

*A PLAY OF LIGHT* - A Solo Performance of My Own Design

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Abstract

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This thesis documents the creation of A PLAY OF LIGHT, a capstone assignment for the Professional Actor Training Program. I track the creation and performance of my solo show, from inception to performance. For this project, I pulled upon two major life events that fundamentally changed my outlook on life: my partial vision loss at twenty-five and being raised by a legally blind father. This events not only inspired the projects themes, but also the structure and goals. I was attempting to speak to physical mortality and mental health through parallel stories, one of vision healing and one of vision loss—light and darkness. I employed several acting skills and techniques I learned throughout my previous two and a half years of training in my process. This thesis explores my chosen methods of research and my artistic choices along with the explanations behind such choices. I also have included the script for the solo show and eight figures to give a visual aid to the thesis.

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### Critical Reflection

At twenty-five, I lost vision in my right eye from a freak accident, medically called an “event.” I woke up on August 25, 2015 with complete darkness in the lower third and right most portions of my right eye. I immediately experienced bright light flashes, squirrely light rivers that look like worms moving across my plane of vision, a whole new host of floaters in both eyes, soreness across my face, and extreme sensitivity to bright light for a further three months (Figure 1). At first, no one really knew what was causing this issue. The most likely reason to lose vision as I was experiencing was either brain tumors or multiple sclerosis (MS). The doctors observed that I had enflamed optic nerves, and I subsequently received endless testing for several days. The tests—some very docile and others rather invasive—yielded no actual results (Figure 2, Figure 3, Figure 4, Figure 5). No one knew why the symptoms appeared or what was really going on, nor knew how to help me. These moments were incredibly nerve-wracking. I had no insight into how to manage it, if the vision loss would get worse, or, in the worse-case scenario, if I may actually be slowly losing control of my body and health with a disease like MS. As it turned out, my eyes themselves were actually fine, which was more disconcerting because it meant something could be wrong with my brain. Eventually, the doctors discovered calcium deposits around my optic nerve, called *drusen*, through an ultrasound over my eyelid. Since my optic nerves had enflamed beyond their natural size in this event, the *drusen* permanently damaged my optic nerves, resulting in the injury that rendered me with vision loss (Figure 6). As a fundamental experience within my life, I knew my piece would be about vision, loss, and healing, a process I still work on to this day. I was pulled to these themes and ideas as they were formative in my adult life and growth as an artist. Discussions of mortality, health and mental health spoke to me as they deeply ingrained in the fabric of who I am. This experience drove

much of the physical work and was the emotional grounding with which I connected to the piece from the beginning.

I am, however, not the only person in my family to struggle with sight. My father, Norman Jones, is legally blind. His diagnosis—*retinitis pigmentosa*—is seemingly unrelated. Although there are studies that show some correlation between my father's disease and my medical event, I currently do not show any symptoms of his progressive eye disease. He has slowly been losing peripheral vision over the last 50 years. At age 63, he has been legally blind for roughly 10 years. Whereas as a typical field of vision is 118 degrees, my father only sees 16 degrees at the center of his sight plane. My father, also a theatre artist, has long been an inspiration for me. Despite his ailments, he has remained chipper and positive throughout his life, which in turn have helped him heal from the trauma of sight loss as a both an artist and human. Many years ago, my father was part of a devising piece called *Play of Light*, set in the mid-1950s about several men who received cataract surgeries. The piece was a part of my father's own theatrical healing. *Play of Light* is a relationship-driven story about healing and discovery. One of the several characters who struggled to learn how to see from this play was named Samuel, created and played by Tim Denesha. He told an intriguing story about the character's personal relationship to sight, light, and healing. I decided to extract parts of that character and transform them for my own. The devising piece, *Play of Light*, took little science into account, but it did scratch the surface with an issue that I knew I could expand on: how it feels to learn how to see.

In my additional research, I discovered Sir Harold Ridley (Figure 7), who actually did perform the first intraocular lens implant for a cataract treatment at Saint Thomas Hospital in London, England on February 8, 1950 (Figure 8). Which led me to my main idea: I sought to

explore what it was like to be the very first man to learn how to see after being blind his whole life. I contemplated his experiences through my own and those of the devising character Samuel's years later. Despite the doctor's best attempt to aid this patient, the first patient to regain sight would have little to no emotional and mental support with the actual experience of seeing for the first time. Such an experience would be undoubtedly terrifying, unexplainable, alienating, and isolating, despite its groundbreaking connotations within the medical field.

