

WALK THE WALK AND TALK THE TALK.

A PERSONAL REFLECTION ON LIFE AND LARYNGECTOMY

Clifford Hughes

Abstract: In this article, Clifford Hughes, singer, teacher, preacher, reflects on the experience of living through cancer of the larynx, and thus losing the voice which had been fundamental to his various careers. He writes of the pain of loss and the challenge of change, but also of the joy of finding that a life can be rebuilt, with help from loved ones and friends, from health care professionals, and from God.

Keywords: Cancer of the larynx, laryngectomy.

Introduction

In the course of my life, I have enjoyed three voice-centred careers – as a teacher (Headmaster and Founder of Beaconhurst, Bridge of Allan and Head of Loretto Nippers); as a singer, called by the Scotsman ‘Scotland’s foremost lyric tenor’ at the 1974 Edinburgh Festival; and as Minister of St Mary’s Collegiate Church, Haddington. Then, voice cancer struck. This is my story.

Walk the walk and talk the talk.

But the time came when I could do neither. Under my blue cassock and Geneva gown, which I wore at St Mary’s, I was supported by two exceedingly arthriticky knees. An orthopaedic specialist, scanning X rays, commented laconically ‘You’ve worn away most of the cartilage. Your bones are grinding together...you need knee replacements.’ Certainly, by lunchtime each Sunday after two services, they were agony!

In the meantime, something more sinister had crept up on me. Gradually I was becoming a hoarse whisperer! For a preacher, formerly a professional singer and a teacher, this was seriously bad news. With cancer accounting for three of my family, I was clearly genetically programmed to go the same way, and the young doctor’s diagnosis couldn’t have been

more clear. ‘You have laryngeal carcinoma... a tumour on your larynx...voice cancer.’

After a month’s radiotherapy, ending on Christmas Eve, there was no celebratory festive champers for me; all I wanted was another swig of liquid morphine.

A laryngectomy operation was scheduled and I woke up afterwards in the intensive care unit of St John’s Hospital, literally voiceless. In this operation, one’s neck tubing is rearranged so that one cannot breathe through the nose and mouth, but instead by means of a stoma, a small aperture (a wee nostril) in the neck. Talk the talk? I couldn’t even whisper. Kathleen, my wife, and I held hands and wept. ‘There is a time to weep’ says the Philosopher in Ecclesiastes 3:4. Our time to weep had indeed come.

Loss, Acceptance, and Beyond

Looking back over five years, I can confirm from my own experience that I was travelling along the route mapped by the late eminent counsellor and psychotherapist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. The loss of my voice was truly a bereavement. My life had been voice centred – as teacher, singer and preacher. Suddenly, there was nothing. I passed through the denial stage, when I kept saying to myself ‘this cannot be true!’ Come to think of it, I still often waken in the morning and think ‘It was just a dreadful

dream.' I experienced the anger, which expresses itself in the 'why me?' question. I did my share of bargaining. I encountered depression, perhaps even despair. At this stage, I thought that my life was effectively over. I gave away my books; I threw out lots of personal ephemera; I binned my sermons. But then, at last, I did reach acceptance of the reality of my situation, and with that, came the need to get on with life.

But now, I would add a sixth reaction. Celebration! The apostle Paul wrote to the young church of Philippi 'In whatever state I find myself, I have learned therewith to be content.' On another occasion, to the church in Corinth, he speaks of 'rejoicing' in his infirmity. Theologians have long argued about the nature of the 'thorn in the flesh to torment me' which Paul spoke about. Whatever it was, troublesome as it was, Paul learned to live with it, and even to triumph over it.

There is certainly no future in following the example of Kate, Tam O'Shanter's wife, the 'sulky, sullen dame...nursing her wrath to keep it warm.' Bitterness is a cancer of the personality, and it is terminally destructive. Paul's recipe has been the answer for me. Contentment, rejoicing – in a word, celebration.

The Healing Power of Laughter

How did I arrive at this stage of emotional evolution? Quite early on, my wife Kathleen coaxed and encouraged me to grapple with the technical problems of a new way of speaking, and we soon learned that laughter was 'the best medicine'. It was hugely therapeutic for me, psychologically and physically, and so it was too for others with whom I came into contact. There had been a time to weep; now it was time to laugh!

