

Insight - Opinion

Lost in the private pain of a loved one in need

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870 words

16 February 2008

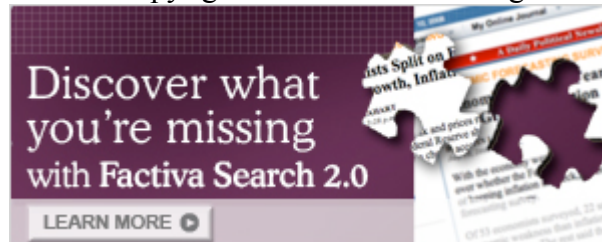
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ESSAY / IDEAS / COMMENT

Families face what can be an unbearable dilemma as carers of the injured or ill - how to ease the burden while having a life of their own.

HOW do you write about somebody you love? Do you tell their secrets in the hope of bringing more understanding into their life, into yours, or do you stay silent to protect them? How do you write about the private struggles occurring each day inside your own home?

Those who have someone in their family battling an illness or living with a serious injury understand this invisible dilemma. And why, even in the midst of your own frustration and anger at who and what the person you once knew has become, you carry their secret.

You do this because you love them and would do anything to bear some of the burden for them, anything to make it your own. Eventually this happens anyway. Your family and friends, life as you know it, change before your eyes.

Like a ripple it begins, and soon enough the aftermath of one person's injuries within a family becomes visible upon them all.

This is the reality of living with a person who has what doctors carefully call an acquired brain injury.

The Transport Accident Commission leaves viewers with a dramatised understanding of this sort of brain damage. Its ads feed us with images of people unable to feed themselves and drooling as they attempt the simple tasks of speech and movement.

The reality is far worse.

My dad had a car accident four years ago that left permanent brain damage. Not the kind instantly recognisable through his physical appearance, but hidden damage that silently altered his personality, moods and memory and left him in constant pain.

Migraines that never ceased continued to cripple his body and mind, and at the age of 43 rendered him unemployable. For a proud and hardworking person, this aspect of his injury broke him the most.

For the past four years my dad has had to go between doctors, psychologists, endless scans, tests, medication, doses, GPs and group therapy to be evaluated and to prove to the government and his employer that he is not faking it.

As he sits at home in a sea of sadness, feeling useless and unworthy, they question his motive and character. It took my dad four years to be able to see a specialist. Four years to be part of a recognised pain clinic.

He has had to fight for every cent of his pension, which is one-third of his full salary. He has had to record and attend any meeting they have scheduled.

During the last and final round of tests, the specialists came to a conclusion. They told Dad in a letter that he would never be competent in a workplace again. That he would be unable to cope with the stressful environment that is work. That his injuries and pain would never heal.

Gone was the hope that he would some day get better, that the pain would eventually pass, that our family would be able to piece together a semblance of the life we once had. That he would again embrace everything he once was and could do.

They let him know in a letter that this would never be the case. They let us know that our old dad was gone.

Last week, after four years, I was done. Twenty-one years old - and done. I had had enough, this time my dad had cut too deep. I took an outburst to heart. I thought about how much I had changed in order to accommodate who he had become. To cater for him the best way I knew how, by disappearing into myself.

I remembered the times when the others would fight back if he was rude, but I would simply turn around and walk away, become invisible.

I thought about what it was like to be young and to have lost friends and become trapped in a spiral of self-destruction. To drink too much, to always want more, to find peace in no longer being in control of yourself or of your surroundings.

I blamed dad for the hardships I have watched my mum and my sisters face as they have tried to accommodate a trauma within our home. As each of them handles the consequences and anger and desperation that have entombed our lives, our dad.

I was tired of keeping secrets, of missing out on feeling young, and, more importantly, of feeling in control of myself, of my life. I was done.

And then I changed my mind.

Because no matter how frustrated I become, no matter how hurt or lost I can feel in my own home, I remember. I remember what it must feel like to wake up in pain and have a letter reaffirming that you will never get better.

And I love him once more with everything I am. For having the courage and strength to wake up and face each day because he knows we need him.

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