

Handling Life's Challenges: Brain Tumor and Depression Work Talk

Flyer text: Dale Murrish will speak about his experiences with brain cancer, diagnosed in 2003, and the clinical depression which followed it.

The best advice we got was from a fellow GM engineer who had the same kind of brain tumor five years before: hit the cancer with all the tools in your arsenal: conventional medicine, alternative medicine, spiritual, diet, exercise, music etc.

Dale is grateful to God for another 11 years of life, and for the support he got from his family, friends & GM coworkers. Later he fought the depression with a slightly different set of tools. His presentation will deal with the sovereignty of God in suffering, grief and other painful circumstances of life.

Each area of resources has its strengths and limitations, and it's up to the individual and his/her patient advocate to navigate through the many available options. This is a serious topic, but people should come away encouraged.

Thank you to Carly Savickas for inviting me to speak as part of the GM Lifesteps program. And thank you all very much for coming. There are feedback forms on the tables and question cards if you have a question. Those attending on-line can ask questions too at the end.

June 24, 2015, Storms, Tools and Monuments – Giving Thanks to God

Today's talk is about how to handle life's challenges. I will focus on the **tools** used to fight a couple of serious **storms** no one wants to face, and looking back on the many answered prayers and seeming coincidences, the **monuments** to God's faithfulness to me and my family. We all face challenges and don't have control over the cards we are dealt sometimes. It's up to us how we play those cards.

Slide 2: Biography

A bit about my background, for several reasons. It's context for why disability retirement at age 44 was not a good option for me. It's also to make life easier for my boss when I hopefully do retire in another ten years, and to show some internal engine parts for those who might not be familiar with them.

I've been part of the USA Melting Pot club since 2011. To help inspire young people, we have our speakers give pro-sports style biographies as they talk about their countries of origin or hobbies. My first hometown is NW Indiana, 30 miles from Chicago. Wired to be an engineer, the natural choice was Purdue University, Indiana's land grant school like Michigan State or Iowa

State. About half the students study engineering or agriculture. I got to coop at Caterpillar and try out five different work assignments while in school, and go on a bike tour of Europe in 1981 instead of summer school. When I graduated in 1982, the most interesting job offer I had was to work on a finite element analysis of the tibia with and without a knee prosthesis with Professor Ben Hillberry and be a teaching assistant for a sophomore machine design class. I turned professional in 1984.

Slide 3: Work? Work. (2 word story)

Wired to be a mechanical design engineer, I was recruited by Purdue graduate Max Freeman. When asked describe my ideal job, I said I'd like to design and analyze my own parts, basically one of the job openings in his Advanced Engine Group. Our charter was to design two new engines per year. My first major project was the redesign of the 1.9L Saturn crankshaft to a new bore and stroke: 82x90 mm from the original 76x105. This is a souvenir from that project, a quarter scale cast aluminum version of the lost foam nodular iron crankshaft.

I've had an interesting career, working as a Design Engineer on cylinder blocks, crankshafts, & balance shafts. I got to design the piston pin for the SGE (Small Gas Engine) engine family, now in the 2016 Chevy Malibu. I've also worked on the Malibu's 1.5L Turbo crankshaft, which weighs 11 kg compare to 16 kg in the 2.5L naturally aspirated engine it replaces.

Slide 4: Work? Work. Old & New

Yesterday Michael Olesch of Mahle called with the news he is retiring at the end of the month. We worked together during the Piston Resource Center days in the early 90s. Mahle is one of several good suppliers I've had the privilege of working with over the years. I am the third generation to use those drafting tools. I've had fun designing several piston pins, and it would be easier to spend a half hour telling you how to take 5 or 10 grams out of a 100 gram piston pin. But you didn't come to hear about my career.

I tell you this as background that I've been blessed with enjoyable, rewarding work. So the idea of having to take a medical disability retirement in my mid-forties was not a joyful option for me.

