such surgery should not be limited to people of privilege.

I’ll leave it to someone to the right of me to explain why the ability to see should not be the right of every citizen.

For those who get the surgery, the restoration of sight is miracle enough. But just as important, if not more, is restoring a sense of well-being. Studies show a strong correlation between cataracts and depression, especially in older adults.

And so it was not just my vision that my childhood friend brought back to me. It was a sense of brightness and hope.

As I drove home from the Maine Eye Center — without glasses — I remembered playing “Over the Rainbow” on the musical saw for Charlie when we were kids. It was a good tune, but it wasn’t the one I’d have played for him now, if I had a saw, and he lent me his bow.

I’d have played him “I Can See Clearly Now,” the Johnny Nash song. It had been a big hit, back when we were young. *Gone are the dark clouds that had me blind.* The world shone all around me. I saw no shadows.

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