



A tale of
celebrity tumors

Liz
Taylor's
Brain

Elizabeth Taylor's Brain

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by Michael Finley

In January 1997 I suffered a stroke caused by a brain tumor called a meningioma and considered, because of its relatively slow rate of growth, to be benign. And it was benign, but it was not my best friend. "Is not," I should perhaps say, because it's still up there, making odd pinging sounds and pressing against my language center.

Benign, but a big deal at the time, and a very upsetting episode for me. I thought I had reached the end of my little journey among us. I thought I was going to leave my children fatherless, and I hated

myself for doing that to them.

But it was also a very interesting time, because tumors inside the head are so diverse and do so many different kinds of bad things. I liked learning about them, and I became something of a brain tumor junkie for a while, absorbing what I could about brain tumors, surfing the net for brain tumor sites, meeting other people who had them, and eventually pen to paper and writing about the topic.

The celebrity factor

It was when I began to write that I discovered that, in America, disease and celebrity are weirdly intertwined. A friend, Jim Thornton, suggested I write an article for USA Today on how I told my two young kids about my condition. So I sent the features editor a proposal, with high hopes of acceptance. What I got instead was a rejection letter with an odd twist.

"We very much liked your essay," the editor replied by e-mail. "But I'm afraid we have to say no. There are so many people with different ailments, and they are all so

convincing, that we have made the editorial decision to only feature first-hand accounts of people who are already in the public eye."

In other words, USA Today only runs health stories by celebrities. A story about Mike Finley's brain tumor rated at best only a C, no matter how bad the tumor was or how good the writing was. Whereas, a story about Nicole Kidman's brain tumor (she doesn't have one, as far as I know; I am merely using her as an example) has terrific reader potential. I can even write it as a mathematical formula:

$$\text{PATHOS} + \text{PATHOLOGY} = \text{POPULARITY}$$

PATHOLOGY

I was taken aback. No, the heck with that, I was pissed off. What a world, I thought, that requires the additional juice of fame to call attention to a story that is already paying the price of life and death.

What if I were dying (in fact, I was pretty sure I was), and I came to you and said, please hear my story, and you said to me, "I'd love to hear your very important life and death story, only there's one problem: you aren't anyone of note."

Well, that's how it is in America. If you stop and think about it, this may be why we have celebrities: so that we don't have to treat one another as individuals (there are too many of us), so we appoint identifiable stand-ins for certain points of view. In a sense, the celebrity becomes the cause, as a kind of shorthand. Thus Jerry Lewis for MD, Charlton Heston for Alzheimer's, Princess Di for minefields, Bob Dole for erectile dysfunction.

I was bitter about USA Today's policy, and I'll let you in on a secret. One reason I wanted to talk about brain tumors was because I thought I finally had an issue people had to care about, one that could make me a bit of a celebrity.

"Hey, isn't that that guy with the thing in his head?"

"He talks pretty good for a guy whose brain shares skull space with a malignant tumor."

"A front row table for you, Mr. Finley! With your usual, four Advils and a glass of mint iced tea!"

Sigh.

The greatest of them all

My tumor wouldn't go away (it's inoperable), but neither would the

issue of celebrity.

One night I flicked on the TV, and there was Barbara Walters. It was the week immediately following her ratings smash interview with Monica Lewinsky. The whole world tuned in to that broadcast -- which seemed pretty vapid to me, a woman who had become a celebrity for performing fellatio on a president.

So the next week, Barbara knew she had to come up with someone just as good, just as in-demand, as Monica, in order to show that Barbara Walters made Monica Lewinsky, and not the other way around.

The follow-up guest had to be someone glamorous, world-renowned, yet still sympathetic. Barbara chose the greatest celebrity of them all -- Elizabeth Taylor.

Madonna and Marilyn and Monica would eat their hearts out to monopolize, as Taylor has, the public eye through six decades of gossip, crisis, Egyptian beehive stardust and violet-eyed humanity.

She is not just a queen of multiple facelifts. She is someone who has actually suffered, quite a great deal, in fact, and she speaks with the authentic vocabulary of suffering.

The brain tumor is the latest of

Taylor's health problems. She had both hips replaced in 1995, then required additional surgery because one leg wound up shorter than the other. A month before that operation, she was hospitalized with an irregular heartbeat.