I thus set out to write this "patient zero's" story, whom I called Samuel Clarkson, interwoven with my own. His story came naturally to me through theatrical and medical research. I spent an average of an hour and a half a day writing and editing, or moving and exploring in my work, each day this year. The movement portions threaded in between the moments of time with the Samuel character served several purposes. Each movement tableau was an expressive and evocative glimpse into my experience with losing a portion of my vision. I intentionally mimed and moved through the invisible world as a symbol and metaphor for losing sight and experiencing the world as a foreign and invisible entity. I metaphorically divided stage left and right into light and darkness. Although I moved back and forth these separate spaces to delineate location and character, this device was deployed for more than this simple storytelling technique. I sought to evoke the sense of a partial blackout and a partial vision for the audience. Each movement piece was layered between the monologues serving as a passing of time for each, back and forth.

I applied dialect work from Bridget Connors voice class, phonetics from Scott Hafso's speech class, movement and composition work from Jeffrey Fracé's Composition, Viewpoints and Suzuki classes, text and character analysis work from Zane Jones, Cathy Madden and Mark Jenkins' classes, and confidence from Valerie Curtis-Newton's solo show class. My piece was

set in London England in 1950; I knew I would be applying Bridget Connors dialect class from the start. I began with detailed cultural contextual research, in order to understand the time and place. I have personally been to England many times but the precision of the 1950s time-period was important to me. I felt the need to understand the times, such as using words like trousers instead of pants. I also made sure I was particular about oral posture, rhythm, musicality, intonation pattern and tempo, and finally phonetics. I used the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) which we learned in Scott Hafso's speech class to annotate the difficult sections of my text in order to properly pronounce each word.

In Jeffrey Fracé's Composition class, we were fortunate enough to work with undergraduate students from the dance department. I was able to work on a movement piece for that class with a dance student named Katie Daugherty. I thought we had worked particularly well together, so I asked her to help me compose the movement sections in my solo show. She was integral in providing feedback and accountability to my creations, watching each new section as I created it, and directing the movement sections. I felt particularly equipped to move in an expressive and intentional way because of Jeffrey Fracé's other movement classes—one with extreme attention to structure and form, being Suzuki, the other with post-modern evocative expression, being Viewpoints. Zane Jones', Cathy Madden's, and Mark Jenkins' studio classes were consistently a part of my process in building the life and world of my character, giving him a physicality, a moment to moment existence in the world, a bio-psycho-social history, a spine, and a deep need. My process also was aided from Valerie Curtis-Newton's discussions on resistance and personal confidence as an artist. I knew I had something to say which was important to me, which pushed me to engage with understanding the mentality concepts of how I was getting in my own way helped me apply myself to the work on a daily basis. I knew that

putting myself out there did not guarantee success, but I knew the kind of work I wanted to put forth as my own. I did not procrastinate out of fear, even when it was at the forefront. In the end, even if the show was not perfect, and even if it is a work-in-progress, I am immensely proud of it. I can say I put my all into it, which is how I can say I succeeded at my goals.

I would say the most significant thing I learned from this process was my capability. I am more than enough to create full, genuine, and worthy stories to be told. I learned that I do not need pre-approval to go out into the world and speak my truth.

*A PLAY OF LIGHT* Script

**Light:**

Texture on Samuel, possibly a window, filled out stage right, stage left dark.  
Silhouette for transitions

Expressive and evocative light for movement sequences. Filled out stage left, stage right dark.

**Preshow Songs:**

- Grace VanderWaal – “Clearly”
- Hot Hot Heat – “Bandages”
- The Guess Who – “These Eyes”
- The Shins – “The Past and Pending”
- Sufjan Stevens – “City of Roses”
- Johnny Nash – “I Can See Clearly Now”

**Sequence:**

- Exposition and history
- Wake up tableau
- Childhood
- Work tableau
- Bandages
- Doctor tableau
- Everything sucks
- MRI
- Consciousness
- Fate and the waiting room
- Ruth
- Feelings and push the table
- God
- Guitar

---

*(Sitting in chair, bandages over his eyes. Post-surgery. Addressing the audience as a group of researchers. Saint Thomas Hospital medical theatre, London)*

*Cue Lights Down for top of show*

*Cue Voiceover*

*Cue Lights up on Samuel when he’s sitting in the chair*

*Voice over: February 10<sup>th</sup>, 1950 Saint Thomas Hospital medical theatre, London*

Samuel: I’ve been told you’re here to observe me... Since this is the first time this has been done. Well. I’ll save you time.

I'm Samuel Clarkson. O+. Slightly low blood pressure. Minor risk after surgery. And what Dr Ridley's done is state of the art, they say, so you all must be such a fascinated little group. Where do I start? Erm? Well...

