My Chiaroscuro Moment

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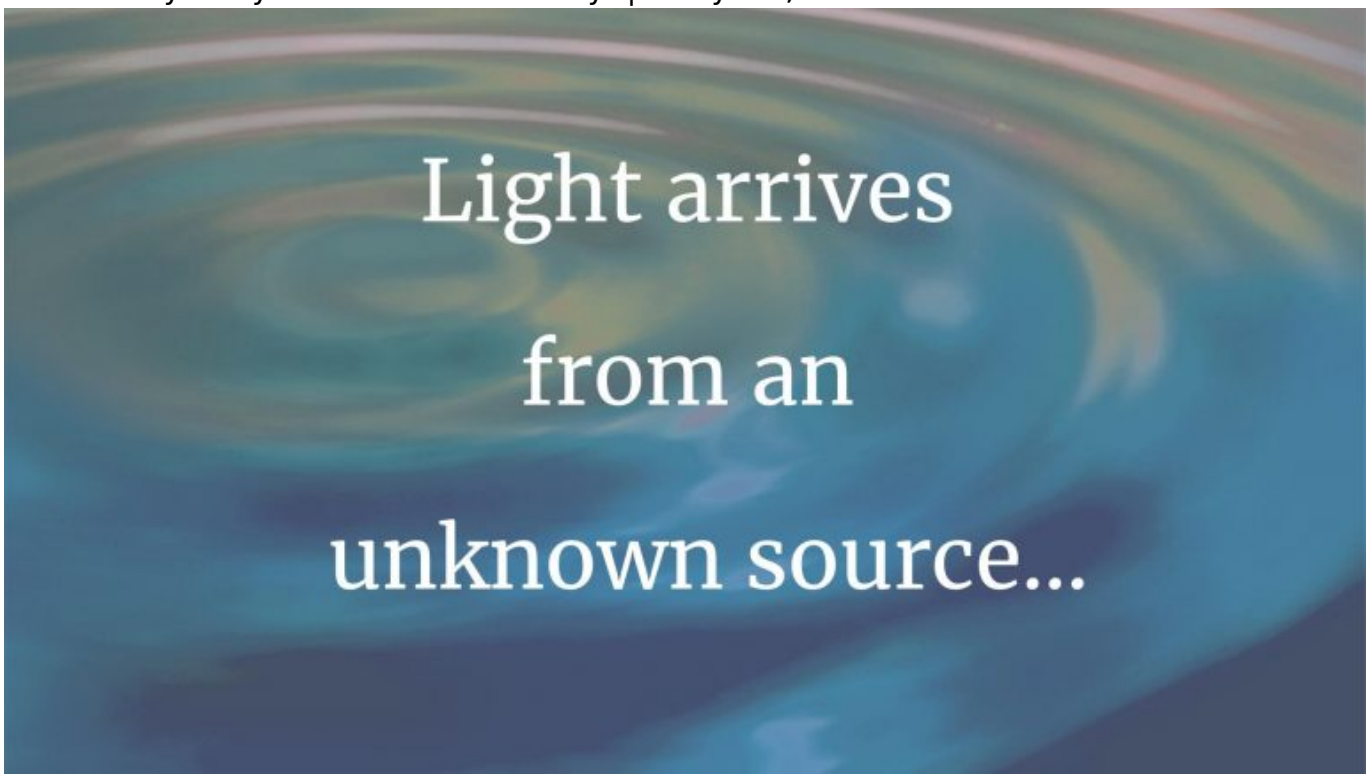

From a young age, I aspired to enter the nursing profession. Beginning my career, in the late 1970s, I scarcely imagined how many facets of health care I'd come to know—from human-subject research to healthcare law and bioethics—or what opportunities my career would bring.

One opportunity came in the early 1980s: I went to Rome to work as a nurse at a university. During that remarkable year, I took advantage of my location to learn more about Baroque art.

Visiting the San Luigi dei Francesi Church, I first saw Caravaggio's cycle of three paintings dedicated to St. Matthew. I fell in love with their beautiful *chiaroscuro*—a technique in which the artist uses bold contrasts between light and darkness to heighten the scene's drama and highlight its important elements. Intriguingly, the light source is often invisible.