In 1990 she nearly died after suffering severe respiratory problems. And way back in 1983, Taylor went public about a 35-year addiction to painkillers and sleeping pills. Taylor attributed her abuse on a series of spinal surgeries and a history of back, neck and leg pain, going all the way back to her National Velvet days.

She had surgery in 1997 in London to have the meningioma -- same tumor I have -- scooped out.

"I've been pronounced dead, not able to breathe, and I went to the tunnel with the white light, all of that," she has said. "It sounds unreal. I feel kind of crazy when I talk about it.

"I have almost died several times. So I have a great appreciation of every day I wake up breathing. Colors, different tastes, different smells -- I appreciate it all on a different level."

Her public suffering gives her, out

of all the talk-show wanabees queuing up for their moment in the bright lights, street credibility. The fact that she has suffered, that her body has caused her pain and humiliation, makes her more of a person for us.

The Barbara Walters interview would have been a terrific opportunity for Taylor to pause, and explain, through her spokespeople, if necessary, what a meningioma was and what it meant for her.

But she didn't do that. She talked generally about her difficulties, but avoided specifics about her craniotomy.

Online furor

That night I logged on to one of the brain tumor chat rooms on the Internet. Everyone was abuzz about miss Taylor's appearance, and the verdict wasn't good. They were looking for a celebrity to embrace their cause and call attention to the problems they were all having, so they can raise money to research more successful tumor diagnostics and therapies. But Taylor ducked the challenge.

"Here we have a celebrity of the first magnitude," wrote Anne. "And a great chance to do some education

about brain tumors, and she won't discuss it. Thanks heaps, Liz."

"I understand some people from the American Brain Tumor Association asked Taylor to speak up about it. Miss Taylor's office informed them that she has decided not to make a big deal about brain tumors, because she's already so identified with AIDS," wrote Terry. Terry knows everything, especially about Liz Taylor. "AIDS is so important to her. She doesn't want that compromised."

"I disagree," wrote Marie. "I think it's all for our consumption. Being a spokesperson for AIDS makes her seem like an angel of show business. Whereas, actually having a brain tumor is a threat to her career. It harms her image, and makes people think of her in a way she doesn't want, something unglamorous. She doesn't want people to think of her that way. So she bailed. Either that or Liz, about whom we know virtually everything there is to know, has suddenly become private about her life, for reasons of personal modesty."

"What is it," wrote Marty, "that keeps famous people from wanting to acknowledge their brain tumors? Is it a desire for privacy, or fear of scary publicity, or not feeling up to

the demands of being a spokesperson?"

"They're just scared shitless and feeling sick as hell," Nona wrote.

"They see their lives going down the toilet, they've been healthy as horses all their lives, and don't think the power they have, as celebrities, to reach out and help other people, will help them in any way."

A list of the sufferers

That was how people on the listserver decided to put together a list of celebrity brain tumors, famous people other than Elizabeth Taylor who have had brain tumors. As a writer, I was asked to compile the suggestions and say a little something about each one.

Show business provided the lion's share of stories.

For openers, there's Roddy McDowell, a good friend of Taylor's, whose career spanned from Lassie to Planet of the Apes, who died of a brain tumor in 1999.

Sandy Duncan, of Peter Pan and Wheat Thins fame, is a survivor.

Susan Hayward, nominated for an Oscar for her performance in *I Want to Live!*, died of a brain tumor in 1975.

Silent film vamp Pola Negri, born Apalonia Chalupec, died of a brain tumor, but not until she had lived 98 years.

Bert Convy, actor and 70's game show host (*Win Lose Or Draw*, among others), passed away from a brain tumor in 1991.

But Nell Carter, comedienne and singer, beat the odds and survived hers.

George Gershwin, perhaps America's greatest composer, died in 1937 of a brain tumor.

Pat Paulsen, the deadpan onetime Smothers Brothers sidekick, and oft-time presidential candidate (slogan: "We Can't Stand Pat") died of metastatic brain cancer in 1997.

Reggae star Bob Marley of the Wailers also died of a metastatic brain tumor, at age 36, in 1981.