I was born Samuel Clarkson, as I said, January 27th 1923 with a particularly nasty form of congenital cataracts, rendering me totally blind.

Dr Ridley, my doc. During World War two, treated The Royal Air Force casualties. He observed, or discovered rather, that when the splinters of acrylic plastic from aircraft cockpit canopies became lodged in the pilot's eyes, that it didn't trigger the inflammatory rejection, while the glass splinters did. This led him to the big idea. He proposed the use of artificial eye lenses made of essentially this same acrylic to treat cataracts. It's a true story.

On February 8th 1950 at Saint Thomas Hospital, Doctor Harold Ridley achieved the first permanent implant of an intraocular lens in an eye. Those eyes, as you may well know, were mine.

This has never been done before. So, so one knows how to help me. No one has been born blind and been given sight since Jesus spat on the ground and rubbed mud in a man's eyes.

*Cue Lights to Transition*

*Cue Voiceover*

*Cue Lights to Taylor Tableaus when Taylor lays down on the table*

---

WAKE UP TABLEAU

*Voice over: August 25<sup>th</sup> 2015 Beverly Massachusetts*

Taylor Text: What the fuck?

*(First montage of my experience with losing sight.*

*Wake up with darkness in the eye*

*Look in the mirror*

*Confused)*

*Cue Lights to Blackout*

*Cue voiceover*

*Cue Lights to Up on Samuel when he sits in the chair*

---

*Voice over: February 12<sup>th</sup> 1950*

Samuel: I had been trying to figure out what seeing is since I was a kid. When I was a kid people would always tell me "You're blind, you were born blind." I'd ask them, What is blind? "It means you can't see," They'd say. And what is see? They couldn't explain that (either).

So I did some experiments to figure it out. Once when I was eight, I put on a pair of pants that I knew were too short for me. I knew my mother was in the kitchen so I strolled in very casually, said, “Hello, Mother.” You know, as eight year olds do. I went to the sink to get a drink of water. She stopped whatever she had been doing and said, “Hello yourself. Samuel. And what’s with the highwater pants?” I banged the glass on the counter which cracked it all the way through. “How do you know they’re high water pants? You’re way over there, you didn’t touch them, how do you know?” She was quiet for ages. Then she said “I know because I can see them.” I guess she started crying. I was scared. I couldn’t understand—she had this strange power she could use on me at a distance and without me even knowing it. Seeing. I resented it. I envied her.

*Cue Lights to Transition*

*Cue voiceover*

*Cue Lights to Taylor Tableaus when Taylor wipes down table*

*Cue sound one, quiet restaurant ambiance*

## WORK TABLEAU

*Voice over: August 25<sup>th</sup> 2015*

Taylor Text: Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry, I can’t see with my right eye.

*(Second montage of my experience with losing sight.*

*Go to work and act as if all is normal.*

*I remember joking about it at the hostess stand with one of the owner’s daughters*

*I had had ocular migraines before but this felt different.)*

*Cue Lights to Blackout*

*Cue Sound Off*

*Cue Voice over*

*Cue Lights to Up on Samuel when he sits in the chair*

## BANDAGES TABLEAU

*Voice over: February 13<sup>th</sup> 1950*

Samuel: Is this light?

*Cue Lights to Transition*

*Cue Voice over*

*Cue Lights to Taylor Tableaus when Taylor stands in front of table*

*Cue sound two, quiet doctor ambiance*

## DOCTOR TABLEAU

*Voice over: August 26<sup>th</sup> 2015*

Taylor text: Thank you doctor

*(Next day go to the pcp, who sends me to the optometrist (they do a bunch of field tests and look at my retinas), sends me to the ER at mass eye and ear. Wait for hours. Get seen by the general practitioners (who do a few more tests), who can't figure it out, so they send me upstairs to the emergency Neuro-ophthalmologist, who wasn't actually in so I saw two doctors in residency from other countries. One of which wanted to do an ultrasound with the jelly and all on my open eye. We opted for the closed eye. They have a machine there, of which there are only three in the world now. It's the original field tester. It's much more accurate but much more labor intensive for the doctors. The new ones are just computers and flashing lights, then you click a button when you see the light.)*

*Cue Lights to Blackout  
Cue Sound Off  
Cue Voiceover  
Cue Lights to Up on Samuel when he sits in the chair*

*Voice over: February 15<sup>th</sup> 1950*

Samuel: Light. How's this make me feel? It's nothing like I thought it would be. It's difficult. I'm doing nothing better, most things worse. I used to be able to walk like a sighted man, people often didn't know I was blind. Now I grope and stumble.

