

FROM THE INSIDE LOOKING OUT

THE PERSONAL JOURNEY OF A SPEECH-LANGUAGE PATHOLOGIST'S RECOVERY FROM A CLOSED HEAD INJURY



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Introduction

So, here I sit gazing out at the beautiful calm. The water shimmers like a sheet of emerald colored glass. A few feet from the end of the dock, the sailboat bobs to the rhythm of the waves as they gently ripple along its hull. I rock slowly in the old familiar cozy chair and savor the warmth from my snuggle blanket and sheep skin pull over. Another sip of coffee and I decide to take a “mental snapshot” of this early morning scene from the porch window at the cabin on Green Lake. With a sigh of contentment, I remind myself once again to “capture the moment”. MMMMM, Calm - Peace - Quiet - Life is good!

And now back to my game. One of the best assets to my Starcom phone is that it has one of my favorite games - Solitaire. As I move my cursor around hoping that the next card will be “the one”, my mind drifts back to a year ago. It was a time when my favorite game was not just played for fun but one that I purposefully engaged in as an attempt to improve my concentration and critical thinking. It was one of my many little strategies to help “therapize” myself through a “real life” trauma.

A speech pathologist with a head injury. Now isn't that an oxymoron. One who attempts to help others heal, now fighting to heal herself. A learning opportunity that I hope none of you ever have to experience. But possibly you might enjoy sitting in the passenger seat as you travel along with me back through time and see through my eyes what many of your patients may not have the opportunity to express to you from the same perspective as me - since I am one of your own.

The fall

It was Christmas day 2005. The holiday festivities had gone on much as they normally do in our family. Later that evening, with my tummy full, I headed upstairs for a fresh cup of coffee. After a short visit with the women in the kitchen, I headed back down stairs to the family room. As I rounded the corner on the top landing, my heel caught in the carpet and I felt myself being thrown through the air into a somersault. Smack! My head hit the stair with a thud and I immediately started into a second roll. My right hip hit hard. I grabbed frantically trying to take hold of something; anything to stop the fall but there was nothing. The carpet ran through my fingertips futilely. I became keenly aware of what was happening as my head took another whack. I had such momentum gaining that I knew I was not going to stop this accident from happening so I thought that I had better try to relax and take the hits as best I could. The hip took another blow and then my head smacked the side of the wall with such force that it punched a hole in the gyp rock the size of a baseball. Thoughts raced through my mind “Ohoh. THAT one was BAD. It's really going to hurt!”

One more hit to the hip and then the side of my head struck the concrete based tile flooring at the bottom. There I lay with my head on the lower landing and my body strewn in various angles up the stairwell.

For the first few weeks, my world became a dreamland of doctors appointments, CT scans, physiotherapy appointments, and x-rays. My first blessing came when I was told that my hip was neither broken nor dislocated; a miracle in itself. However, I had a partially dislocated shoulder, and a concussion. There was concern that I may have a brain bleed. I couldn't walk independently as my balance was significantly impaired. I felt like that wooden puppet I kept watching on the muscle relaxant commercials. My body had become like a rickety old train clacking on and off of its tracks. It clicked and creaked in ways that I could never have imagined.

I must say that initially the confusion and mobility issues were some of my greatest challenges. More tests and my second blessing came when all of the results came up okay. I didn't appear to have a brain bleed. I thought, “Great, a few weeks of rest and I should be good to go!”. Unfortunately, neither my body nor my brain was on board with this decision.

The job

Since 1980, I have been a speech language pathologist in the public school system (part time) and have had a private practice since 1991. I love a good challenge and am passionate about impacting people's lives. I enjoy the flexibility of my profession and have savored the “art of multi tasking” that goes along with it!

A couple of weeks post trauma, I tried to return to work and was instantly aware that I was not ready. I took some more time off and tried again. I lasted a couple of weeks working in the office only. Again, I became aware that the stress of even being in the work atmosphere was upsetting to me. On my third attempt, I came back to work in a very modified capacity. I didn't do any assessments or paperwork and only worked with my easy clients; the “speechies”. I went to work right on time and left at the first bell. I couldn't bear the thought of “my kids” doing without service until June, as there was no one to fill my position. I felt as though I was letting everyone down. Quite frankly, I was stubborn and embarrassed as well. I wanted to prove that I was okay. In a way, this return to work actually became a valuable source of therapy for me. It relieved the guilt and shame. But more importantly, it gave me a place to go and something to do. It was probably one of the best remedies for overcoming the depression and sense of low self worth.

Having said that, I must add that I was wise to pull back as I did. I was not capable of working at full capacity and would not recommend anyone in my situation trying to fake the “I'm okay” scenario. I found that my colleagues were the better judges in helping me in this area. They helped me see my limitations and patiently supported me through my rehabilitation.