French film director Francois Truffaut (*Jules and Jim*, *The 400 Blows*, *The Last Metro*) died in 1984 of a brain tumor.

Ten years ago, Dirk Benedict, star of *Battlestar Galactica* and several other TV shows, was suffering from a so-called incurable cancer. He claims to have cured himself through a microbotic/macrobotic

diet. He wrote a book about his experience, *Confessions of a Kamikaze Cowboy*.

Harris Barton was a star player with the San Francisco 49ers. He is active today in the National Brain Tumor Foundation, sponsoring an annual walk around Angel Island, a State Park in San Francisco Bay.

The strange coincidence of the deaths of two Soviet cosmonauts in August have raised some eyebrows and some questions: Are the Soviets having problems with their space program that they're trying to shroud in secrecy as they have in the past?

The brain tumor deaths of two Soviet cosmonauts within a few weeks of one another in 1988 were so improbable, that at first their deaths went unreported. Rumors of unusual training regimens, or events in space, were never answered. No explanation has ever been given for the extraordinary unlikelihood of the two deaths.

Otto Klemperer (1885-1973) partly paralyzed following an operation for a brain tumor in 1939, Klemperer often had to conduct in a sitting position. (His son was Werner Klemmerer, Colonel Klink on Hogan's Heroes.)

William Vaughn Moody. American poet and playwright (1869-1910) whose mystical and dignified work was considered a sign of unfulfilled promise upon his early death.

Anthony Burgess, the British novelist, critic, and man of letters, found out he was going to die in 1958, so he wrote a novel to pay off his family's mortgage. The book (*Enderby*) sold, so he wrote 30 more, including *A Clockwork Orange*. He lived until a brain tumor took him down in 1993.

Right in the midst of our compilation, the film critic Gene Siskel died. He had acknowledged being treated for a tumor several months before, but had not released any information about it, preferring to go on with his business. For this reason many of us assumed he had a "chronic treatment" tumor like my relatively accessible meningioma.

When he died rather suddenly, no information was given out to the press. Still, rumors surfaced. One of our group believed he had a glioblastoma multiforme, frontal lobe, the prognosis for which is usually one to two years.

Politics, perhaps because of the excellent health benefits, has its share of survivors. Sen. Joseph

Biden had an arteriovenous malformation, which acts much like a tumor. Senator Arlen Specter from Pennsylvania had a meningioma treated with Gamma Knife, a kind of radiation.

Latino Congressman Frank Tejeda of Texas died of a brain tumor in 1997.

And then there was political operative Lee Atwater. George Bush's campaign hatchet man in the 1988 campaign, Atwater had a reputation for being brilliant as a tactician, pleasant as a friend, and brutal as an opponent. The notorious Willie Horton TV ads, blaming Michael Dukakis for letting a murderer out of prison on furlough so he could go on another murdering and raping rampage, were the product of his perhaps already tumorous brain. For this he was accused of playing the race card, whipping up fears of black crime to capture white votes. He was also a fair rock and blues guitarist, performing at victory celebrations and other events with the likes of B.B. King.

I read that when Atwater was dying, he sent messages to people he had bashed in campaigns. Now that he was suffering, he understood better the pain his tactics caused, and he

begged them all for forgiveness. Many made the trip to his bedside, and Atwater tearfully apologized to all that did.

Many of us in the online forum thought the accusations of cellphones causing brain tumors made it likely that the ranks of celebrity business basin tumors would soon swell. But so far, it hasn't.

Finally, the world of sports yields a long list of survivors and victims.

NFL founder Pete Rozelle died of a brain tumor in 1990.

Lyle Alzado, NFL linebacker and B-actor, died of a brain tumor in 1989. Alzado was criticized for steroid abuse as a football player - which he steadfastly denied, until he was diagnosed with terminal cancer. It was an object lesson in hubris seeing this giant of a man reduced to tears and despair by the shortcut he took to fame and fortune.

Josh Gibson, slugging catcher of the Negro Leagues, sometimes called the "black Babe Ruth" died from a brain tumor in 1947.

Screwballer Dan Quisenberry, the witty submarine pitcher for the Kansas City Royals, was diagnosed with a glioblastoma multiforme in

late 1997 and had 80-90% of it resected. But it was too much for him, and by the winter of 1998 he gave it up.

