

Let's Play: Celebrity Brain Tumors

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by Mike Finley

Was I excited. USA Today was looking at a piece I had written, about a tumor growing in my brain, and from the first conversation I had with the editor, they seemed really serious. USA Today – the newspaper for the rest of us. I imagined the whole USA reading my story – today. I was one lucky guy, all right.

But then I got an email from them.

"We very much liked your essay," the editor wrote. "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."

I have a brain tumor, so the words took a few moments to register. But this was it in a nutshell:, USA Today only wants health stories if they're by or about celebrities. A story about Mike Finley's brain rated at best a C, no matter how bad the tumor was or how good the writing was. (And it was excellent!) Whereas, a story about Nicole Kidman's brain tumor (she doesn't have one, as far as I know) has terrific reader potential.

Let me express this truth as a mathematical formula:

PATHOS

+ = PUBLICATION

POPULARITY

Was I taken aback? Hell, I was pissed off. What a world, I thought, that requires the additional juice of fame to call attention to a story that already requires (maybe) that the writer die.

It's like, upon approaching the courtroom of public opinion, being prevented from entering by a bouncer. You want to point to your head and the little beastie gnawing

through your intellect inside, and the guy in the sunglasses is sympathetic, but he's got a job to do.

It's like, you want to confide to a friend something that is happening to you, something that is a matter of life and death. You say, "Please listen to my story," and the friend replies, "Hey, I'd love to hear your story, only there's a problem: you aren't anyone anyone gives two hoots about."

Let me give you the back-story. In January 1999 I was doing situps in my upstairs office when I felt something happen inside my head, from the exertion. It felt like my brain was melting.

It felt serious, and it was. Within a week I was diagnosed as having a brain tumor called a meningioma, about the size of a croissant, inside my left ear. This "benign" but unpleasant fellow had been there a long time, perhaps 20 years. It took all that time to cause a major vein in my head to dry up and snap off (medical term: *thrombose*). My moment of unbelievable pain was the snapping-off part. My tumor, doctors informed me, was inoperable – too close to the language center of the brain to risk going in. But, with any luck – cross fingers – maybe it will just sit there. So far, that is what it has done.

Life very rapidly became very educational. I read up on brain tumors. I talked to dozens of survivors, wanting to be one myself. And I began subscribing to an email-based listservers, or online bulletin board, on which people like me, with things in their heads, discuss their harrowing experiences, their surgeries, their outcomes -- and sometimes their deaths.

Think it can't happen to you? Well, every year, 350,000 Americans are diagnosed with brain tumors, so you may be a winner and you don't know it. No one knows what causes them. There are many kinds. My kind, a meningioma, is the least bad of a grisly lot. Every year 15,000 of us die.

But you never hear about them. There is a National Brain Tumor Month (May), but it hasn't caught on as a celebration, perhaps because of the limited gift-giving options. There's a lot to know, but not many of us know very much. And some of us aren't very good at knowing things any more.

So you have the celestial indignity of being struck down. Then the more mundane indignity of USA Today telling you you didn't make the cut. Vaqueros, that's how it is in America today. But I understand their point. Why do celebrities exist? So we don't have to pay attention to one another. There's just too doggone many of us. Instead we appoint proxies, identifiable stand-ins for certain points of view. Thus Jerry Lewis for MD,

Charlton Heston for Alzheimer's, Sally Struthers for Christian Children, Bob Dole for erectile dysfunction.

Celebrities are like Congresspersons, there's one for about every half million of the rest of us. The bottom line is: they matter, and we don't.

So I was bitter about USA Today's policy, but I'll let you in on a dark 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. I wanted to matter, too! The thing in my head was supposed to be a ticket to fame. If I mattered, maybe having the thing there wouldn't be so bad.

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

"Talks pretty good for a guy whose brain shares skull space with a bolus of runamok cell metabolism."

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

Sigh. I returned, disconsolate, to my friends at the brain tumor listserver. "They didn't want my story because I'm not famous," I said.

