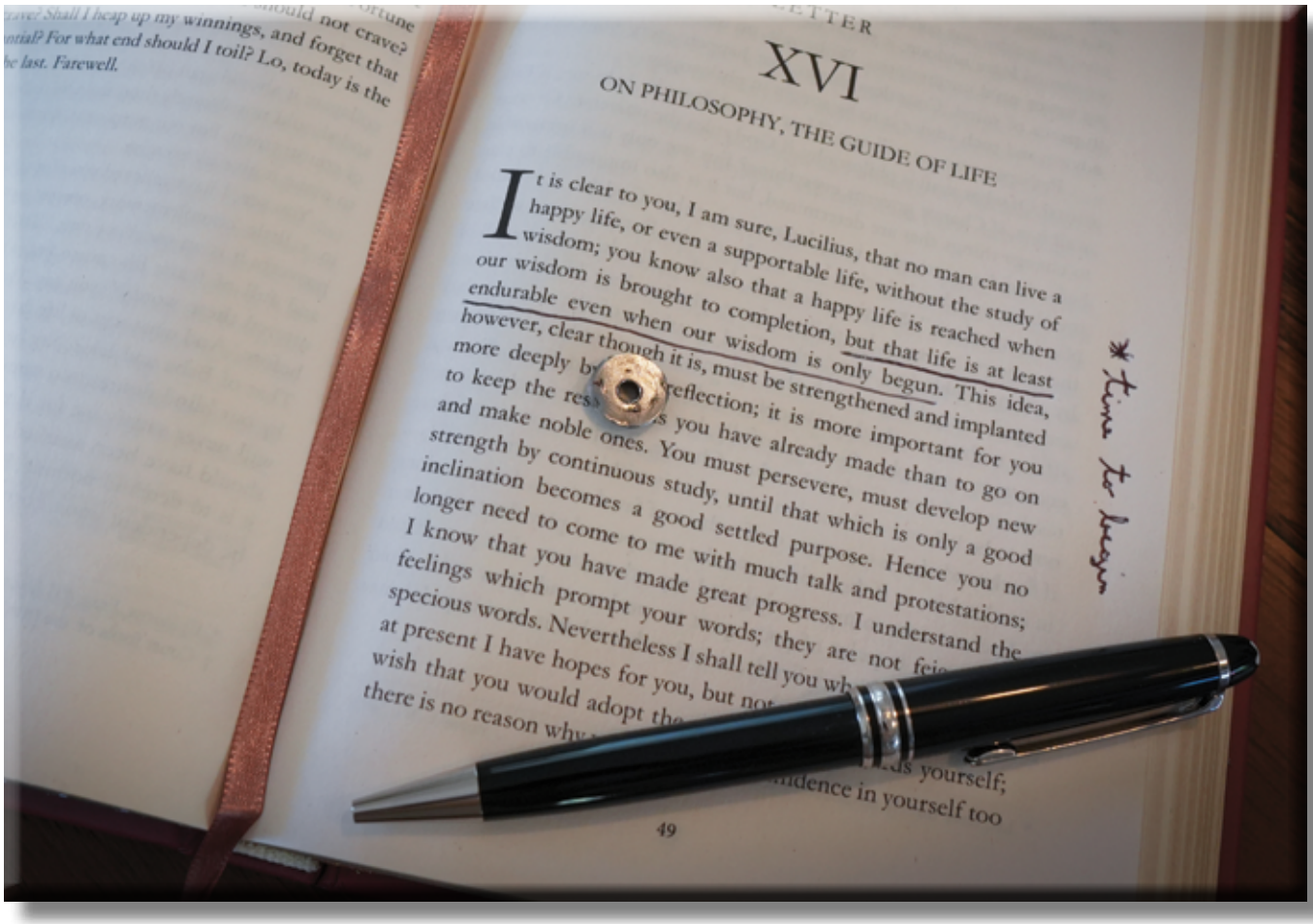
One Eye Open

by Dave Harris, ASPE



We never see it coming. That's what the proverbial "they" say—and how right "they" are! In my case, I quite literally didn't see it coming. The sudden noise startled all three of us in the shop. None of us had expected it. In an instant, my life changed, and I had no idea yet. I raised my hand to my face, and there was blood—not much, but enough to know something wasn't right. When I pulled my hand away, I saw Mike and Jason staring at me. I asked for a paper towel. Jason handed it to me and said, "Let's get to the hospital." I still felt no pain. But moments later, we were in a car and on the way to the nearest emergency room.

Being in the shop was normal. What was about to happen was not. It was a Friday night, and after a long week at work, I was looking forward to relaxing on the couch and binge-watching some mind-numbing TV. My phone rang, and it was Mike. Mike is a good friend of mine who has a large workshop behind his house. It's the place where the guys all gather to work on cars, swap stories, make fun of each other, and pass the time. So, when Mike called, I didn't hesitate. I just grabbed my keys and headed over.

