

Book Review

Listening in the Silence, Seeing in the Dark: Reconstructing Life after Brain Injury, Ruthann Knechel Johansen, Berkley, California: University of California Press, 2002, pp. 236, hard cover.

Ruthann Knechel Johansen, a professor of literature and narrative theory, has written an account of her son, Erik's, recovery from a severe traumatic brain injury sustained in May 1985. She takes the reader on a journey through his emergency medical intervention, inpatient rehabilitation, community reintegration, and completion of graduate school. Throughout the text, she interweaves medical facts with philosophy and literature, as well as poetic verse, using such to meditate on issues of 'self' and consciousness, societal views on health and illness, and the importance of stories in our lives.

Johansen begins with the day of 15-year old Erik's car accident and the care he receives at a Level 1 trauma center in Southern New Jersey. With an initial Glasgow Coma Scale of 3 and various complications, the author describes her reactions, as well as her husband's and daughter's, to Erik's life threatening injuries. She uses this as an opportunity to introduce us to her belief in the importance of narrative, while stating that her son's story was being written by various medical professionals due to his inability to speak for himself. The author does not hesitate to explain that she believes these stories are rather limited and tend to objectify the patient through medical jargon and condescending communication.

After becoming medically stable, Erik enters an inpatient rehabilitation program where the author begins to elaborate on Erik's resulting cognitive deficits and how they are addressed in rehabilitation. Her concern regarding the lack of holistic treatment provided was made apparent as she expressed that her son was still struggling to regain what Damasio has termed, "extended consciousness". After his discharge, Erik returns home where he begins to receive outpatient therapies while resuming school, and working intensively with his hands with an Italian artist, a wood shop teacher, and a neuropsychologist with the intention of

redesigning his brain's circuitry. What follows is a description of the trials and tribulations experienced throughout his college career, his decision to study rehabilitation counseling, and his eventual marriage.

However, as the author states in the Introduction, "This is not a book of head injury resources or prescriptions, nor is it simply a medical biography." To continue to summarize Erik's road to recovery would be doing the author an injustice. The main issues raised in this book are the effects brain injury has on the family unit and the importance of narratives in our lives. Through these themes, Johansen philosophizes on what is 'self', specifically questioning is 'self' present after brain injury, describing the rebirth of 'self', and asking who is adequately equipped to tell the stories of those who have been brain injured. She proposes that treatment teams, as well as those close to the victims, often speak for the injured, but such leads to an incomplete narrative. She proposes that, "varieties of stories with a broad array of narrators are necessary to support our psychological work and collective awakening to our own relational being." In other words, she sees a 'self' as dependent on relationships with others. A final important point raised by Johansen is the "acceptance of vulnerability" in the families and victims of traumatic brain injury – the knowing that things will never be the same.

At times, *Listening in the Silence, Seeing in the Dark* reads more like a philosophy text and one can get lost in the author's flowery discourse. In addition, if recommended to patients and their family members, I would duly warn that Erik's recovery was aided by a strong social support network and extensive resources, which not all individuals may have available to them. In addition, the current rehabilitation milieu is drastically different than the world of rehabilitation in 1985 as Johansen rightly explains in Chapter Seven. Overall, the book's strengths lie in Johansen's description of how traumatic brain injury affects the family and her ability to express the importance of holistic healing.

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