

February 23, 2020

My Fight Against Melanoma

It's been eleven years since my fight began with melanoma, and it's been nine years since my doctor told my son in law, Eric Graham that I only had one to three months to live. Eric is the husband of our younger daughter, Tracey, and they are both doctors. but because of two "happenings," I was confident that God was intervening, and He did, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

In was late December 2008, and I was standing in my daughter's kitchen in Ocean Springs, Mississippi mixing a drink. I bumped my head on the stove hood. After saying a few words not becoming to a gentleman, I was assured that it was not bleeding.

The next day, I felt something that seemed to be a very small scab, and I assumed I had bled a little. A few days later it was still there, and I scratched it off. It felt smooth, so I thought it was healed. But a couple of days later, it was back. I am a retired airline pilot, and most of us have had more than one spot frozen off the left side of our faces, (the side that's exposed to most of the UV rays in the left seat) and most turn out to be benign. My physician daughter looked at it, and said it didn't look dangerous, but it was time to visit the dermatologist anyway, and she would probably freeze it. Dr. Jacqueline Sasaki was my dermatologist. Her practice was busy, and it would normally take thirty or sixty days for a routine appointment, but she had a cancellation, and saw me the next day. She also thought it looked harmless, but she is very conservative and sent it to pathology to be on the safe side.

It is somewhat ironic that two days later, as I was getting ready for my annual golf trip to Scottsdale, I was standing in a drug store with a travel size container of hair conditioner in my hand when I saw my dermatologist's name on my cell phone caller ID. I instantly knew that she would not be taking the time to call me with good news. The harmless looking growth was melanoma. I put the container back on the shelf. I didn't know much about melanoma, but I knew enough to know that I probably would not need hair conditioner in the near future. I will admit that I was scared. My first thought was the possibility of this being a death sentence. Home was only about three miles away, but I made two calls on the way there, to two of my closest friends. First call was to my pastor, Dr. Michael Youssef. We had planned the first service of the Church of the Apostles, in my home in Buckhead, twenty years before, and since then it had become a mega church.

The next call was to one of my golf buddies, Dr. Rein Saral. Rein was a bone marrow transplant pioneer at Johns Hopkins, and he had recently retired as CEO of Emory Clinic. In his "semi-retirement" he was working at the Winship Cancer Center at Emory. (Rein's administrative assistant was Deborah Dean. I knew her, but I didn't know how important she would become in my life, by paving the way for me, in my care.) It's also ironic that Rein was going with us on the Scottsdale trip. I told him the diagnosis, and he said he would call me back in a few minutes. He did, and he said Doctors Charles Staley and Keith Delman were with him. Dr. Staley was chief of oncology surgery, and I had played golf with him a couple of times. Dr. Delman had completed a fellowship at M.D.Anderson in Houston, and I told them that I could be in Atlanta by noon the next day.

I didn't sleep very much that night, and I had already brewed the coffee when the wakeup alarm sounded. As I reflected during the night, a lot of things had started coming into perspective as I counted my blessings. I was 73 years old, and I had lived a spectacular life. Until Katrina wiped out the Gulf Coast, my whole life had been very easy. I had come along between wars, and had my dream job as a Delta pilot in the era when airline flying was still a dream rather than a nightmare. I always had significant income from other business, and just lived the good "Buckhead Atlanta lifestyle". Like lots of guys with big egos and narcissistic tendencies (notice, I only said "tendencies"), I had taken most of the good in my life for granted. Anyway, after we drank our coffee, my wife, Joan and I decided to drive the 390 miles from Mississippi to Atlanta, and we were on the road by 5 AM.

By the time we left Emory that afternoon with an excellent prognosis, my attitude had started to change. Dr. Delman told me a lot about melanoma, and he was confident that mine had been found early enough so that metastasis was unlikely, but he recommended that a number of lymph nodes be removed to be sure. He recommended that I go to Scottsdale as scheduled. My younger daughter and her husband are both doctors, and they had to be convinced, but Delman assured them that it was okay in a telephone call. The surgery was scheduled for a few days after I returned from Scottsdale. The operation was a success, and the lymph nodes were negative.