My doctor said It's a like trying to learn Mandarin without translation. It's not. I see a circle and a square -- one moment I can tell the difference, the next I'm lost. I look at my bed and think it's the door.

Everything keeps changing. Everything looks different all the time. This chair, it looks one way now, okay, but I stand... and it's changed. I move a little, it's different again. I get further away, it shrinks. Sometimes it's like things are coming at me or twisting and squeezing, pulling and constricting. Does this make any sense to you? Things don't stay the same. It's not like with your hands. Things change. It never stops, I get dizzy, it's exhausting. There's so much to learn, and nothing is like anything anyone has known before.

Seeing is the hardest thing I have ever had to face. It's worse than being blind. Lot's of people give up and never use their eyes. The doctors need to prepare people better. I wasn't prepared It's confusing. I don't sleep.

*Cue Lights to Transition  
Cue Voiceover  
Cue Lights to Taylor Tableaus when Taylor lays down and puts hands on table  
Cue sound three when Taylor is fully under the table, loud MRI sounds*

MRI TABLEAU

*Voice over: August 27<sup>th</sup> 2015*

*Cue Lights to Blackout  
Cue Sound Off*

*Cue Voiceover*  
*Cue Lights to Up on Samuel when he sits in the chair*

*Voice over: February 18<sup>th</sup> 1950*

Samuel: My experience of consciousness was fundamentally different from people with sight. I had no frame of reference to consciously build a sighted model for the world. It doesn't mean that things didn't have dimension. They did. It was just different. It's easy for you to imagine waking up one day where you can see the complexity of white light, or 9 more color wavelengths, or the acute smell of a dog or the hearing of an owl... Because you already have those senses.

No one really knows how to help me. Because how do you explain something so inherent as a conscious experience? (My mind is a visual blank slate)

*Cue Lights to Transition*  
*Cue Voiceover*  
*Cue Lights to Taylor Tableaus when Taylor sits in chair by the table*  
*Cue sound four, quiet waiting room ambiance*

FATE TABLEAU

*Voice over: August 28<sup>th</sup> 2015*

Taylor text: Excuse me, how much longer will I have to wait?

*(Fourth montage of my experience with losing my sight*  
*Waiting for results*  
*Hearing my projected fate*  
*Stepping into the unknown)*

*Cue Lights to Blackout*  
*Cue Sound Off*  
*Cue Voiceover*  
*Cue Lights to Up on Samuel when he sits in the chair*

*Voice over: February 19<sup>th</sup> 1950*

Samuel: Ruth, my wife was here. For the first time. Day before yesterday. She had been so worried how she'd look to me. She'd told me "I hope you'll like my face."

I expected her to arrive in the afternoon. So that morning I was practicing walking down the hall to the solarium. I wanted to be able to show her around. I was moving very carefully, and everything was jumping and shifting as ever, but suddenly there was this very bright red. I hadn't ever seen red. Not like this. It's this color you don't see around here. It startled me. I stopped and stared at it. It began getting bigger. I heard footsteps. Getting louder. I was overwhelmed.

(as if to her) "Ruth." (Back to audience) Early train. It was her dress.

That moment, I was lost. The room was spinning. I'm not sure if it was literally spinning, to be honest. It may as well have been. Then, I've been here for weeks, and I couldn't find my room. Ruth found it, she read my name on the door. She walked me in and sat me down like a child.

The rest of her visit we didn't know each other. Strangers. It was Ruth's beautiful voice, but the shape of her... Who is this? And for her... Who the hell am I? I'm groping all around the room, I'd fallen twice so my knees and hands had scrapes and rug burn. She'd never seen me like this. I'd look at her, but she'd turn away. We couldn't touch each other.

She left this morning.

*Cue Lights to Transition*  
*Cue Voiceover*  
*Cue Lights to Taylor Tableaus when Taylor stands and inspects table*

## FEELINGS TABLEAU

*Voice over: AUGUST 30<sup>th</sup> 2015*

Taylor Text: Sigh

*(Fifth montage of losing my eyesight.  
Laying on the ground needing to cry  
To move the feelings from head to your heart  
Deep prayer for healing)*

*Cue Lights to Blackout*  
*Cue Sound Off*  
*Cue Voiceover*  
*Cue Lights to Up on Samuel when he sits in the chair*

*Voice over: February 20<sup>th</sup> 1950*

Samuel: There is nothing like great loss to bring you back to God. In a way I think He knows that.

Sometimes I don't know if God actually speaks to me or if I just produce ideas when I slow down enough to breathe, and think things out. Maybe He's my imaginary friend in the universe. Maybe He's real.