There was always a lot of noise in the shop: metal being hammered into shape or out of the way, some yelling, an abundance of cursing—the language of an auto shop. That evening, I joined Mike and Jason mid-project. The goal? Get "The Bucket" ready for a race. The Bucket, short for "bucket of bolts," was Mike's 1,500-horsepower drag-racing Camaro. It had been the main shop focus for months, and it was inching closer to rocketing down the track. It was satisfying to see

it come to life. The shop had a badge of honor—*built not bought*. There was a fulfilling sense of ownership in doing the work instead of just paying someone else to do it. In this shop, getting your hands dirty was just what you did.

When I walked in, things were already underway. Jason was busy with one of the many *somethings* The Bucket always seemed to need. The car was up on the lift, and Mike was under it, working on attaching a tow hook to make it easier to get the car on and off the trailer. The problem? We needed to drill a 3/8" hole through a piece of 2x2 steel tubing. So, with safety glasses on and a hole saw on the drill, we got to work. With a little pressure and a spray of sparks, we had a hole that went entirely through the frame—well, almost entirely. The shop is very well lit; under the car, though, it could be dark. Working in the shadows under that car was business as usual. Neither of us noticed the small metal disc still inside the hole—the "hanging chad." Left behind by the drill, that little piece of scrap was about to be a very big problem.

The drilling, with its metal shards and flying sparks, was finished, and so the safety glasses came off. After all, all that was left was to put the bolt in the newly drilled hole and tighten the nut. Mike grabbed the impact wrench. One thing about Mike's shop: the tools were always the best—strongest doodads, toughest widgets, and the most powerful dinglehoppers. The impact wrench was no exception. Mike put the bolt through the hole. I put the washer and nut on the other side. And our friendly neighborhood hanging chad was right there between the frame and the washer. I held the closed-end wrench on the nut, and Mike began tightening the bolt with the impact wrench. The nut didn't feel like it was tightening the way it should. I even said, "Hold on." Then, *bang*! It was loud—like a gunshot. That little metal menace, being pressed between the frame and the washer, exploded free. Out of every direction that disc could have taken, it chose the one heading directly for my now-unprotected eye. The noise startled me more than the impact. I don't think I felt anything. I put my hand up to my face and felt the blood.

My hospital visit—or, rather, my visits to three hospitals—would stretch over the next 24 hours, with eight of those spent in surgery. At the first and closest hospital, they did little more than bandage me up and send me on my way to a facility that was better equipped for my injury. Because our eyes tend to move together, they covered both of mine to keep them from moving around and aggravating the injury.

"Do you have any questions or concerns for us?" the attending doctor asked.

"This place is the worst," I said. He looked confused until I added, "When I came in here, I could at least see out of one eye."

Later, I'd realize that humor was my way of making sense of the moment—or at least keeping it from feeling overwhelming. It was the beginning of asking questions I'd never had to ask before. *Why did this happen to me? Will this define me? What happens next?* The joke had lightened the tension in the room, but it also marked the beginning of a philosophical journey—an attempt to wrestle with things that felt unexplainable to me. That thought didn't leave me. It would follow me through each emergency room, into surgery, and through my recovery.

The staff sent me off to the second hospital. They offered an ambulance, but I didn't see the need. I wasn't in any pain, it didn't feel life-threatening, and I really didn't want to pay for a $3,000 Uber ride. So, Mike drove us. By the time I arrived, the ER was ready for me. They ushered me back and called the on-call ophthalmologist.

At this second hospital, things seemed to be moving right along. The doctors believed the injury was a severe corneal scratch, so they gave me a sedative and began prepping me for surgery. There was nothing for Mike and Jason to do, so I thanked them for being there, told them I'd call in the morning when it was over, and sent them home. By then it was late. I was tired, sedated, and ready to get on with it.

What happened next is hazy; but at some point, the team decided to run X-rays to see what the extent of the damage was. That was when everything changed. I don't remember the X-ray, but I do remember being woken up and told that I was being transferred. They didn't know where—only that I'd be sent to whichever hospital had the next available specialized retinal surgeon. What had changed? No one had expected that the X-rays would reveal that the 3/8" disc of metal (shown in the picture at the beginning of this article) that had caused the injury was still inside my eye—and I had no idea.

For this transfer, an ambulance was the only option. Apparently, there are rules against sedating people and then just sending them off, hoping they arrive safely at the next facility. The ride took about an hour to get me to Washington Hospital Center in DC. And it was another three hours on a gurney in a hallway before I'd be put into a room. Honestly, I didn't care one bit about the wait—the sedatives were working their magic. Early the next morning, I finally met my surgeon. I'd later find out he was a visiting fellow from Georgetown University and something of a rock star in the retinal surgery world. He explained to me that the surgery would take about two hours to remove the disc and that he didn't foresee any problems. But you know what they say—we never see it coming.