Slide 6: Hospitals, MRIs and other tests

In October 2003 I had a stuttering incident where I couldn't finish a sentence at the dinner table. I said, "Wow, that was weird." We went to the Emergency Room (called Onstar to let them know we were on the way – a little plug for GM there...☺). After some tests, the doctors thought it was a mini stroke and put me on blood thinners. Turns out it was really a petit mal seizure and the bomb would hit a few months later.

Slide 7: Changing for an MRI

Another dinner table conversation in mid-December was interrupted by a grand mal seizure. After numerous tests, an MRI revealed a probable low grade malignant brain tumor. I was scheduled for a biopsy in January, and told to *go home and have a nice Christmas*. We could read between the lines – it might be my last.

Slide 8: Memories of Cancer Journey

In January the biopsy revealed an oligodendroglioma tumor, confirming the MRI. A pathologist we knew from church had told us we'd learn more about brain tumors than we ever thought possible. He was right! We learned that benign tumors are level one, but still dangerous in the enclosed cavity of the head. Malignant gliomas are rated levels two to four. Oligos are level 2 or 3, astrocytomas are level 3, and glioblastomas are level 4. If there is a recurrence, it often comes back as the next highest grade tumor.

Slide 9: Tonawanda Visit January 2004

My wife Cheryl and I visited several different cancer centers after the biopsy: Henry Ford in Detroit, Cleveland Clinic and Roswell Park in Buffalo, NY. A special part of visiting Buffalo was being prayed for by a handful of people in the office at the Tonawanda Engine Plant. People at GM came out of the woodwork to offer support and help.

Slide 10: A Lifeline of Hope from Dave Ehlen

While we were feeling shell-shocked about the diagnosis, we got a call from a fellow GM engineer who had the same kind of tumor with the same chromosome defect five years before. Dave Ehlen and his wife came over with this notebook and spent time with our family one evening in February, 2004. It meant very much to meet someone who had traveled this

dangerous road before and survived it. They gave us the good advice to hit it with all the tools in our arsenal: our Christian faith, conventional and alternative medicine, a cancer diet, exercise, and music.

Slide 11: Battle Plan: Cancer

Support of family and friends, getting enough sleep, taking family vacations, guarding emotional and mental health, and support groups for both patients and caregivers are also very important. As with anything, each resource has its limitations; people are usually only trained in one specialty. It's up to the patient and caregiver to decide what may not be true, and also what may simply not fit your particular needs.

Slide 12: Training before the Surgery

While "training" for surgery, I rode my bike and read good books, including Lance Armstrong's "It's Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life." His cancer foundation and the yellow LIVESTRONG bracelets were popular at the time. I still have our daughter Kayla's poem on my wall at work:

("Live long, live strong, live joyfully; Render each day as a gift!
Live long, live strong, live joyfully; Remember, each day is a blessing from God!
Live long, live strong, live joyfully; Press on toward the goal and remember: LIVE STRONG!"
"In Him we live and move and have our being..." Acts 17:28a)

I was able to work part time from home for a couple of months until the surgery at the end of March, and naively thought the brain surgery would be just like the biopsy, with no major loss of function afterwards. I thought I would be back to work in a few months and it would be no big deal.

Slide 13: Cancer Battle Plan

Neurosurgeons at Henry Ford Hospital removed the tumor in March, 2004. Part of the surgery was done while I was awake. The tumor was in the speech area of my brain. The doctors had awakened me during the surgery to talk with a speech pathologist during the sensitive part of the surgery. They froze the tumor before removing each portion of it, figuring if I could still talk when it was frozen it would be safe to remove: a 90% chance I wouldn't have permanent

deficits. It was a unique experience being awake during major surgery, feeling the coolness with my “lid” off, listening to the doctors, and trying hard to talk with the speech pathologist, because I wanted them to remove the entire tumor.

The doctors told us afterwards that they had to close quickly because I had an unexplained seizure at the end, but thought they had removed the entire tumor. They recommended chemotherapy to kill off any remaining microscopic cancer cells to prevent recurrence. My tumor had a chromosome defect that made it especially responsive to chemotherapy. Chemo for brain cancer is a little different than other types of cancer because of the blood-brain barrier, which is designed into the human brain to protect it. Only a few chemo drugs will cross this barrier. Researchers had discovered a new single drug, Temodar, which is easier on the system than the previous 3-drug cocktail. So a few months later I began treatment, taking an anti-nausea drug before the Temodar. Very few physical side effects, just muscle fatigue when climbing stairs.

