

THE RAINBOW THROUGH THE RAIN

Before entering the ministry, **Clifford Hughes** was known to concert goers and radio audiences as one of Scotland's leading tenors. Since his retirement from St. Mary's Collegiate Church, Haddington, he has become an encourager of others who, like himself, are living with laryngectomy. The author affirms the therapeutic value of laughter for sufferers from communication impairment. This article carries a hilarity warning.



above: Clifford Hughes

'I've removed it all!' said the Consultant Surgeon when he came to see me in the Intensive Care Unit. My relief that the cancer had gone was quickly replaced by the sheer awfulness of the reality that my larynx had been cut out. I was voiceless. I couldn't even whisper when my wife Kathleen called later. With notebook and pen, my first written communication was a banal... 'Hello. Good journey?' Then we both broke down and wept. Three enjoyable voice-centred careers as Teacher, Singer and Preacher and now – nothing.

Looking back over eight years as a Laryngecomee I can pick out the 'bereavement' journey mapped out by the late Elizabeth Kuebler Ross. I still wake up occasionally thinking 'It was just a bad dream'. Despair. My useful life was over.

But like the blind George Matheson, I began 'to trace the rainbow through the rain'. The apostle Paul complained of 'a thorn in my flesh to torment me'. It wasn't his mother-in-law...more probably malaria picked up on his travels. But he goes on to say: 'In whatever state I find myself, I have learned to be content'. The final stage of the journey is Acceptance. In fact, there's a step beyond. Paul speaks of 'rejoicing in my infirmity'. There's a newish medical research study called gelatology which explores the therapeutic value of laughter. I'm through it! I'm there! I've arrived!

I began to see beyond my preoccupation with my own psychological problems, the physiological changes and the social challenges, to the fact that I'm one of 100,000 'Larys' worldwide. Laryngeal cancer is one in every thousand diagnosed cancers. I joined Chinwags, a mutually supportive group of perhaps a dozen Larys who meet regularly at the Maggie's Centre in Kirkcaldy. We care and share and laugh together. We are part of a much larger, very diverse, family of folk with communication support needs. It is estimated that 2.5 million people in the UK have communication 'impairment' of some kind. People with aphasia, autism, brain injury, deafness, dementia, learning and mental health difficulties, M.S., Parkinson's disease, motor neurone disease.....and children, from birth, affected by cerebral palsy and Duchenne muscular dystrophy. 800,000 people in the UK have difficulties so severe that only their immediate families can understand them.

I am particularly fortunate. Having been a professional singer and speaker, I have developed good diaphragmatic breathing and clear diction. In recent years I have been privileged to work alongside speech

and language therapists. We took 'A Case for Action' to the Scottish Parliament 'to ensure that national and local policy and planning take account of the needs of people with communication support needs' and to ensure that 'the impact of communication disability on health and welfare is recognised'.

The Law Society of Scotland held a Day Seminar, a service accessibility review, to assess their provision for folk with a wide range of disabilities. Much has been done, not least and at great cost, by our churches to ameliorate the mobility problems faced by the wheel-chair disabled. But what about all who have a hidden disability? I relish my involvement with friends who have a range of communication support needs within The Civic Participation Network. A CD Rom, Talk for Scotland, is available online at www.communicationforumsotland.org.uk

I am closely in touch with a ministry friend who developed aphasia after sustaining a stroke on the hospital ward. I sent him a frivolous limerick.

*Good Heavens! What's happened?
Poor Dick,
lying there on the floor looking sick.
It's his heart? No, his head!
Haul him back into bed
and switch on the life support, quick!*

I heard nothing. I'd blown it. I'd upset him. And then, to my joy, his response in kind. Imagine two rather refined older ladies from the congregation commenting (preferably with a Morningside accent) on the Reverend's unsteady gait and slurred speech.

*Our Minister's problem with drink
is not as severe as you think.
His footsteps may weave,
his words hard to believe;
it's just that his brain's on the blink!*

You don't have to be aphasic to select the wrong word! The dermatology experts had taken a biopsy on what they reckoned was a bit of skin cancer on my brow.

'How's Clifford?' a concerned friend asked Kathleen.
'Oh! He's fine! Waiting for the result of his autopsy'.

I came across these Alternative Beatitudes just the other day.

BLESSED are you who take time to listen to our difficult speech, for you help us know that, if we persevere, we can be understood.

Blessed are you who walk with us in public places and ignore the stares of strangers, for in your friendship we find relaxation.

Blessed are you when you never bid us hurry up, for often we need time rather than help.

Blessed are you who stand beside us as we enter new ventures, for our failures will be outweighed by times when we surprise ourselves and you.

Blessed are you who ask for our help, for our greatest need is to be needed.

Blessed are you who help us by the grace of Christ, for often we need the help we cannot ask for.

Blessed are you when by all these things you show us that we are individuals, not because of our disability, but by the acceptance from God which no disability can destroy. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad.

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