After the surgery, I was under the care of Dr. David Lawson of medical oncology, so I could be checked every three months, and Dr. Delman informed me that there was less than a 20% statistical chance of recurrence. So much for statistics - two of them came back within four months. They were only a couple of millimeters from the original lesion, and once again, they looked harmless because they were amelanotic, meaning that

they were skin colored. By the time the surgery took place in June 2009, another one had shown up. The most painful part of the process was having four injections of a radioactive material around the growth. This is done so a CT Scan can locate lymph nodes that might be infected. Needless to say, needles in the scalp are not pleasant. This surgery was more extensive than the first. The skin graft was done by Dr. Albert Losken a plastic surgeon, and I spent one night in the hospital. Once again, the lymph nodes were negative, but this time six weeks of radiation was recommended as a backup because of my history. Dr. Walter Curran was the radiation oncologist in charge of my treatment. I also had a full body PET scan, and a brain MRI, and they were both negative, no sign of metastasis.

The radiation was completed in September 2009. I felt completely recovered. During that time many people were praying for me, and two incidents occurred that proved later to be prophetic. We heard from a guy that we hadn't heard from in nine years. Joan talked with him, and he said that he had heard that "Gene has melanoma," and he went on to say that he had a dream the night before, and he woke up and wrote it down. He read it to Joan, and then he read it to me. It was a long paragraph, and I can't quote anything but the last line. "This sickness is not unto death."

I didn't pay much attention to it. I had some melanomas, but I was getting them all excised, and I had been back on my feet, and living normally within a month each time. Until this time I hadn't felt sick.

God knew that my faith would be tested, and he sent another prophetic nugget my way two weeks later. Joan had a dream that got our attention. She woke up in the middle of the night, and she woke me, and said, "I dreamed Isaiah 38:5." I asked her what it said, and she replied, "I don't know, I just dreamed Isaiah 38:5." I was slightly incensed that she woke me in the middle of the night to tell me that, and I told her to go back to sleep. In the morning I still remembered being awakened in the middle of night, and my curiosity was aroused. I asked her if she had ever figured out what was in Isaiah 38:5, she answered, "no." She then looked it up.

Isiah 38:5 "Go and tell Hezekiah, This is what the LORD, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life."

To put it in context: King Hezekiah was sick, and the Lord told Isaiah to go to him, and tell him he was not going to recover. Hezekiah prayed, and shed some tears. Before Isaiah left the palace, the Lord told him to go back to Hezekiah, and tell him the Lord

said, "I will add fifteen years to your life." Wow that was strange, but we agreed that the message must be for me.

Eric and Tracey read the story in 2 Kings 20:7-Then Isaiah said, "Prepare a poultice of figs." They did so and applied it to the boil, and Hezekiah recovered.

Eric's family is in the wine business. He didn't know they had fig trees in their vineyards, but he was standing in the middle of a vineyard, and he spied one. The next day a FedEx package arrived at my house with two figs. I had to Google poultice, to learn how to make it.

A short time later there was a scar that didn't seem to go away. Several doctors looked at it, and all agreed that it looked like a suture granuloma. In December, it started to drain and I had Dr. Sasaki look at it. Once again, it was skin colored, and looked harmless. She sent it to pathology, and it was melanoma. It was excised in January 2010 by Dr. Delman, and another skin graft was done by Dr. Losken, and because of my history, another round of scalp radiation was recommended, which took place in February and March of 2010.

All during this time, while I had been fighting melanoma, my PSA had been rising, and in February, a prostate biopsy was performed by Dr. Fray Marshall, the head of the urology department. It was positive for cancer. Dr. Marshall had been fighting cancer himself, and he had come back to work for a short time. He died less than a year later. He was a brilliant physician, and a true southern gentleman.

In April, 2010, I had another brain MRI and full body PET scan. There was no evidence of metastasis, but it was noted that there seemed to be significantly more blockage of my left carotid artery than had been evident on the last MRI, which was done only a few months before. At this point, I had undergone three surgeries to excise melanomas from the same general area of my left scalp in a period of twelve months. I had undergone two rounds of scalp radiation, and I had also been diagnosed with prostate cancer, and a clogged carotid artery.

I was preparing to join my wife who was in South Africa on vacation. On April 26th, I had my regular appointment with Dr. Lawson. He had more tests run on my carotid artery, and got me in to see Dr. Thomas Dodson a vascular surgeon that same day. (Just one of the advantages of academic medicine; Dr. Lawson called Dr. Dobson, who was about

to teach a class in an hour, so he said, “get him over right now.”) Dr. Dodson sent me to get an ultrasound and a scan, and he recommended surgery before I left the US, and so he operated on April 28. Recovery was uneventful, and I joined my wife about a week later in South Africa. We were back in country in early June.