Another member of the Royals, manager Dick Howser, succumbed to a malignant brain tumor in 1986.

Fritz Von Erich, who invented the "evil wrestler" in professional wrestling in the 1960s and '70s, along with a handful of evil wrestling holds, such as the "camel clutch" and "the claw," died of a brain tumor in early 1998.

Tim Gullickson, American doubles champion with his brother John, saddened the tennis world with his rapid deterioration and death in 1995.

Eric Liddell, the British runner celebrated in the Oscar-winning movie Chariots of Fire, who won a gold medal in the 400-metre run and a bronze in the 200 meters at the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris. Asked the secret of his sprinting speed, Liddell replied, "When I run, I feel God's pleasure inside me."

The world of business yielded relatively few examples. Dawn Steele, the head of Columbia Pictures, and described by some as the "most powerful woman in

Hollywood," died after a two-year fight with a brain tumor in 1997.

Gerry Pencer, the founder and CEO of Cott Corp., the 4th largest beverage company in the world, and the company whose formulas routinely beat Pepsi and Coke in blind taste tests, died in early 1998 of a glioblastoma multiforme tumor.

300 names

Our celebrity brain tumor list took on a life of its own. In all, we culled nearly 300 names of celebrities who had survived a brain tumor, died from one, or had a loved one die of one. Surely, we thought from all these celebrity names, it would be possible to select a survivor spokesperson for the brain tumor cause.

Liz Taylor might not want us, but surely someone on our list -- someone living -- would. Right?

For several weeks the e-mails flew and the panel was very excited. Everyone had a favorite candidate spokesperson. We even held an election. The thinking was that a straw poll conducted on the Internet would be enough to persuade someone famous to reorganize his or her life and spend the lion's share of the rest of it speaking out on our

behalf.

But as people added names to the list, the concept began to blur. We began to assume that whoever we selected from the list would be happy to take on the role of spokesperson, feel honored to be asked.

Then I saw the following note, from Jeanette, a glioma patient who lost a lover a year earlier to metastatic brain cancer.

"Folks, we've forgotten what we set out to do. Here we are deputizing the Association to play pin the tail on the donkey with some as-yet-undesignated movie star.

"Sure, it would be great to have Elizabeth Taylor on our side. But don't you think these things rise of their own accord? If Liz Taylor wanted to focus on increasing public awareness of brain tumors, wouldn't she have done so?

"And if we tap someone famous to be our official spokesman, what have we accomplished? Won't it strike people as false, like we're conceding that our lives don't matter, just the lives of the stars?

"I keep thinking of Rebecca. For me, she will always be my spokesman, about brain tumors, and about living

and dying. She didn't need a celebrity speaking for her. She was so strong, and so clear.

"My life has been changed forever, and for the better, by some of the people I have met in this group who aren't with us any more. Tyler, Cheska, Zuzu, Amy, Mary, Rebecca, Mike, Keith, Scott, Matt, David, Carol, and many more.

"They weren't famous like Liz Taylor. But each of them brought commitment, courage, dignity, humor, and humanity to the fight.

"If our cause is ever to really be heard and acknowledged, I doubt it will be because a Liz Taylor who stepped up and came to our rescue. She had her chance, and chose to keep silent. Meanwhile, how many of our friends at this site have gone to their deaths trying to help me to live?

"Come on, people, think. If we are really good, if we are really communicators, if we really know what we want to say, and say it in the best words we can find, there's no way our message will be ignored.

"I don't want some movie star mouthing my dying words for me. Tell Elizabeth Taylor thanks, but no thanks."



About the Author

Michael Finley researches and writes about a host of topics relating to culture and change. His website “Future Shoes” is a treasure trove of articles and essays about what we are becoming. Mike’s book with Harvey Robbins, *The New Why Teams Don’t Work*, won the Booz-Allen & Hamilton Global Business Book Award for “Best Management Book, 1995, The Americas.” Mike enjoys the distinction of being named one of a handful of “Masters of the Wired World” in 1998 by Financial Times Press. Other nominees include Arthur C. Clarke, Nicholas Negroponte, Alvin Toffler, Charles Handy, Al Gore, Tony Blair, and Jim Barksdale.



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