I made it through until spring break and was keenly aware of my need for some mental R&R. With Easter right on the heels of the break, I had a good stretch of time to feel like my feet were finally getting planted. For the remainder of the year, I stayed on a moderately modified schedule and





allowed myself the time to build up to the regular rigor that goes with our job.

A most special day came for me on my return to work in the Fall 2006. I was in the middle of multitasking; surrounded by the normal back to school hubbub when the joyful thought struck me “You’re back! Rosslyn, you’re back!!!!” I was thrilled! After nine long months, I finally felt like the old me had returned.

Summary

Fortunately, I can do what I once did! Fortunately, I was blessed with a good recovery. Fortunately, I had a support system at home and at work. My husband, my daughter and my son were consistently patient, loving, and compassionate with me. My employers were unbelievably supportive through this whole process. I know that some people would have not taken the path that I chose. They may have chosen to stay at home and wait until they were fully recuperated before entering back into the stream of life. But the truth is, no one knows if you can swim if you don’t get in the water and at least try. My head injury was described as “mild to moderate” and my systems were not noticeable to many who knew me. If I would have had anger management issues or more severe symptoms, I’m sure many aspects of my journey would have changed. But in my case it was not so.

I should add one last thing for any physicians who might happen to read this article. I have had the same doctor for 33 years. He has known me since I was 17 years old. Interestingly, after the accident, it was he who had the most difficult time believing that there was something wrong with me. As I said, my test results seemed okay. I looked fine and because I’m such a verbal person anyways, I sounded fine as well. But I wasn’t!!!! I would strongly encourage all care givers (professional or lay) to take the time to truly listen to your patient, family member or friend with a head injury. If they say they are struggling, trust them. Encourage them. Believe in them. Accept them just as they are; head injury and all. Show patience, kindness and genuine concern.

How many other people out there could be suffering in silence? They may well be aware that things are not as they were but lack the knowledge or support to deal with their issues openly and honestly? I would hope that my vulnerability and honesty in writing this article might be a support to such an individual. I have been there and I understand the grief and sense of loss. I understand the fear and isolation. I understand!

Final thoughts

On Christmas day 2005, I started on a journey, which few speech-language pathologists have ever had the opportunity to travel. It was a real life practicum. Now that I am on the other side of it, I am grateful for it being a part of my life. Would I ever want to go through it again? A resounding NO! Am I glad to have gone through it? Yes! Every experience in our life is there for a reason and it’s up to us to enjoy the good and learn from the bad. Above all, I have gained a deeper appreciation for my health and the time that I spend with those I love. As a clinician, I can now empathize with my clients from a whole new perspective. And if my experience can make one of my clients feel more at ease or better understood, then I am very happy.

Thank you for taking the time to read these personal reflections. One is always wise to inform themselves of these stories while remembering that “there but for the grace of God go I”. Every day of health that we have the pleasure to enjoy is truly a gift. So “capture the moment” because life is good!

We want to hear from you! CASLPA Membership Survey Coming Soon

Let us know what issues are important to you and what CASLPA should focus on over the next 3 years. As we prepare for the 2009-2011 strategic plan, CASLPA members will be surveyed, information will be compiled and the board of directors will develop a strategic plan that meets members’ needs.

In the last membership survey conducted in 2005, members said they wanted CASLPA to:

- Raise the profile of speech-language pathologists and audiologists. We responded by developing award-winning television, radio, and this year, print public service announcements. Our reach to date is 69 million Canadians.
- Develop position papers on priority issues – and identified their top issues. We have recently published position papers on the professional doctorate degree in audiology (AuD) dysphagia in adults and cochlear implants in children.
- Represent our interests to government. Three press conferences were conducted on Parliament Hill in the past 2 years and numerous meetings with MPs and staff from various government departments including Veterans Affairs, Health Canada, Blue Cross, etc., have been held.

The programs and activities that CASLPA conducted over the past few years highlight the impact of the responses to the 2005 membership survey.

The next membership survey will be conducted in the spring. This is your opportunity to provide valued input. Be sure to complete the survey when you receive notice. CASLPA needs a solid understanding of what members want and expect from their association. CASLPA is your association – an association dedicated to championing and supporting the needs of our professionals, thereby maximizing the communication potential of all Canadians.



**Let us know what you think!
Look for Communiqué
readership survey in the May
e-newsletter**

Is your quarterly newsletter keeping you up to date and providing you with interesting and usable information? Let us know by completing the readership survey which will be available in the May e-newsletter, *Communiqué*.

Follow the link provided and fill out the online survey. Your comments will help us to improve *Communiqué* and ensure that it continues to be a relevant and valuable publication.