

Bearing Witness

As I presently navigate new tumor growth in my brain, I'd like to offer a surprise strategy to face suffering.

January 13, 2024 By [Adam Hayden](#)

"You have given us the opportunity to bear witness to your experience, and that is a brave gift of vulnerability that we are privileged to accept. Thank you."

I think a lot about suffering. Maybe it is all the religious studies and philosophy that I've done over the years (decades, really). Maybe it's my own suffering with a life-limiting illness. Maybe it's the orientation toward suffering—my inclination to notice it, in the news, current events, and the difficult episodes of history that we must continue to tug from the history books into the daylight—that keeps it at the top of my mind.

Following are four narratives that shape my thinking about suffering:

- Clint McCann of Eden Theological Seminary who said (paraphrased), suffering is a condition of participation with creation. This one comes from my brother, an Eden Seminary grad, with whom I've discussed suffering and its influence on theology
- Arthur Kleinman who discusses the role of the empathetic witness in clinical care. Physicians may be empathetic witnesses to suffering by being present, and in their presence, give value to the experience of the one who suffers
- Elie Wiesel, the mind (and experience) from which many ideas for facing suffering spring forth, who says, "To people I love, I wish I could say, 'I will suffer in your place.' But I cannot. Nobody can. Nobody should. I can be present, though. And when you suffer, you need a presence."
- Disabled bioethicist Brooke Ellison, who said, "My life has been one of deep meaning and

purpose brought about by circumstances that, at the time, seemed meaningless and purposeless.”

The quote that appears at the top of this post is more or less one that I say on a regular basis. Not a quote, exactly, but a distillation of ideas into one central message: When people share with vulnerability, they are offering a gift to others, and thanks are owed by those who accept the gift by bearing witness.

I feel these writers’ ideas churning the waters of my soul while my steady demeanor traverses the waves of serious illness: McCann’s participation, Kleinman’s witnessing, Wiesel’s presence, and Ellison’s reminder that meaning can arise from the meaningless.

Each of these ideas, it seems to me, begins with contradiction. You may associate creation with goodness, here it is intertwined with suffering. You may have thought a physician ameliorates suffering, not bears witness to it. You may feel that love demands we take the place of our loved one who suffers, yet not only can we not, we should not. To discover purpose in the meaningless is straightforwardly contradictory.

See, this is the secret to suffering: To examine our attitudes and imagine their opposite.

Some years ago I watched a short video made by a friend who was dying. They were thanking their spouse, medical team, and community for their care. They were completing their life, they knew it; they accepted it; they were adjusting their expectations in light of it. A commenter on that video wrote, "Don't give up! I am praying that you can still have a miraculous healing!"

Here we encounter the opportunity for surprise. A miraculous healing assumes that our illness will be cured, our symptoms resolved, our cancer in remission. Of course, modern medicine and its dogmatic obsession with conquering death has suggested this to us.

What if we were to challenge our presupposition? What if we were to be contradictory? What if we thought to be surprised?

"A miraculous healing has already occurred," I replied, "They have accepted their mortality, and they are moving forward with calm, compassion, and completion."

If this person were to hold out hope for some miracle cure imagine how their suffering would be amplified when such a healing is not possible. But to heal from the existential distress of facing one's own mortality and to develop the maturity to find gratitude despite it all? That is true healing. And for this person to share with brave vulnerability, they offered a gift to us, and we owe them thanks by bearing witness. To tell a person at peace with their mortality that you are praying for a cure, which is outside of their control, is to disrespect their agency, which is to choose to end life on their terms. Recall our lessons: Participation, witness, purpose, and presence. How are you showing up aligned with these values?

I am presently navigating new tumor growth in my brain, and the doctors have hypothesized that I may have experienced a small stroke. If a stroke, I am at great risk for a larger stroke in these weeks immediately following. If the tumor growth is recurrence and the blood artifacts that may be caused by stroke are, instead, new tumors from malignant cells that have migrated, then the risk to my life is no less severe because a recurrent high grade brain malignancy is notoriously treatment resistant. That is not to say that there are no therapeutic avenues, only that there are too few.

Whatever your body is feeling now having read that, flip it; be contradictory. What do we do with suffering? We ask, Where is the surprise? Where are the contradictions? For it's in these spaces that we find true healing.

[This blog](#) was published by [Glioblastology](#) on December 27, 2023. It is republished with permission.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

<http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/blog/bearing-witness-brain-cancer-suffering>