

When the MRI Scan Is Bad, I'm Ready to Perform

Brain cancer blogger Adam Hayden on scanxiety, limbo and action

December 16, 2024 By [Adam Hayden](#)

The spa treatment

"Bring it in!" gesturing for a hug, I called to M* while lying flat on the MRI table. M* is one of the best. They've administered a ton of my MRIs, and we've developed a pretty cool friendship.

"I'm getting the spa treatment today!" I delivered in a tested Dad Joke tone as M* draped the warm blanket over me. "You've got his music queued up?" M* called to M^ (Yes, two M names. We're de-identifying a little here.) "Of course, I do!"

For decades, I've watched my dad befriend every store clerk, grocery bag boy, server, and bank teller he's encountered. I guess that's where I learned it. Fundamentally, all of us are doing our best, and we owe it to each other to be friendly. I mean, have you seen it out there? Yeesh! So, I try to make friends. This radiology crew is a good one.

That was Monday morning; wouldn't you know it, the radiology report was already posted by Monday afternoon. It never goes up that quickly!

report just posted, I texted.

I'm in a patient room, I'll call you, Whitney replied.

"Did you read it yet?"

"Not without you."

"Ok, well, open it!"

"Hm," I grumbled like Whitney and I were looking at the same thing. We sort of were—she knows my nonverbals.

I began reading the impression... "nodular enhancement" ... "paramedial parietal" ... "superior frontal lobe" ... "ex vacuo dilation something" ... "parenchyma" oh I know that one! "white matter."

Then my eyes catch it before my brain processes the visual input into syntax into semantics into data into information into understanding

Like thinking in slow motion

"Worrisome for tumor progression."

"Ah, shit."

I've probably given as many talks as I've had MRI scans: forty-some over eight-plus years. You're never not nervous before a talk. But there's a deep trust I've proven to myself that my body will show up and perform. It's the thing that I do. It's my dunk from the free throw line. I could give a keynote on a topic I've never heard before with five minutes of prep time and an understanding of my audience.

You have to understand your audience. Almost more than you have to understand your content. People don't learn anything at keynotes other than the vibe you set, and conferences are pretty much vibe fests. The learning happens in the lab, and the operating theater, and the exam room.

Whatever angst I have approaching the stage, it vanishes when my cane makes contact with the floor.

There I am, performing.

Scans are waiting to perform. That's the vibe.

You're prepared, you know what's coming, and you've done it before, but there is no relaxing, and this starts at least a few days before the scan. I've had them monthly, every couple of months, and once, I went five months between scans. The duration doesn't much matter: you're restless as scans approach. I guess the uncertainty makes sense. If you're getting scanned often, that means there is reason to; if you're getting scanned with a longer interval, then you're just waiting for the growth of the spot we didn't catch sooner because we went three or four months.

There is no escaping this anxiety; there is only coping.

This week, my name turned up on the call sheet, and it was time to perform. We had a worrisome scan. The radiologist is pretty freaked out, scoring me a 3C on a scale where 4 is worsening imaging, and there is no D, 3C to 4, so seems less than ideal.

My doc isn't so sure. In a quick call Tuesday night, he called the changes "subtle" and doesn't see a reason to stop the current chemotherapy. We meet tomorrow morning for our official after-scan

virtual visit to go further in depth. I've already started the process of getting the scan out to a doc who's taken a look at my brain quite a lot to get a second set of eyes on it, or I guess a third set.

I pretty quickly moved through the emotional range of the news. I trust my body to show up for treatment. I just drag it through for a while, and when I lose my will, my body drags me through it.

Not everybody has an awake craniotomy when they do surgery on your brain while you're holding a conversation. Maybe that's why our oldest calls me a "Division One Yapper"—sometimes shortened to "Ugh. Dad, you're a D1 Yapper."

Whit and I both show up like this. We bicker and banter nonstop (two D1 Yappers), but we also show up in the shit. We are two people who just show up in the hard stuff and trust our bodies to drag us through, which we've both done in different parts of our individual lives.

The thing about showing up in the shit is that sometimes the shit is easier to show up in than the waiting. Scanxiety is weird because you're almost waiting for a bad scan, which is just to say: my god, can we finally fucking just do something other than watch this thing live in my brain scan after scan after scan, year after year after year, it's enough!

This life is a limbo, bro. It's a middle space; a grey area. It's a backstage waiting to perform but nobody gave you a copy of the run of show, other than letting you know that the show does end at some point, but nobody rehearsed for that.

I'm ready to drag myself through treatment again. More chemo tomorrow, and I guess we'll try to figure out whatever is happening in my brain and whatever that means.

I'm ready to perform.

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