At 7:00 p.m., I woke up, groggy and disoriented after nearly eight hours in surgery—and permanently blind in one eye. The metal hadn't just gone into my eye; it had also punctured the back of the globe. The surgery was much more involved than anyone had anticipated. Dr. Mussa had done all that he could, but the damage to both the cornea and the retina was severe.

In the days that followed, I thought that was where the story ended. Guy gets injured. Guy recovers. Life goes on. But, for me, philosophy had entered my life in its own way—through a loss I never saw coming and so many questions to which I just didn't have the answers. *Was this an accident or is there meaning in randomness? Am I still the same person? Why am I okay with all of this? Am I coping well or just in denial?* I really struggled with that last one. But the accident became less about my physical loss of vision and more about how I would now choose to see the world. The great philosophers would later remind me that what lay before me was exactly that: a choice.

I didn't really know where to turn for answers. So, I turned to books. I found myself highlighting passages and making margin notes in books from Plato, Socrates, Seneca, and Kant. One I kept coming back to was Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" found in *The Republic*, in which prisoners sit in the dark, believing the shadows they see are reality, until one of them is forced into the light.[1] At first, he resists. The brightness hurts, and the truth unsettles him. That part stuck with me. As easy as the *seeing* metaphor is to make here, this wasn't about seeing. It was about the discomfort of being shoved into a new reality I didn't ask for. That tension pushed me back into the margins of my books. I didn't have a clear answer, but proof that I was trying to find one was showing up in those notes. And that's where I started to notice a consistency in my questions, highlights, and scribbles. I began shaping them into an outline. Over time, those fragments started forming something rough but deliberate—not answers but proof that I refused to quit looking.

Time has passed, and my depth perception has improved, though it will never completely be normal. The sun can seem just a little too bright sometimes, but I barely even notice anymore. Most importantly, I've come to realize that life doesn't stop when we say, "Hold on!" The big moments that shape us, even if only 3/8" in size, don't arrive with a warning or gentle preparation. They happen in the blink of an eye, without mercy. We never see it coming. *But the jolts that life gives us can be made even harder by the mind.* Seneca put it this way in *Letters from a Stoic*: "We are more often frightened than hurt, and we suffer more from imagination than from reality."[2] This

journey taught me that my injury was only part of the battle; the greater challenge was how I chose to see it.

But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that seeing differently wasn't just about the eye—it was about the mind. In the months that followed, that realization became something larger than recovery—it became study. I found myself wanting to understand why Stoic ideas had resonated so powerfully in the face of loss. What was it in their reasoning that felt like steadiness when everything else was unstable? I began reading more seriously, not to feel better but to think more clearly. What had begun as a search for meaning turned into the disciplined act of learning philosophy.

At first, I turned to the Stoics because they seemed practical. Their words were steady hands in chaos. Seneca and Marcus Aurelius spoke as people who knew the world could change without warning and who believed that reason was not a way to escape misfortune but to stand inside it without losing yourself.[3] I saw myself in that idea. Philosophy wasn't distant—it was a workshop for the mind.

Eventually, I returned to Plato, whose "Allegory of the Cave" had been little more than an abstraction to me before. I started to see it differently. The moment the prisoner steps into the light isn't about enlightenment as comfort—it's about disorientation, the same kind I felt when I realized my sight was gone. I began to think that philosophy isn't about seeing clearly but about learning how to adjust to the brightness of truth when it hurts to look.

As my reading deepened, I noticed how each philosopher offered not answers but methods. Plato questioned perception, Seneca disciplined emotion, and Kant would later force me to confront how much of what I think I "see" is shaped by the mind itself.[4] The accident had been a single, uncontrollable event—but it revealed something profound: that understanding is itself an act of creation.

Today, when I look back, I don't think of philosophy as something I discovered after the accident. It feels more like something the accident revealed—an inclination that was always there, waiting to be called forward. The eye I lost changed how I view the world, but philosophy changed how I interpret it. What began as a wound became a doorway; and through it, I found a discipline that teaches not how to avoid pain but how to use it as light.

What began with a loss of sight has become a new way of seeing, not with 20/20 vision but with one eye open, searching for meaning.

About the Author: Dave Harris is a network engineer, equestrian, and student of philosophy based in Middleburg, Virginia. As an Associate member of the International Society for Philosophical Enquiry, this is his first published essay as he embarks on his exploration of philosophy in print.

NOTES

1. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1992).

2. Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*, trans. Robin Campbell (London, England: Penguin Classics, 2015).

3. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Gregory Hays (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2002).

4. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Ω