Slide 14: Landscaping Project – Speech Therapy

Thinking skills were a different story. The speech area of the brain is also the part involved with list-making and organizing. I worked with a speech therapist for six months to help me with getting sentences started and other speech difficulties. My family was patient and persistent in making me ask for things at the dinner table instead of just pointing when the words wouldn't come.

Jennifer Peacock also helped me with things like categorizing, with therapy that included card games and puzzles. The homework was difficult for me. I remember staring out the dining room window, struggling to make a list of ten things that are green: “Oh yeah, grass, bushes, trees.”

One day in her office when she had a couple of trainees observing, I was embarrassed when tested on naming vegetables in 90 seconds. All I could think of was broccoli, carrots and cauliflower, and then my mind went blank for a very awkward 80 seconds.

The brain is kind of like a Microsoft Windows program, which has icons, drop-down menus and keyboard short cuts. With the regular paths severed by the surgery, my brain developed new

pathways to get the job done that summer. I was wrong about getting back to work soon; removal of the tumor was a **VERY** big deal.

Part of my healing was to work on a project that involved several steps: planning and executing a back yard landscaping project. Making a list of the steps involved was the hard part: tearing out the old bushes, preparing the soil, buying the new bushes, planting them, planting new grass seed. It was frustrating to get all the way out there and realize I had made a simple mistake like forgetting the shovel. That sort of thing happens to everyone, but I felt like I'd been cut off at the knees and was always second guessing, wondering if things would ever be normal again.

Now, when I mow the grass, the lilac bushes are much taller than me. It's a real blessing to be alive and physically able to do things like driving again. Because of the seizures, I couldn't drive for about nine months. My first trip to Meijer to go grocery shopping by myself was a *very* happy and memorable experience.

Support from family, friends, and GM coworkers was very meaningful. I remember one guy who said "There's a bunch of people out here at Milford who are praying for you that you don't even know." That meant a lot.

Returning to work in January 2005 was a scary experience. I had long term memory but had difficulty with short-term memory, background noise and learning new things. GM was gracious enough to let me work part time at first on a much less stressful job similar to what I had done in the past and was very familiar with.

Gradually these deficits faded and I'm so glad to be able to contribute fully at work again. Last weekend I had to trim the lilacs so I could mow easier, and they are starting to shade the vegetable garden we planted a few years ago. A friend suggested the "Dear deer, Know no!" sign when we put up the fence, which is effective without the sign. We told him our local deer weren't smart enough to read anyway. ☺

Unexpected Hurdle Challenge or Storm Slide 15

As difficult as the brain tumor was, a far bigger mountain for me and my family was the depression that followed. Starting that summer of 2004, at the beginning of the year of chemotherapy which followed surgery, I had extreme mood swings that started with the steroids

I was taking to prevent swelling of the brain. I was quickly weaned off the steroids, but the mood swings gradually got worse until I was hospitalized for a month in January, 2007. Afterwards I spent five months in a room-and-board. By God's grace, I also survived that life-threatening illness. I attacked it with a slightly different set of tools.

With the brain tumor experience, I'd learned that troubles are for sharing and found people were mostly sympathetic. With the depression, I learned that I wasn't alone. A surprising number of people suffer from depression or know someone who does.

Slide 16: Depression

Clinical depression was like a very black, dark cloud where I couldn't see any light. Life didn't seem worth living, but with lots of prayers and encouragement I persevered. I'd been told by others who had experienced depression that it was a season and things would get better, but didn't believe it could be true for me.

When I was depressed, Cheryl would read the Bible to me and suggest I think of three things to be thankful for. I'd lie there on the bed and say, "I honestly can't think of anything." Cheryl deserves an award for putting up with me, Mr. Dark Cloud who couldn't even recognize the blessing of a loving, supportive wife and two kids who loved him (there's three things, but I was too depressed to recognize that). I tell this story for those who haven't experienced depression; it's not like, 'I'm feeling a little down today.' It was **awful**.