I was feeling great. My head had healed from the last surgery, however there was another scar that looked like the last one that we thought was suture granuloma, but it turned out to be melanoma. This was the first time that my dermatologist, Dr. Sasaki was almost certain that it was only scar tissue, and not significant. She was wrong – melanoma round four. Drs. Delman and Losken operated on June 28, 2010. Dr Losken said there was a good chance the graft would fail because of the radiation damaged skin. It did fail, and he did two more surgeries – the first in August, applying integra artificial skin, and the second in September for the application of skin from my thigh over the integra.

In August, we made the decision to treat the prostate cancer with IMRT radiation. Dr. Peter Rossi was the radiation oncologist, and the treatment was completed in early September 2010.

It was December 2010, and two years had elapsed since I bumped my head. I had been put to sleep, and cut on seven times. The good news is that I woke up all seven times. The recovery times had been short, and I felt good most of the time. The most uncomfortable time was immediately after the prostate radiation. In fact, it was the day after completion when I was diagnosed with shingles. I was the organizer of a golf trip to Ireland a week after I was diagnosed, and as the organizer, I felt like I had to go, but I shouldn't have, because I was miserable...and I made some of the others miserable.

I had spent so much time at Emory during the last two years with eighty-eight days in radiation, plus all the other procedures. I felt completely “at home” there. I knew lots of people by their first names, and lots of people knew me by my first name. I am not naïve enough to think that there aren't jerks on the staff at Emory, but I have never encountered one. I have come in contact with dozens of doctors, nurses, technicians, administrators, schedulers, receptionists, parking lot attendants, etc. Without exception, everyone has been kind and helpful.

On those rare occasions when I started to feel sorry for myself, all I had do was show up at Winship to realize how blessed I was. All it takes is seeing a father carrying a bald

six-year-old child in his arms, or an emaciated man - younger than me – coming out of chemo to instantly put things in perspective.

Now The Rest Of The Story....Except The Final Chapter

For the first three years, the battle was with skin cancer. It was confined to my left/upper scalp, and I was getting inspected monthly. We learned in October 2011 that an escalation had occurred. I was playing golf in the mountains of North Carolina, when I noticed a small pimple on my head. As I made my way back down to the Gulf Coast via Atlanta, I decided to stop by Winship and get a biopsy. Dr. Delman was in the OR, and Dr. Grant Carlson was in clinic. He saw me, and dismissed the “pimple” as a suture from a prior surgery. He did see something else that “looks suspicious” and he did a biopsy. My eighth surgery was coming up, and it would prove to be a doozy.

When your melanoma surgeon calls you on the golf course on a Saturday, he gets your immediate attention. The “looks suspicious” melanoma tumor had grown into my skull. Dr. Delman told me it was out his hands now, and he would make me an appointment with a neurosurgeon. The following week, I was in the office of Dr. Jeff Olson. I was told that it was unlikely that the melanoma would travel through the skull and the dura (the membrane covering the brain). He planned on taking about a one-inch circle out of the skull, and the plastic surgeon could close it up.

The planned six-hour surgery stretched into nine hours and thirty minutes, and in spite of my hard head, the melanoma had gone into my brain. Dr. John Culbertson was the plastic surgeon, and of that nine hours and thirty-three minutes of surgery, he was closing my head for more than eight hours of that time.

It was the month before Christmas, and one surgeon said to my family, “enjoy him this Christmas.” Dr. Olson didn’t attempt to remove the melanoma cells, because my speech might have been impaired, or I could have been crippled. My quality of life would have been negatively impacted for whatever time I had left.

A doctor who was completing his fellowship in plastic surgery in the spring, passed through the OR, and he saw Dr. Culbertson as he was reattaching hundreds of tiny blood vessels. He came into my room a few days later, and he said, “Mr. Hall I thought you were a goner. Dr. Culbertson is a magician. He doesn’t take anything except the hardest cases.”

Jack Culbertson was a renaissance man. He could talk about anything. He came into my room several times in the following days just to talk. We talked about hunting, fishing, flying, music, politics, and lots of other things. He said, "Gene they will get this cancer under control, and when they do, I will give you a brand-new skull."