Little did I know, gazing at these masterpieces, that I'd one day have a *chiaroscuro* moment of my own.

I spent four decades in health care, and my husband and I raised two daughters. All the while, I enjoyed perfect eyesight—until three years ago, when the vision in my left eye began to get fuzzy. I noticed the change right away: It was a cataract, small but bothersome, and I decided to have it removed.

Cataract surgery is easy, I thought. *I'll squeeze it into my life without any trouble.*

The operation itself wasn't too bad, except for the stifling claustrophobia of the surgical drape sheets piled on top of my head and part of my face. Afterwards, though, I knew that something was wrong. Post-op visual floaters are normal, but mine weren't: they were too numerous, too big and jagged, too inky black.

It became apparent that my surgeon, when implanting my new lens, hadn't completely extracted the old one; instead, he'd pushed portions of it into the back of the eyeball. I would need two more surgeries—one to remove the lens fragments (those jagged floaters)—and one to replace the new lens.

As the reality sank in, so did my sense of fear and helplessness. I'd solved many problems during my four decades in the healthcare system. But now, surveying the complexities of my medical situation, plus the health-insurance maze, the financial drain of more surgeries and the prospect of missing work to attend doctor appointments, I felt overwhelmed.

Still, I drew strength from my husband and daughters, from my large extended family and, in particular, from my dad.

Dad, age eighty-six, had been battling an aggressive cancer. As sick as he was, when I told him about the surgeries, he encouraged me.

"You'll get through them," he said, "and we're all here for you." I took comfort, as so often before, in his loving look of care and concern.

Mentally, I prepared for the surgeries as best I could. Most intimidating was that I had to stay awake during them. But I didn't realize that, during the first one, I would actually *see* the procedure taking place inside my eye. The powerless feeling was awful; the only good thing was watching the despised floaters swirl away.

The second surgery—carried out immediately after the first, with no break from those surgical sheets—was even harder.

When it was finally over, I told myself, *Now the healing can start.* But my relief was short-lived. I learned that my cornea had been damaged by the surgeries, so I needed a corneal transplant.

Far worse was in store: That same week, Dad went into hospice. Three weeks later, he passed away. My whole family suffered our own descent into darkness as our gentle guide was taken from us. Losing Dad made me even more fearful about the upcoming surgery.

If the worst happens, and I lose the sight in that eye, I'll manage, I kept telling myself. But my dread persisted: *Can I handle lying under those sheets again? Will the surgery hurt? What if it doesn't work?*

On the appointed day, I waited apprehensively outside the surgical suite. Then I learned something unexpected from my surgeon.

"The cornea is from a donor who was twenty-three years old," she said kindly. "It has been prepared, and we're ready."

That was the one thing I'd ever know about my donor: He or she was about the same age as my daughters.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, this was my *chiaroscuro* moment—a gentle, welcome beam of light brightening my inner darkness.

I felt too overwhelmed to pay it much attention. But while recovering after the surgery, I began to think more about my donor—a young person whose life had ended too soon, but who had still found a way to give back to the world. Each time I reflected on this, the mysterious inner light grew stronger.

As my eyesight got better, I felt more and more able to envision the unfathomable generosity of the young person—and likely the family—who'd said yes to organ donation so that I could be healed.

I embraced a poignant realization: I'd received a huge gift from someone who had never expected gratitude or appreciation in return. My life was illuminated by a sense of grateful wonder that I'd never known before.

It has been about three years since the transplant—and, unbelievably, my eyesight is nearly perfect again.

Revisiting Rome recently, I made a point of going to see Caravaggio's Matthew paintings. I wanted to savor once more the way the light from an unknown source falls on the apostle's face and highlights what is important in these scenes.

As before, I feel awed and humbled by the beauty of these paintings. They seem lovelier than ever to me, perhaps because now I see them with another's vision—that of my donor, the unknown source of light illuminating what is important in my life.