Things are always making me question. But I do. I still have faith.

God help me.

*Cue Lights to Transition*  
*Cue Voiceover*

*Cue Lights to Taylor Tableaus when Taylor grabs the guitar from the VOM*

---

GUITAR TABLEAU

*Voice over: September 20<sup>th</sup> 2015*

*(Sixth Montage Picking up guitar for help. To express what I need.)*

*(no blackout this time)*

*Cue Voiceover*

*Cue Lights to Up on Samuel when he sits in the chair*

---

*Voice over: February 21<sup>th</sup> 1950*

*(holding guitar)*

Samuel: I love to play guitar. I've even played a few gigs. They used to tell people I was blind before went on stage. Like I was a celebrity.

I picked it up the night after Ruth left. It was nothing like I knew with my hands. A song I wrote had begun like this. But I couldn't bring myself to play. Ruth was gone and took my music with her.

Guitar had always been a refuge, as a child, or at University, whenever things got rough. When no one knew how to help. So I cheated. I closed my eyes. I know this feeling. And I played. And felt myself for the first time in ages. I had been working so hard on something else that I let it get in the way of who I was.

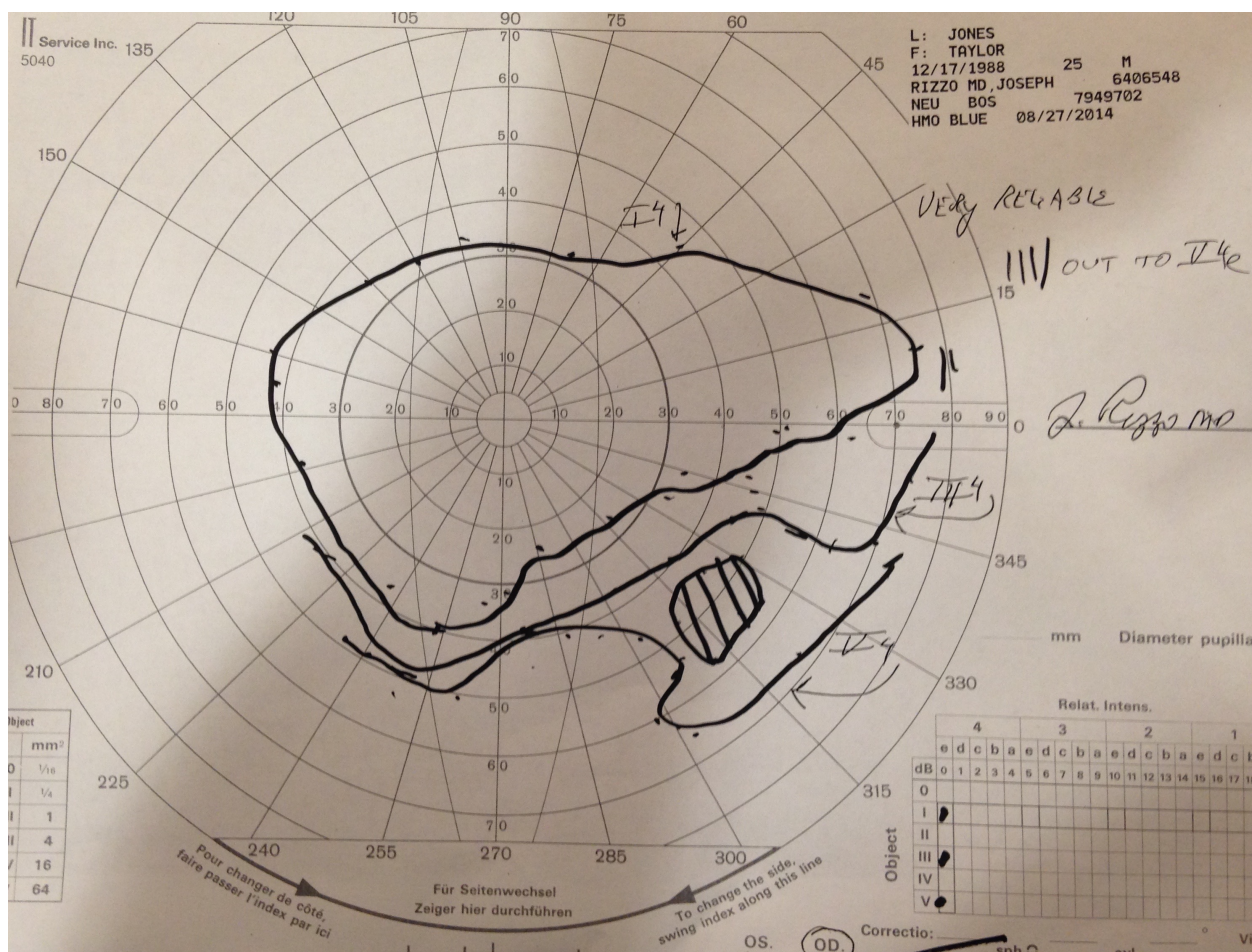
I know I can't live with my eyes closed. I need to continue to learn.