This is excerpts from a blog I wrote on December 08, 2011, ten days after the surgery:

I Was Blind But Now I See

"The lady from hospital social services told me that patients who had been through the kinds of major surgery that I had just experienced would often have unexplained bouts of crying. She was standing next to my bed at Emory last Monday morning, helping with any emotional issues before I was released...

...I hadn't experienced any bouts of crying, but Tuesday morning the Italian tenor, Andrea Bocelli was singing Amazing Grace on ABC-TV, and I wept as the great blind singer sang; "I was blind, but now I see." The social services lady was half right – I had my bout of crying, but it was not unexplained...

...Meanwhile, I am feeling great. My head is covered with a full bandage, I still have lots of staples and sutures as well as a couple of drains from skin donor sites, but I can handle all body needs without assistance.

Dozens of my friends have marveled at how fast I have bounced back each time. I have been back on the golf course, and traveling within a month after every surgery. I have heard terms like; "You are a trooper; you are tough, you have a great attitude, etc."

I think the underlining theme is that folks are amazed that I don't seem to be worried about death. Well, I am worried about death, but not mine. I am worried about the slow death of the greatest nation in the history of the world. I watch and listen to the political midgets who are running, or vying to run our country, and I grieve. I have nothing else to say about that except our only hope is the intervention of almighty God. God have mercy on us.

My future is secure – I know where I am going whenever this earthly phase of my life is finished. I grieve for my friends who don't know what is next. I can't imagine the terror of wondering if one just goes to sleep and never wakes up, or suppose there is a Hell, have I been good enough to escape eternal punishment?

I have had wonderful support from my family, my Emory family, and my friends. Thanks to all of you for your prayers!“

Dr. Lawson has a lot of tools, and he doesn't give up easily. I had more radiation in the winter of 2012, and then I had IL-2 chemo therapy in the spring. That was the first time I felt really sick. Heretofore, when I was operated on, I was up, and playing golf within a month. With IL-2, you go into the hospital for a day or two, and they get you ready for the infusions, then they give you a shot every eight hours, until your organs start to fail. Then you go home for three weeks, and then they do it again. The second time you go home for two weeks. The first time I lasted three days on the shots (five days in the hospital), the second time, two days, and the third time, I lasted one shot before my kidneys started to fail, and my heart entered AFib.

I was well enough for Dr. Culbertson to give me that new skull that he had promised by August of 2012.

Since I was an ex-airline pilot, when Jack visited my room, we had talked a lot about flying and his airplane. He had a single engine turboprop Piper, and for you who don't know about airplanes, turboprop means a jet engine. On December 2, 2013, he was flying from Morristown, New Jersey to Atlanta. It was night, and there were thunderstorms in the area. Tragically, he crashed near Dawsonville, Georgia. He was alone, and he died in the crash. One Emory Doc described Jack as “a man who was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, but made good in spite of it.” I didn't know him very long, but long enough to love him. He was one of my heroes.

Unbeknownst to me, even before my surgery, Eric and Tracey had been praying that I would be healed, but that “the healing would so miraculous, that no man could take credit for it.” It was truly a miracle that I had lived a normal life for the next two years with the cancer still on my brain.

Dr. Lawson has described what happened next as the biggest miracle of all. I had good days until January of 2014 - only interrupted by Yervoy chemo, and lots of MRI's, Scans, etc. I felt great, and I played lots of golf. I was watching the Sugar Bowl on January 2, 2014. It was two years since I had been told that I had one to three months to live, and Alabama was getting embarrassed by Oklahoma. Auburn had a huge comeback win over Alabama in the Iron Bowl in December, and Auburn was playing in the national championship game. I'm an SEC football fan, even Florida...when they play a non-conference game. I tried to "cuss" Nick Saban out, and I realized I couldn't talk. I couldn't talk for about a full minute. The next night, I was out to dinner with several of my family members, and it happened again. It happened several times in the next week. I felt as well, as I had anytime since I had received that phone call with the melanoma diagnosis, and I played golf three times that week. I finally called Dr. Olson's office. I talked to his nurse, and when I told her what had happened, she put me through to him. He said, "there's no downside now," and he operated on me on January 15.

