

I'm Nigel. I was told uh about twenty months ago when I was sixty-nine that I had a grade four brain tumour, uh the nastiest sort you can get.

Diagnosis

I was completely fit, I was sculling. I was doing four or five miles sculling a day um on the Thames the day before I bumped into the car. There were cars on the left and cars on the right and I suddenly crashed. I could not understand why. I didn't have a seizure. I just couldn't see anything, I never had anything. No, although I, I think I, I think I remember my eye sight ended up being a bit like looking through a window where the win-, where the rain is dribbling down you.

I remember that and I couldn't understand why, I thought it was just old age and getting um [sighs], getting uh [sighs] ancient. I wasn't at all surprised. I've always lived my life expecting things to go wrong and they usually do. So um [laughs] it didn't really bother me. But momentarily it gave me a sense of relief that uh when I was told that it was a tumour, cos I thought okay that's the pressure off me. I don't have to do all the things that I've been doing, running and rowing and all the other stuff. I can kind of relax a bit now with a good excuse.

Interviewer: Did, did you ask well how long have I got?

Yeah I'm afraid so. It's a sort of pathetic question that you fall into the trap of asking,[clears throat] and they scratched their head a lot and said uhh maybe then, and maybe it's three months, maybe it's six months, maybe nine months. But I would, I would probably put my uh my affairs in order. You're thinking okay fair enough. So you trot off and go and write wills and that kind of stuff.

Interviewer: So when you're told or when you think you've only got six months left how does that make you feel?

Uh it makes me feel you've got to get on with doing things that need to be done, like sorting out the house, sorting out your will, sorting out all the usual stuff, and um I was actually irritated. I thought I've um failed cos my idea was to see my wife into her grave, and look after her, and uh what I meant was that I couldn't do that and that really did annoy me. I thought I'd failed and let her down.

Treatment

I had uh brain surgery which they, they got their, they drilled a hole through the back of my head, and scooped the things out and then they, or some of it, and then I had radio therapy, and then I had chemotherapy. That went on for about a year.

Did I think they were going find a miracle cure? No I never did, but again it's fatal to raise your expectations, cos they can only be dashed. So I knew perfectly well there was nothing, and then as time went on people, friends would ring up very lovingly and say have you tried this in Dakota, South Dakota, and have you tried this new cancer treatment in uh Brooklyn and have you tried this, and I thought oh that's interesting. And then I thought no forget it.

Enjoying life

Interviewer: Do you still enjoy life?

Oh I, I couldn't be happier. Uh I mean uh you hear stories of people who [sighs] uh get told they've got a terminal illness, and they think uh oh I must go abroad, oh I must go and do this, I'm, got a, got a bucket list. I, I have nothing, I could think of nothing better than pottering around here with Denise and the family, all the family, all the children and uh the dogs and the home, and we're as, as close to paradise as you're ever going to get.

Well it's frightfully corny to say all this, but I don't think I've got any problems. I've got a home. I've got enough money to live on. Um I've got a wonderful family. I've got a unbelievable [pause] wife. So that is my help. So that is my help. That's all I need. Some people will probably say they need faith. Well the faith that I've got is with all of that lot. So I don't have, I don't know whether it sounds very arrogant, but I don't have any problems.

I don't feel sad. I'm perfectly well aware of the fact that I will die just the same as everybody else, just a bit earlier. So it's, goes back to the old thing of just enjoy every day as it comes, but that, that's what we should all be doing all the time anyway.

Kindness

Interviewer: Did you feel overwhelmed by the sadness by your friends and family when they all heard the news? Was it rather nice being the centre of attention?

No, it was quite difficult managing them. Um phone call after phone call after phone call, all from very, very well meaning people, people I love. [Pause] [Sighs] [Becomes emotional]

Interviewer: Does that make it hard for you?

Yeah, [pause] [sighs] so it's [pause], yeah it's hard managing them. [Becomes emotional]

The trouble with people being kind is it makes, it absolutely destroys me and [pause] um people are very kind.

Interviewer: It's cos they love you

Oh well they tolerate me [laughter]. So, sorry um [pause] yeah it's a strange situation cos you can't avoid being the centre of attention and the, the best people are people who just say you're a stupid ass, get on with your life. That's much easier to handle, but kindness is very difficult to handle, well I find it very difficult to handle. [I: Mm] Um and people are very, people have been very good. Fortunately um it's all settled down a bit now, cos they realised that, that I'm still going strong.

And they think okay forget about him. We can get on with our lives, but um at the time I found it uh very difficult dealing with people's kindness and generosity. After a few months people would ring up and there's a definite pause in the conversation, and, and I know exactly what they're thinking. He's still alive, what the hell's he doing still alive? He's supposed to have died six months ago. So you get sort of um sympathy fatigue.

Targets

You know somebody said, do you have um targets you want to get to? Uh and I said no I absolutely uh, I absolutely do not form targets, cos as soon as you, uh targets in time that you definitely want to do and I said no I studiously avoid that because as soon as you do that you keel over, but then I realised that actually there was a target that I [pause], [becomes emotional] was keen on [pause] which is one of the children's wedding.

That was [pause] um which is uh next weekend down in Cornwall [pause] so that will be good. I think targets generally speaking are destructive. I just wanted to go the wedding, and then I realised [laughs] of course it was a target which I um, so I'd completely shot myself in the foot. Um, um do I think it helps? No I don't think it does help, because it leads you away from the idea of living each day as it comes, which is a much better way, a far better way of living.

You enjoy today, maybe tomorrow it's raining, okay well so it is, but if you have a target then once the target has come and gone um [pause] what the hell do you do after that. What do you do after that?

Brave face for others

Interviewer: How much, how much, I've, I've asked this of everybody, but how much of what you say just now about the way the do that, how much of that is just putting on a brave face?

Yeah I thought about that. Do I put on a brave face and, and at three o'clock in the morning weep buckets? I don't. I genuinely don't. I really don't to my surprise cos I'm a fairly emotional sort of bloke, but I don't, I really don't. Um I keep thinking am I in denial but I don't think I am. I, I know I've got cancer and I know I'm going to die, but it's much more interesting to concentrate on what you can do rather than worry about what you can't do.

So you wake up every morning, you think okay what have we got to do today, what are we doing. Take the dogs for a walk, go and see a cinema. I don't know, whatever we do. It's just simple domestic life, it's lovely, but it wouldn't be if I didn't have Denise. She [pause], she makes it. Puh!

Death and dying

I think it's very hard to watch somebody else die, but I think when it comes to me dying or yeah oneself dying I think it's dead easy. I think you just say okay well that's it, I'm putting up the shutters, but I think watching somebody else die, particularly if they're suffering, I think that's pretty hard. And it also puts a great strain on them. Poor old Denise had to do everything for me. By God she does. Um but I think it's hard for her.

I mean I'm slowly declining as you do, but that's apparently is the effects of ch-, treatment, um but if, and if, if the um cancer kicks off again then I suppose that'll finish me off fairly quickly, but it's all quite natural. I don't see anything si-, dramatic or sinister about it, same as we all go through.

Interviewer: So you're not bothered about dying?

No, no, I mean no I'm not, I'm genuinely not, I'm really not. I don't see anything to be frightened of. Um and I think you get, but only in my case, in my case I stress. How many people with cancer go through the most appalling lives in the end of their lives, unspeakable, but I have no pain, I have no disability, I have nothing limiting me, apart

from my limited um intellectual capacities, but that's' not much worse than it ever has been.

[Laughs] And um uh, and, and I can't row, and I can't run, but I think that's a pretty small price to pay at my age.