Some things are getting clearer. Yesterday I found my toothbrush using only my eyes; one of the nurses moved it when she cleaned. I forced my hands to stay behind my back, and looked until I saw it. A small thing, but I saw it.

They are letting me out of here in a few days.

*(Cue blackout. Then Cue sound five, heartbeats by Jose Gonzales)*

Figures



**Figure 1**  
Massachusetts Eye and Ear, Boston, Massachusetts  
Map of my field of vision, Photo by Taylor Jones, 2015



**Figure 2**

The Jenks Vestibular Lab, Massachusetts Eye and Ear, Boston, Massachusetts  
One of the many labs in which my initial testing occurred, Photo by Taylor Jones, 2015

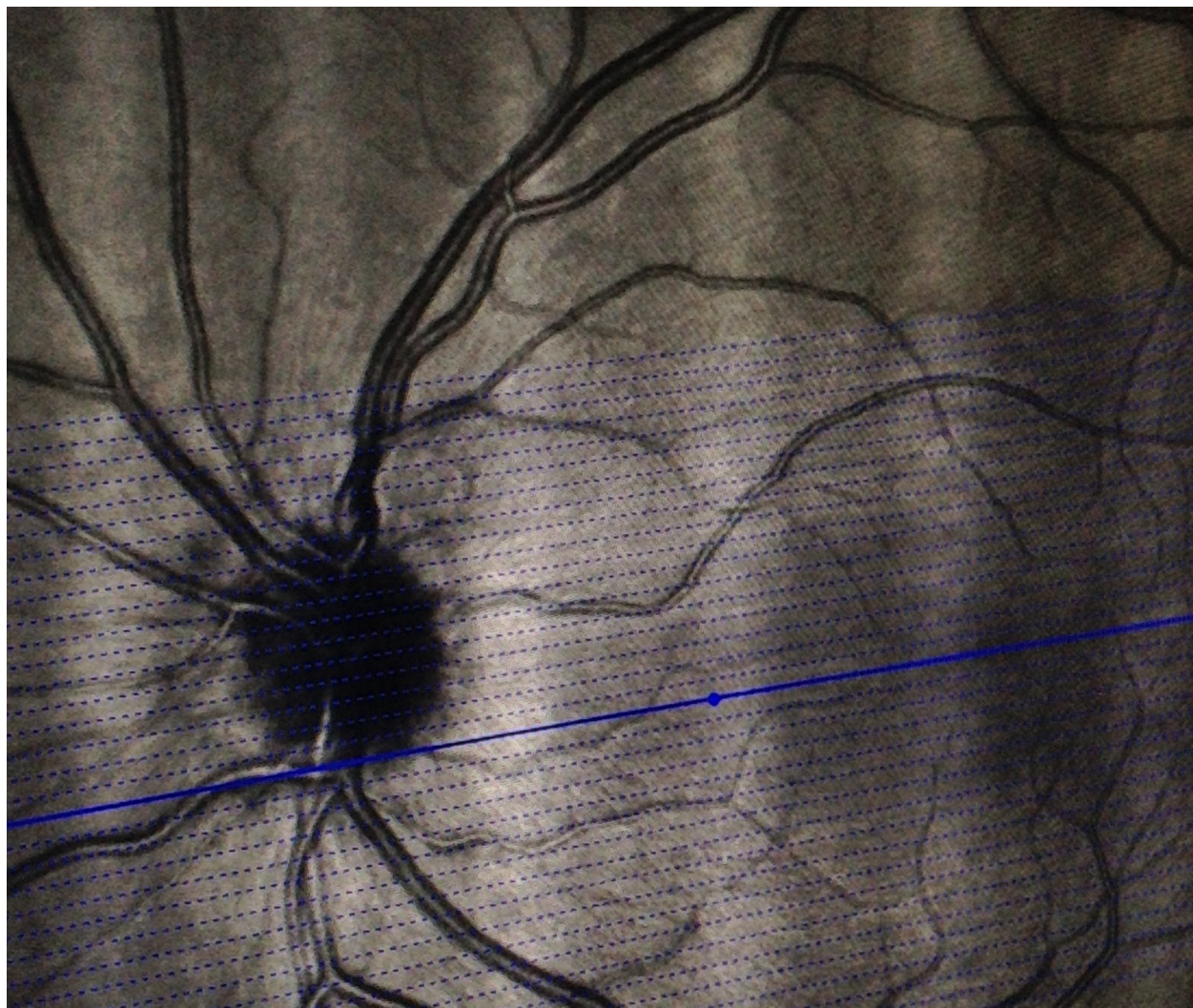


**Figure 3**

Dr. Gurley's Medical Office, Manchester-by-the-Sea, Massachusetts  
The first moments of discovering my vision loss, Photo by Taylor Jones, 2015