After the surgery, I woke up in the recovery room. The recovery room was a good sign, because I spent five days in the ICU after my last surgery. Dr. Olson came shortly after, and I can quote what he said first. "The tumor was sitting on top of the brain, seemingly not attached to anything, and I just lifted it off." He went on to give a description of the operation. My artificial skull acted as a door to my brain, he cleaned out any cells he could see around the tumor, put my skull back on, sewed it up, and he was finished. The whole thing took about twenty minutes. He said, I would start talking again in about four days. WOW! I don't remember whether Dr. Olson said it was a miracle, but I knew it was.

My recovery was going well. I went to out lunch a week and a half later, and I had a follow up appointment with Dr. Olson on January 28. I scheduled a golf game for Saturday, February 1.

On Friday night a friend came over, and we had a couple of adult beverages. Saturday morning, I didn't feel like playing golf, and I was still not feeling well when I went to speech therapy Monday at noon. I had an appointment with Dr. Lawson after my therapy, and the speech therapist recognized what shape I was in, and sent me to Dr. Lawson's office immediately.

Necia Maynard was Dr. Lawson's nurse practitioner. I speak in the past tense, because she semi-retired this year, and started working about two days a week in another department. She took my blood pressure and heart rate, and the next thing I knew, I

was in a wheelchair. The ER is across the road from Winship, and I was speeding across the sky bridge to the ER with Necia at the controls. I didn't know any woman could run that fast, especially with a wheelchair with a 250-pound load. Incidentally, Necia let me down, she wasn't supposed to retire until I was dead. That was February 3, and I was admitted to the hospital with AFib, and I was released three days later. The rest of February 2012 is a blur. I was hospitalized two more times for a total of 20 out of 29 days.

I felt great after these surgeries, except when I played golf, my right hand started coming off the golf club when I was following through. It was about six months later that my fingers started drawing up. It prevented me from playing golf, and I played my last round in July 2015. I didn't have any idea that it would be the last round I would ever play. I started taking physical hand therapy. They asked me what I wanted to accomplish, and I told them I wanted to play golf.

In October 2016, I had a routine appointment with Dr. Lawson, and the chest X-Ray showed small growths on one of my lungs. I had a biopsy a week later, and it proved to be melanoma. Dr. Lawson sent me to see a radiation oncologist, Dr. Mohammad K. Khan MD PhD. I looked up his academic record on the Emory website, and it looked like he was a professional student. I told him that, and he said, "I do like to learn." He told me about a new type of radiation that was 90% effective in destroying tumors like mine. It was only five treatments, but he said Dr. Lawson would treat me with keytruda (pembrolizumab) infusions. That's the drug that cured President Jimmy Carter. It apparently worked, because it's been almost 4 years. I have been getting an MRI every six months. So far, so good!

Meanwhile, my right hand and arm were getting worse, and Dr. Lennon Bowen, an Ocean Springs Neurologist, diagnosed radiation necrosis in September 2017. I had over 100 days of radiation, and my brain was damaged.

I came back to Atlanta in January 2018, and my Emory Neurologist, Dr. Michael Khoury confirmed Dr. Bowen's diagnosis. Radiation necrosis is often progressive, and can be fatal. Apparently, mine is not progressing, and it's stable. Dr. Khoury had me getting a brain MRI every six months, but he just reduced that to an annual basis.

As the result of the necrosis, I have a speech impediment, and my right hand and arm are nearly useless. I have been taking physical/speech therapy off and on at Emory for two years, and my condition is slightly better, but I know that my brain is damaged,

because I have lost my ability to spell and punctuate. The jury is out on my thinking ability.

I'm grateful for the nine years. Joan and I have seven grandchildren from nine to twenty years old, and I'm grateful that I've been able to see them develop, especially in their Christian faith.

I'm glad that Eric and Tracey prayed that my healing "would be so miraculous, that no man could take credit for it." The Lord only used Emory to make it happen. My association with Emory goes back nearly 50 years to when my younger daughter was born there. (My older daughter Anne was born in New Orleans, and she missed most of my "fun" by living in South Africa, but she's back in Atlanta now.) I met Dr. Bill Wood who was Emory Chief of Surgery about 30 years ago, and we discovered that we were distant cousins. He introduced me to Dr. Nathan O'Neal Spell, who has been my Emory Internist for 30 years. Emory Cardiologist, Dr. Byron Williams Jr. has had me as a patient for 25 years, and Eric and Tracey are graduates of Emory Medical School.

My wife, Joan has some medical problems, and I'm a full-time caregiver how, but I feel good, and I'm grateful when the Lord wakes me every morning.