Finally the mood swings stopped and I was depressed all the time, just struggling to get through the day. I'd come home from work, sometimes eat dinner, then go to bed, not interacting with my family. Some days I got so anxious I'd just stand there and quiver. A few times something would send me into a tailspin and I'd spend days in bed. It was a **very** dark time.

My wife was an amazing support through all this: the cancer and the depression. Her background as a court reporter, specializing in medical malpractice, made her an ideal patient advocate. She was wise, tenacious, and loved me well through both illnesses.

God also put other people into our paths.

A great counselor did group therapy in the hospital; David Moore had experienced a lot of life's ups and downs, and had a heart for helping people. David worked with me after I left the hospital. He echoed what Dave Ehlen had said, encouraging me to look at all options and resources, and choose the ones that worked for me. He also helped me get over the stigma of mental illness. He equated taking medicine for depression with wearing prescription eyeglasses or taking medicine for diabetes. That really helped, as did the talk therapy.

Slide 17: Sandra Waters, RN, Nutritional Health Restoration

Another thing that helped me was nutritional supplements/muscle testing with Sandy Waters, a registered nurse who had found this successful with her handicapped daughter when doctors could no longer help. I started seeing her in November 2007, and the supplements have been a great help in reducing the number and dosage of other medications.

Sandy's practice has grown, and Nutritional Health Restoration has helped hundreds of people with all types of medical problems. I'm grateful for her expertise on this journey.

Slide 19: Depression

The worst part of my depression was the guilt I felt about being a cancer survivor and being so gloomy. Others would have gladly traded places with me. I'm glad my wife read the Bible to me, reminding me that feelings are the caboose while Fact and Faith are the locomotives. For a couple of years at church I just went through the motions. God carried me through the desert time when I doubted whether my faith was real.

We went to a church where people were not shamed for suffering, and you didn't have to wear a mask and pretend everything was OK. That really helped.

Suffering is part of life; no one escapes it. My heart breaks for those who didn't have the good outcomes I did.

To those who are suffering: Hang in there if you're going through your own dark night of the soul. For me, living with suffering in a fallen world with a great and loving God still makes more sense than the popular church thinking that Satan is somehow on an equal footing with God in the war between good and evil, or the non-theistic view that bad things happen randomly.

And just because other people have gone through worse doesn't invalidate **your** suffering, whatever it is.

Slide 19: Memories of Depression Journey

Part of the time in the hospital was spent working with the hands to make projects. The plaque that now hangs over my dresser reminds me of my dad's Nebraska farm heritage and the pioneers who came west on the Oregon Trail: a windmill and cattle drinking pool. During the first half of 2007, listening to my coworkers talk about their vacation plans made me sad because I thought my traveling days were over. So the floor mat we use in front of our popup camper is another monument to God's faithfulness.

Slide 20: For All the Saints

Music helped me greatly, even when I didn't feel like singing. Knowing and singing good hymns helped sustain me. Looking back on those dark days, this verse of my favorite hymn "For All the Saints" comes to mind. It speaks of suffering and is a reminder that there is a light at the end of the dark tunnel of struggle, with the promise of heaven someday:

For all the saints, who from their labors rest,
Who Thee by faith before the world confessed,
Thy name, O Jesus, be forever blessed.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

**And when the fight is fierce, the warfare long,
Steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
And hearts are brave again and arms are strong.
Alleluia, Alleluia.**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OaBgaMcOvM>

A verse from Psalm 34 in the Bible says, "Our times are in His Hands." I believe God is in control of all of my days, even the dark and lonely ones.

Slide 21: Family Time - Infected Bone 2013

The nightmare for most cancer patients and caregivers is a recurrence. Usually if the cancer returns, it's more aggressive, and therefore the treatment must be also. After the five year point with clean MRIs, the doctors said I didn't need them anymore. After I had cancer, I was a bit too lax about smaller health issues, like when my head started oozing at the biopsy site.