Let me quote a poignant example. A former pupil of mine, by this time a young mum in her mid 30's, had died of breast cancer. Her parents asked me to share in what they were bravely determined would be a celebration of her life. Her husband, family and friends gathered in the Kirk of Kenmore on the banks of Loch Tay, where she had been married. How could we possibly celebrate when we were so desperately sad? I had been asked to read Psalm 121 in the Authorised Version. But I had a big problem. Like most laryngectomees, I have trouble aspirating

the letter 'h'. I'd make a marvellous Eliza Doolittle : ' in 'ertford, 'ereford and 'ampshire, 'urricanes 'ardly 'appen'! I decided to come clean and share with the congregation the nature of my problem – adding that it was a source of considerable amusement to me and to my family.

Then I launched into..

'I will lift up mine eyes unto the 'ills,

from whence cometh my 'elp?

My 'elp cometh from the Lord

Who made 'eaven and earth...' and so on.

Tears of sadness turned to tears of laughter. My communication impairment had enabled the folk gathered there to move a step forward. The service that afternoon became truly a celebration of the life of a young woman, with joy and loving memories.

Therapist, family and friends had all provided encouragement and support. And, as a special bonus, several ladies in the congregation took me aside and confided that they thought my new voice 'rather sexy'! Having been a boy soprano at Southwark Cathedral, an alto in the world famous King's College Chapel Choir, Cambridge, and a freelance tenor on the oratorio and recital circuit, I have now become a Chaliapin-esque bass! How many men are as privileged – to be a vocal quartet in one lifetime, albeit one voice at a time. I could, after all, talk the talk.

Walking the Walk

What about the Walk? Two knee joint replacements have returned me to the pain free fluency of movement that I enjoyed as a young teacher who ran about enthusiastically coaching schoolboy rugby, and who took girls and boys on hill walking expeditions. A text from the prophet Isaiah came to mind; 'Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing.' At my age, I'm not as frisky as a young stag, but I've made it to the top of the Lomond Hills, and have enjoyed walking and cycling holidays in France with my new knees. I can, once again, walk the walk and talk the talk.

With a little help from my Friends

And is all this the answer to prayer? Every second Saturday in May, St Mary's is the locus for an inspirational ecumenical pilgrimage which concludes with prayer for healing. Because it attracts many

Catholics and Episcopalians, a group of vociferous ultra-protestant dissident voices would be raised each year outside the church, led by the redoubtable Pastor Jack Glass. Despite our theological differences we would chat together amicably before the service, and Jack- aware of my illness-promised to pray for me. Did he know that *he* was suffering from terminal cancer? I had prayer from other sources too. In the church I was privileged to welcome Archbishop (now Cardinal) Keith O'Brien, who, as I later learned, sent out a diocesan letter urging his Catholic congregations to pray for me. Closer to home, I was surrounded by the prayer support of my family, my friends, and the folk of St Mary's. What an awesome rainbow coalition of prayer!

But, as William Cowper's hymn puts it 'God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform', and I would also attribute my 'miraculous' recovery to the therapeutic value of laughter and to the professionalism and skill, the good humour and TLC of consultants and surgeons, doctors and nurses, physio and speech therapists and ancillary staff in every NHS

hospital in which I have been treated. And I've done the rounds; Roodlands, Haddington, the City, Western General, RIE. St John's in Livingston, Ninewells in Dundee, and Perth Royal Infirmary. I also attend the 'Lary' club, known as 'Chinwags' at the Vic (the hospital, not the pub) in Kirkcaldy.

In Conclusion

Nowadays, there is no shortage of carping criticism and lip-smacking lust for litigation. But from my perspective, I say let's thank God for our precious NHS which performs miracles of healing hour by hour, day by day. It has certainly restored to me my mobility and my volubility...I can again walk the walk and talk the talk.

Clifford Hughes has enjoyed a varied career as head teacher, singer and minister. Since his retirement from St. Mary's Collegiate Church, Haddington, he has become 'an encourager' of others who, like himself, are living with laryngectomy.