



Listening in the Silence, Seeing in the Dark: Reconstructing Life after Brain Injury

Ruthann Knechel Johansen

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Traumatic brain injury can interrupt without warning the life story that any one of us is in the midst of creating. When the author's fifteen-year-old son survives a terrible car crash in spite of massive trauma to his brain, she and her family know only that his story has not ended. Their efforts, Erik's own efforts, and those of everyone who helps bring him from deep coma to new life make up a moving and inspiring story for us all, one that invites us to reconsider the very nature of "self" and selfhood.

Ruthann Knechel Johansen, who teaches literature and narrative theory, is a particularly eloquent witness to the silent space in which her son, confronted with life-shattering injury and surrounded by conflicting narratives about his viability, is somehow reborn. She describes the time of crisis and medical intervention as an hour-by-hour struggle to communicate with the medical world on the one hand and the everyday world of family and friends on the other. None of them knows how much, or even whether, they can communicate with the wounded child who is lost from himself and everything he knew. Through this experience of utter disintegration, Johansen comes to realize that self-identity is molded and sustained by stories.

As Erik regains movement and consciousness, his parents, younger sister, doctors, therapists, educators, and friends all contribute to a web of language and narrative that gradually enables his body, mind, and feelings to make sense of their reacquired functions. Like those who know and love him, the young man feels intense grief and anger for the loss of the self he was before the accident, yet he is the first to see continuity where they see only change. The story is breathtaking, because we become involved in the pain and suspense and faith that accompany every birth. Medical and rehabilitation professionals, social workers, psychotherapists, students of narrative, and anyone who has faced life's trauma will find hope in this meditation on selfhood: out of the shambles of profound brain injury and coma can arise fruitful lives and deepened relationships.

Keywords: narrative; selfhood; therapy; traumatic brain injury; healing; spirituality; family crisis; children

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