In the summer of 2013, some of you may have noticed me at the office with a bandage on my head. My brain tumor biopsy site got infected and reopened twice that year. I had plastic surgery early in the year to close the wound, and then it started oozing again. It's just a flesh wound, you know (Monte Python joke). ☺

We continued with our normal family activities and I wore my favorite hat to protect my head when outdoors. I continued my bike riding indoors with a different set of books.

Slide 22: Surgery - Infected Bone

The six weeks between Mother's Day and surgery June 26 seemed like a long delay. The surgery to clean out infected bone was successful. After two nights in the hospital, a PICC line was installed and I was given instructions for taking IV antibiotics once a day at home for six weeks while my head healed.

Slide 23: Favorite Places Up North, 2013

Looking back over the notebook Dave Ehlen gave us, we did almost all of the things he recommended. One thing was taking family vacations, which we have always enjoyed. Here are some pictures from 2013, and a family vacation to favorite places in northwest Michigan in the Sleeping Bear Dunes area. Every time we visit, we hike the Empire Bluffs Trail, an easy one mile trail with a spectacular view of the Sleeping Bear Dunes to the north.

Slide 24: Canoeing the Platte River

Since we had canoed several times on the gentle Platte River and there is very low risk of capsizing, we rented canoes again from Riverside Canoe Rental. With my arm wrapped in plastic just like for a shower, we made it and the view and canoeing experience did not disappoint.

Slide 25: Conclusion

Life is like a beautiful tapestry in a museum. Some scenes are peaceful, some are action-filled and some are stormy. Mostly we get to see only tangled threads on the back side, and only the small part we are working on. Occasionally we get a glimpse of part of the front side. One day it will hang in a museum for all to see. I believe it is God's museum, and He chooses to reveal bits and pieces of the front side to us here on earth at times.

I don't have it all together, and still struggle sometimes. On the darker days it's a matter of doing the next thing, whether I feel like it or not.

I don't have a trophy testimony. But I do have some **monuments** of God's faithfulness to me and my family through the storms of two life-threatening illnesses. After the huge storm of depression, I felt like the ship in C.S. Lewis' Voyage of the Dawn Treader, sails battered, limping into the harbor. Grateful to be a survivor...

Thank you for listening. I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have.

Questions:

How did your illnesses affect your children?

Mike and Kayla were 13 and 10 at the time of my seizure. We were honest with them and told them I could eventually die from the cancer or even possibly during surgery if something went wrong. They knew I probably would have some issues afterwards.

They had just finished learning the Heidelberg Catechism. It felt like final exam time. Were we going to live what we said we believe? Here is the first question for those not familiar with it.

Heidelberg Catechism

1. Q. What is your only comfort in life and death?

A. That I am not my own,[1] but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death,[2] to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.[3] He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil.[5] He also preserves me in such a way[6] that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head;[7] indeed, all things must work together for my salvation.[8] Therefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life[9] and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him.[10]

[1] I Cor. 6:19, 20 [2] Rom. 14:7-9. [3] I Cor. 3:23; Tit. 2:14. [4] I Pet. 1:18, 19; I John 1:7; 2:2. [5] John 8:34-36; Heb. 2:14, 15; I John 3:8. [6] John 6:39, 40; 10:27-30; II Thess. 3:3; I Pet. 1:5. [7] Matt. 10:29-31; Luke 21:16-18. [8] Rom. 8:28. [9] Rom. 8:15, 16; II Cor. 1:21, 22; 5:5; Eph. 1:13, 14. [10] Rom. 8:14.

<http://www.wts.edu/resources/creeds/heidelberg.html>

In the end it strengthened our family, being able to look back on God's faithfulness.

Our daughter was a camp counselor at a Christian camp during college; one of her campers had a parent with bipolar disorder. She was able to empathize and pray with the girl, telling her about her dad, and that I had gotten better. No guarantee that things would change with her parent, but God would be faithful to walk through the storm with her.

Many other good questions were asked about medical treatments, diet, exercise, alternative medicine, music and several other topics. When I have time I will summarize the answers and post them. The questions added to the presentation, so thank you for attending and asking them.

Feel free to share this with others if you found it helpful!