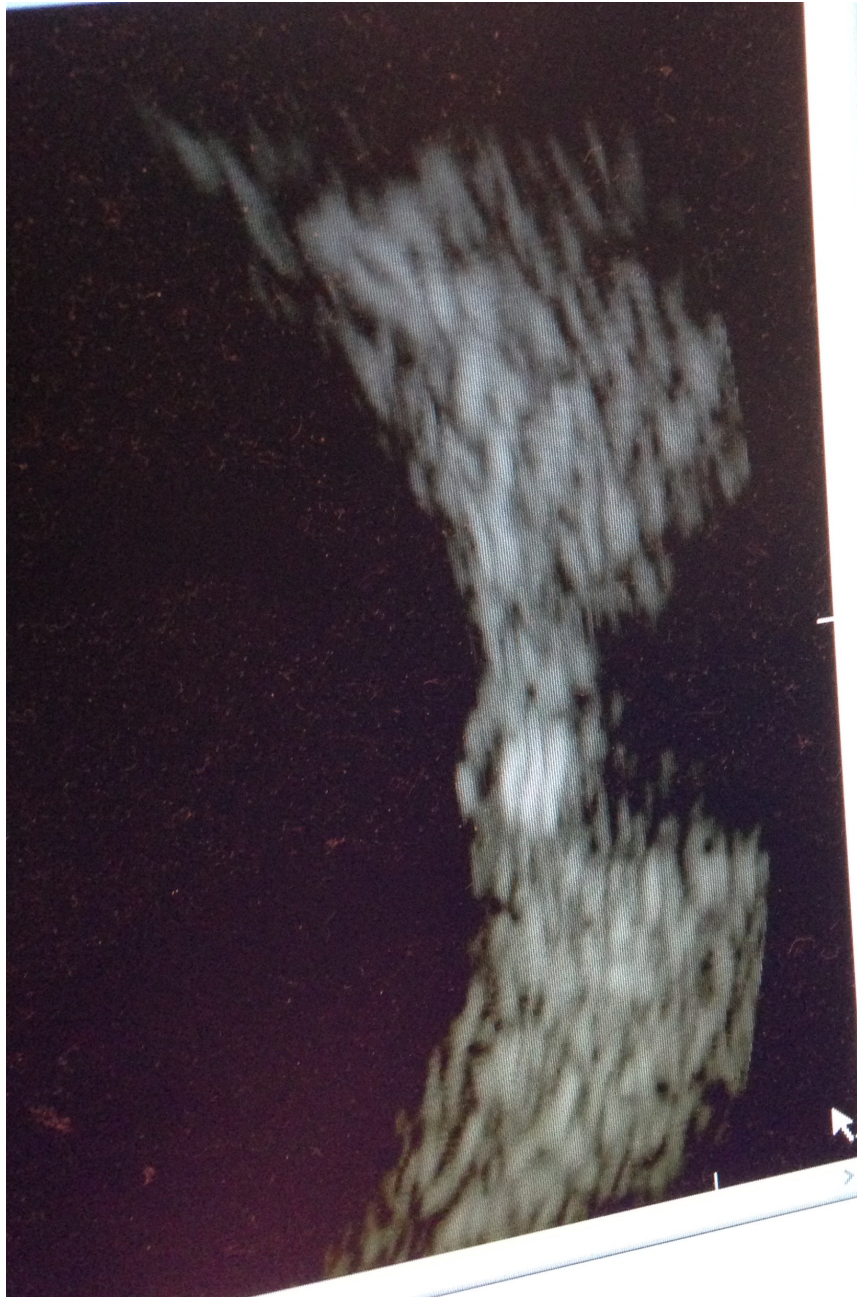


**Figure 4**  
Emergency Room, Massachusetts Eye and Ear, Boston, Massachusetts  
Medical Bracelets, Photo by Taylor Jones, 2015



**Figure 5**

Dr. Gurley's Medical Office, Manchester-by-the-Sea, Massachusetts  
Imaging of my inflamed optic nerve, Photo by Taylor Jones, 2015