"You're famous to me," said Dora. (Dora, I adore you.)

"Well, maybe they're right, Cheryl said. "Maybe that's just how it is, and we should select a celebrity spokesperson, like those other diseases," Cheryl said.

And so began an online scheme to locate someone who was famous, attractive, had a brain tumor, and could still talk, and coerce that person into being the hood ornament for our malady. It was no simple task. Most of the really good brain tumor victims reveal their condition only in the final throes.

Some of the best are long gone: comedian and presidential candidate Pat Paulsen, conductor Otto Klemperer; reggae star Bob Marley; political schemer Lee Atwater; Cornelius from *Planet of the Apes*, Roddy McDowell; film critic Gene Siskel; actress Susan Hayward; NFL founder Pete Rozelle and player Lyle Alzado; CIA director William Casey; Negro League slugger Josh Gibson, modern-day screwballer Dan Quisenberry; Royals and Yankees manager Dick Howser and Phillies reliever Tug

Magraw of the “Ya Gotta Believe” Mets; director Francois Truffaut; *Rhapsody in Blue* composer George Gershwin; *Frankenstein* author Mary Shelley.

Wouldn't Mary Shelley have been great, though? That Elsa Lanchester hairdo is how my tumor feels to me.

Some, like Nell Carter, survived brain tumors, then succumbed to something else. Some of the living are famous, but not quite famous enough, or famous but not entirely attractive. Sandy Duncan is kind of long in the tooth. Onetime liberal Arlen Specter (R-Pennsylvania) has been neutered by his Neocon colleagues. Joe Biden (D-Delaware) is likewise partisan – and his venous malformation is tumor-like, but not actually a tumor.

The strange coincidence of the brain tumor deaths of two Russian cosmonauts a couple years ago raised eyebrows and questions: Are the Russians having problems with their space program that they're trying to shroud in secrecy, the way they did in the past? In any event, dead cosmonauts make poor spokespersons.

Many of us in the online forum thought the recurring accusations of cellphones causing brain tumors made it likely that the ranks of celebrity business basin tumors would soon swell. And if not the stars themselves, then their agents. So far, it hasn't.

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.

One name of the 300 stood out, bathed in glamour, drama, and stagecraft: Elizabeth Taylor. If you could get Elizabeth Taylor, you didn't need Sandy Duncan or Arlen Specter, right? She is not just a queen of multiple facelifts. 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 declared. " 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 wannabees queuing up for their moment in the bright lights, street cred. The fact that she has suffered, that her body has caused her pain and humiliation, makes her more of a person for us.

So our little group wrote her a letter, inviting her to be our spokesperson. We pictured her sitting on a shiny divan with Barbara Walters, maybe wearing one of those turbans she likes now, explaining what a meningioma was and what it meant for her. It would be great.

Only, she never replied. Taylor ducked the challenge. Our group was crushed.

"Here we had a celebrity of the first magnitude," wrote Anne. "And a great chance to do some education about brain tumors, and she wouldn'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 about Liz Taylor. "AIDS is so important to her. She doesn't want that compromised."

"I disagree," wrote Marie, who once explained that her meningioma seemed to make her more analytical. "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

harms her image, and makes people think of her as 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, suddenly became private about the least private life of her century.

And that was it. Within a few months I stopped subscribing to the listserver. I found that, when I spoke to people with more serious brain tumors, it freaked me out, and made me think my own tumor was more serious than it was. The web is a health paranoiac's hell-zone, filled with unfiltered suggestions about everything that just might be going wrong. If you're at all suggestible, or feeling vulnerable, you probably oughtn't to go there.

Every now and then I see some celeb's face peering up at me from the checkout line. It's funny, I think of all of them having things in their heads. And they don't know it! Paris Hilton has one. The guy from Creed has one. Kevin Costner, he has a really big one. But you wouldn't know it from those rueful, over the shoulder glances.

Guys, when you find out, if I am still around, call me. I do ghost work, too.

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