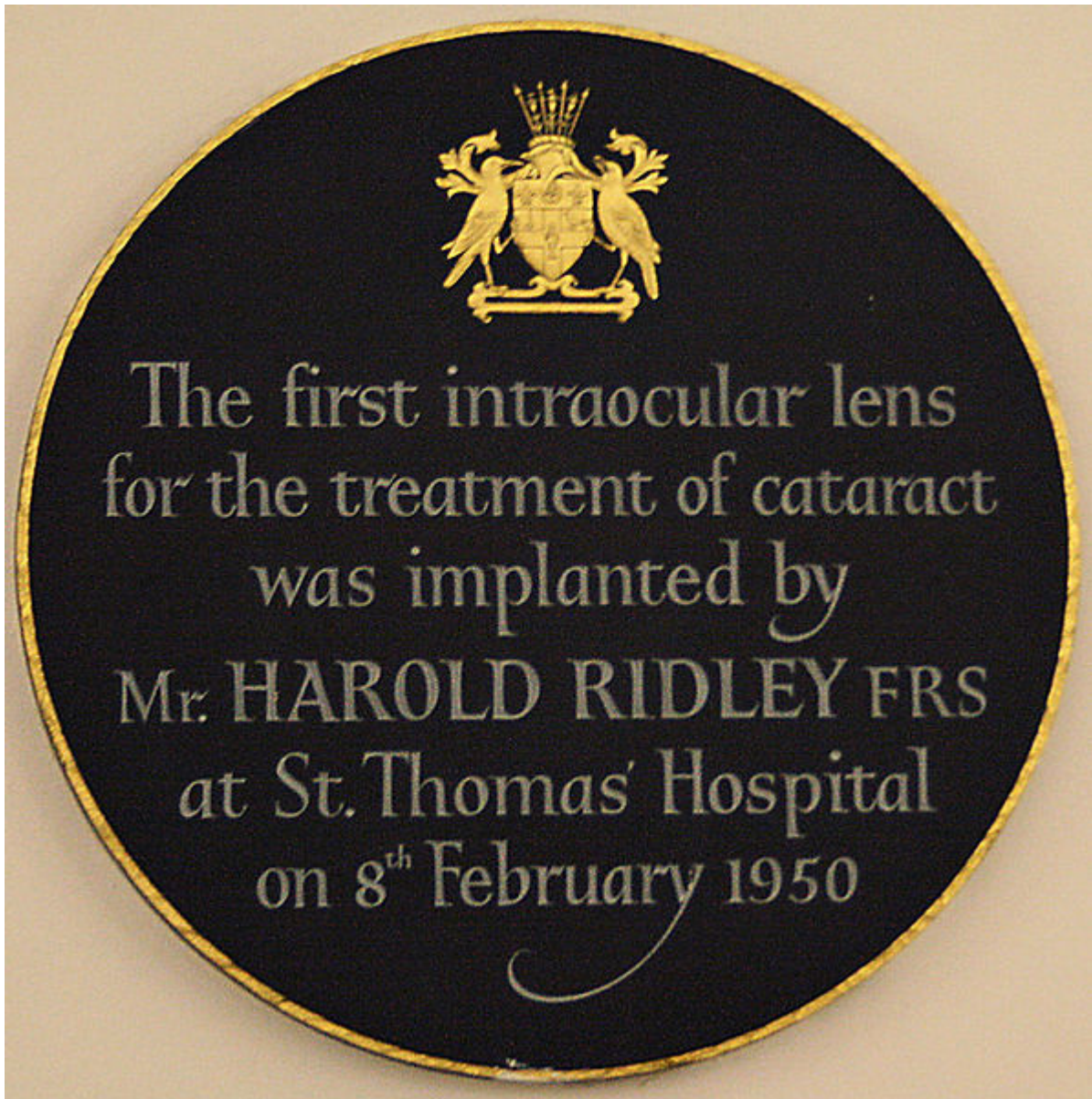


**Figure 6**  
Emergency Room, Massachusetts Eye and Ear, Boston, Massachusetts  
Enlarged optic nerve (black semicircular area to the right)  
and white *drusen* against optic nerve (bright white dot), Photo by Taylor Jones, 2015



**Figure 7**

Portrait of Sir Harold Ridley, from David J. Apple's *Sir Harold Ridley and His Fight for Sight: He changed the world so that we may better see it*, Slack, Inc., 2006.



**Figure 8**

Plaque commemorating Sir Harold Ridley and his landmark placement of the first intraocular lens, 2008, Photo by David Ruben